

Whatever It Takes: The New Media Editor

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ABSTRACT: In preparing new media literature for publication, the editor must often take on nontraditional roles. In this panel, three new media editors discuss these new roles.

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INTRODUCTION

In the field of electronic publishing, editors of poetry and fiction can no longer rely exclusively on the standard editorial practices that have long served the print world. When dealing with Flash poetry or hypertext fiction, for example, it's no longer sufficient to confine editorial activity to simply editing and proofreading text. Works of new media literature derive their impact not just from text alone but also from the effects of other media and from the workings of interactive software. An editor must contend with all these elements to ensure that each is working well in its own right and in conjunction with the other elements.

In order to make sure everything is functioning smoothly in a piece, a new media editor must often take on the role of beta-tester and technical consultant. In other cases, to enable a work to live up to its full electronic potential, the editor may become so deeply involved with shaping the work's presentation that the boundary between editing and full artistic collaboration begins to blur. When an editor is involved with rereleasing electronic work that was originally published years ago, he may have to take on the role of conservator and historical investigator in order to replicate the look and functionality of the original work on modern computer platforms.

It is often said that because the Web allows authors to reach readers directly through self-publication, the need for middlemen such as publishers and editors will disappear. Complex electronic literature, however, is proving that the hand of a capable editor can in some cases be even more valuable to the new media author than to her counterpart who works in print. Making a case for this in the following discussions are Robert Kendall and Rob Swigart, coeditors of the Web publishing site Word Circuits [1], and Nick Montfort, coeditor of *The New Media Reader* [2].

THE EDITOR AS TECHNICIAN

By Robert Kendall

Since 1998 I have been editing literature for publication on Word Circuits, working first with Deena Larsen and then Rob Swigart and Margie Luesebrink as coeditors. We have helped prepare a variety of electronic stories and poems for publication, and in nearly every case we've been obliged to suggest or implement extra-textual changes in the works. Of course, we've also made the standard copyediting and proofreading corrections that are required of any editor, but here I'm going to focus only on the editorial input that's unique to e-literature publishing.

At the most basic level are the responsibilities of technical editing. This essentially involves beta-testing the work on different platforms to uncover bugs, broken links, or browser compatibility problems. Having three editors using a combination of Mac and Windows greatly aids in being able to verify that a piece works across all browsers on all platforms. We must also sometimes tackle bandwidth problems. For example, when we published one Flash piece, I was able to reduce the file sizes by about 400K, which cut the load time in half without affecting appearance or function.

These sorts of basic technical problems could in theory be handled by a technician with no specific editorial skills. The next level of editorial work, however, could only be performed by someone with not just a good knowledge of software issues but also an intimate understanding of the text at hand and an ability to evaluate literary problems. This type of work could be called usability editing. It involves approaching the work as an "average reader" and looking for elements of interface or presentation that might confuse people, cause interpretive problems, or otherwise detract from the text's effectiveness in ways of which the author isn't aware. In a number of cases we've uncovered such issues and helped the author solve them.

In the hypertext "Stained Word Window," by Deena Larsen (who with this work was an author rather than an editor for Word Circuits), a navigation problem arose. The work uses a Java-based image map in the left-hand frame as a navigation tool. When you move your mouse over different parts of this image, different pages of text are loaded into the right-hand frame. The pages at the right also contain links, but I found it often impossible to access these links. When I moved the mouse pointer from the image map toward these links in the right-hand frame,

it would usually pass over a hot spot on the image map, loading a new page, since the hot spots are activated by rollovers rather than clicks. I discovered that the problem could be solved by holding down the mouse button as you moved the pointer over a hot spot you didn't want to activate. Larsen was unaware of this feature of her Java applet but quickly added an explanation of this technique to the instructions on her title page.

A different problem arose with Peter Howard's Flash poem "Xylo." The poem is based on animated text that fades in and out in carefully choreographed rhythms. The text movement was very well timed throughout the piece until a point near the end at which a line flashed by too quickly for any of us to read. Since Howard wanted this line to be comprehensible, he slowed the movement down at that point for the sake of legibility. Even for an experienced author of kinetic poetry, it can sometimes be difficult to judge exactly how much time is needed for the reader to take in a line.

Komninos Zervos's Flash poem "Childhood in Richmond" presented an interesting problem of accessibility. The opening page contains a number of rollovers that trigger visual changes or audio clips. To me and some other readers, it appeared initially that this was the extent of the piece, because we were unaware that the page also contained a rather hard-to-find link leading to additional pages. This could obviously pose a huge problem for readers, but once it was pointed out to him, Zervos easily solved it by expanding the clickable area of the opening link.

More complex issues of link accessibility arose with Stephanie Strickland's "The Ballad of Sand and Harry Soot," as we provided suggestions and some help with coding during the final stage of the work's development. At the request of Strickland's collaborator, Janet Holmes, I provided CSS codes to remove the conventional underlining and control the colors of links so they would appear the same as the work's multicolored body text. After Strickland made most of the text links in the work invisible so that the reader would have to "feel" for them with the mouse, Deena Larsen and I feared that the reader would simply ignore the invisible links. Our feedback influenced the final disposition within the poem of invisible links and links that stood out in a color different from that of the body text. Since some unlinked words were also colored, making them look like links, the final product unsettled the expectations of readers while at the same time luring them into the game of finding the links.

The role of the editor in ensuring a work's readability can extend even further. An editor with programming skills can open new doors for authors, letting them enhance their work with features they didn't know were possible. I am the codeveloper of Connection Muse, an adaptive hypertext system designed to improve navigation in

hypertext poetry and fiction. I have helped a number of Word Circuits authors reshape the navigational design of a piece with the aid of Connection Muse.

Jackie Craven's "In the Changing Room" is a hypertext that interweaves eight interrelated short stories. Readers progress through the work by following fragments of different stories, jumping from one storyline to another where they intersect. At various points readers have the option of going back to an opening menu to take up any one of the eight stories from its beginning. In the work's original form, it was very difficult for readers to traverse the full length of any of the stories, because the link structure provided no paths directly through each of a story's nodes in sequence.

I used Connection Muse to add conditional links to the opening menu. After this alteration, when readers returned to the menu and clicked on the icon for one of the eight stories, they were taken not to the first node of the story but to the first unread node of that story. Thus, clicking on the icon for a story now allows readers to take up that story exactly where they left off. This makes it possible for readers to read all the text of each story—something that was nearly impossible in the original version—while maintaining the fragmented interweaving of textual threads that is essential to the work's character. In the following section, Rob Swigart discusses how Connection Muse has enhanced other Word Circuits publications.

A Web publisher can usually benefit most from a staff that combines editorial acumen with a broad range of general technical skills. Occasionally, however, an editor will develop specialized technical skills and focus on helping authors stretch their wings in a particular area—such as I focus on hypertext navigation in much of my own editorial work. As Web technology becomes increasingly complex and e-literature more ambitious, it seems likely that such technical specialists will become increasingly common among editors.

THE EDITOR AS COLLABORATOR

By Rob Swigart

Some writers of electronic literature act as their own programmers, graphic artists, and designers. Others, especially those who come from the print world, form relationships with the editors of a Web site who perform these roles for them. An editor may contribute graphics, design, navigation elements, and programming—may become, in effect, a collaborative partner in the work.

At Word Circuits we are publishing "The Glass Snail," a short story by Milorad Pavić, author of *Dictionary of the Khazars*, a formative book in the literature of paper-based hypertext [3]. "The Glass Snail" is a narrative with two beginnings (depending on which of the two characters you want to follow), a single middle, and two alternative endings. Thus there are four possible stories in a kind of

hour-glass structure that echoes the theme of time in the story.

An effective hypertext structure is built into this story, but we wanted to do more than just add a few links to the text. The three Word Circuits editors—Robert Kendall, Marjorie Luesebrink (aka M.D. Coverley), and I—had many phone conversations and email exchanges about how to present the piece on the Web in the most effective way possible. With the author’s approval we decided on a graphic theme, a layout, and navigational elements. We became true collaborators with the author in turning the work into electronic fiction.

The first step was to decide how to break the “The Glass Snail” into pages. The story was already divided into five short chapters, but these would have to be subdivided to avoid a lot of scrolling. We observed how the text fell naturally into small sections, or what I call NITs (Narrative uNITs), which are small, somewhat self-contained sections that make sense on their own but at the same time propel the reader to the next NIT. We then put each NIT on a separate page.

“The Glass Snail” has an Egyptian back-story and the characters, though contemporary, are reflections of characters from ancient Egypt. Their story therefore plays out as a kind of echo of the historical figures. We wanted to find a look and feel for the project that referred to, but did not slavishly imitate or illustrate, the Egyptian theme. We agonized over the color scheme and the graphic accompaniment. We settled on background colors, text colors, and some border decorations that felt in keeping with this mandate. We repeated the design elements from page to page within each chapter for unity and then varied them from one chapter to the next to give each chapter a distinctive look.

We wanted a somewhat dreamlike visual quality, in keeping with the character of the text. We considered using blatantly surreal imagery, but in the end settled on a more subtle approach: a series of images in which faces or objects (such as a pair of goblets) become progressively clearer with each new page. The faces only gradually become recognizably Egyptian, just as the Egyptian themes in the text emerge slowly. The images and design elements were carefully planned to reflect the important structural symmetries among and within the chapters.

In the original story, Pavi_ included instructions to the reader at branching points. For example, “If you did not read the chapter Christmas Candle, read it. If you did, this is the end of the story.” We decided at these points to let Connection Muse provide conditional links, which would be displayed only if the reader had not yet read the relevant chapter. Connection Muse also allowed for automatic bookmarking. If the reader breaks off reading and comes back days later, the text resumes again at the place where the reader left off.

Connection Muse played an even more significant role in my own piece, *About Time*, which was published on Word Circuits. As author, I contributed the graphic design, the text, and the basic navigation structure. Editor Robert Kendall helped enormously by implementing the Connection Muse in the work.

I wanted to make the structure of “About Time” as transparent as possible. Links to all NITs in each section are present on every page, but because the links were in the form of graphical buttons, I had no way of changing the color of visited links to keep the reader oriented. The Muse solved this problem by keeping a history of what NITs the reader has visited and changing the navigation button graphics to show which ones lead to visited NITs.

The next challenge for me was to implement recorded audio in “About Time.” In one of the story’s two parallel threads (the one about a pundit named Cro de Granville), I wanted to provide spoken commentaries by friends and acquaintances of the protagonist. I wanted users to be able to click on links in the text that would simultaneously trigger the audio and launch pop-up images of the speakers. Rob worked on this feature with me until it was functioning the way I wanted it to.

Then we added a hidden element that would simply not have been possible without the Muse. All the links to the audio commentaries are conditional links that lead to either positive or negative comments about de Granville. The condition is determined by where the user clicks on the opening title page graphic to start the story. Thus, unbeknownst to her, the reader’s first action will determine whether all the audio comments are friendly or critical towards the character.

Connection Muse made one more contribution to “About Time.” The piece is assembled into three parts, or “acts.” Thanks to conditional links, the reader cannot move from one act to the next without first visiting all the NITs in each one. Only after all links register as visited does a new link appear to the next act. Once it appears, though, the reader may navigate freely around all the explored territory.

Without Robert Kendall and Connection Muse, “About Time” would have been a very different, and in my opinion, impoverished, project. Working on this piece really brought home to me how important an editor’s role can be in helping an author realize his goals.

THE EDITOR AS CONSERVATOR

By Nick Montfort

My most recent new media editing experience was a rather unusual one: I worked with Noah Wardrip-Fruin to edit *The New Media Reader* and did much of the work to get the CD component of that project ready. The CD collects documentation of new media projects, along with

some of these projects themselves, included in functioning versions. The projects, which date from 1962 to the mid-1990s, include electronic literature work of several different sorts, as well as art, games, videos, and text files.

What I did to prepare the works varied a great deal, as did the amount of contact I had with the authors, artists, and programmers. In some cases, I did almost nothing but select works in consultation with Noah and put them in place on the CD. Other programs required the selection of appropriate emulators and interpreters, testing, and, in a few cases, porting. We had no contact at all with some authors, while we received essential help from others, who did extensive preparatory work. Noah and I did introduce the material we presented on the CD, as an editor working in print would; we also went through the arduous process of obtaining permission to publish the CD material. These were somewhat familiar editorial tasks.

Our most unusual obligation as editors was having to make sure that work spanning four decades was accessible on multiple modern computer platforms. My contributions weren't creative ones in this case, but publishing older electronic literature reveals another way in which new media editing is becoming an advisory, supervisory, and preparatory function that encompasses computational, HCI, and non-text media aspects, not just the care and feeding of the traditional text. In cases where older works are being republished, the necessary technical skills should be joined with a sensitivity to the goals and methods of the authors, and of course a familiarity with the author's work. We were fortunate to have much existing work to build on, and a few examples to look to, in putting together *The New Media Reader* CD. For instance, Deena Larsen had previously worked to prepare William Dickey's HyperCard poems, which were finally published for the first time on the CD.

Several pieces we included on *The New Media Reader* CD ran in interpreters. Applications are usually in binary form and will run only on a particular type of computer; an interpreter is used to run machine-independent code. (The Java Virtual Machine is a familiar example.) Judy Malloy's "You!"—written in BASIC and originally installed in a museum—required a BASIC interpreter. I selected one that would run on both Macintosh and Windows. I then ported "You!" to the dialect of BASIC that this interpreter supported, commenting the code as I went and dealing with several issues of incompatibility along the way. Getting the interactive fiction works *Adventure* and *Curses* working was much easier. *Curses* is in the standard Z-machine format. We included a Z-machine port of *Adventure* along with Z-machine interpreters for Windows and Macintosh.

Thanks to the previous efforts of many programmers, a

number of emulators were available to us that allow software for old hardware platforms to run on current computers. We included the first text-and-graphics adventure game, *Mystery House*, as an Apple II disk image. The Apple II emulators on the CD enable people to run this program (and others that are on the CD, including the cinematically-inspired game *Karateka*) almost exactly as they would using an actual Apple II. We also included a PDP-1 emulator running the first modern video game, *Spacewar!* Another programmer had taken the approach of reimplementation, using a modern programming language to create a new, public-domain version of Eliza, which we included.

In several cases, documentation seemed the most appropriate or feasible approach. Stuart Moulthrop's hypertext fiction "forking paths" could not be presented in its entirety because this previously unpublished work contains the text of a Borges's story that Moulthrop did not have permission to publish or disseminate. So Moulthrop provided a complete "anatomy" of that project with all of his original writing, all the links from each lexia, and notes to indicate what fragments of Borges's story were included. Though we did include the interactive program that constitutes Robert Kendall's "The Clue," it runs only on DOS or Windows and does not include the original musical soundtrack. The music had been painstakingly synchronized by Kendall to a particular hardware configuration when the piece ran as a museum installation. To illustrate how "The Clue" looked and sounded in this original incarnation, I digitized a video that had been taken of the piece as it played and included that as well.

In this particular project, Noah and I dealt with just a handful of the issues that can arise in trying to resuscitate old electronic literature. Efforts like this will not become any easier, unless more is done in the name of preservation. Part of the effort of the ELO's Preservation, Archiving, and Dissemination project, which I am involved with, will be focused on helping to make free, open-source interpreters and emulators available for formats and systems that are of importance in electronic literature.

Future editors of today's electronic literature should aim at making fully functioning versions of the works accessible to as many interested readers and interactors as possible. They'll have at their disposal the same methods that helped us prepare the materials on *The New Media Reader* CD: reimplementation, porting, interpretation, and emulation. Documentation can serve an important purpose, but if we flatten our whole electronic literary heritage into nothing but a set of texts and screenshots, no one will be able to understand why we found any of this at all compelling and interesting, and no one will be able to have the sorts of profound and provocative electronic reading experiences that we value so much.

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