The Mouse

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Writing in Small Chunks?: Electronic Media and the Novelist

In 'The Getting of Meaning: Mobility and the Hypertext Writer and Reader' (*Australian Book Review* 188, February/March 97), Moya Costello writes:

> Because the reader of electronic text is mobile, and because reading on screen is currently more difficult than in print, I am tentatively assuming that an aspect of a rhetoric/poetics of writing fiction for hypertext is short, screen-length chunks of text. (p. 35)

Costello convincingly places this assumption in

> the practice of feminist experimental writing and a postmodern aesthetic, characterised by assemblage and amalgamation, non-linearity and associativeness, indeterminateness and immanence, playfulness and genre boundary crossing...

Costello goes on to suggest two methods for a writer to get complexity and depth in these short chunks of text: a) through hypertext links, where 'meaning accumulates alongside the accumulation of fragments'; and b) through writing 'in a distilled, compressed and summative, poetic, imagistic and aphoristic way', where depth of meaning 'is derived from the pile-up of images.' Both of these methods acknowledge the reader's mobility around the text and address the writer's need to be aware of, and at least to some extent, in control of the reader's interactive behaviour with the text.

While fully admiring Costello's excellent article and the pioneering insights contained in it, as a novelist I am tempted to ask the question: 'What's different?' For the reading of the traditionally-published novel (with the pages bound in strict order) it seems to me that the writer has always had to deal with the situation where meaning 'accumulates alongside the accumulation of fragments' and 'is derived from the pile-up of images' as presented by traditional and more radical pre-electronic narrative means. The chunks and fragments novelists have always dealt with are the 'scenes' (setting-characters-sequenced action) and the 'events' (individual actions, ideas, lines of dialogue and thoughts) in the novel. The pages of the novel may have been bound in order, but the reader could always 'navigate' among scenes and events, once they were known, to put together readings which were 'interactive' in the sense that processes of reordering, linking, emphasis and prioritising went on in the reader's mind. Writers who were not aware of this reader capacity were seriously disadvantaged, not only in their understanding of how their novels could be read, i.e. in their control over the meanings they were creating, but also in their insight into the potential for complexity and depth available in the page-bound narrative.

The nineteenth-century American novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote: 'The role of the novelist is not to tell, but to suggest'. This is as good advice for the pre-electronic novel as it is for electronic writing. It contains within it the notion that the novelist should be in control of the suggestions s/he is making, and that this is the essential feature of the writer's business. As with electronic writing, not all navigable reader paths will necessarily be predicted, but the skill comes in the degree to which the writer consciously sets up the complex of readings. There is a significant difference between the writer who says: 'Oh, I didn't realise my work could be read that way' and the one who can say 'I didn't think of that reading, but it fits'. The idea of new readings which 'fit' but weren't specifically thought of by the writer don't challenge the writer's intentionality, they are rather a product of Hawthorne's notion of creating narrative structures where suggestion is valorised and where the novel operates by an internal web of pathways defined within a territory of reading. In 'better' novels, this territory of pathways may be entered from different points - e.g. from the perspective of other eras and cultures - without the intrusion causing an internal breakdown.

Costello also indicates that

> [w]riters used to trafficking exclusively with the word will have to learn about other forms of expressivity. With the pervasive use of icons, the computer screen itself is already a graphic environment. A screen usually reminds readers of film and television, and therefore they expect image and sound. (p. 35)

It is interesting that Costello uses the word 'image' here, because it is the word used by pre-electronic critique to describe 'signposting' or 'flagging' devices in the novel and other forms. I know, as a novelist, that if I want to refer the reader back to page 17, where something significant happened, I have at my disposal the employment of a linking image. I place that vase of flowers on the kitchen table on page 17, where an important conversation takes place, so that I can link subsequent events to that dialogue by the future placement of vases of flowers. This use of iterative imagery is similar to the hypertextual use of click-on script and icons.

At the recent 1997 Word Festival in Canberra, I attended a workshop conducted by Mark Morrison, the designer and writer of 'Australia's largest ever multimedia production' - *The Dame Was Loaded* (Beam International, 1995) - a delightful CD-ROM adventure game in the crime genre. Morrison's work in this CD-ROM goes well beyond the normal understanding of computer games; it is a superb critique of the crime genre and of novel-writing in general. It demonstrates the potential of multimedia to deal with the novel form and its narrative possibilities.

Morrison acknowledges his roots in arcade games, interactive CD-ROM games such as *Full Throttle*, and interactive narrative websites like www.sfblend.com. He describes multimedia writing as being 'writing further out' - a process which must deal with voice, data, film, text and the limits and potential of new technologies.

I sat in Morrison's workshop thinking the same question I had while reading Costello's *Australian Book Review* article: 'What's different?' Based in the choice-point/bifurcation gate/split-path/branching narrative mode of the electronic game as we know it, Morrison's approach is somewhat locked into puzzle structures. This is not necessarily a bad thing; the commercial market seems oriented this way at present. But I do wonder why the choice-point gate in the multimedia reading experience needs to be limited to the configuration of a puzzle or a viewpoint selection. Why can't the branch-point be expressed as a range of ideas, sometimes with alternative outcomes but not necessarily so? After all, this is how serious novels usually work.

To move back a frame, various novelists have tried in the pre-electronic era to create narratives which look very much to have multimedia structures. John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* experimented with the split-path ending. Luke Reinhart's *The Dice Man* played with random selection at narrative gates, and two of Julio Cortazar's novels aspired to totally random chapter sequence readings (which his publishers vetoed, preferring to print them in bound-page form rather than on shuffleable cards as Cortazar had suggested). In 1969, B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* was published by Panther/Secker & Warburg as unbound chapters which could be sequenced at the reader's whim. The novel has been trying to metamorphose into multimedia format for some time now.

Serious novels usually work by means of the writer selecting a sequential reading while building in a suggestion of pathways not taken. (If only Lord Jim hadn't made a spur of the minute decision; if only Captain Ahab had never seen a white whale; if only Gatsby had not fallen in love; if only David Meredith had been more like his brother Jack.) The traditional novel narrative relies on avoidance at alternative choice-points: tragedy relies on the happy ending being averted; comedy on the tragic being side-stepped.

The serious multimedia novel might look closely at the choice-point gate. While it provides an opportunity for alternative outcomes and viewpoints, it can also be seen as a launch-pad for layering narrative. I can imagine a multimedia novel which reads at one level like Jackie Collins, and at another like Virginia Woolf. I can also imagine a multimedia novel which reads at one level like Robert G. Barrett, at another like Peter Carey, and at another like Joseph Conrad. Apart from that, I can imagine a multimedia novel by Brian Castro which is accessible and of interest to a) the newsagent-shelf reader, b) the serious general reader, and/or c) the PhD student.

At a choice-point gate, the electronic novelist might ask: Do you want to know what X thought if she had or hadn't been a) depressed; b) drunk; c) thinking about her father; d) beaten up by her husband on the previous night; or e) suffering PMT? Similarly, that novelist could ask: Do you want to read what Y thought if he had or hadn't been a) suffering a bout of paranoia; b) hungover; c) scared by the situation; d) thinking about his mother; e) looking at his receding hairline in the mirror; or f) beaten up by his wife on the previous night? Etc.

If one acknowledges that novels are generally about what people do and how they think, and that the difference between the commercial and the serious versions lies in the degree to which a focus on action is replaced by a focus on psychology, then the multimedia and internet forms offer the possibility of a novel which can be all things to all readers. I am constantly aware of the fact that most commercial writers want to 'do something serious' while most serious writers want to be 'accepted commercially'. Perhaps multimedia/internet forms will provide an accessible, all-encompassing format.

Significantly, Morrison suggests that novelists look to the internet as the future publishing arena. What can be done in a million-dollar production CD-ROM can be done on the web for almost nothing (apart from the cost of the time spent by the writer/producer/designer/actors/filmmakers/etc). The era of individual hard-copy distribution (i.e. traditional publishing via bookshops) may be coming to a close. From their writing stations in garrets, kitchens and studies, novelists will be able to publicise and sell their work. Additionally, publishers will continue to move into web bookshops, offering to individual writers the publicity power of established web links to promote individual titles. There's nothing new in this. It's the same as the difference between self-publishing today and having a recognised publisher/distributor handle your work.

Costello is aware that with immanent technological developments 'electronic text may be read much like it is in print if electronic books mimic printed books'. The sit-at, non-portable monitor screen looks destined to be a momentary cul-de-sac along this highway of change. As Birkets points out (in *The Gutenberg Elegies*) there have been only three great eras for the narrative: the oral, the printed, and the electronic. In my opinion, the movement from the oral to the printed era involved only cosmetic changes for the makers of narrative. I predict that the movement from the printed

to the electronic era will involve again only superficial reorientations for stroytellers. But in that reorientation (as with the Gutenberg experience) some of the essential aspects of narrative-building will become clearer and more available for exploitation/use/consumer accessibility.

Novelists make narrative by whatever means. Storymaking and storyreceiving seem to be unavoidable human behaviours. The seeking of air, food, shelter, sex and story has not diminished in intensity through centuries of technological change. In this list, 'story' is the odd one out because it looks like something we could survive without. But, as the consequences of book-burning activities by totalitarian regimes show, story involves the key concept of cultural identity for the presently living. What point is there in being, if we don't know who we are? Novelists need not feel intimidated by contemporary technological change. The story survived the printing press, and turned it into a winner, because the printing press was one of the story's natural homes, just as the tribal campfire had been. The computer and the internet are equally home to the story. The present technological situation for the narrative may be compared with selling the old home or campsite, and moving into a different, up-dated neighbourhood.

The title of Costello's insightful article - 'The Getting of Meaning' - suggests that something may be lost in this process of moving to the new technology site. I'm sure that Costello is being ironic here, but the point is worth dwelling on. Firstly, why should wisdom only be associated with a process whereby parts of trees and/or recycled rubbish, marked with pigment derived from vegetables and mined minerals, and stuck together with cotton or glue, end up on the shelves and in the hands of a discerning readership? Secondly, and I think this is Costello's point, why should wisdom not be associated with gamma radiation available through turning on a switch, pressing buttons, and paying the electricity bill? Clearly, a lot of what has come to us via television screens has been decidedly lacking in wisdom. It has established for the radiation media a reputation for superficial treatments and, above all else, superficial entertainment. But is this the case because serious writing has been slow to move from its decreasingly comfortable print-medium niche? My reading is that Costello is asking serious writers to get moving, to see the broader picture as Morrison has done, to go with the flow as storytellers had to do in the fifteenth century. Perhaps this is not a problem related to the future so much as it is a problem related to the past.

I don't think novelists need necessarily to write for the future in small chunks in a way much different from how they write at present, but I do agree that the culture of the novelist has to change to accommodate the big chunk, the changing frame of novel writing.

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LETTERS AND DEBATE

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