

A Book Author's Thoughts and Dreams About Digital Writing. Interview with Noel Baker

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Abstract

Noel Baker is the author of the best selling *Hard Core Roadshow: A Screenwriter's Diary*, a book about the shift of a book into a script for a film. Noel has also been interested in interactive fiction. He served as a consultant in seminars on interactive fiction. Roberto Simanowski asked him why he never himself wrote an interactive fiction, what he thinks about the readers' relationship to linearity and disorder, about his desire to shift a book into a new media work, and about the financial and technological limitations in digital writing.

dd: Noel, you are well known as the author of the best selling *Hard Core Roadshow: A Screenwriter's Diary* from 1997. It is less known that you have made forays into the field of digital writing, having served as a consultant in seminars on interactive fiction. What was the aim of these seminars and what was your role in them?

NB: My experience in new media is limited, frankly, to 'using' (why does it sound like an illicit drug?) and to - as you have it - consulting. I'll point out that this came about while I was teaching screenwriting at the Canadian Film Centre in Toronto (this is an elite film school, Canada's rough equivalent of the American Film Institute in LA). In the late '90s, the CFC opened its Habitat New Media Program to train students in the arts and techniques of digital storytelling. In 2000 I was invited to join the Habitat faculty as a storytelling consultant. The idea was that a screenwriter implicitly understands how to bridge the gap between the written word and the image, how to tell stories in pictures, and how to 'play with time,' writing in a story mode built on 'cuts' between moments.

Students in the program (most are sophisticated people in their 30s with diverse professional and creative backgrounds) form teams and develop prototypes for story-oriented new media projects. The focus is on 'digital interactive storytelling' -

which as we all know is a great-sounding phrase that barely hints at the minefield of contradictions and complexities of a practice that often feels more like a proposition than an actual artform. Through two terms in this program, I gave student teams feedback and advice, usually at pains to remind them that technology that permits the user to navigate a story-world spatially is a great innovation but it doesn't exempt the artist from delivering the emotional and intellectual satisfactions that we demand from more conventional forms of 'story.' I used to repeat Billy Wilder's dictum for screenwriters and movie directors: "Never be boring."

dd: The option of alternative navigation in hypertext has been enthusiastically welcomed in the late 80's and during the 90's. It failed to convince the audience, and even scholars don't all see the future of digital writing in the link anymore. As Tim Parks states in his article "Tales Told by the Computer" in *The New York Review of Books* in October 2002 about our ambiguous relationship to alternative and linearity: "The mind's frequent yearning for a freedom from linearity, often expressed in the nonchronological ordering of events in the text, is held in fruitful tension with (indeed expressed through) the implacable forward movement of the numbered pages. A desire to be outside time, free from linearity, can only be expressed within time and the bounds of the line." Do we, longing for an alterable world, at least want it to be described in a well-designed unalterable way?

NB: I think we're all curious about new ways of seeing and thinking and reading. Brion Gysin and William Burroughs experimented fifty years ago with 'cut up' fictions, essentially texts written in which sections or lines were cut from one place and pasted elsewhere, to see what surprising narrative turns and insights might be yielded by an experiment in guided randomness. But even finished cut-ups unfold in linear sequence. The Surrealist Andre Breton developed the Surrealist parlour game called "The Exquisite Corpse," in which one 'player' would write the first three words of a sentence - an article, an adjective, and a noun - and then fold the paper over so that the next player could not see it. The next player would write a verb, an article and an adjective... and the next player would finish the sentence with a noun. The paper would be unfolded to reveal surprising nonsense sentences (or surprisingly good poetry). For example: "The exquisite corpse drinks the new wine." As long as there were enough people to participate, these were alterable sentences; yet the finished products were still lines that we read from left to right. Clearly, we are readers and viewers in a structurally-bound world. Writing and films are unavoidably expressions rooted in time and the bounds of the line.

The question is, can we create well-designed alterable stories on the computer? People who know much more about this than I do have probably thought about the nature of time and perception as they consider these questions. So I'm probably just following others whom I haven't read when I guess that the solution probably lies in adding verticality to the horizontal narrative model, making an x-y graph out of the

idea of 'story.' Can this more multi-dimensional model free us from the idea of the link as a digression along the horizontal line? Perhaps we'll get used to viewing multiple screens of text and image, with narrative possibilities unfolding simultaneously. Mike Figgis's "Time Code" film (with its four-way split screen) was an interesting early experiment in this area.

dd: "Hard Core Roadshow" is about taking a book and turning it into a script, which in turn becomes a film. Could you imagine taking a book and turning it into a piece of digital writing? Could you imagine creating such a piece from scratch?

NB: This is an interesting question: would a writer with experience adapting literature for relatively mainstream movies see an upside to adapting literature for digital media? Yes, perhaps, in the case of short fiction, no in the case of the novel or longer narrative nonfiction.

Short fiction or poetry - from the traditional short story, to experimental microfictions, ficto-criticism, poems, short literary collages, and perhaps comic books and graphic novels - might lend themselves to new media adaptation precisely because the conciseness of these forms limits the user's interactive options and contains the experience to a matter of minutes rather than hours. I also think that, from a production standpoint, there's a do-ability factor in these shorter forms (in terms of visual and sound production, hypertext options, narrative branching) that might prove far too epic an undertaking in the case of the novel. In terms of economics, such projects are likelier to be financed in an arts-grant context than as commercially underwritten entertainments with a profit motive. From an art-making standpoint, there's a lot of freedom available to the adapter of short fiction as long as there's no commercial imperative to be 'popular.'

With comics or graphic novels, there may be some more commercial potential, especially if the narrative experience contains game or puzzle elements. (By the way, Roberto, this story-or-game-or-puzzle distinction strikes me as a major conundrum in the semantics of new media classification, since the popular audience seems to want interactivity to mean 'play').

Why can't I imagine adapting the traditional novel (in any genre or stratum of 'literariness') for new media when I have done so and will do so again for film? First the simple economics: who's paying the adapter? The grant-supported artist, or the new media explorer adapting a short fiction as a labour of love, can fulfill a variety of expressive goals where the time invested is relatively short and production costs are relatively low. In long-form adaptations, where is the money going to come from to finance a complex, labour-intensive piece of work that could take years to develop? As a writer, I don't see a living in it yet because I don't see much of an audience-base (unless, again, we're talking about games with a modicum of narrative complexity). There is an established industry and market for games. There is at best curiosity about the potential for digital stories among some culture-

forward types but as yet no broad market. Outside of gaming, people seem to prefer their entertainment to wash effortlessly over them, like film or television - lie-back as opposed to lean-forward experiences. I suspect that average people checking out digital storytelling will wonder where their reward is (i.e., is there a victory to be had? A point total? A new personal best?). When they see that they are not playing a game, and that the reward is the experience itself, they'll bail, finding it to be more 'work' than 'play.'

As to the question of creating original new media work... of course I could see doing this. Of course, I'd have to take my populist inclinations into consideration and perhaps try to aim high in a low genre, like the mystery, to create something like the new media analog to Godard's "Alphaville". I would want to do more than arouse the idle curiosity of the user, I would want to give her a stake in the story. I would probably create a puzzle element, something to solve. But for me, this is where things get fuzzy - at what point are you really designing an elaborate game?

dd: *Roadshow* provides great insight into the commercial world of scriptwriting, one of the hardest is that there are many people who have the final say on what the screenwriter creates. Do you see a comparison between this connection of text and film, and the connection of text and technology in digital writing, where the writer does equally rely on many aspects of a complex setting and may have to give in to the progamer who has the final word about how something can be rendered on screen?

NB: Certain production realities have always influenced the writing of films. In the Habitat program, the same considerations were always coming into play in the creation of digital story prototypes. Did the programmer have the 'final say'? It was usually more of a collaborative process. It would depend on the talents of the programmer and the limits and capabilities of the technology. "We can do this with Flash, we can do that shooting digital video, we don't have the time or money to shoot a stack of fifteen versions of this 'scene' but maybe we can do three...." You see what I mean? Where physical production or rendering come into play, whether in new media or film, the writer and his/her collaborators often have to make narrative adjustments and improvisations to take technological or physical limitations into account.

In writing the screenplay for "Hard Core Logo" - adapted from an experimental novel by author Michael Turner - I had to 'show' what the book had 'told.' I had to create a dramatic context and invent incidents to illustrate things that the book might have glossed or summarized. Sometimes, on a limited budget, the screenwriter has to rework a script because the production cannot afford a particular location, or cannot afford a particular stunt. Sometimes a scene that you'd like to set in a moving car has to be set somewhere else because the production cannot afford to lock off a city road, or hire elaborate camera-car equipment.

Generally a screenwriter must take into account whether she is writing a modestly budgeted independent film or a big-budget Hollywood film. I've done both (my Hollywood film is in the works at any rate). Lower budgeted films offer creative freedoms in terms of theme and character that you don't get in Hollywood films; big budget Hollywood films offer freedoms in terms of writing for an epic scale that are not there at low budget levels. The writer also takes into account the tastes and demands of a director and actors, which are sometimes at odds with one's own. Perhaps it is only the novelist or poet who has complete and total control over her work.

dd: What would be a screen writer's dream for digital media?

NB: Rather than adaptation, I am much more interested in the idea of the emergence of an original new media genius who makes a life's work of constructing an absorbing experience that is created specifically FOR the computer, that perhaps (when the technology exists) fulfills a *Hamlet On the Holodeck*-type of potential, drawing the experiencer into a simulated environment that all at once delivers the aesthetic arrest of symphony, literature, film, theatre, tea ceremony, and any other ritual construction you can think of.

To this extent I've heard of this film/television/new media project by Peter Greenaway that sounds interesting. There's an enticing description of it from the project's website at www.tulseuper.net:

Peter Greenaway's work in progress, *The Tulse Luper Suitcase* Trilogy, is an ever-expanding series of simultaneous divergent incomplete elements that (as is Greenaway's wont) will probably demonstrate the (impossible) attempt to express the infinity of representations that comprise the whole world. It will incorporate many media forms: three feature films, a TV series, two CD-Roms, 1001 (of course) Internet stories, and it will take place simultaneously in many cities throughout the world.

Sounds like a step in the right direction to me.

dd: Let's see if a star from the old media can show us the way. Thank you for the interview.