

Coding the Alphabet

essays about digital writing

Matt Briggs

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Acknowledgments

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Shot Gun Publishing

Toward the end of December last year a heavy brown envelope arrived from Northern Ireland decorated with gold foil postal stamps of angles under blue halos. I found a contract attached to a boiler plate letter addressed to “Dear Author.”

Domhan Books Contract

First English Language Paperback Edition

This agreement between Domhan Books and the Author in regards to the name and the name of the manuscript “Personal Archaeology” by Matt Briggs with original cover by S. McNally shall be considered legal and binding in all countries.

I had never heard of Domhan Book. My name is Matt Briggs and *Personal Archaeology* was the name of a manuscript I had been shuffling around my desk for almost five years. I had no idea how they found my manuscript, although the name S. McNally was familiar. I had contacted Siobhan McNally, a British agent at Island Literary Agency, almost a year before. If this was the same agent, I thought, it odd that she

hadn't contacted me about a publishing company's interest in the book.

To test the book's ISBN, I went to Barnesandnoble.com. I scored a hit. My novel had been published in November 1998, a month before Domhan Books sent me the contract. I imagined in a moment of delirium as I looked at the flickering title of my book that copies filled Barnes & Noble worldwide. I called the University District store to see if they stocked the book. "Who is the author?" they asked. "Matt Briggs," I said. "We can order it," they said. I called Elliott Bay Bookstore; they could special order the book. I called my local Magnolia Bookstore; they could have a copy in her store by the end of the week.

A confusing series of corporate mergers and new technology had propelled Domhan Book's products from virtual books distributed from the web to printed books stocking the shelves of the planet's two largest bookstores. The agent I had originally contacted, after agreeing to represent a number of writers, found conventional publishers unresponsive, so she bought an existing publishing company named Domhan Books. She took her catalog of books to LightningPrint, a Memphis company that produces books-on-demand. LightningPrint operates a press that generates finished books in just under three minutes from digital files—a process that promises to streamline book production with the precision

McDonald's applies to sandwiches. Ingram, North America's largest book distributor, bought LightningPrint. Barnes & Noble, in turn, bought Ingram, and according to S. McNally, Barnes & Noble asked Ingram to make all of the Lightningprint titles under consideration available by Christmas 1998. Thus Domhan Book's entire catalog went from digital manuscript to perfect bound books.

I ordered my book from Barnesandnoble.com. After work the next day, I my paperback novel shrink-wrapped to a piece of cardboard stuck in a FedEx box on my front porch. My book, which I had sent into cyberspace many months before and it returned bound and with cover art that looked like a bad computer scan of a Hardy Boy's jacket.

Disturbing things had happened to my manuscript. The first chapter had been rewritten. In the description of my principal character, someone had added, "But he was certainly an interesting figure. Now that he had come out, I could see he was more powerful than I had at first imagined." New paragraphs appeared throughout the book as well as cuttings indicated by ellipses as if my entire manuscript had been poorly quoted in someone's term paper.

I became angry about how haphazardly this had occurred. The mechanics of the situations worked so smoothly, but how poor is the publicity for a book if the author is not even aware the book has been published?irate, I went to Barnesandnoble.com and

posted a glowing review of my own book. As William Styron, author of *Sophie's Choice*, I posted, "Five Stars. Amazing First Novel. Simply, I was blown away."

S. McNally responded to my work almost a year previous to the contract arriving in the mail. I found her in on-line database of literary agents that included the names of famous agents like Amy Tan's agent, Sandra Dijkstra. She liked the book and asked if I minded if she posted the book to her website while she looked for a conventional publisher.

I didn't hear anything else from the Island Literary Agency. I periodically checked on my book and it just sat there; the website growing dustier and duster into the summer and then the site disappeared. I've posted dozens of things on the web and the collapse of a website is just as silent as the disappearance of print magazines, however, instead of outdated copies, the website leaves a trail of broken links.

I found a publisher for my book of short stories, *The Remains of River Names*, with Black Heron Press a publisher that published books I admired. I began yet another revision of *Personal Archeology*, now, with the energy of knowing it would have a chance of getting published. An occasional letter came back from an editor or agent. One agent said that while they liked my novel, publishers don't publish fiction anymore. This is the space I'm used to working in. I work on something until I like it, and send it out; much more often than not, it is like throwing a stone into the sea. I

never hear anything again. This time, the sea threw the stone back.

I found S. McNally's website for Domhan Books and e-mailed her asking to remove the book from her website, to return all printed copies to me, and to pass along all financial information to me. She responded that she had added value to the book by printing it, by having it professionally edited and that she wouldn't return it to me, but that she would pull the book from her website.

When people saw that my book's publication wasn't a good thing, they asked me, are you going to sue? It hadn't occurred to me that I could do this. Sue? Suing implied that I had a valuable commodity instead of a wad of typescript I had been farting around with for five years. I had intellectual property and this agent turned publisher had published my book and taken my property.

I went to the legal clinic in the old Vance building in downtown Seattle run by the Washington State Lawyers for the Arts. I presented the documents and the situation to a lawyer; he adjusted his glasses and said, well, the situation was too complicated for him, as this involved copyright law. While yes she definitely didn't have any legal right to publish the work as I had never signed a contract, or even seen a publishing contract for that matter; however she could pose an argument, however weak, that she had the right to distribute the electronic copy from her website.

S. McNally did remove the work from her website and at the heart of the matter, I don't think she was attempting to exploit her authors. Really there was very little money to be made. I believe she was possessed by the possibility of the digital delivery system. As someone who works on web pages and publishes on the web, myself, I understand this urge for instant communication. Except books are not instant units of information. They take a long time to write. They take a long time to read.

“One final point,” S. McNally wrote to me on New Year's Eve, “I would like to mention is not to waste people's time contacting them and asking them to represent your work if you have no intention of using their professional expertise. YOU contacted me, gave me info, and the bio, and so on, not the other way around, and my time, money, and effort could certainly have been better bestowed upon more grateful authors who are serious about getting published.”

At most, I had asked her to represent my work, not to publish it. Certainly, I want the work to finally get into the world, but the end is for the work to be read rather than just published. Regardless, it is confounding that a book can escape so rapidly from the wordprocessor and into the bookstore.

Gutenberg's Codex

A guy I met on the internet invited me to an evening of cocktails and interactive readings. It was a fundraiser for the Electronic Literature Organization. I knew this. But, I expected a gathering in a basement, in someone's ranch style bungalow, a card table maybe with salsa and chips, and intellectual gibberish about interface design or the aesthetics of hard vs. soft branches. I've been following hyperfiction since 1995 (not long sure, but remember this is a genre whose seminal works were only written thirteen years ago). So far, in the genre, I haven't experienced anything that works as well as the Atari 2600 version of *Adventure*. Hyperfiction has all been, up to this point, digital versions of choose-your-own adventure books, that were themselves failed attempts at translating role-playing games. Even hypertext classics such as Michael Joyce's *afternoon, a story*, presents hard branches (i.e., a user makes conscious decisions). Hyperfiction as a genre feels primitive and remains awkwardly self-aware. I remain skeptical that text can coexist with a four-dimensional, graphic, interactive environment.

Regardless, I await my conversion into one of the digitally faithful. I suspect that any day someone will present a hyperfiction masterpiece as defining of the new world of literature as *Don Quixote* was for the printed word. So I went to the party to get myself informed.

I consider a literary party swanky if people bring wine in bottles with corks, formal if there is something to eat, and snooty if there is a bartender. Money just isn't associated with anything literary. At literary functions, like an author reading in the near empty, clammy basement of the Elliott Bay Book Company, I always feel as if I belong to a social club supporting an obscure interest, like Crimean war veterans. It's become pretty clear to me that living literature takes place in basements and off-night bars. It is not a central part of the economic life of any city. Writing done by living people, living outside of Brooklyn is diabolically difficult to find.

In reading the directions to the party, I was confused by the directive that I might want to take the shuttle from a nearby elementary school. I thought perhaps somebody had brought their van. I was late and I figured I'd walk. A thirty-six seat bus idled in the parking lot. The driver opened the door and asked me, "You'd like a lift up the hill?"

The house sat on a wooded slope about five minutes from Microsoft's main campus in a development of massive houses squeezed onto tiny lots. From the front

door, I could see the white and grey choppy surface of Lake Sammamish through the massive, second growth Douglas Fir. A smiling woman handed out name tags at the door. A staff wearing white vests and black slacks tended to the cheese-trees and the bottles of wine. How much? I asked. The bartender didn't know what I was asking. I took two glasses and wandered around the room holding them in front of me as if I were carrying them to someone. I looked for the guy I'd met on the internet. I read name tags and couldn't find him as I was unsure exactly what he might look like from the small photo on his website. Microsoft people from Cleartype and Slate milled around. They had their names written neatly on their tags: Amy Griswald / Cleartype. That's how I knew who they were. They mixed and planted business cards into each other's pockets.

Finally, I recognized a profile from the photo and edged my way through a locked-in huddle of Slate people. Before I could reach him, he stood up on the stone fireplace and nervously cleared his throat. He explained the occasion for the gathering. It was to get support and ask for money for the "Electronic Literature Organization." He explained the premium levels. He apologized and said that this was the first time he'd done this. Everyone leaned forward to listen and nodded as if to say, "You're doing fine." The highest donation received a copy of Richard Bangs' book (whose house this all was taking place in). Mr.

Bangs raised a copy of his book into the air. He'd be happy to sign his book.

They ushered us downstairs, finally, to witness actual electronic literature, so that we could know where our money was going. Dressed in construction outfits, *Invisible Seattle* set out to build a novel from contributions from people they had solicited on street corners and at Seattle's Bumbershoot arts festival. In the mid-80s, realizing that a computerized bulletin-board system would automate the process, they moved everything to a system of networked computers. Staring distantly into the misty pre-IPO past, the performance troupe announced, "We invented the internet. We just didn't know it." Shelley Jackson, the author of the classic hyperfiction, *Patchwork Girl*, fumbled with her laptop as she guided the audience through an electronic exploration of a digital space she called "My Body." "It is my body," she said. "What would you like to see?" To handle the interactive element of the hypertext, she asked the audience shout out links. By this time the fourth glass of wine and my nervousness at not having a business card had trickled into the cold skin behind my ears. I wanted to yell out choices that weren't hyperlinked. I wanted some true interactivity. Some women sat on the stairs and when they saw me brushing up the walls toward the top, said, "We'll move," but before they could get their legs under, them I stepped over them nearly knocking them over. Finally at the top of the stairs, I

met the guy. “An interesting set up,” I said. He nodded. I asked about his day-job. He’d quit his day job for the website where he worked. “So what are you doing now?”

“This is it,” he said. He nodded his head. He edged past me and said, “Get another glass of wine and hang out.” He went down the stairs and I climbed back on the bus and the bus took me down to the steep parking lot. I schemed on the way down the hill. If he could get corporate sponsors, how could I get corporate sponsors? I didn’t feel disgust at selling-out, but amazement that there was something to sell.

Technology is fueled by cash; and so then, writing as a form of technology can also be fueled by cash.

The alphabet, the Carolingian minuscule, moveable type, have all been technological advances. However each new advance can initially only be understood through the lens of the old. It takes several generations for artists to catch up. It took forty years after the advent of movable type for Aldus Manutius to develop a typographic aesthetic that exploited the new medium. Until then, book manufacturers attempted to make their books look like hand-scribed tomes. To quote Robert Coover quoting George P. Landow in *The New York Times* essay “The End of the Book,” “Electronic text processing marks the next major shift in information technology after the development of the printed book. It promises (or threatens) to produce effects on our culture, particularly in our

literature, education, criticism, and scholarship, just as radical as those produced by Gutenberg's moveable type." An organization like the Electronic Literature Organization wants to be one of the first on the block to understand what the effects are, or if possible, to help develop the aesthetic.

They have unwittingly (or wittingly, I should give credit because I wish I'd thought of it) discovered that by closely fusing computer software (that is digital technology) and literature a literary-commercial hybrid has been created that requires computer hardware and software to read and write. The fusion of software with literature allows for speculative investors to venture capital on books, because no longer are we dealing with a code as mundanely open source as the alphabet arranged into meaningful and literary patterns. Electronic books are written with patented code.

In a recent qualification of his evangelical support of hypertext, Robert Coover wrote at Feed.com, "in terms of serious literature, the web has not been very hospitable. It tends to be a noisy, restless, opportunistic, superficial e-commerce-driven, chaotic realm, dominated by hacks, pitchmen, and pretenders, in which the quiet voice of literature cannot easily be heard or if heard by chance, attended to for more than a moment or two." After leaving the ELO fundraiser, I trolled through their web-site to maybe uncover something I'd missed. Surely they included some

aesthetic mumbo jumbo on their site? Instead of finding information about literature, the site was chock full of press releases from publishing companies launching partnerships with software companies. The site is less a scholarly review than a trade magazine. In many ways this is the literature of the future. Business will be the literature of the future. At a symposium titled, "Technology Platforms for 21st Century Literature" Coover said, "Part of the concern for this symposium is that as we leave behind the printed page and [their] commitment to the line, and enter into this multidirectional, multilinear space, which is more vague in its outlines, we enter into problems about the impact of literature." Perhaps he should have also asked the question that as writers abandon the alphabet for code, which manufacturer will provide the underlying operating system? Because that's not the kind of stock I want to own.

A Hypertext Alphabet

“Before them, on the screen... in an orange computer font—Garamond Antigua—were the twenty-six letters of the English alphabet, as perfect and simple as atoms must have seemed when Democritus (she thought) imaged them, those simple squiggles of which arguments were formed, those squiggles that divided houses and united them, that were arranged into words intoned over baptisms and death... Words were civilization!” Rick Moody, *Purple America*, 1997

The mnemonic song of the alphabet is probably the only song I sing I sing every day. Every time I use the mailboxes at work, I run across the first letter of the person’s last name and I sing the ABCs to place Gilland, abcdefG and I place I can find there the slot. Otherwise, it could be anywhere.

The alphabet book teaches letter shapes and sounds and help students map the written language to their spoken language. Alphabet books, these simple structures are Rosette stones for the illiterate, transferring them from the purely oral world to the written one.

An alphabet book lists and illustrates the entire alphabet. It provides a context for the alphabet and in this sense it is the fusion of technology with human behavior; speech is a natural outgrowth like hands for information, but the alphabet is a prosthetic to speech, removing the necessary human voice, in a long line of letters.

I don't believe I had ever seen a lion or outrage or xylophone or unicorn before I began to learn to read, but then I'd also never heard an A separate from an E—suddenly speech revealed that words could be broken down into mysterious parts, as startling as the discovery years later that human bodies broke down into bone and organs and blood.

I remember writing my last name on the chalk board in school. Five of us stood under the tall, dusty slate while Mr. Johnson, the husband of the couple that taught my kindergarten class, patiently called out the letters to my name. B and I sang the song, shooting past the first character, ABCDEFG.. AB and then I pictured the letter and traced out its shape on the wide dusty space. R and I stumbled down the row of letters, abdcdfghijklmnopR to R for Briggs and slowly I moved through my name and it seemed like such work and confusing because outside it was sunny and the sky was filled with puffy white clouds headed toward the Cascade Mountains and the piles of orange leaves that would crunch when I stepped on them filled the deep crevices of the maple tree roots and I stood inside

under the green slate with its long wooden dish filled with decades of chalk dust and my fingers were sore from gripping the point of the white chalk like a canine tooth and I sang out the alphabet to write my name abcdefghI. And when my name stood out on the board, I recognized the shape and I felt myself pull my lips around those dangling gs and the trailing slope of my S – BRIGGS – which was me and there I was on the green slate in the room under the flickering florescent lights. There you are, Mr. Johnson said and I sat back in my seat.

I had the alphabet and now I had my name and I went home to claim everything with words in it. I wrote my name, MATT BRIGGS on the loose leaf side of every book in the black bookcases my uncle had made for my mother.

I have a callous on my index finger from writing. It developed in the first grade, leaving splotches of blood on the bluish wide ruled paper I used to practiced the wide loops of my Palmer Script. I labored over each letter of the alphabet, grounding the song into my brain and the shape of the words into my fingers.

Presented here is a hypertext Alphabet Book. With the ABCs and the spoken word names of the characters. Explore it for a minute and I think you will find that in mapping spoken language to written language, we are building what Joyce calls the ABCDE-minded, the linear mind. It may be an artificial construct, but two thousand years have refined a

powerful mnemonic tool that hypertext can only parody.

Side Bar

The alphabetic principal is how spoken language is mapped into written language.

1) Significant amount of variance in understanding of the alphabetical principal can be explained by phonemic awareness and letter name knowledge.

2) These two variables do not do a very good job of explaining the variance in scores measuring children's understanding of the orthographic patterns of written English. Phonemic awareness rarely developed in the absence of the letter name knowledge. Instructionally the implications are that experimentation with paper and pen may be as important to the literary development of children as reading.

Crash Printing

A profile of Paul Hunter's Wood Works Press

Paul Hunter operates Wood Works' press from his basement in Fremont on a vintage, 1904, Chandler and Price letter press. His books are hand pressed with hand set type in hand bound books. Recent volumes include, Marion Kime's *Whirled*, Charlie Burks' *Gauze, Violins, Etc.*, and Mark Svenvold's *Death of the Cabaret Hegel*.

I used to live on Paul's side edge of Phinney Ridge, and remember wondering who lived in his flaking grey house as I passed on my way to the bus. Coated with peeling slate paint, the turn of the century bungalow perches on the muddy edge of the ridge digging its basement into the hillside. A lot of things go on in Seattle basements. Some things you don't want to know about. I imagine that the Northwest's old preeminence in the hemp trade came out of these basements with plants being tested for potency and cross pollinated with potent species across town. Under halide lights the odor of old coal and wood

stores and the THZ content grew. Seattle music guy Steve Fisk talks about how he used to go down into his basement when it was raining to just make noise. And Paul Hunter goes down into his basement to print simply constructed and durable books.

This last May, he showed me around his basement and chewed my ear off about his press, do-it-yourself printing, technology and the modern bookstore. He'd been printing the *Death of the Cabaret Hegel*, by Mark Svenvold, and the stack of books rose out of a box; the spine of each one slightly varied from the last, the title set with garamond and the cover art, a wood block print, on red Frabriano stock.

His chapbooks are not like anything produced by the commercial or even the non-profit publishing world. For one thing they aren't like any of the chapbook's I've held, typically stapled xeroxes promoting next year's chapbook contest. Wood Works' chapbooks are a simple answer to the absence of any printed matter in the middle ground between the sloppy here - this - week - never - heard - from - again xeroxed 'zine and the heavily subsidized academic softcover poetry books. Paul Hunter's books feel well built. Paul intends the books to be held and read and kept in a reader's library for a while. Wood Works has published a strong representation of some of the more accessible and talented Seattle poets.

Handling one of his chapbooks I understood why Paul feels that something is wrong with the publishing

world. He said the industry has been locked in the same model of merchandising since the 18th century. Books are marketed through the corporate American parody of the quaint neighborhood book store, Crown, Waldenbooks, B. Dalton. “The book market is terrible because the purpose of publication is not served strictly by the making of money,” Paul said. Media conglomerates own most publishers. They want to keep new product on the shelves, so the industry pulps books much more rapidly than in the past. But readers often go to a bookstore just three times a year to buy books. “Hell, it isn’t serving any other purpose than the making of money and isn’t even going a great job of that. Bookstores should be treated differently as far as inventory goes.” Books should remain on the shelves as long as there is any potential demand. Paul mentions a friend who bought a book, new and off the shelf, at Blackstone’s in London. The book had been published in 1803.

Our libraries are developing into the same problem. In the past, before the library became a source of current information, it also had a function as “a reservoir of the past” where readers could find out of print books and find the real, the old, and the authentic. Books are an *appropriate technology*, he said. Books printed and stored on shelves are the appropriate technology for libraries. He showed me a book, a menagerie of letter from A to Z, that had been hand set by Frederic Goudy’s wife. On each page, I

could feel the impact of the type gouged into the paper by the press and the force of her arm. This book had been discarded from its Colorado library as if it had reached an expiration date.

Over and over again Paul Hunter said, “Appropriate technology.” I wasn’t sure what he meant. Of course, he talked rapidly about how he saw letter press working in relation to technology and I’m nodding, sure, but I wondered what he meant by appropriate technology? Any new technology is better than any old technology, isn’t it? Faster, more efficient, cheaper? Too often we assume that the most recent innovation will serve as the best method. This is progress, in with the new out with the old. But the Green Revolution swept the entire world in years following World War II. Third World countries and relief agencies pumped pesticides and fertilizers and genetically compliant crops to the four corners of the planet and within forty years, countries like India while producing more grain have also lost a rich and varied genetic history of rice species. They lost something like several thousands crops and now have six or so corporate backed species. This is progress. Likewise, in the publishing industry the old, inefficient model of editors who sorted through drek and slush piles while fostering authors with small print runs and modest advances, in order to build a larger print culture, has been replaced by Acquisitions Editors. These mega-multimedia corporate employees buy relatively little product with

publicity-sized advances. For instance Nicholas Evan's million dollar advance kills maybe forty other first time books. They pump more product and less content through efficient supermall bookstores and apparently earn more money. This is progress. Where are the advances in communication technology leading us? I hesitate to say that they empower the individual to speak or even earn much money, as in the silly cartoon AT&T ad with the furniture as widget designer selling his oblong chairs to the now desolate, overpopulated and starving four corners of the Green Revolutionized earth. Technology, specifically something like the Web, has a built in self-praise factor, claiming a need for the user to keep current on itself, except that it contains nothing except ads for itself.

Wood Works' chapbook are pure content from the words to the texture of the words gouged into the paper. They are plainly set in a clear body typeface. Paul has taken time in their design and construction. A hand built chapbook is indeed the appropriate technology for a bundle of related poems that add up to something. I can sit down with this artifact, under a tree and away from any electrical socket and telephone transmission, and make sense out of what a Wood Works' poet like Charlie Burks has to say.

In designing his books, Paul Hunter believes in introducing the elements of his book quietly. He said, "Only monumental books should the bastard title across both pages." With his chapbooks, he has the

half title on the first right page and an illustration on the facing page. His books aren't monumental or self-promotional but simply deliver the printed word in clean hand-set type. Paul plans making a portion of upcoming Wood Works editions in hardback. He said, mainly to satisfy the needs of collectors. "I'm just not fussy about books because they get used. They're tools."

Wood Works publishes broadsides in addition to chapbooks. "Broadsides are public pieces, things you will have to live with," Paul said. His print run is usually 300-800 and if it sells out, he's willing to do a new laser printed run. "Sam Hamill at Copper Canyon press used to do that in the early days." An upcoming project is the *Art of Poetry* by Lin He-Jing translated by Paul Hansen. Another upcoming book is *Driving & Drinking* by David Lee.

He returned this last spring from Colorado with a Chandler and Price. It's a gigantic turn of the century cast-iron machine that looks like it forms rail road spikes from molten steel. His model survived a fall from a loading dock. One arm has a vein of flash where it was soldered and welded back together. These presses have remained virtually the same since the 1850s. They were in commercial use as late as the 1950s. The only significant change has been in the spokes. The earlier model has a curl to the spoke and the new model is straight. New means those built after

1905. My MAC will be lucky to last a twentieth of the Chandler and Price's age.

He also has a small table top press, a Victor, which weighs about a hundred and twenty pounds. He once used the Victor in the classroom and it was the first press he started to print books on.

The chase is the metal frame for the type holder. Lifting it up feels like hefting an old cast iron plate for a Franklin stove – the set type lays flat across the surface and you see the texture of the rows in reverse, in metal. Traditional typesetters don't use more than a quarter of the plate but Paul uses the whole thing in order get the maximum page size off his table top Victor and the Chandler and Price.

It takes Paul eight hours to set a single poem, with three to four hours of that jostling around with the make-ready. The make-ready is a process where he evens the type and fine-tunes the impression. Even through Paul sets his type on a smooth sheet of leaded glass, the initially impression comes out uneven, leaving unregistered letters. He places sheets of tissue on the flat surface of the platen to raise the level of the text, using the make-ready imprint to map out where the ink isn't registering and where he needs to increase the padding.

“Crash Printing” describes the denting and embossing of the paper. “For awhile the fashion was to put the ink as light as possible, but I think the denting of the paper, the very slight three dimensionality of the

edge, the contrast between dark and light is the strongest it can be and can't be achieved any other way."

Describing the setting of type he says: "Working in shades of grey, suddenly the scaffolding falls and you can see the whole thing, that sudden reversal is magic; low-contrast to high-contrast."

Paul Hunter is not adverse to technology, but has a respect for the tradition and the physical product of the letter press. In setting a poem, he wanted to break the straight edge of the left margin but he found he lost hours and hours trying to experiment with each layout. He ran upstairs and typed out the entire poem had the layout five minutes later, and then run back downstairs to set the whole thing in another day's labor.

Some of the new type styles excite Paul. He would have bought them for his letterpress if he could find the cast metal faces. He says he's developing some cravings and could easily spend a couple of thousand dollars on type. Although he hasn't outworn his like of garamond. Considering how long it takes to set a single page and the number of books he's already set, it's amazing he hasn't outworn his like of the alphabet. A typeface for the hand press has to be something you won't get sick of.

Paul is considering using photopolymer plates to unite the ease and control of computer typesetting

with the physical production of crash printed books. He can then create the plates using a computer, produce a mirrored photonegative, lay it across the plate and expose it to an UV light source and then wash away the exposed polymer. Re-expose it to the UV the plastic hardens. A letter sized plate costs about ten bucks and is durable enough to be used for embossing.

This is a hybrid technology: it melds a five hundred year old technology with type faces and layout software that didn't exist last season. It would save hours of labor and produce an artifact indistinguishable from traditional letterpress. In a sense this is a violation of what the letterpress has become. They are no longer tools just to generate printed material. Anyone with a photocopier and wordprocessor is in possession of production tools that are more efficient than any of the historical printing process. It's the actual labor of hand laying type and then imprinting the image into a page that adds the weight and permanence to one of Paul's chapbooks.

I find spending the time setting a poem makes me spend more time with the writing in the poem, Paul said. "When I begin to publish work I enter into a dialogue with the writer. I've asked for work. Sometimes people don't get it. Small work is just something on the way to something bigger. With the *Death of the Cabaret Hegel*, I went back and for the with the author. Sometimes I get, 'how about I send you bunch of stuff and you pick out something you like.'

That doesn't work. A chapbook is one thing.
Everything Word Works issues is numbered. We are at
#17."

Paul's been learning and getting more ambitious
and has grown a long way from his first run. #1 reads,
"Set in a jolly mish-mash mash of 10 point century type
mixed up. I had just decided to lay something out and
didn't realize that my type cases were all mixed up. I'd
used them for my classes. Days and days of sorting
type."

Who Codes the Alphabet?

Labels like “hypertext” and “multimedia” show “the principal that produces such names as ‘wireless’ and ‘horseless carriage.’ that long list that illustrates how every innovation must pass through a primary phase in which the new effect is secured by the old method, amplified by some new feature. (1) In this case, hypertext reflects the computers long association with the other machine that used a keyboard, the typewriter. As the medium is fully realized programmers rail against the linear tract of text, the locked in mnemonic of the alphabet with its inane stumbling of letters, why does z follow y follow x and so on? As processor speeds zip forward and internet connections match CD-ROM drives, the two demensionality of the page melts into an environment of information that exists in the third and fourth dimensions—that is cyberspace—a graphical, information environment; exit MULTI and exit MEDIA and exit TEXT.

But I think hypertext as a transitional technology illustrates some interesting differences between print and computer information access.

What is Hypertext?

Hypertext blends the text of the printed book and the responsiveness of the computer. "The essential feature of hypertext, as defined in recent years, is the concept of machine-supported links (both within and between documents). It is this capability which allows a non-linear organization of text." (1) Authors no longer organize text as static cells of information linked like box cars to a structure where readers connect cells through the act of reading, reading becomes an act of building the linearity of the text through navigating through the information space; this breaks the classic linearity of printed text. One effect of this, is that it stresses connection between cells of information rather than the cause and effect relationship between cells of information, that is, in a book one piece of information comes after another suggesting that the first leads to the second or causes the second, but in hypertext each cell of information has a discrete location and lies in relation to other information.

The encyclopedia and the dictionary represent printed versions of hypertext. Arranged alphabetically, the information in these books do not lie in a cause and effect relationship. M does not fall because L has caused M, but rather M follows L in the alphabet.

Information in these books is organized to help access information retrieval. Other topological aids foreshadow hypertext, indexes, glossaries and footnotes expand and link information.

The theory behind the advantage of hypertext is that since basic cognitive skills operate along non-linear paths, and reading and writing both require traveling upward to the linear path of the printed text and then back into the non-linear pool of remembered information, hypertexts are closer to the core of cognition. Hypertexts attempt to exploit the basic nature of human cognitive skills. "Both the reading and writing process emphasize a lot on the non-linear nature of thinking." (2)

4 Dimensional Document Display

The computer demands interactivity. When I approached my first desktop the thing that seemed the most telling was the blinking of the cursor. This wasn't a piece of paper that would accept the mark of a pen, instead this was like a television screen and the machine had to recreate at each instant the image of the cursor, blinking.

The simplest form of interactivity is the offer between two choices, as in the tree fiction. A. Do you follow the smell of the roasting meat? B. Do you open the trap door? limited subset of choices brings the controlling hand of the author into play, in this case the programmer, since the suspension of disbelief

requires uninterrupted involvement in the fantasy scenario.

Soft branches provide, “indirect algorithms that allow more deeply nested and widely interconnected branching.” (11) Thus, the user enters the interactive environment and both unaware of the limit of choices but has completely free reign to act within the environment. Most video games operate in this way, offering the user a limited environment, like a maze, but with-in the confines of the environment the user has complete freedom of movement and choice.

Interactivity becomes more complicated with the addition of ‘agents’, that is the presence of either simulated or real characters presented in real time. Unlike standard fictional characters, agents seem to have the same freedom of movement and action as users. These agents can be other players, as in the many on-line adventure games and or they can be simulated agents, which are computer controlled and at this stage of the technology are pretty wooden.

Furthermore the computer medium liberates the user from the paper constraints of two dimensions. In cyberspace, objects can be three dimensional, and despite the two dimensional display they can be rotated and examined in real time. The user can click through ‘layers’ of a document. The term, ‘multimedia’, is as much a misnomer as ‘horseless carriage’. Sound, three dimensionally, real time, the interconnectedness of information– that is the

immediate access to the past and present real time documents regardless of location in cyberspace are unified in a single display.

Another striking feature of interactivity is the stress this places on real time. In a novel time doesn't really exist. It may take a minute to read a passage that covers thousands of years and it may take several months to read a novel covering a day. However, in the computer medium things happen in actual time. In PAC-MAN, the ghosts follow the user, gradually increasing their pace until the user touches one. But unlike real time, the computer can loop back through past time. Things can be recorded and played back. The information of the past can be stored on the screen as an icon, and selected and played. Time becomes another component to the 'written' document. For instance, in using MS Word, it is possible to 'undo' or 'redo' each of the steps taken in creating a document. Thus, once the steps are recorded, the user can sort through each choice. In MS Word 95, among the standard selections of bold text, underline text, text can be formatted in blinking text—a format that cannot be printed and is limited only to screen display, a display that depends on the element of time to animate the text.

Thus, these are some of the basic capabilities of the medium. Where does that leave Hypefiction? It suggests a multitude of possibilities for fiction, but it doesn't bode well for text much less hypertext. Text in general seems antithetical to the demands of the

medium. For instance, the triumph of the object oriented business desktop, that is the Macintosh desktop, over all of the other operating systems suggests that this kind of iconographic, real time display is more suited to the medium than the odd, and arcane 'real language' displays of MS-DOS or 'Basic'. "While the print medium is designed to be read, text is no more welcome in a presentation than it is on your television or in the movies. . . Restrict the use of type to titles and text bullets that reinforce major points. Any part of the message that can't be communicated through these vehicles should be narrated." (13) Text interactivity just doesn't suite the medium because a user anticipates the upcoming hard branch and usually all of the required information will be presented there, anyway. In short, the required information being 'what are my choices?'"

Is Hyperfiction Fiction?

Hypertext yields to the obvious temptation to recreate fiction, unbound from the apparent shackles of the book's linearity. While it sounds odd to read a dictionary as fiction, hyperfiction promises a fiction that is responsive to the reader, to more or less degrees. The reader (or user) guides the fiction through the information cells. A typical hyperfiction would involve a matrix of discreet cells, each cell comprising a scene, a description, a story fragment, and ending in a branch of choices. This is often called

“tree fiction,” which is a solid framework of branches, thus a narrative line is determined by making choices at each branch, thus excluding some paths. This form has appeared in book form as *Choose-Your-Own-Adventure* books or to a limited extent, books like Nicholson Baker’s *The Mezzanine*, 1988, which used footnotes to expand information.

In the FAQ for Interactive Fiction the low-tech dismissal of this kind of hyperfiction comes through in the definition of “computer adapted story telling: A presentation of different but consistent experiences of the same story. Could be achieved through point of view shift, browse around, or plot branching. (3)” These kinds of fictions have existed in printed form in the past, thus the phrase, “computer adapted” implying some sort of conversion, to which the computer game designer, Chris Crawford replies in response to converting board games to the computer, “they are design bastards, the illegitimate children of two technologies that have nothing in common.” (Crawford, 50) These fictions, when working, barely maintain the illusion of choice. When a branch is presented, usually there are two choices in a situation where there is a multitude of options. For instance, “You in a room filled with books on every conceivable subject. There is a window overlooking the garden. A cello rests against the wall with a piece of paper folded into its strings. A door exits the room. Do you, a) get the note, b) exit room, c) return whence you have

come.” These are the obvious choices of action, but the other possibilities, by the fact that they are denied suddenly scream attention. What is outside the window? Maybe there would be something interesting in the bookshelves? I’m just in this room to get the note, the cello and note could have been in the last room. . . and so on.

The early forms of true-Interactive Fiction have been floating in the primordial soup of college mainframes sine the late 60s, but increasingly the fictions become more suited to the medium, thus offering higher level of interactivity and more sophisticated strategies of maintaining the integrity of the fiction. “There are many forms of Interactive Fiction, but the one thing they have in common is that the reader is allowed some degree of interaction with the story.”(4)

A close cousin of interactive fiction, and the place where the greatest interaction, and thus the greatest suspension of disbelief occurs, in the cyberspace, or Realm– which harkens back to the role-playing game origins of interactive fiction. A cyberspace is an artificial space in which characters interact and explore, determining their own narratives and their own destinies– in essence a simulation of reality, although it can be stylized, fanciful, and bizarre.

Hard branches are the most violent and most intrusive form of interactivity. To make choices requires that the user step back from the document at hand. In the case of fiction, this is just one step too

many. Suddenly, I find myself sitting in front of a computer instead of in some well, crafted and insightfully prepared environment. Then, sitting in front of this computer screen, I realize that these branches don't offer all of the choices I would like. It is impossible to offer enough hard branches to account for the possible choices. "The problem cannot be solved with high capacity storage medium for the limitation is not in the storage medium but in the designer's inability to anticipate every case and condition and to provide proper branches to deal with all allowed cases." (14) The entire experience of the hypertext, hard branch breaks what the fiction author aims for, "what Coleridge called- in one of the most clumsy famous sentences in all literature- "the willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith." (Gardner, 23)

However, object oriented interactive fiction meets many of the demands of the medium, primarily the visual and interactive requirements of the computer. The user exists as an icon in real time in the environment. Thus, branches are offering in a multitude of choices and the user can respond as the branches occur. Thus the data of the story becomes follows "a whole metaphorical world, one in which the user would explore to discover what the computer could do." (16) "In such an environment one object becomes a doppelganger you, just as the piece you

have control over in a board or video game becomes 'you.' (17)

The effect of this is that the narrative falls away and the user is left in a fictional realm. A sort of archaic description of this experience is offering in the *Dungeon's & Dragon's* handbook,

"As details of the dungeon are revealed, the player characters will meet 'monsters' which they will have to avoid, talk to, or fight. A 'monster' is any animal, person, or supernatural creature that is not a player character. A monster may be a ferocious dragon or a humble merchant. For game purposes, any character not a player character is a monster." (18)

Stories, can nevertheless, be told in these realms. But the more developed the narrative, the more limits have to be placed in the way of the environment's interactivity. On one end of the scale there is the pure, realm, can be seen in a crude form in the Atari 2600 game, *Adventure*, where the user could freely wander a maze that opened into rooms. In these rooms, there were things to encounter. A fuller expression of this environment found its expression in *Ultima IV* in which the user could wander and encounter "agents" who directed the user into clearly defined narratives that take place in mazes.

A number of traditional story styles can be told in with these kinds of stories. The most complex would be the picaresque novel, which would be the gradual accumulation of experience and exposure to different

environments. These stories are like the ancient models of Beowulf and Gilgamesh. Furthermore an interactive story allow the user to choose between different narrative sequences and spaces, attempting to draw a meaning out of the juxtaposition of these elements. This would follow the experiments of the “surrealists,” and could achieve some interesting effects.

However, interactive fiction cannot achieve the insight into process that printed fiction can give. “The control of the action is not intellectual, it does not rise out of the essence of things: it discusses reality the way a lecturer does. . . it does not capture process.”

(Gardner, 166) Thus interactive fiction, while it is absorbing the way a game is absorbing, cannot be as aesthetically satisfying as print fiction. “Literate people think of cause and effect as sequential, as if one thing pushed another along by physical force.” (McLuhan, 287)

Information on the Internet lays in a pool of information with the user constructing the branches through “net surfing”. Accessing information builds a metafictional approach to the information, that is the user is aware of the subjectivity of the information, to some extent the choices the authors have made to create the information, and because of the amount of information searching becomes a sort of creative act and the browser in effect creates the information, or at least creates the branches that reach into the pool of

information and access it. The Internet, because of its almost all inclusiveness and its stress on non-linearity and connection over process, undermines the existence of fiction. The fiction writer presents an artifact that is unreal and suggests a heightened effect of experience. In a sense fiction writers are in a dialogue with other fiction writers, communicating and respond to other writers narratives. The Internet is a speeded up and more accessible version of this. The long, crafted novel falls to the anecdote, the dirty story, the tirade. Anything that takes more time to read, much less to write, seems out of place and sort of anachronistic. On a listserv that carries subscribers writing, almost all of the submissions are poems of less than fifty lines or paragraph 'stories.' Most submissions receive several critiques. In November, a writer submitted a sixty page document to the server. It received one response. "I was blown away by your essay." That was it. Just as TV is a poor medium for so called 'realism', commercials disrupt the flow of anything attempts to absorb the readers. Finally both movies and TV are an old and visual medium that do not suite the print/oral medium. "In cyberspace, everyone is an author, which means that no one is an author: the distinction upon which it rests, the author distinct from the reader, disappears. Exit Author." (19)