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onscreen - media art

Alt-X turns 10: unclassifiable writing triumphs

Darren Tofts



Mark Amerika

A brief history of publishing...In 1476 the English bookmaker William Caxton returned to England to start his own press, having mastered the new techniques of printing in Germany and Flanders. Jump cut to the mid 1960s. Maverick thinker, Ted Nelson, conceives a radical publishing model of electronic distribution, of screens and something called hypertext. Wipe to early 90s digiculture. Alt-X network begins publishing digital books online, texts specifically designed for new electronic reading interfaces such as Ebook and Palm Pilot. The network's founder and contributing author, Mark Amerika, is lauded by Time magazine as an innovator, a visionary taking the world into the 21st century: a thinker for the digital age, giving us a glimpse, a snapshot of what the future of publishing will look like.

Fade to Kailua beach, Hawaii, 2003. Here we find the digital thoughtographer himself, strolling on the beach, pondering Borges, books of sand and the Coen Brothers film *The Man Who Wasn't There*. Scanning his shadow he reflects on its outline, the way it traces him, leaves his mark on the sand, like writing. This trace, he reflects, this "not me", is nonetheless an insinuation of himself, "an alien life form whose shadow Other is always on the verge of disappearing." I manage to catch his attention, or at least his trace, before it vanishes.

How does it feel having 10 years of online publishing behind you?

Remarkable. As with all things virtual and continuously refuted by time, it feels elusive yet enduring. As Borges reminds us, "Time is the substance I am made of. Time is a river which sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger which destroys me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire which consumes me, but I am the fire."

Alt-X has been called the "publishing model of the future." How would you evaluate its success as a new distribution paradigm?

When I first started the site a decade ago as a gopher site, before the world wide web was even graphical, it began as a kind of conceptual art project, where an internationally distributed network of like-minded artists, fiction writers, and theorists could build a niche audience of "interactive-others" who would see what we were doing and, if they felt at home, begin participating in the project themselves. When the Mosaic GUI-browser came out, we had to shift gears and evolve a more visually prospective and hypertextually inclined publishing model, which was a great challenge

provocative and hypertextually-inclined publishing model, which was a great challenge and one we took on with pure pleasure (and here I should thank the then teenaged Knut Mork, whose father came from Ork, and who found us on the web from his terminal in Oslo, Norway).

For a while, we were inventing this new “network publishing model” and updating our content and design on a weekly if not daily basis. In some ways the mainstream media must have been right referring to us as the “publishing model of the future” because soon after we began gaining notoriety in the web culture, I’d say from 1995 and after, lots of other network publishing ventures began developing their own projects in cyberspace—and a lot of their content and strategies looked quite a bit like ours. Now, I’m not suggesting that Alt-X was one of the early models of dot.com hyperbole—in fact, we were constantly manipulating the vibe that came from that side of the commercial culture—but it’s funny, because that “future” that we apparently modeled became grossly perverted by the speculative market of the late 90s and so we had to once again adjust accordingly.

So how did you respond to this climate of change?

We could have gone one of 2 ways: either accept venture capital and become something that we were not, or blow off all offers and further problematise the discourse network. Of course, we chose the latter and soon began challenging the concepts of “online publishing” and “writing” themselves, no longer content using the web as just a visually appealing hypertext delivery system for content that reflected book culture, but that viewed the medium more as an exhibition or network installation model that expanded the concept of writing to include streaming media, experimental artist ebooks, net art, mp3 concept albums, “invisible” theory, and electro-poetics.

In this context, Alt-X does have a reputation as a niche publisher for the digerati. But it does have the potential to be a modifier of culture, as well as a distributor of culture. Do you see a role for yourself as a latter day Gutenberg, contributing to the dissemination of a digital literacy?

Sometimes I feel more like a latter day Cervantes, or Quixote as the case may be, and the windmills I keep chasing are really avatars of the tortoise. No matter how fast I go, I can never catch up with that ‘other’ thing that seems to slowly lead me toward the finish line and that somehow always keeps its distance from me. But I will get there one day, Darren, mark my words!

I really like Alt-X’s tag as a distribution platform for “unclassifiable writing.” Given the critical zeal of new media theorists to name and categorise new writing—ergodic, hyperfiction, cybertext, interfiction etc—how can Alt-X retain its edge as a purveyor of the inscrutable?

We don’t seek to publish or exhibit work that would fit into the mold of an easily digestible academic theory. True, our popular Electronic Book Review new media forum is a place to debate all of these terms, contexts, sub-contexts, and historical plays. The actors who participate in the “edified conversation” at ebr—not the least of which is the executive editor Joe Tabbi—are some of the most provocative thinkers in new media culture. But we still believe it’s socially more responsible for all of our writers, whether breakthrough fictioneers, biomedica net artists, or politically-incorrect

critical theorists, to experiment with the form and content of actual creative practice, to use what Matthew Fuller once termed “word bombs”—that is, an interventionist phraseology—to hack into reality by way of a Burroughsian strategy of “storming the reality studio.” In fact, a new Alt-X tag for the next decade should be something like “real sites, fictitious media.”

Alt-X is clearly still going strong. What do you have planned for its future?

A huge 10-year anniversary party. Announcement will be in your email box sometime in the early Fall. No need to RSVP; just bring your body and a desire to work it all out.

Are avatars welcome?

Sure, as long as they leave a trace.

Darren Tofts is the editor with Annemarie Jonson and Alessio Cavallaro of Prefiguring Cyberculture: An Intellectual History, Power Publications, Sydney 2003

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