

Evolving practice: writers working online with trAce

Writers working online

The trAce Online Writing Community was established in 1995 in the English & Media Studies Department of The Nottingham Trent University. In 1997 we received £356,000 of lottery funding from the Literature Department of the Arts Council of England to set up an online organisation for writers and readers, and that grant comes to an end in September 2000. However, trAce is set to continue and indeed may well expand. We are marking this first phase (and moving into the next) with Incubation, an international conference on Writing and the Internet to be held in Nottingham on the 10-12 July 2000 (<http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/incubation>)

The last five years have been heady and exciting for web-based literature. During that time there have been leaps forward and back, but it cannot be denied that the internet has changed the nature of text for ever (as Computers & Texts has so clearly demonstrated). This article examines some of the key features of a period which can never be repeated - the first steps of writers and readers working online.

From the start, trAce has seen itself as a broker and facilitator, utilising the open and democratic ethos of the web to bring together writers from every genre and discipline. Working from the basis that whether you are a poet or a romantic novelist or a screenwriter the principles of using Flash on your webpage remain the same, we promote an accessible and inclusive approach to information technology with the focus on creativity, collaboration and community. We offer training and support both online and offline, using the latest technologies to connect writers and readers around the world in order to meet, collaborate, exchange ideas and produce exciting high-quality new writing. Together, writers from different cultures and artistic practices explore regional and national work, learning from and inspiring each other in a cross-pollination of ideas and concepts which generates fascinating new literary forms.

Aware that much of this writing is ephemeral, we maintain a growing archive of materials. There is no other collection like this anywhere in the world. It includes online journals by writers who have worked and trained with trAce, from professionals to beginners; learning materials, help files, and FAQs; email discussion lists; logs of online meetings, and records of writing projects in text-based virtual worlds (MOOs). Not to mention the writing projects themselves and frAme, the trAce Journal of Culture and Technology. All this material can be approached in many different ways: by writers working in both conventional and new media; by readers wishing to learn how to approach online texts; by educators teaching the web; by arts researchers in avant-garde media and new crafts; and social researchers looking at the development of community online

The whole notion of online community has come to be central to the way trAce operates. The website and its accompanying discussion board provide a contact point and virtual workroom where writers can work both independently and collaboratively. There are areas for different activities - shop, newspaper, culture magazine, mentoring, workshops etc. In effect, trAce is not simply an information

resource - it is an interactive 'virtual district'. As one new user said recently: 'A fascinating village - easy to use and inviting to explore with lots of interesting byways'. The site population has a large stable core of lurkers (visitors who read but do not participate), plus a smaller core of regularly active participants, and an extra group of itinerant users who drift from project to project. The website gets an average of 7500 hits a day and has attracted users from 99 countries.

The best known example of trAce's sense of literary community is the Noon Quilt¹, a collaborative web-based writing project. The Perl code devised to build it is freely downloadable for anyone who wishes to make their own version, and it's now also available as a full-colour pocket-sized book featuring the best patches.²

Evolving Practice: the disappearance of hypertext

Perhaps the most significant change in the five years trAce has been watching writers on the web has been the move away from hypertext. It's odd to think that not so long ago the web WAS hypertext - we thought of the two in the same breath. But of course hypertext has been around much longer than the World Wide Web, and its culture and protocols are not necessarily the same. In 1997 when Mark Amerika of Alt-X³ and I planned a contest for writers working on the web, it was natural for us to call it a Hypertext Competition, but even by the time the first prizes were awarded in 1999 many people had already given up using the term. Today everyone agrees that of course their sites utilise hypertext but it is only one component in the toolbox of the website craftsman. It would be like calling a door a hinge - hypertext may be the hinge of the site, but it is only there to facilitate much more complex openings and closings. We are currently planning the launch of the second competition and still can't decide on a name....

But if we can't call 'writing on the web' hypertext, then what *can* we call it? Well, the jury is still out. The new site Webartery⁴ tackles the dilemma directly in the descriptive paragraph of its mailing-list:

'This list focusses on discussions of Web art or Net art, which involves a synthesis of previously often separate arts: writing, recorded sound, visual work, etc. It also can involve programming. The broad goal of the list is to participate in a thinking through/out of poetics of Web art. In other words, the discussions focus on the practice and theory of Web art as it arises. Part of the thrill of the art is in the synthesis, so artists of various backgrounds, critics too, are encouraged to participate.'

On that list, Joel Weishaus suggests we might end up adopting the term 'net.works'. For some years now Christy Sheffield Sanford has called her work 'web-specific art'. I quite like 'web-writing' or 'webart'. It does seem that 'text' has somehow already got left behind. I posted to the Webartery list that

'web-writing is a special craft in its own right. It's MORE than writing, and MORE than programming and MORE than design. I do think that people like many on this list, who do all of those things, may become rarer as the specialists arise, and that the making of webart will become more and more collaborative. More like film-making than novel-writing, for example, though there will always be renaissance specialists who do everything.'

'HTML and HELL start and end the same.'

Not only do writers working on the web engage with unfamiliar media, but they often come from very different backgrounds. It's intriguing to watch a formerly text-only poet become fascinated by making images - a change in approach which often totally surprises them. It's absorbing to watch a programmer take their first halting steps in poetry, or a novelist explore sounds. What's even more interesting to bring the three together and facilitate the making of an entirely new work which combines all their skills. (Joke: programming = the only art-form that fights back)

The trAce online journals allow us to inhabit the minds of writers working online, whether they are professionals supplying a service to the trAce community, or beginners who have come to learn.⁵ For example, trAce has hosted four writers in residence, three entirely virtual, and the fourth living and working in the East Midlands region for six months. They all have very different skills and interests and their online journals demonstrate their work-processes very clearly.

Alan Sondheim⁶, a poet and philosopher living in Brooklyn, New York City and our second virtual writer-in-residence, keeps an extensive journal which explores his work with programming texts and obsessive exploration of web culture:

'...this afternoon looked at binary systems in all sorts of forms again. I wonder where this is taking me. I feel the need to create some sort of ordering among all the philosophical / phenomenological / literary / etc. work I'm doing - as if there were underlying structures guiding me...'

Novelist Bernard Cohen, our 'flesh' writer-in-residence who left his home town of Katoomba in New South Wales to work with us in Nottingham for six months, also became interested in programming but for a different reason. He had discovered Lingua MOO, the educational MOO where trAce has a meeting room, and become intrigued by these strange environments where 'text is all you are'....

'I wanted to program a 'bot', a programmable online text generator which participates in MOO conversations. Members of Lingua MOO can configure a personal bot, by 'creating' one. The object menu classifies generic bots as 'educational objects', which I thought was funny (it reminded me of the manufacturer's description of my baby's foot-rattles as an 'infant development program') — but in trying to make my bot behave itself as I thought proper, I discovered a number of peripheral results.'

The 'peripheral results' can still be found in Bernard's room at LinguaMOO for those intrepid enough to search for them.⁷

The poet Christy Sheffield Sanford⁸ was trAce's first virtual writer-in-residence. Her six months of duty early in 1999 were spent partly at her home in Florida and partly at Northwood University, Michigan, where she concurrently held a Fellowship. She worked entirely online, workshopping, teaching, and running personal tutorials, as well as creating her own work. Christy's application of choice is Dreamweaver, and much of her time at trAce was spent enabling others to develop and extend their skills in web-page building and design. Christy's journal gives an interesting insight into the changing world of the professional web-specific artist:

'My creative work: I turned in 'The Meeting of Image and Text,' the 700 word + essay about visual and textual issues on the web. Ted Warnell is editing a special section of *Ylem's* Newsletter. At this point, I have 10 works in the Light-Water series. I completed the Fronds page and a title page. I sat at my desk creating rollover buttons in Dreamweaver for approximately 5 hours straight. It was supposed to be easy, but I decided they looked too regimented, those buttons. I decided to scatter them across the page. When I shifted from a table to the 'div' command, suddenly, they wouldn't work. I was directed to use 'switch image.' Essentially, start over. I decided to go with the table and just screw up the orderly look with crooked alignment and multiple tables. A web-zine wants this meditation. I feel a responsibility to *The Little Magazine*, perhaps they will take this work instead of 'Fountain Albertas.' The clearance of midi sound files is beyond me. All the Applet creators were so generous. A lesson.'

The title of this section, 'HTML and HELL begin and end the same', is taken from the journal of David Leicester⁹. David, a Derby writer, spent three months working in the trAce computer studio on a Writer's Attachment. This entitled him to several hours of free one-to-one training plus that most valuable of benefits - free and almost unlimited access to a fast networked PC. Sadly, we aren't able to offer the same to our Online Attachments, since they are scattered around the world and one-to-one online mentoring and some free webspace are the best we can do, but they seemed to have very positive results despite the problems of distance. Dael Allison¹⁰ a journalist who works from her family farm in the bush and surrounded, she says, by platypus and kangaroo, writes in her journal:

'It is so much easier to be shown something, physically, as in 'Come over here and have a look' than it is to interpret text instructions. You can take your coffee over, plonk yourself down, ask a lot of questions, babble on inanely and the computer dominatrix thing is beautifully defused. With interpreting text if you make a mistake in the first few lines for instance, you are stuck and can't move on because you don't know what you have done wrong. There is also the possibility of making the assumption that certain aspects of knowledge and practice are already known. So the process of finding the problem becomes very laborious.

[...Carolyn's example...] is my text equivalent of 'look at this' - it is fantastic. And the training on-line is wonderful, despite the occasional drawback, because without it I would still be just using word processing, completely non-plussed at the prospect of doing anything else (and always copping out by asking other members of the family to do it for me) The empowerment of understanding html (or some of it, at least)!

In 1999 The Poetry Society nominated trAce as one of their Poetry Places¹¹ (the only one in cyberspace!) and the outcome was Wired Poets, an online mentoring scheme for poets wishing to learn web-skills. The resulting works and journals were all very different, since each of the four poets brought different levels of existing skills. Martin Glynn¹², a performance poet from Birmingham, had no experience of the web at all and approached it very nervously:

'April 19, 1999: After an initial period of trepidation, frustration, and insecurity, I have managed to negotiate the terrain of the Internet, and hopefully upload my first ever document on the trAce website. I am so relieved to be getting into my poetry places attachment, as I have had nuff things go wrong with my computer. I would really like to thank Leonie for her unconditional commitment to helping me get off the ground and conquer my initial fears.'

But by June, he was confidently surfing and using the web for research, although it was clear from his journal that he was still very cautious:

'As someone who works a lot in prison, I am struck by how many inmates would love to get involved with web design, internet, etc, but are prevented from doing so, for obvious reasons. Once again it set me thinking about issues of access. For every new group who does get access there is another one who doesn't.'

In fact, American gaols are increasingly using the internet as a teaching aid, but to take Martin's general point about access, it cannot be denied that it is certainly a problem we have come up against time and time again, especially in England, where phonecalls remain so expensive. But all the indications seem to be that the telecoms industry is coming to its senses and that soon the costs will be more reasonable. Meanwhile, it is very difficult for UK writers and artists to polish their webskills without running up huge phone bills, and of course this is a deterrent to the development of a serious webart culture in this country. However, there certainly are some people in the UK working in this area, and the number is growing all the time. We would like to think that trAce has helped that along and we intend to continue to play a very active role in the growth of the web as a highly-flexible and exciting new medium.

The future

From October 2000 trAce will enter a new phase. We will become a Consultancy Service, still based at The Nottingham Trent University, and still working on much the same kinds of projects. Our focus will continue to be on the individual writer / artist and on facilitating their use of the web in whichever way suits them best. We will concentrate on five main activities:

Commissioning new work – Local, national and international writing projects, both individual and collaborative.

Project management and consultancy – Advising organisations and institutions on suitable projects and training, and managing projects.

Conferences and events – International conferences; regional, national and international events including hothouses and retreats.

Lifelong learning – Training programmes including on and offline writing tuition; netskills; creativity. mentoring.

Archiving and recording – Preserving online material for recording and research.

Incubation¹³, the trAce International Conference on 10-12 July 2000, will bring together people from around the world who have been working with us over the past four years. We expect it to be an exciting and provocative event and hope that you will join us as we grapple with the debates caused by the massive potential of this new creative medium.

Links

¹ <http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/quilt/>

² The Noon Quilt, eds. Teri Hoskin & Sue Thomas, pubs. The trAce Online Writing Community, ISBN: 1 903229 00 6 <http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/quilt/book/>

³ The Alt-X Alternative Publishing Network <http://www.altx.com>

⁴ Hosted by Jim Andrews <http://webartery.com>

⁵ trAce Online Journals <http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/journals.htm>

⁶ <http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/writers/sondheim/>

⁷ can be viewed at <http://lingua.utdallas.edu:7000/3656/> To actually enter the space, access via <http://lingua.utdallas.edu> and @go #3656

⁸ <http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/writers/sanford/>

⁹ <http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/attach/leicester/>

¹⁰ <http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/attach/allison/>

¹¹ <http://www.poetrysoc.com/places/about.htm>

¹² <http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/poets/glynn/>

¹³ <http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/incubation>

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