# The Authoring Problem Is A Publishing Problem

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**Abstract.** We don't have an authoring problem: we have a writing problem and a publishing problem.

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## 1. Origins

In reviewing the academic literature of digital stories and electronic literature, two assertions are universally acknowledged: first, that interactive stories in the form of computer games are a huge — and hugely-renumerative — business, and second, that only one Big Break, one celebrity author or one blockbuster title, separates these endeavors from universal acclaim. These assertions are, of course, contradictory.

Writing is hard. Hypertext writing broadly construed — which is to say, electronic literature that does not slavishly simulate the codex book [1] [2] — begins in the work of two men who could not write. Douglas Engelbart and Ted Nelson are among the most influential thinkers of the past century, but their collected publications are few (chiefly [3][4][5]). Nor is this an accident of the growth of other media; neither man made much of radio, or television, or public performance, nor did they reach an audience through their systems or the engineering in the way John McCarthy, Seymour Cray, or Steve Jobs did. They were not indifferent to writing, and Nelson, especially, was for many years compulsively dedicated to mountains of notes and drafts. When they did write, they wrote well. They invented a new way of writing, but seldom used it in public.

Writers need publishers, because publishers nurture an audience. The study of new media publishing begins before its history with K. Eric Drexler's insightful distinction between hypertext publishing and publishing hypertexts [6]. For Drexler, hypertext publishing is the exciting and important work of building sprawling literary ecologies like Xanadu [6] or the World Wide Web, while the humble task of publishing individual hypertexts was a temporary, incunabular service that might bridge the chasm while the big arcology domes were assembled and the newly terraformed literary world got itself into habitable condition. I picked up that modest and transient task in 1988, and wondered what was delaying the anticipated flood of digital stories. I still wonder [7].

## 2.      No Man But A Blockhead

Dr. Johnson said that "no man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money" as he (like I) dashed off a paper hours before it was due. Shakespeare wrote for money[8]. But Johnson loved to read and Shakespeare liked the theater. He knew (and drank with) his competitors, he knew (and made fun of) the production of generations past, he was current with theatrical fashions that were not his own [9]. With rare exceptions, we aren't like that. The enclaves of the Infocom tradition, to be sure, read and discuss each other's work, though they seldom venture beyond the borders of their shire [10]. The thick volumes of the *Proceedings of the International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling* show remarkably little passion for digital stories, and little sign that the students of interactive digital storytelling know any interactive digital writers whose work they eagerly anticipate or to whose recent work they cannot wait to respond in kind.

From the beginning, we have treated the literary economy as an inexorable natural phenomenon. This is demonstrably false: literary economies are social constructs. So are literary communities. Nothing about the design of Twine, for example, lends itself to stories about contemporary queer sexuality; the distinctive community that has grown up around it [11] does not arise from its engineering any more than some special quality of Sylvia Beach's bookstore and *La Rotonde's* liquor created the Lost Generation. It's not the machinery of the systems or the engineering of the means of production (though both matter [12]), it's the conviviality (and hard work) of the folks at the table.

## 3.      Writers, Not Authors

We don't have an authoring problem: we have a writing problem. Seventeen years ago, A-List blogger Magdalena Donea told a crowded auditorium that, one day, she hoped to be a real writer [13]. Everyone there knew her blog, which began with her departure from home, from her country, from Europe, and with her hilltop vow: "this, I will remember." She was incontestably a writer: she wanted to be an *author.* All writers confront intractable media, misguided editors, ignorant audiences. Yet, they write.

Much of our work pursues whatever we imagine will gain audience: first free distribution on the Web, then graphic novels, twitter fiction, storylets in first person shooters or multiplayer strategic puzzles or 99¢ casual games. We aspire to AAA jobs the way the lost generation tried to get a foothold in Hollywood. But the film world ruined the Fitzgeralds, it did Hammett no favors, it did little for Faulkner, it made and unmade Orson Welles.

Our problem is not our systems [14] [15] or our literary economy [12]. Our problem is that we don't read interactive digital stories, and we don't write interactive digital stories that we want to read, and even if we did, no one would know because it is no one's job to tell us about them.

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