The Book is Dead, Long Live the Book

H. M. Franking


Between the ranting of the bibliophiles and the technophiles, some tempered voices are raising important questions about computers and books. The Future of the Book, edited by Geoffrey Nunberg, is a collection of such voices. The essayists are librarians, professors and writers. There's even an afterword by renowned semiologist and novelist Umberto Eco. This work frames the debate about the future of the book in the digital age with a lot of erudition but also some unwarranted concerns.

Several essays provide information about the history and development of the book. They remark that the paper-based book, like the alphabet, was once the latest technological rage and was met with resistance, like the computer, from the establishment because books are more than delivery systems for information. They are a way of life developed over centuries. As Carla Hesse, James J. O'Donnell and Paul Duguid explain, our concepts of authors, readers, the canon of texts, and texts as intellectual property were not inevitable but "were the cumulative results of part social and political choices...." (21)

Most of the essayists are concerned with what O'Donnell calls the "reconstruction of our culture" by computers. This revolution can radically alter the concept of the book as a legal, even sacred, object, undermining current concepts of the author and the reader as well. It will disrupt established publishing and distribution methods for texts. It will decentralize control and access of information currently dominated by the government, universities and libraries. It even threatens to redefine the nature of texts and, more important, the nature and function of language.

George P. Landow, for example, thinks that "Unlike all previous forms of textuality, the digital word is virtual, not physical." (216) Regis Debray agrees that hypertext and the lack of closure it brings would make computer texts "fatherless and propertyless, borderless and customs-free text, which everyone can manipulate and which can be disseminated everywhere." (146)

The notion, however, that printed books are spatial and computer texts are temporal is like assuming that radio waves are not physical because we can't see them. Text on computer screens is not suspended in some parallel universe. Computer text does exist in some type of very real, though invisible, memory - RAM, ROM or cache. And, as Luca Toschi says, even if we link texts, each of those computerized texts will have an author and a copyright. (169) As for authorship, surely the last 20 years of postmodern critical theory have done enough to discredit notions of closure that try to privilege authors' interpretations of their texts. As a reader, teacher, literary critic, author and publisher, I have yet to see any author control a reader's interpretation. Closure is an illusion, albeit a necessary one for texts. Cyberspace will not destroy the concept of authorship and texts as legal entities. Just read those dire warning labels about copyright infringement on the latest web page you surfed or on that software you just bought.

Geoffrey Nunberg sees hypertext leading to a loss of quality information because he thinks criteria for publishing on the Internet is not controlled as well as it is by established publishing norms. To him, "Computers don't preserve the social and material boundaries... they disrupt the properties embodied in the notion of publishing." (124) Nunberg is correct. But, I don't think removing control of publishing from the hands of a few communications conglomerates, whose bottom line is money, is such a terrible thing. Sure, a lot of junk will get published on the Internet. But, take a look at most of the books sold at large chainstores. Are they really the purveyors of any culture to which you want to be seriously connected?
Others, like Nunberg, are also concerned about the collapse of catalogs and classifications of information by hypertext because collections won't be materially constrained. The chaos that surely will follow is to him akin to removing library walls and seeing the reading rooms fill up with street people." (129) Understand, the government, universities and libraries have controlled information and access to it for centuries. They have done a pretty good job. But like other bureaucracies, they won't easily surrender their control. In spite of this, computers have made revolutionary changes in how information is accessed. Most of the changes suggest that it will be a more democratic, less elitist and bureaucratic system, at least for a while.

Virtual reality (VR), more than hypertext, is seen by many of these essayists as the major threat to the book as the purveyor of our culture and a particular threat to verbal language. (268) A good part of their concern has to do with an apparent lack of closure to VR worlds. It is true that VR will create entertainment, work and instructional environments all over the known landscape. But, there is a vast difference between having a VR experience and writing a novel about a VR experience. For example, I planned to produce a computerized video novel (CVN) about a VR experience in which I was going to use VR as a technique in the novel itself, much like a stream of consciousness or omniscient point of view. The work was a paper-based manuscript submitted to my multimedia publishing company. It was about a motel whose rooms narrated stories about its guests. I wanted to create a VR interface so that readers could enter the hotel and walk around the rooms. They could watch TV and even hear the toilet flush. The novel had a beginning, middle and end. It had the prerequisite illusion of closure. It was to be the second in a series of computerized video novels that I was writing and publishing. In them, I do "renegotiate words and images," but I find that words are the primary medium. These CVNs are not interactive. The reader does not change the stories or role-play the characters or write themselves all over the text. And, I can assure you that I go to great lengths to maintain copyrights and trademarks for authors. Consequently, I can agree with Michael Joyce that even virtual worlds are structures of words. But, there is a critical difference between looking through and experiencing virtual worlds and looking at and creating texts about that experience. One is life; the other is art.

But, anxiety about virtual reality runs even deeper. It has to do with what Jay David Bolter calls "the renegotiation of word and image" with images dominating text and leading "to a crisis in rhetoric." (264) He and others direly predict that VR is a movement toward "an unmediated perception of the world" away from language altogether, toward natural signs. I find these comments interesting but unrealistic. (269) When, for example, was the last time you had an "unmediated perception?" Maybe once, back in the womb? If you're not sure, maybe it's time to reread Mikhail Bakhtin. And, how can a sign be natural once we make it symbolic?

One common word runs through most of these essays - "closure." Possibly because, like Debray, others here believe, "You can't have culture without closure." (148) Translation: "You can't have the culture of the book without closure." These essayists understand that "closure" is just another word for having everything left to lose. It's about appropriation, power and control - control over the meaning of texts; control over who and what gets published; control over information and access to it; control over the canon of texts; control over the use and functions of language; and more.

Some of the essayists express serious concerns about the effect of the computer on the culture of the book. Others express unwarranted speculations. Many happily conclude that society is not at the mercy of implacable techno-forces. O'Donnell, for one, asks not what computers can do to or for people, but rather what people can do with computers "by pitching in joyously to the ongoing reconstruction of our culture." (54) The main flaw of "The Future of the Book" is that it's a book - with some outdated information and flawed assumptions. More important, it offers vital insights into how we can shape our multimedia future and still preserve the cultural connection to our most glorious, printed past.

Notes

1. It is this "reconstruction of our culture" (54) by computers, however, that concerns most of the essayists. Geoffrey Nunberg quickly and amusingly dismisses those bibliophiles who whine about computers replacing books because they can not curl up by the fire and read a computer or take one to the beach. Nunberg points out that those "twitchy little screens" are continuously improving while books as we know them today took centuries to refine.

While I agree in principle with O'Donnell that often predictions about computers are made by "mugs," I think it is possible to see more than "twenty-minutes into the future" by people who, like me, work on a daily basis publishing on CD-ROMs and the Internet. I think desktop
computers are currently powerful enough to become home servers, like main frame computers once were. They can hold all the hardware and software necessary to keep Intel and Microsoft contented beasts. But these desktop servers should shortly be equipped with cordless terminals, like telephone extensions. I picture these terminals as if they were slim volumes of poetry. Not only will we be able to curl up by the fire and read on them, we will be able to haul them to the beach. I would suggest putting solar panels on the covers of these PC terminals so that when we snooze with them over our faces as we soak up the sun they'll be recharging.

As for predictions, I wish *Time* and *Newsweek*, etc. would stop asking Bill Gates what the next major revolution in computers will be. Bill Gates is not the Louis Daimler of the computer; he's the Henry Ford. His genius lies in seeing the viability of other people's inventions and then using his power and wealth to make them necessities for the masses.

2. The same would apply to Michael Joyce's Hotel MOO. It can never be literature because it does not have an author creating a universe that has a beginning, middle and ending. Instead, the MOO is an experience such as playing a very unique and interesting game of charades. It could only become literature if Joyce or someone else wrote a novel that simulated a MOO. In this case, the MOO program, like the VR technology in our CVNs, could be used as a novelistic technique. Joyce would have to create the characters, manipulate their behavior, and write their stories. And yes, he would have to fake closure. Again, the difference between experiencing a MOO and writing a text about that experience is that one's life, the other art.

3. Lanham, Richard. *The Electric Word: Democracy, Technology and the Arts*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993. Richard Lanham describes two ways of looking at texts here and elsewhere. The first is a looking through the text; the second is a looking at the text. Nowhere in this work is Lanham referring to Virtual Reality that I'm aware of. I have applied his theory about two ways of looking at a text to Virtual Reality because I think it works in explaining the dilemma some of these essayists find themselves in when they fail to distinguish between experiencing a VR, MOO, MUD, or hypertext and recreating these experiences in literature. The former would be like going through the funhouse at the State Fair. The latter would be like reading John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*. The former is looking through the experience; the latter is looking at the textuality that recreates the experience in an attempt to understand the experience, among other things.

4. T. Todorov, translated by W. Godzick, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogic Principle*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984. "No member of a verbal community can ever find words in language that are neutral, exempt from the aspirations and evaluations of the other, uninhabited by the other's voice. On the contrary, he receives the word by the other's voice and it remains filled with that voice. He intervenes in his own contexts from another context, already penetrated by other's intentions." (13:131)

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Long Live the Book. by Om Malik Aug 17, 2010 - 9:00 AM CDT. 19 Comments. While that day came a long time ago, that definition now includes buying any book anytime and anywhere. That's thanks in large part to the emergence of first the Kindle device (amzn), and later the Kindle store. Today, I don't read many of the books I read in my younger days, skewing instead towards more esoteric stuff including books about baseball, business strategy and history.

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