

JACK IN THE TEXT

From multimedia to hypertext, the written word finds a new home

BY ALVIN LU

TECHNOLOGY'S A WHORE and the media pimps are trying to get you to jack in. Forget about cyberspace — all that stuff about virtual universes and electric immortality is drug-pushing. They're toys for people who can't get enough dead air out of their TV sets. If you want a cyberpunk experience, slap some Public Enemy in your Walkman and take a ride on the bus.

Computers are a lot more mundane than that. They're like a wrench or a screwdriver: tools. You do work with them to get satisfaction out of them. They're not very sexy. Despite all the hype, and promises of multimedia extravagance, electronic books are actually the opposite of what virtual reality claims to be: They're a nerdy return to the written word, even as VR promotes our current slavish worship of image. If electronic books have it in them to spark a revolution, it's one that will have us reading — and imagining — again.

Currently, the advantages of a light paperback still outweigh whatever benefits a computer can bring to written text — but they're working on it. The few adventurers who're exploring electronic publishing are still trying to figure out what a computer can really do for text. Nobody's quite hit on maximum potential, or fully understood how radically computers can change the way we read. Meanwhile, there's a wide range of approaches as everybody's experimenting, with mixed results. Here's a casual, somewhat arbitrary look at three of the more popular tacks: print adaptations, multimedia, and hypertext.

Print adaptations are what most people think of when you mention "electronic book." They're floppy disks that you can buy in a bookstore, currently almost all published by one company, the Santa Monica-based Voyager Company. The disks carry the text from familiar print books, best sellers like Gloria Steinem's *Revolution from Within*, sci-fi like William Gibson's *Neuromancer* trilogy, and classics like *Moby Dick*. You pop the disk in your Macintosh Powerbook and read.

While I still prefer to read these books in their usual print form, the Voyager books offer a couple of interesting characteristics. By letting you play with the text — changing fonts, highlighting parts, and indexing marked parts and even specific words — the computer serves as a speedy referencing system, making research and quote-searching a lot easier. On a more profound level, sitting down and actually reading a Voyager book can make one re-realize how powerful written text can be: Once you get past the initial unease of reading off a computer screen, the trappings fade away and once again you're transported back to the familiar space of the mind's eye. If nothing else, Voyager books are a revelation of how adaptable written text is. Certainly writing

survives the shift to electronic screen much better than visual art does.

Still, though, I was left asking: What greater advantages can a computer book provide us? *Multimedia* has long been touted as the next big thing, but it's been a bit sluggish in taking off. So far its use has been mostly confined to fancy boardroom presentations. And often multimedia can get boring, with stale images, sound, and text arbitrarily thrown together without much artistic sense. Unfortunately, a lot of the people in control of expensive multimedia technology are about as inspired as a wet napkin. The potential, however, is great, if real writers, visual artists, filmmakers, and musicians could ever get together.

One interesting experiment in punky, throwaway multimedia technology is Jaime Levy's one-woman show, *Electronic Hollywood*. The newly released *Ambulance*, an "electronic novel," combines a dead-pan horror-story text written by Monica Moran with illustrations by Jaime Hernandez lifted from *Love & Rockets* and with bass samples from FIREHOSE's Mike Watt. Levy, who put the whole thing together, is a slacker-generation graduate of San Francisco State University, and after leaving San Francisco's "bad video art scene," she hit upon the idea of making electronic magazines that would be easily accessible for non-computer users, or, as she puts it, "normal dudes who happen to have a Mac and don't know that it can play graphics or music." Her electronic magazines *Cyber Rag* and *Electronic Hollywood* are just that, magazines on disk that combine graphics, primitive animation, and sound with text, including "the usual hateful editorial" and "reviews about Techno House Raves ... and a Greater Bay Area dis."

In *Ambulance*, the imported graphics and sound lend the text an intentionally cheap feel, all the better to reflect the affected Generation X poseur despair of the story. (Besides encountering excessive violence, the characters in *Ambulance* do lots of drugs and write inane messages in each other's yearbooks.) The low-tech, comic-book sensibility of *Ambulance* gives it a welcome unpretentiousness, but leaves something to be desired as far as literary quality. Fortunately for Levy, however, serious literature isn't quite what she's into. "I'm an MTV-head," she says. Anyway, her hard work has begun to pay off. She has a forthcoming collaboration with Billy Idol (!?) due out soon, with specially programmed multimedia floppy disks to be included with limited editions of Idol's upcoming CD, *Cyberpunk*.

"There's two different ways to explore electronic publishing," notes Levy. "There's the multimedia-graphics thing vs. the sub-linear, hypertext thing. I'm more into the TV-video thing."

Hypertext, an interactive form in which

the narrative branches out in all directions, has long been championed by serious literary experimenters. Much of the work done in hypertext has been confined to certain academic circles and in on-line computer



networks like the Sausalito-based WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link). Probing the fringes of the literary avant-garde can be exciting, if a bit disorienting. Still, hypertext has strong roots with experimental print writers going back to Laurence Sterne and coming up to Julio Cortázar and Milorad Pavić.

One of the more fascinating hypertext stylists, who originally "published" her work in the WELL, is the Bay Area-based visual artist and writer Judy Malloy, whose *Its Name Was Penelope* is published by Eastgate Systems, an East Coast software company that publishes the majority of "serious" hypertexts. *Penelope* is a personal memoir that takes on a unique form: The story is

constructed out of fragmentary images and recollections of a childhood in New England and a career as a struggling woman artist in San Francisco in the age of AIDS. The images run together and layer on top of each other, providing a unique mnemonic effect as the computer presents each fragment of text to the reader in random, shuffling order. The experiment with randomization is bold and surprisingly effective. As a result, *Penelope* can be read through multiple times — theoretically endless times as interest fades — each reading creating overlapping, but never matching, impressions.

Though a visual artist — one who's spoken at classes at San Francisco State and held "art conferences" on the WELL — Malloy has chosen not to incorporate graphics into *Penelope*. Her reasoning points to some interesting theories on the way readers receive visual images versus written text. "As a writer, I'm asking the reader to form images in his or her mind. I find that what happens when you incorporate graphics and animation is that, unfortunately, you break images in the reader's mind. It

takes the focus away from words and turns it into something different. It's not as ... seductive. Readers become distanced from the characters' minds and instead are just watching." She adds, of the experience of reading hypertext, "You can't just flip through it."

The debate on what kind of roles text and graphics will play against each other in the future of electronic publishing won't be settled for some time, not until the toddling form finds its walking legs. And then it'll be complicated by the incorporation of sophisticated, but expensive, video technology with computers. Will words survive?

With hypertexts, the problem so far is that most if not all of the ones published have a decidedly tentative, experimental feel to them. This is true of even tightly controlled pieces like *Penelope*, not to mention sprawling webs of text like Stuart Moulthrop's *Victory Garden* (also available from Eastgate). It's that quality that prompts readers like Levy to say about hypertext, "I kind of don't get it. It's a little too complex for me." Which is fine. Right now, electronic publishing is still testing the waters and it needs to push in even more individual directions. As Malloy points out, "Electronic literature is not any one thing." But it is literature.

Alvin Lu is a freelance writer.