Life Between Words

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Introduction

Books tell stories; that much is axiomatic. They aim to inform, entertain, educate, and sometimes even enlighten. How effectively they fulfill their intended purpose is more than a simple matter of words.

In between the conceit of the writer, and the pleasure of the reader lies the apparatus of production and publishing. This apparatus is now pushed to the circumference in all the major directions of the compass.

Forming one axis are books as limited edition *objets d'art* at one end, unashamedly filling the buyer's addiction to *tsundoku*, and on the other as slop delivered at the buffet of eReader *All-You-Can-Eat* subscriptions. Along the other axis one finds room only for the guaranteed *Bestsellers*, and opposite those the hapless world of academic publishing shackled in leg-irons. The vast middle is left to neglect due to ever shrinking budgets at the few publishing houses, which remain.

Content and Creation

It is surprising then that in this era of ready access to self-publishing, the degree of attention paid to the printed page seems akin to the parallel universe of 480p videos being put up on YouTube a decade ago. While those earlier videos could be excused for their poor production value due to the high cost of entry in both the equipment and software required to gain even incremental improvements in the final product, the same cannot be said to be true for typesetting either then or now.

Indeed the intrinsic appeal of TeX and its con-

sorts has been the ready access to the highest quality typesetting it has provided especially with very modest hardware, and little or no software costs. And by virtue of its availability on nearly every possible platform, the main barrier to entry is in the practitioner's willingness to devote enough effort, or even to reach out and appeal to the generosity of the wider community.

For those in STEM[1] fields, TeX is the *lingua franca* of manuscript delivery. But the publishing world extends far beyond STEM. Why then have we not seen a commensurate widespread refinement in the published word even as more and more writers as content creators put their offerings up for direct sale?

One possibility is that those who create videos, even as amateurs, have consumed a steady diet of video through streaming services, gaming, and animation. This has imbued them with exemplars that allow them to evaluate the quality of what they themselves put out with discrimination. Not always, but it is possible the rise in self-published video has risen from an educated palate.

Another is that the content creator of video is closely connected to the tools of the trade: they stand both behind and in front of the camera, and follow this up with editing and rendering sessions at home. Yes, there are *Actors* just like there are *Authors* who leave production and post-production to others, but should the vast majority of writers be content with not bothering how their words will appear to their *audiences*?

And yet another would be that because each video is produced in digestible chunks, creators

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[1] science, technology, engineering and mathematics

have repeated opportunities to practise their craft, and to test out what works and what doesn't. A critical audience is only too ready to point out failings in the product. Production is sequential, and so this built-in feedback loop should push the diligent producer to improve steadily with each iteration.

Writing is a different form of creation: the output of words can be (and rightly should be) decoupled from its final form. As a result, there is a substantial delay between raw content, and the edited product. By the time there is feedback on the end result, the writer is likely working on their next project or even the one after that.

A Handshake with the Reader

Reading a book—any book—seems an act of defiance if not courage in the modern era. In a world of frictionless content delivery ever ready to extract a dopamine hit whether through social media, or binge-worthy video series, picking up a book requires a commitment that can only be considered in epoch time. Contrast this to what we typically will tolerate before we prematurely click to another more enticing video in the recommended list, or skip to the next episode while bypassing both closing and open credits.

So let us look closer at what this means to the reader of a book. If they have forgone the easy choice of the fast food offering of a typical eight minute (video) meal, and have eschewed binging on a series only to be left wondering "What happened to the whole night?", then surely they deserve to be front and centre when they chance on picking up a book. Your book, whether as writer, or typesetter (or indeed both) should seek to respect the reader with more than just the wisdom of words, while offering something to savour during the act of reading itself.

Jan Gehl, in his seminal book *Life Between Buildings*, contrasted *necessary* activities with *optional* activities, and further contrasted both of

these with *social* activities which he claims are linked to both. Assigned reading at school would fall under the first category, while reading for pleasure would fall under the second.

What is so interesting about Gehl's treatise is the observation early on in the book, "When outdoor areas are of poor quality, only strictly necessary activities occur". The analogue to reading should be clear: if the words themselves are delivered to the reader with the same indifference to their presentation as public spaces are often designed, the result is a withering away of the desire to read, which can and should be a source of nourishment and pleasure. Brutalist spaces might exemplify a `common ideal`, but it is the intimate gardens that draw people to explore and imagine.

The design of space can also provide another useful point of comparison, that of *physicality*. At any given moment, we find ourselves in a single place even if our minds are susceptible to wandering away. Being constrained to a single place limits our activities to what is on offer there. In a related manner we are also constrained by *linearity* no matter how kinetic our activity. While skiing down a mountain, we cannot divert ourselves to look at discounted airline fares, all the while fooling ourselves that we will return shortly to our descent with the full effort it requires. To do so could be fatal.

If we are walking along a nature trail, we cannot simultaneously be fixing the plumbing under the sink even though we might be thinking of *how* we might do so. If we slip into our own thoughts, at least for very long, we are just as likely to be jarred out of our stupor when we hear the cawing of crows, be subject to the diving attacks of the red-winged blackbird, or when we trip and fall as we are looking at our phone, pricing out the copper fittings. We are guided or forced back to the immediacy of the surroundings.

Those who work in the trades are well aware of the danger of ignoring what is directly in front

of them, whether it be the flame of a welding torch, or the pulse of electricity running through a live circuit. Such work extracts a focus from the practitioner, pushing aside any other thoughts to the periphery.

Both physicality and linearity are the very conditions that a reader of a book is constrained by. These constraints, though, can show themselves as a path to a different release: freedom to immerse ourselves unencumbered by the petty worries that encroach constantly. Paradoxically, the physicality of reading is what gives our mind permission to dive deep into our imagination!

How then can we apply these ideas to the page presented before a reader?

Lines that Connect and Surround

It is simple enough to speak of *readability* and *legibility*, but is there another way to look at what might keep the reader's focus? I purposely did not use the word *engaged* as it has been rendered nearly impotent by its attachment to the extent one's staring at a screen will allow the viewer to be enticed to click through an adjoining advertisement, and forget the source from whence they came.

If the activity of reading requires both physicality and linearity, and what writers seek is to provide readers with a reason to *choose* a book as their optional activity, then should we not try to understand what connects all of these together?

When one approaches typesetting from the standard of geometrical precision, as we might do so while perusing the catalogue of designs in Robert Bringhurst's *The Elements of Typographic Style*, I believe we do not give sufficient consideration to both the reader and their surrounds. In doing so we choose to treat the book mainly as an edifice in itself, one that will outlast both writer and reader. Those of us who savour books are justifiably drawn to this form of design *couture*, but is it sufficient?

Instead, what if we consider typesetting in the manner in which Gehl prescribed the design of public spaces: that which brings human interaction to the forefront, and puts emphasis on the contact between people, which buildings should only frame rather than define? What would a book based on those principles look like, and in what way would it differ from the standard templates?

Following this as a guide, the page then becomes a vast landscape of *human* interactions: between writer and reader; between the fingertips and the texture of the page; between the eye and the visual sculpture of the font; between the thumbs holding the book open and the lines they bookend across the page spread; between the smell of yellowed parchment and the faint memory of a scent inhaled long before.

The totality of the experience is *sensory* as well as *cerebral*. Indeed, it could be said that the pleasure of reading is the sensuality with which it excites not only the neurons, but also the nerve fibres. A book savoured becomes like the trail of bread crumbs left along the path of experience, connecting the person we once were to the person we become. As such, it has the potential to become a cherished talisman that reinforces and invokes memories.

At its best, it is both immersive and interactive, enchanting the reader actively with its material against the resonance with their own life journey. It can strive to be either believable, or fantastical; both will work as so long as the reader is pulled in the direction of agency.

Reading can be a conduit for an emotional fulfillment quite different from other consumptive activities because the reader is in control of the pace, free as they are to pause at sentence end; to reflect upon the possibilities invoked by the text; or to cast their eye back up the page to better link together the written thoughts. Indeed, this can deepen the experience rather than jarring us out of the moment as it would with

music, food, video, or even spoken word, which rely on the receiver to suspend their disbelief for the duration.

Contrast this with the prescribed speed at which video is presented and digested even if we are given the illusion of control over it through some pseudo-button selection. The pace of presentation has been set long before in the editing room, and buttressed by the pulse of the accompanying theme music, or laugh track: we are *prompted* to feel what we are *expected* to feel.

What guidelines might we then offer to the writer/publisher in the age of self-publishing in a way that does not exact from them an additional harsh toll to the already exhausting activity of plucking words from the air? And is it likely to be the same if we were to pass along that framework to publishing houses whose allotment of resources is similarly exhausted by the time a manuscript gets to the typesetting stage.

A Choice Illusion

When presented with nearly unlimited choice, the value of each available choice naturally diminishes. Having a library of tens of thousands of books at our fingertips, either to buy or borrow is not a surefire recipe towards more reading pleasure, or even simply more reading.

Our time is limited. Our capacity to read is limited. Our desire to pick up a book is limited by our physical surroundings, by our state of mind, by all of the quotidian responsibilities that encroach by jumping the queue in priorities. This is not merely a lamentation, but rather an acknowledgement that a reader's time is subject to resource scarcity that is easily obscured by the illusion of choice.

The somewhat recent focus on content delivery, and the determined whittling away of any and all related friction points—such as with Kindle's earliest incarnations and their 3G enabled Whisper-Net—surely got people to consider more books.

However delivery and digestion work on different time scales.

Having a text delivered nearly instantly and anywhere is undeniably a convenience, but it commensurately reduces the reader's commitment to any single book, especially if upon powering up of the device, one is presented with alternatives chosen to entice you as to queue up next. Often it also allows the reader to abandon a book at first notice if another looks to be more appealing.

In economic terms, this injection of *opportunity cost* into the consideration of what one should be reading at any given point weakens the bond of linearity that typically exists between reader and book.

All the more reason that the book the reader picks up should be produced in a manner that strives to inform the reader that those who created it—writer, typesetter, publisher even if all are the same—acknowledge the commitment the reader has made, and strives to reciprocate with an experience of commensurate value. The reader should be aware that what they have picked up was created with consideration, and most importantly without cynicism.

Frictionless delivery, an abundance of choice, ease of use, and instantaneous access all are wonderful things. The convenience they offer should in no way to be understated. However, the erosion of value that comes part and parcel hearkens to the cautionary tale found within Ilse Aichinger's *The Bound Man*. This can easily lead to paralysis, both in the reader and the writer.

Going back to Gehl's exposition, too much choice has the unfortunate side-effect of creating distance between between subject and object, the very opposite of what should be an involved experience!

In *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, Matthew B Crawford wrings from the dilemma an overarching characteristic: that of *attentiveness*. For the reader too much choice dissipates the attentiveness with which they approach a book; and for the writer

(as publisher) too much choice supplants attention to detail for close at hand generalized offerings.

Tooling Production

Resource scarcity is even more widespread in production if writers themselves are forced to become typesetters immediately after the draining process of stringing together tens of thousands of words into a cohesive narrative.

When offered a tool that offers superior control at the expense of increased complexity, against a tool that is likely to be the very same as the one used during the composition stage—again in contrast to self-published video creation—it is easy to see why that might be an easy choice: convenience is a powerful draw.

Moreover, unlike writers in STEM fields who might have more than a passing familiarity to programming, their counterparts in other fields would find the concept of markup and compile totally foreign to their experience. And so they stick with what is familiar.

The illusion of choice then also extends to layout. Page design templates proliferate: one can almost imagine Internet barkers at every node shouting out "A Page Design for Every Manuscript!". Writers who might first dip their toes into typesetting may easily find themselves overwhelmed, accustomed as many of them are to the comfort of the word-processor where they first put word to disk. The writer who uses a programming editor remains an oddity in this world.

Many such templates are built strictly for ease of use in the belief that design details best be kept hidden else the user abandon them at first use as being too complicated.

Therein lies the dichotomy: writers who are adventurous enough to venture further than their word-processor into the world of markup typesetting face enormous barriers to entry: command-line interface, cryptic syntax, edit-compile-revise workflow with post-processing debugging. Easy enough then to give up.

At this point we may as well be parsecs away from the ideals of geometric layout. The cost-benefit analysis consistently comes up red.

A wood-working maxim states that, at their core, projects consist of only two activities: cutting and fastening. You can produce all kinds of pieces that are aesthetically pleasing, robust enough for repeated use, and fulfill the purpose of their design honestly with a focus on just these two aspects. In spite of this, many wood-workers fall into the trap of accumulating new tools, deemed *essential*, for each new project. The effort spent on the selection and purchase of the tool undoubtedly is part of the fun, but it is no less a great diversion from building something with the tools at hand.

As Gautama Buddha enlightens us from the Noble Eightfold Path, perhaps a worthy goal then would be a Middle Way that leads new typesetters on the path to liberation from glib layouts, and writers to feel satisfied that the default print templates do not detract from the stories they wish the world to read.

If we wish to inform those writers interested in the potential to be extracted from production then what is needed is a framework that is relateable, accessible, and produces results that align with their self-interest: that is to have their words reach the reader effectively.

Reading begins with 'Re'

I believe that a fresh viewpoint from which to look at the connection between typeset page and the extent of attentiveness it invokes in a reader is to borrow from fluid mechanics; specifically the velocity profile of fluids.

Fluids display the characteristics of laminar and turbulent flow, and their propensity to one or the

other is defined by their Reynolds number (Re) (hence the title of this section).

At the centre of a river (for example), which often combines both laminar and turbulent aspects, is where the current is strongest. But that is only at the surface. There is a velocity profile from bank to middle, but also from bed to surface. Undercurrents may possess a velocity profile hidden and out of sight. Of course rivers do not move only in straight lines, but with twists and turns; similarly reading carves through unformed thought, and through memory. Wind skimming over the water affects surface characteristics as surely as surrounding stimuli buffet the reader.

One can find in reading similar elements to that of fluids: the reader's eye can flow uninterrupted across words, sentences, and even paragraphs.

At times it can all seem so effortless. What happens, though, at the margins? A deceleration as the eye reaches the margin boundary, only to refocus at the beginning of the next line, and once again to pick up speed in the middle. Repeated over and over until reaching the next singularity: at the the end of text block, at the end of the passage, at the end of the page.

This is entirely consistent with Gehl's thesis that promoting human contact occurs at human scale (body) and human speed (walking). The critical thing here is to note that there is both a *static* as well as *dynamic* element to what he proposes. If words are to invoke imagination through attentiveness then the typesetter too should take note that the geometry of the layout must accommodate the dynamic aspects of the reading experience.

Spacing around text should allow for variation in reading position: sitting in a subway train while it jostles along the track is a different experience than reclined on the couch at home. The distance the book is held naturally without the support of a horizontal surface should mark one end of the range of acceptable font sizes and leading. In other words, the laminar-turbulent boundary

shifts depending on the environment in which a book is picked up to be read.

Even if the reading position is accounted for, one must still give allowance for external pulls: sitting in a coffee shop with a broad surface that not only accommodates the meal but also the book comfortably—an almost ideal setting—one is still susceptible to being startled by the entry and exit of new parties, the call from the server of the next order, boisterous conversation at the adjoining table. All of which require that the typesetting allows the interrupted gaze of the reader to easily recover the break in continuity of thought.

The difficulty of the written material may dictate a pace of reading that is at odds with the layout. I am thinking here of academic journals where the close spacing seems to wilfully disregard the notion that the reader may require assistance to maintain a mindful interaction with the material. The typesetting density, in this case, seems to be a throwback to the days when journals were printed and mailed, and this was a sensible response in order to minimize costs. We are back to optimizing distribution just as we are with eReaders. Wouldn't it make more sense that, commensurate with more difficult material, space would open up leaving room not just for annotations, but also for the mind to extract full value from the content by having room to digest in the gaps.

Attentiveness as a prerequisite of absorptive reading demands from the environment-typesetting coupling the stringent condition of laminar flow. Typesetting done in isolation with concern only for the book and its distribution simply cannot extort the reader's attentiveness to its fullest potential, or even in a meaningful way.

The Potential for ConTEXt

I have purposely not set about to offer prescriptive solutions as I would like to see an active discussion within the community about what ap-

proaches might be used to overcome the gap.

My hope is that by offering an alternative frame of reference, one that is inspired by the design of public spaces that place human interaction front and centre, we might restore the balance between the reader and the book, and guide the direction of further development of ConTEXt to make it more accessible for generalized use.

However, with every lament there is most certainly an opportunity, and here is what I see as one that the ConTEXt community could leverage: there are some realities of production that all publishing faces, primarily set page sizes. These format options seem at first glance crowded into a tight space: choice but not much *differentiation*. Variation is slight: it might just be a matter of printing equipment available, or historical exemplars that are taken as is.

For instance, see if you can find amongst the list of page sizes offered in Amazon's self-publishing choices anything that approximates the Golden Ratio? Fine. Accept these limitation as they are. Concentrate on what might lift writers and novice typesetters to maximize the results of their efforts to produce a higher quality output. Rather than seeking to find printing sources with more *ideal* choices, keep the focus on the reader of the work.

At the ConTEXt Meeting in 2018 there was an informal discussion considering what it might take

to put a web front-end to ConTEXt with parameterized setup of layout, which matched what self-publishing requires of the print-ready copy downstream. But then go one step further: to offer local printing via a chain of specialty printers who might offer pages sizes, and paper quality which match the *local* consumers' expectations. Issues related to copyright protection were also raised: how would a writer feel about putting the raw manuscript in the hands of such a web-site and brand without the market presence of the well known options?

Well then, what about using cross-platform toolkits then? Say ElectronJS which relies on well-used web technologies: using the same code base one can offer genuine choice to those who prefer to have the typesetting done 'on-premise' rather than 'in-cloud'. And with the on-premise option one could envisage a complementary suite of tools to handle the surrounding scaffolding of writing projects: cataloguing and managing characters, background info, research about locations, scene outlines, etc.

Here we would be offering writers and typesetters real value to aid them in their quest to produce *beautiful* words, while narrowing the gap between them and their audience. We would be providing an assisted platform to help them produce output that emphasizes the ideal of 'life between words'. This should be the ultimate goal of all books, regardless.