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Working in the Dark: an interview with Don Austin

Interviewer: When did you create *ned after snowslides*, and how long did it take from conception to completion?

Don Austin: I got the idea for the project in 2001 and it took close to three years before it was up and running. It felt like three projects in one (the text, the images and the technical side) and each of them had to be done at least twice. I began by writing the text as though it were a print novel. Some 150 pages into it, I realized that I didn't know anyone, including myself, who wanted to read something that long on a screen. I then spent a long time paring it down to 75 pages before concluding that I needed to rethink the whole project and start afresh. I saw that the kind of hypertext writing I was interested in was closer to a very condensed prose poetry than the novel. So I rewrote it as a series of 43 linked prose poems.

For the images I bought a digital camera and took over 2000 photographs around the city over two winters, later paring them down to around 150. And for the technical part, I took workshops at the College of the North Atlantic in Flash, Photoshop, Adobe Illustrator and in creating web pages. I researched the philosophy of hypertext and the various ways in which units of text and image can be arranged on a web site.

Before I started, I thought it would take about a year to complete the work. I mentioned this time-frame to someone at the Arts Council and they said, oh, you'll see. Sure enough, I didn't get the site up and running until 2004.

Interviewer: What sparked the project?

Don Austin: In late 2000 I bought a new iMac, got an internet connection and started surfing the web seriously for the first time. It struck me immediately that the structure of a web site with its links, images, sounds, and small videos had possibilities for a fiction writer. I was so naïve; I thought I was the first one who'd thought of this. I found out that hypertext fiction has been around since the mid 1980s. I had written a story around this time called *Another Warm Storm* about a disaffected middle-aged man wandering around St. John's. It was written as an inner monologue, a series of observations and digressions and had been published on a local website called SIEVED.COM. It seemed to me that surfing the web, being constantly interrupted, going off on endless tangents, was a lot like how my character thought, and that it suited an inner monologue particularly well. And, since I wanted the city of St. John's to be a character in the book, too, with a website I could include pictures and perhaps give a more vivid sense of the place. About the same time I heard about the Aliant/Arts Council Cultural Innovation Fund. I applied for a grant, got one, and I was off.

Interviewer: Did you create the text, the images and the website at around the same time or did one prompt the other? Let me put that another way: did the text suggest using certain images or did images inspire the text?

Don Austin: I did the writing and photography simultaneously, but I don't remember one particularly influencing the other. They seemed to inhabit their own compartments. I pretty much finished the text, then designed the way the pages would look, then went through the photos to see how they'd fit in. My main concern was to not illustrate the text so much as expand and compliment it. That said, occasionally when going through my picture files I did pick ones that did just that and, on at least one occasion (when taking pictures of the lost gloves) the idea found its way into the text.

Interviewer: Did you have a structure for the work in mind when you began or did it evolve as you began to play with the technology?

Don Austin: I had only a vague general notion about the structure when I started. I had the idea that I would add a lot of different media, audio snippets and links to other websites, short videos, parallel texts, a whole pile of stuff. Just as when we walk around town, we 'click' on certain sights or overheard words which sometimes change our train of thought and 'link' us to memories, or ideas, I thought the piece could imitate this process so that reading it would be something closer to our everyday experience than what we often encounter in fiction. But I realized after a while that I'd bitten off too much. On top of that, I found out that my internet provider would give me only a certain amount of free web space on their server. So in the end I had to pare it all back even more. That's why some of the pages don't have pictures at the top. That might be a good thing since winter often has its grey days and white-outs and blank spaces. So, in the end, practical concerns partially dictated the structure.

I decided, too, that readers perhaps had enough problems with this new form and that I should help them (and myself) out by devising a simple formal structure and a clear timeframe. I found a scrap of newspaper I'd kept in a notebook for 20 years and decided to use it to hang everything on. It had 43 sentence fragments so there would have to be 43 pages and, since each one of them except the first could be read in any order, everything would have to happen in the present. I also limited the main colours of the site to grey, white, and blue, with a little ochre so it wasn't visually cluttered.

Then it was a matter of adding the pictures and figuring out how the various pages and images would link together. The text itself already had a certain randomness and digression built into it which made the process a bit easier. In a way I almost couldn't go wrong however I arranged the individual parts. The piece was designed to be read randomly but I didn't want to trick people or confuse them either, so the sentence fragments on the home page provide links to all the pages. Also, since nostalgia is one of its main themes, I designed it so that if you hit the left hand navigation button (often called the "back button") at the bottom of each page, you'll go through the site the way it's laid out on the home page. Just the same, I've always recommended going in a getting lost.

Interviewer: Did you create the website (create the HTML) or was someone else assigned that work?

Don Austin: I knew someone who designed websites for a living (Darrell Heath) and I paid him to do it. He did a great job, even tweaking the design a little.

Interviewer: It seems to me that the experience of reading *ned after snowslides* in printed form would be quite different from reading it as a hypertext. Did you create a print version?

Don Austin: No. I thought of sending just the text to publishers but never did. I also briefly entertained the idea of making a print version that would go in a box and could be read randomly.

Interviewer: What did the hypertext form allow you to do that you could not have achieved using a traditional print form?

Don Austin: One of the main things the form allowed was interactivity, involving the reader in how the piece would be experienced. I suppose if the internet didn't exist and I had wanted to make a print version, I could have replicated the process by putting the three choices at the bottom of each page and letting the reader make the decision of where to go next. And instead of the onscreen slideshows, I could have created numbered boxes of photographs that the reader could go to when they came across a corresponding highlighted word in the text. This would be a somewhat clumsy version of hypertext, but it seems to me there would still be something missing.

With the print form, you can hold it in your hands so that you have an idea right from the start how much space it occupies. But with hypertext it seems more like the experience of crossing a portal into a space whose size and contents are more of a mystery than that of a printed copy. I believe some call it n-dimensional space, whatever that means. I like to think we discover a hypertext as much as read it. We're only given that flat screen so we don't know how deep it goes or in how many different directions. The first page is like that first street we set foot on in a new city, and we find its parts by accident sometimes depending on the people we meet, the things that pique our interest, our own energy or fatigue, and so on. Also, to continue the city metaphor, there's the possibility that the site can be renovated, subtracted from, added to or altered, in the future just as a city can be.

And something else: my main character was someone whose own narrative had been interrupted. So a medium that in itself is fragmentary and that constantly interrupts itself and doesn't know where it's going might better suit a story like this. The form may have allowed me to make the reader feel this better than a printed format would have. On a practical level, the piece allowed me to create something that was immediately accessible to anyone who had access to the internet. Plus, it could be linked to other sites (and sometimes was) so that I instantly reached an even broader audience. It was a kind of self-publishing that had a distribution system built into it. I could even put a counter on the site to see how often it was visited and I did.

Interviewer: What other hypertexts were you aware of at the time? Did any one of them influence you more than another?

Don Austin: When I looked around the internet I found quite a number of writers who worked in this area, from Michael Joyce (who wrote what at the time was perhaps the genre's most celebrated example, *Afternoon, a story*) to Adrienne Eisen, one of my favourite hypertext writers. I think with her it was a case of her style being closer to my own so that it gave me encouragement. I was a little disappointed with the majority of hypertexts. I had to remind myself that it was a new form and also that even among genres that I enjoyed, I still really only liked a small percentage of the work done in them.

But more than anything I was inspired by a print book I'd read years before: *Nadja* by Andre Breton, the de facto leader of the Surrealists in Paris. It came out in 1928, a long prose poem

with wonderfully evocative black and white photographs.

Interviewer: Have you created any other hypertexts?

Don Austin: No, just this one. I am inspired by your interest in it, though, to do more. I have a couple of ideas for pieces which I think might work as hypertexts. I like the idea of collaborating with readers, doing something that I would start and others could add to. An elaborate version of the Surrealist game, *The Exquisite Corpse*. That's something a hypertext can do quite easily. I could also extend the ned piece into the four seasons.

Interviewer: You make reference in the text to John Ashbery, Marcel Duchamp and W. G. Sebald. How did the works of these authors influence ned?

Don Austin: I was reading a lot of Ashbery at the time, and I think he gave me a way to write in which there would be no development of a narrative. I wanted to do something where practically every sentence could stand on its own since the reader might abandon it at any time to follow a link. So Ashbery gave me the license in a way to be random and free and even somewhat incoherent and silly at times, to stretch things and trust that it would still hold together.

Duchamp, I believe, has influenced all of us, perhaps unknowingly. He has probably changed how we view the world. His *Large Glass* uses humour and chance and has a text as an integral part of it, so he may even have invented multimedia, I don't know. There was no direct influence except that when it came time to mull over what I should do about crediting the news photograph that appears on the home page, I decided to alter it in Photoshop and use "R. Mutt" as the credit. "R. Mutt" was how Duchamp signed one of his first "readymades" (a urinal which he titled *Fountain*).

Sebald I found interesting because of his serious fictions which often use images. I think as writers we sometimes distrust images or, at least when paired with writing, associate them with illustrated children's novels and comic books. Sebald includes them and they give resonance and depth to his texts.

Interviewer: What was your greatest challenge in creating this work?

Don Austin: I found every single part of it a challenge (the writing, designing the pages and figuring out how the links would work together, the technical part, the promotion, renting the domain name, even answering these questions). But the greatest challenge was the technical part, creating the website itself. That was the hardest because it was the most foreign to me. For a long time I was completely overwhelmed and intimidated by it. I studied different programs for writing HTML, I sent away for books on GoLive and ImageReady, I did online workshops on making web pages and I got almost nowhere. Then one day I ran into a visual artist who'd gotten the same grant I was working on and asked her how she had learned to make web pages. She told me that since it wasn't her forte and not something she thought was important for her to learn, she paid someone to do it. A weight was immediately lifted off my shoulders.

Interviewer: What surprised you most about the finished work?

Don Austin: I was surprised and happy that it worked at all as a hypertext and that it looked

half-decent. You never really know how it'll turn out when you're doing something new and working in the dark.

Interviewer: Thanks, Don.

St. John's,
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