

Resurrection Man

An archaeological dig into the CALL Review
Site under construction

by Tony Williams

Before I begin...

At the battle of Gettysburg the first people to turn up on the scene were not the generals and soldiers but the correspondents, war artists and military historians, determined to get the best seats when recording the event for posterity. They got their priorities right. If only David Eastment, our first editor, had appointed an archivist and long-term project czar before firing up his word processor in 1984 I would not be in the pickle I am in now.

I have taken on the job of assembling the raw materials that went into 16 years of editions of the *CALL Review*, or the *Muesli News* as it was known first, and knocking them into electronic shape to make them available to members via the Web or CD-ROM. And I am in trouble. I envisaged about fifteen hours for the job, but this has proven to be wildly optimistic.

A word of explanation. I had acted as editor and then 'Co-ordinating Editor' for two or three years in the early 1990s and as such had assembled and kept a quantity of back numbers of the magazines. The issue came to the boil when I was involved in yet another office reorganisation and had to take a decision about these accumulated copies of *Muesli News* and *CALL Review* which were taking up precious space. When I put it to Comp-Sig committee members that pulping might be an option, some of the solutions depicted in *Pulp Fiction* were proposed for me instead, so I thought better of it.

In the subsequent discussion a consensus emerged that, old or not, very many and indeed most of the articles were of intrinsic, timeless value, still readable fifteen or ten years after writing and should be preserved for the nation.

As every edition since 1984 originated in electronic form it was a straightforward matter to read it in, and put it onto our Web page. But read on...

This article looks at the history of the magazine, its contributors, editors and the pitfalls in the resurrection process.

I want to keep readers up to date with the state of play but first let me remind myself of why I think it is worthwhile.

The articles

The CALL Review always had a wide remit: hardware and software reviews, academic and pedagogical features, reports on meetings, conferences and national projects, polemical exchanges, hints and tips, descriptions of classroom practice (good and not so good), humorous articles and not forgetting crossword puzzles contributed by 'Buffer'. Not a few of these articles feature prominently in the bibliographies of learned CALL publications. I could single out Alison Piper's three-part survey of the relationship between Writing and Word-processing which appeared toward the end of the 1980s and was later reprinted. I could also mention the seminal 'Cast your nets upon the Waters' by Professor J Gobldigu.

The fact that *Muesli News* was not a refereed periodical had its advantages - its tone could afford to fluctuate between the academic, the practical and the amusing. It could also be more up to the minute - essential in the environment of technology. The name *Muesli News* was a drawback, however, since it did not sound serious enough in academic circles. It did not have the same cachet as *System*, for example, where *Muesli's* articles were often reprinted.

For a number of years the *Muesli News* was the envy of other SIGs for the quality of its presentation, its regularity of appearance, the high level of contributions. But inevitably other SIGs caught up.

The editors and the articles

As a spin-off from recovering and organising the editions and files I have drawn up (in electronic form) a list of all the editors, titles of articles and their authors in the years 1984 – 1999. This is in itself a valuable resource, I am sure. It is too long to be included here, so I am proposing that it be made available to members via our web page. In the thirty-nine issues in my care I have identified at least 154 different writers. Let me just mention John Higgins, Tim Johns, Sue Hower, Alison Piper, Jeremy Fox, Armandro Baltra, Mike Carrier, Sue Fortescue – no, no, there are far too many to continue.

When this is made available members will be able to judge for themselves whether the effort was justified.

Long-term readers and contributors may remember that in an effort to spread the workload and ensure an internationalist tone, at one time the editorship was made peripatetic. Prominent CALL practitioners were invited, threatened, cajoled but never bribed to do a stint as editor. Totting up their names I am reminded of those church plaques which list the number of incumbent vicars in the church's lifetime, and to one's amazement, we read that there have only been 23 since the year 1299 AD, so that vicars must have served an average of thirty years each! In the paltry sixteen years of *CALL Review's* existence we have got through at least fifteen different editors, little over one year each – so there must have been a lot of bloodletting! But no, seriously, this rotation was deliberate policy, and, to be honest, not many lusted after the job, regarding it as somewhat less alluring than that of a double-glazing salesman. It was also less remunerative.

So who were the editors? Here is a rapid run-through of their names. If I have missed any, my apologies.

David Eastment, Glyn Jones, Chris Jones, Tony Williams, Sue Fortescue, Roland Nyns, Frans Hoffman and Linda Swanson, Mike Carrier, Gary Motteram, Caroline Moore, Richard Law (the British Council one), Paul Snookes, Alison Piper, Scott Windeatt. Some have fallen out of the sight of CALL - others are very much still with us.

Editor as Leonardo

One practice that established itself from the first was that of the editor as a loner. Where normal club magazines would have an editorial team of at least three or four workers: an editor, proof-reader, page-layouer and graphics designer, *Muesli* editors stuck to the Leonardo da Vinci model, and believed that computers could enable you to combine all these skills in one person. The other rationale for this was to save time and avoid the delays intrinsic to decision-by-committee - editors even went so far as soliciting contributions from writers and drumming up advertising themselves. Not a lot has changed in this respect over the years.

While the use of peripatetic editors shared the burden and ensured more or less timely and frequent publication, it also meant that there have been fluctuations in house style and choice of software vehicle.

Ravages of time

Although computers may offer the most sophisticated data bases and storage devices for organising and storing work, these provide no guarantee against the ravages of time, human frailty, the vagaries of memory and the onward march of technology.

Complete editions were variously produced with Wordwise on the late lamented BBC B computer, with Microsoft Word, Word Perfect, Ventura, Pagemaker on the PC and

QuarkXpress on the Mac. And this variation was not to be avoided, for we could not compel one-off editors to switch to the printer's darling but heavyweight QuarkXpress.

But now all the BBC B, Apple II and other 5.25" disks have evaporated. A good many editions, fortunately, were laid out using Quark on the Mac. I say 'fortunately' with reservations, because Quark, for all its virtues, has not always been downwardly mobile, and version 3.32 is too grand to read files created by its old mother 2.5, for instance.

That covers all the editions written between 1988 and 1991. At the time of writing I am still belabouring QuarkXpress for a solution. (Needless to say, my copy of Quark 2.5 was overwritten when 3.32 came along and the backup vanished three years later.)

In all cases editions were prepared as camera-ready copy and taken to the printer on paper. In practice this meant that once the paper masters were at the printers the editors' valuable disk space could be cleared for the next job. As Coordinating Editor I occasionally received editions on disk, but mostly not. Looking back wistfully, this is the point where the putative *CALL Review* czar would have stepped in and commandeered the electronic originals.

Retrieval

Even after overcoming the substantial problems of version compatibility, I still get messages on loading up telling me that 're-flowing of text' will take place; in the originals some funny old fonts were used and finding those would be a research project in its own right. Font substitution and text reflowing mean that the original layout gets shot to pieces.

As the archaeological project progresses we may find the most coherent procedure is to 'suck' out the text from all the electronic files where we can locate them, pipe it into a simple template and re-introduce scanned-in graphics afresh. The output may not be pretty, but if the intention is at bottom to enable members to get access to hypertext rather than admire what clever layouters the editors were, it will do the job.

Scanning, OCR, retyping?

Optical Character Recognition is the last resort of a desperate man. All the old Wordwise disk are lost and their contents exist only on paper. But my OCR package (ReadIris), makes very heavy going of old dot matrix printouts and the error rate is an unacceptable 30%. This means, for instance, that I spent two hours scanning, OCR-ing and tidying up just two pages of Issue No 1. Yet for the first four editions there may be no alternative if we are to resurrect the text in electronic form and make it available to new members.

There is always another possibility, of course, and that is to send it away to commercial scanning bureaux and pay them very large amounts of money to recover the original. I don't think COMP-Sig's coffers would rise to that, however.

Another more outrageous option again would be to type the whole thing again into Quark and start the page layout afresh, proof-reading and all...

Yet re-typing is actually a viable option when it comes to typescript and poor quality dot matrix output as in the first four editions of *Muesli News*. Seeing me labouring away correcting letter by letter the OCR spin on the scanned-in text, my colleague Frauke Noelker grabbed the printed text of the next edition and in one-and-a-half hours had typed it in – which was a much better performance than I was turning in. However, this only holds good for relatively unformatted text with no graphics. The Crossword template that came in in *Muesli 3* had to be scanned in as graphics anyway if it were not to be discarded.

Comp-Sig archivist Geoff Taylor has suggested another solution in the form of a shareware package for the Mac called last *LastDitch* which is designed to 'suck' text out of any intransigent file. Unfortunately this is in the form of a Hypercard 'stack' and my last brief encounter with Hypercard was in 1990 – and is a piece of software that I hesitate to re-learn But Geoff has successfully used this on one issue so far.

Graphics

A word about graphics. In the early days very few graphic illustrations were used, and some of them were for advertisements which we can safely decide to omit. Later on more and more illustrations were included, but not a few of these were in paper form (stuck onto the camera ready copy) and never had an electronic origin.

These will have to be re-scanned in from the paper edition – no chance of going back to the authors!

Moreover, even where graphics were submitted in .tif or .gif form, etc, sometimes they became detached from the original files and disappeared. While Quark may retain an image of these graphics which is sufficient for printing out on laser printers, when compressed into Acrobat form these graphics are lost. The only way of recovering these will to scan them in from paper, and again it is a matter of time and priorities whether this job will be done.

I ought to mention the “collect for output” facility in Quark. This is a vital procedure which I only learned about in the mid-1990s when preparing disks to send to the printers (camera-ready copy on paper was not good enough for colour work). This placed on the floppy disk (or by now the Zip disk) the file, copies of all graphics it used, and all fonts. If it couldn't find them it made you search for them. I had learned by now that Helvetica on my machine may not correspond with any of the Helvetica editions held by the printer - so I had to provide a copy of my version. But back in 1990 for backup purposes I had done a Save or Save as...and blithely assumed this was enough. Ten years later I realised that this saved no more than the file and its formatting, but not the actual graphics and the actual fonts. I had saved the work but with its arms and legs amputated. This is not a problem if you are still using the computer you had in 1990... So be warned even today....

Listings

When it comes to program listings I am in a quandary. In the early years these listings (in BASIC and does anyone apart from Burkhardt Leuschner remember Comal?) were a regular feature of all computer magazines and were various routines and tricks which programming CALLers assiduously typed into their BBC B's. My dilemma is that scanning is inaccurate and there is little point in devoting hours to meticulously reconstructing something which no one in the world will ever use. To return to our archaeological metaphor – we can regard these listings as unearthed ruins. Excavation proves only that they were there and gives an indication of their general outline and purpose. But it is *infra dig*, so to speak, to rebuild them in all their former glory. So my decision has been to leave the listings unearthed but unreconstructed. For *Muesli 2's* Programmers' Corner Arthur Rope sent in a listing enabling students to select programs or text files from a screen menu ‘with the touch of a single key!’ A simple requirement which every network manager needs to meet in some way. Arthur Rope was right there with his solution in 1984, which I think is great in its day - but the listing for now remains un-proofread.

Comp-SIG members may be of a different mind, however, and for them the original listings are available as photocopies and their electronic rough counterparts will soon be made available in electronic form.

How will it reach you?

Geoff Taylor and I have been discussing the various merits of Adobe *Acrobat* vis-a-vis *html*. I am for Adobe Acrobat, mainly because I can work with it a little and also because it can easily take an existing Mac file and compress it into cross-platform format. If recipients do not have an Acrobat reader it can be downloaded free of charge from the Adobe web page. It is also quite flexible in that if readers wish to quote from any of the articles (with full attribution, of course), they can cut text passages and paste them into Word, for example. The full Acrobat editor is not needed for this.

Geoff Taylor argues for *html* because, one, he is good at it, and, two, it is specifically designed for the Web. It is not so good for graphics.

So far, since I seem to be the prime mover in this project, Acrobat has the day, but that may not be the end of the discussion.

What have I learned?

Have I gained anything from the experience? One sad conclusion is that paper has proved to be the only future-proof medium (if you can protect it from mice, flood, fire, shredding). Paper has been the vital organising reference and means of salvaging these sixteen years of work. This is not so surprising since the paper product was always the target.

Paper may be future-proof, but it is no longer the answer, of course. We want and need to be able to access all the materials over the web or on CD-ROM, we want to perform hypersearches on keywords, etc. There is no argument.

The major lesson was stated at the beginning of this article: when founding a new SIG, or any other organisation for that matter, think ahead, think decades ahead. Don't assume that it is all going to fold in a few months and that what you are doing will pass. Assume permanency. If people are going to put in work, paid or unpaid, their work should be respected and made to last. Technology will constantly change but learn to ride with it. If a major watershed looks likely, be sure that somebody is on hand whose job it is to supervise the transition and safeguard your treasures.

Last word: if the new kids on the block don't know what *Muesli* means, it is "Microcomputers Users in English as a Second Language Institutions." The founding fathers could have called it a lot of other things, but that is what they came up with. Jocular or not, the title was very memorable. But with the years the joke palled and one did tire of repeatedly spelling it out. But there are some regrets...