

Editing outside the box: why, and how, freelance editors are in a prime position to thrive in the digital publishing landscape

Selena Hanet-Hutchins

Books are strangers: more radically alien than any human traveller, they come marked with the irreducible distance between reading and writing. In their folds and between their lines they carry all the distributions of space, time and textuality, rendered into a concrete instance in the moment of reading. (Cubitt 1998, 12)

Perhaps the book has never seemed more alien than now, especially for editors. Not all of us are comfortable with that ‘moment of reading’ involving a digital interface, nor with the speed of change in this age of ereaders, cloud-based libraries, and mobile content; some are even afraid. Not only must we adapt to rapid change as consumers of books, as readers, but we must also engage with new technologies and a faster, leaner workflow to produce them. What is the editor’s role in this context—is there one? Yes.

During my ten years in trade publishing, five of them purely freelancing, I have often felt that editing is a vocation: we come to editing via a love of reading, through which we experience god. We cannot shut our ears to that call simply because our world seems to be going to hell in a hand basket ... or a handheld device—that is exactly when we are needed! Yes, books have changed. Yet our most valuable asset, rather than to attempt to reinvent ourselves and our work, is to be true to what we are and have been, and apply it to the current context.

Is a book a box?

Once, a book was a circle, or a spiral, its meaning made in conversation. Story was not written down, but shared in the flow of life. In *Treading Lightly*, Tex Skuthorpe and Karl-Erik Sveiby explain this ancient knowledge system, unpacking the ancient Nhungabarra stories Skuthorpe learned as he grew to adulthood. (Skuthorpe & Sveiby 2006, 7).



About the author

Selena Hanet-Hutchings runs texture, a broad-scope freelance editing business servicing a range of clients in publishing and other industries. She teaches

editing at the University of Wollongong, where she oversees publication of the anthology *Tide*. Selena regularly delivers guest lectures and workshops on writing, editing and digital publishing to colleges and universities, arts and writing groups, and corporations.





Yurrti - Goanna



Tex Skuthorpe's own painting of the goanna yurrti or totem. (Image from the artist's website: <www.tuckandee.com.au>)

The stories were drawn with a stick or tool in the dust. Skuthorpe 'read' these stories in action, talking and walking them with elders. Each layer of knowledge opened up as he was ready for it, as he reached for it. Editor Janet Mackenzie presents a playful breakdown of the word 'BOOK' in *The Editor's Companion: Beneficial Organised Operational Knowledge*. (Mackenzie 2011, 23) If we apply it here, then these story-maps are the first books.

Many thousands of years later, text-based books arrived in the shape of a religious scroll or a codex. Reading them was an experience of virtual pilgrimage, of communion with god. It was the printing press that packed books into boxes. At first, reading was a communal activity; then, wider distribution of books and greater access to education allowed readers to make that journey into the story world alone, collecting clues in each 'person, object, event, anecdote, image, recollection, bit of information, leap in time' to find and build its centre, its deeper truth. (Pamuk, 2011, 154) For me, this describes editing, and so I tell my authors, Editing in Paradise participants, and the students I teach: read as a reader—read the manuscript and its world for clues.

Then, a new BOOK was born—the 'information superhighway'. It was revolutionary, but familiar; made of 'pages' and 'folds', 'lines' and 'text', it brought new multimedia forms of communicating, playing and storytelling. New Media Artists, such as Sean Cubitt, Michael Joyce and Mez Breeze, experimented with temporality and structure, with interactivity and interface, and honoured the reader's role in making story.¹ Artists, gamers and codeworkers recognised that 'highway' was a poor analogy for the internet, because it was not a logistics link between two points, but a complex human-dimensional map of connections. To read it was to participate in a new kind of quest story whose joy was in gathering new signs and symbols in the pursuit of 'flow'.

1 I wish I could show, or even find, all of the early hypertext works I fell in love with but, for the most part, they were temporary and not archived. *Twelve Blue* by Michael Joyce is fairly representative, as is the work of Mez Breeze. The Electronic Literature Organization has published a representative collection: <<http://collection.eliterature.org>>



‘Flow’ is the way people describe their state of mind when consciousness is harmoniously ordered, and they want to pursue whatever they are doing for its own sake. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991, 6)

Editors were a different kind of geek: booklovers, safe in our utopia rich with the scent of books—lovely boxy shapes with covers and endpapers. By the time Cubitt was writing *Digital Aesthetics*, trade publishing had become ‘big publishing’, focused on the bottom line and how to grow it. (Thompson, 2011) Meanwhile, software developers were deleting a publishing role with each new application released. Those who had found a home in the booklovers’ utopia now became part of the assembly line in a book factory, waiting for the next round of retrenchments—flow was a rare experience at work. While flow was not in the workflow, editors were; there would always be the magic triangle of writer, editor and publisher. But we had forgot ourselves: missing from the workflow was the most essential element to the book business: readers.

Breaking down the box

Editors are brave. The writer’s companion and the reader’s advocate, we travel alone into unknown territory prepared to face brand new challenges to reach our goal.

[E]very manuscript is different, every writer is different, every story or nonfiction subject is different. What stays the same is the purpose of the editing: to help the author make the work as good as it can possibly be. So good that literary agents want to represent it, publishers want to publish it, and readers in significant quantities want to read it. (Browne 2011)

As Browne in the United States, some Australian editors left big publishing. Some embraced the changing game in other industries; others left for freelance editing, a healthier working life and a more fluid and connected style of interaction with the individual story-makers. Many still worked with trade houses, as well as establishing trusted networks, or hubs, with other publishing freelancers (desktop publishers, designers and typesetters, printers) and a growing community of self-publishers. I left because I could see how the ‘single source’ highly illustrated, well written and beautifully designed PDF novels and art books that I had been forced to reject as in-house Submissions Editor might come together with the hypertext- and Flash-based multimedia works I had been reading since the 1990s—and it seemed trade publishing couldn’t.² What a book could be! I left because I could see what I could be: an editor outside the box of book publishing, in the world of story.

Margaret Atwood warns to be wary of literary utopias: they are really ‘ustopias’, and fragile in the face of an alien encounter: we are forced to see there a reflection of our reality, of us. (Atwood 2011, 67–75) In leaving readers out of the book-making frame of focus, and out of the work flow, big publishing left themselves prey to monsters: other corporate businesses making money out of Beneficial Organised Operational Knowledge: Google and Amazon. Both had a strong presence at the 2007 London Book Fair.³ (Hanet-Hutchins, 2007) Booklovers should have read it better: bookish geeks and code geeks are one and the same—readers in search of god: good orderly direction: the perfect interface. In the business of books, Amazon had found it.

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- 2 I started telling anyone who would listen. How I wish I’d written it down. But editors aim to be invisible.
 - 3 Amazon were grudgingly included on several of the panel discussions and Google had an enormous white display to showcase their new cloud-based library. Also exhibited was Margaret Atwood’s Long Pen, invented to connect readers with authors to sign their books remotely. The distance between writers and readers was no longer ‘irreducible’.





The monsters at the edge of big publishing's map: Amazon, Apple, Facebook and Google fight it out on the cover of The Economist's tech edition, December 2012

When Amazon and Apple raced to provide the first ereader and included features to take advantage of the social web, the call went out: books have left their containers.⁴ But books had never been in containers—not for readers. In fact they had been such expansive worlds, they had been like second lives.

4 In 2010, Kate Eltham and Richard Watson were touring for if:book Australia with exactly this message.



Novels are second lives ... full of people, faces and objects we feel we recognize ... we are sometimes so powerfully struck by the extraordinary nature of the things we encounter that we forget where we are and envision ourselves in the midst of the imaginary events and people we are witnessing ... [W]e substitute novels for reality, or at least that we confuse them with real life ... [and] we want the novel we are reading to continue and hope that this second life will keep evoking in us a consistent sense of reality and authenticity. In spite of what we know about fiction, we are annoyed and bothered if a novel fails to sustain the illusion that it is actually real life. (Pamuk 2010, 3)

So novels and role-play gaming are both like living second lives, and both rely on the authentic reality of the story world. The same is true of film: story world is key. (Henry Jenkins 2008) Is it such a surprise to find ourselves in the convergence culture of the 'Pottermore era', and is it really new?

Big publishing talks about embracing transmedia and augmented reality experiences, or the gamification of books, setting fear into the hearts of editors already up to their eyeballs in work and updating knowledge, skills and software, but they are still thinking of the book as a box in an assembly line. MOBI and text-based EPUB is essentially a print book in a different box, plus marginalia—a book for the age of the 'information superhighway'. The enhanced ebook isn't very different to the CD-ROM of the late 1990s. (Hanet 1998) Apps are a new proposition for books but most don't have the collaborative reading capability of the text-based ebooks. The product 'book' has not left its box, there is just more inside it now, and it has not yet embraced the potential of the BOOK⁵: Beneficial Organised Operational Knowledge to the power of networking.

Books without boundaries: editing outside the box

If editors can read the new landscape, we might see the shapes of our future work and workflow is the same the codeworkers have used since the 1990s: pods, hubs, spirals of human-dimensional interaction with downsized headquarters, fluid spaces of co-working rooms and 'hotdesks' for mobile workers who commute physically, via the internet, or as hologram. (Frey 2012–2013) Sydney-based digital start-up Xoum Publishing, publishing 20 to 30 digital books and one to three in print each year, have responded with a workflow that incorporates readers' feedback at the design and editing phases and makes use of tools such as iCloud, Adobe's Acrobat and Creative Cloud, and Basecamp, as well as regular phone, email and Skype time with authors, readers and each other. They devote one to two days per week (on average) to research and development and use social media as part of the business mix; ebook conversion is done offshore.⁵ Writing and editing are still the slowest steps of the workflow but, in a word, Xoum is agile.

Agility is scary. This buzzword means rushed books in service of the market Zeitgeist. In-house and freelance editors alike are under extreme pressure to deliver edits at a speed that kills quality and breaks the editor's human spirit.⁶ 'Agile' is more than just a buzzword. Born in software development, these are the values underpinning it:

We are uncovering better ways of developing software by doing it and helping others do it.

Through this work we have come to value:

Individuals and interactions over processes and tools

Working software over comprehensive documentation

5 Rod Morrison, Xoum response to work practices questionnaire, 30 November 2012 to January 2013.

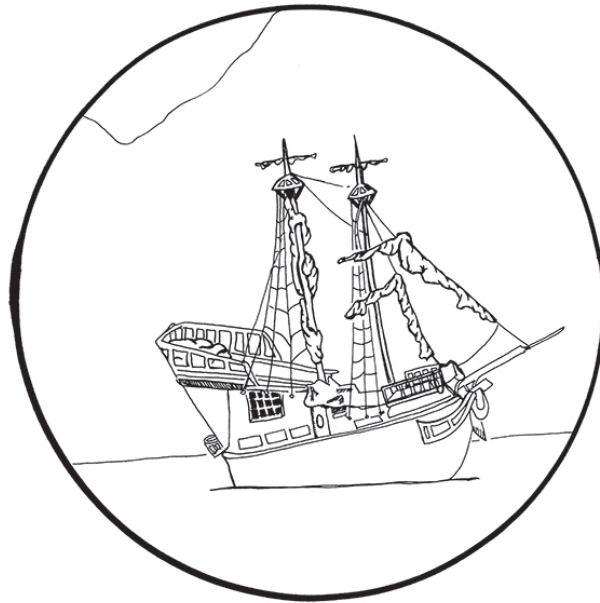
6 We have all heard horror stories of the editor asked to perform the copyedit on top of the Track Changes structural edit, or the tag-team writing–editing process to get an ebook out in six weeks, or the manuscript that arrives for structural editing with 'notes to self' from the author: *Still to write—scene where [description]*.

Customer collaboration over contract negotiation

Responding to change over following a plan

That is, while there is value in the items on the right, we value the items on the left more. (www.agilemanifesto.org) ⁷

Collecting clues, marking the signs and symbols, structures and patterns on our journey, we are a portal of synthesis between story-maker and story-reader, and we can reflect a truer reading of the text. Replace the word 'software' with 'books' and doesn't this describe what editors have been doing all along, especially freelance editors?



there is
nothing
new in
this world,

Image by Misha Donohoe <www.mishaleena.com>

Using that editorial eye to look again at the first Australian BOOKs, we see they are not dissimilar from the mobile web: map-images of reference points based in the landscape, designed to transfer a bank of linked knowledge that could be navigated through conversation and contemplation; a different reading of the story, a deeper level of knowledge is there when you reach for it. Every time the story is travelled, or told in conversation, it may take a different path depending on the readers. What might they teach us about the BOOKⁿ? What happens if we think of book publishing like this, as a map? We see www.gnooks.com: god in books, to the power of networking.⁸

⁷ Bold font is the authors' own.

⁸ www.gnooks.com, part of www.gnod.com, is an artificial intelligence (AI) map of what people read.





Gnooks book map showing what else readers of Australian writer Kim Wilkins read. The more readers authors have in common, the closer together they appear on the map.

By stepping outside the box of publishing altogether, a freelance editor can see that curatorship, quality, publicity and distribution are already in the hands of co-reading, co-writing and co-editing communities online. What the BOOKⁿ has made possible for their online identities, readers want to do with books. They want to own and redistribute story in broadcast feedback: the remix, the mash-up.⁹ This will require a different kind of business model and a different kind of software, and for authors and publishers to relinquish the right to be the authority on the content of the book, instead releasing it to an ongoing workflow beyond the current chain, which ends with the retailer.¹⁰ Then the book will have truly left its container, and we will really have our work cut out for us.

And eVERYthing
is BEING
EXPERIENCED
for the
FIRST TIME.

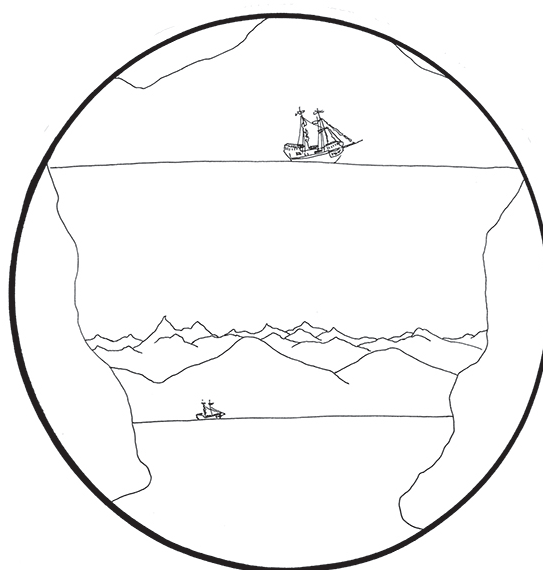


Image by Misha Donohoe <www.mishaleena.com>

9 I wanted to do a mash-up for this paper. Copyright, as we know it, makes that difficult.

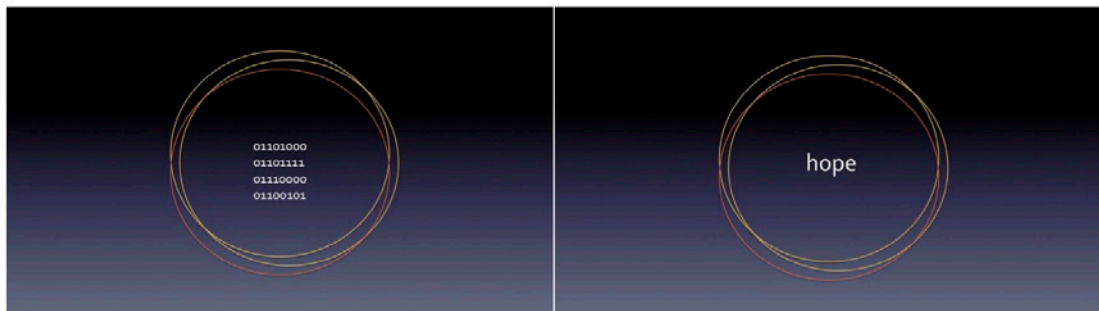
10 The changing opportunities for retailers and retailers in this landscape is a topic for another paper.



Conclusion

There is no need for fear, because editors are fortunate: our work is autonomous and meaningful and we are built for the future that has arrived, even when it contains Google Glass. Freelance editors have the space to interact with individuals and story worlds, to work and play in order to create information and the ideal interface for story. Story is everywhere, and people are making the BOOKⁿ. We can help them.

There is no need to turn ourselves into miserable machines—then we might be easily replicated by ones and zeros, by algorithms; an algorithm cannot yet replicate the relational associative power of the brain in imaginative play, in reading and synthesis—but rather let us look to the first books, and celebrate their human connection to the spiritual, with love for reading and this new BOOKⁿ.



The word 'hope' in binary (left) and in English (right); with ascenders and descenders, 'hope' reaches up to [h]eaven from the [p]ain of hell

Let us hang on to hope, and embody its embrace of 'what if?' Let us use what we know of language, communication and story to think the unthinkable and play at the edges of what's possible, and attempt to create something new—information, art, a miracle; a moment between the folds and lines of an experience that might hint at the presence of god—good orderly direction—in all things, even in books.

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