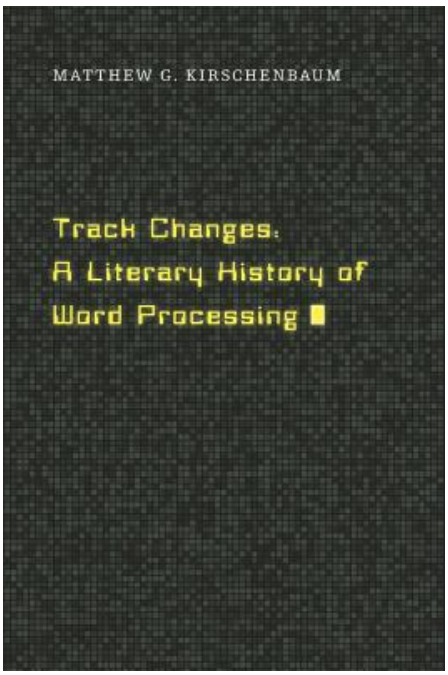

Track Changes: A Literary History of Word Processing

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The story of writing in the digital age is every bit as messy as the ink-stained rags that littered the floor of Gutenberg s print shop or the hot molten lead of the Linotype machine. During the period of the pivotal growth and widespread adoption of word processing as a writing technology, some authors embraced it as a marvel while others decried it as the death of literature. The product of years of archival research and numerous interviews conducted by the author, "Track Changes" is the first literary history of word processing.

Matthew Kirschenbaum examines how the interests and ideals of creative authorship came to coexist with the computer revolution. Who were the first adopters? What kind of anxieties did they share? Was word processing perceived as just a better typewriter or something more? How did it change our understanding of writing?

"Track Changes" balances the stories of individual writers with a consideration of how the seemingly ineffable act of writing is always grounded in particular instruments and media, from quills to keyboards. Along the way, we discover the candidates for the first novel written on a word processor, explore the surprisingly varied reasons why writers of both popular and serious literature adopted the technology, trace the spread of new metaphors and ideas from word processing in fiction and poetry, and consider the fate of literary scholarship and memory in an era when the final remnants of authorship may consist of folders on a hard drive or documents in the cloud."

Track Changes: A Literary History of Word Processing Details

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From Reader Review Track Changes: A Literary History of Word Processing for online ebook

Rafael Ontivero says

En algunos momentos se convierte en bastante truño, con idas de olla filosóficas sobre el concepto de las palabras convertidas en electrones y pajas mentales similares. Parecido a los que dicen que echan en falta el olor o el tacto de un libro cuando leen un eBook (pues a mi, este libro ha hecho que me duelan los tendones de la mano por tenerlo abierto, cosa que no me pasa con mi Kindle).

Por lo demás, por lo menos para los friks a los que les interesen estas cosas, el libro es muy interesante porque cuenta lo que tu mismo has vivido y lo que no. Por ejemplo, yo asistí a la explosión de WordStar en CP/M (de hecho yo llegué a escribir un libro de más de 250 páginas con él, ahora perdido), pero por ejemplo me perdí la época de los procesadores de texto específicos, aunque vi de refilón una vez un armatoste de la marca Amstrad que se iba a comprar un amigo de mi jefe pero que al final siguió con su máquina de escribir de toda la vida.

Junto a lo de arriba, lo interesante del libro son las experiencias de los propios escritores, como la de Clarke enviando sus composiciones por modem vía teléfono satélite de la época desde Sangri-La.

Michael Feehly says

Aside from the far too frequent mention of Stephen King, this is a great book that helps preserve and share the early history of word processing and its integration into publishing, writing, and everyday life.

Ernst says

This is a great book. It traces the history of word processing, and how in particular fiction writers adopted this technique. As such it offers a great insight into the writing process of a number of writers, as well as a history of the early personal computers, something that awakened a certain nostalgia in me.

On a deeper level, it also illustrates the writing process, how you get from a full brain and empty sheet of paper/screen to a finished book. Warmly recommended for anybody either writing or loving literature.

Kathrin Passig says

Es ist eher eine interessante Materialsammlung, die mühsam in buchähnliche Form gebracht wurde. Viele, viele Zitate von und Tidbits über Autoren. Die Geschichte der Textverarbeitung endet überraschend früh, eigentlich noch vor den 1990er Jahren. Aber wenn man es eher als Nachschlagewerk oder Materialsteinbruch benutzen möchte, sehr gut.

Lee Hauser says

A bit academic, and didn't have quite as many stories about writers and their early word processors as I would have liked, but the computer history nerd in me was pretty happy with this overall. I hope the author does a similar study about later developments in word processing and how more current writers use the technology.

TJ Wilson says

This is for the nerdiest of nerds.

The writing is very introspective. Much more so than I thought. Good philosophically meanderings through the world of bits and bots and muse.

Recommend for writers and software nerds. Maybe historically-minded people too.

David Dinaburg says

I love haunting quotes at the opening of novels; they serve to ground the story—like a song referenced within another song—in our *existant* reality, even if it is a wildly fantastic tale.

But unless you purposely flip back to refresh yourself, you'll only see the quote before you begin the text. It will be completely shorn of context, which is pretty neat, adding to the mystique but potentially dooming the quote bemusing irrelevance or, dare I say, complete oversight.

But it you're forced to view the epigraph every time, like during the opening of the 1998 PC game Baldur's Gate, the frequency may etch itself on your brain. I vividly recall it opening with "*He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster...when you gaze long into the abyss the abyss also gazes into you…*" and you're going to fight monsters, so it seems pretty straightforward. Then it turns out you are one of a dozen demigod offspring of the deceased god of murder, catalyst for his inevitable rebirth and...well, don't turn into the next god of death, okay? Right, so we've agreed, it was the perfect quote. It was also sixteen-year-old Dave's first brush with Nietzsche, so thanks for that, Black Isle!

Track Changes has an epigraph, too, so I was instantly in love: "*Well, salvage whatever you can, threadbare mementos glimmering in recollection.*" I am steeped more than most in the ephemeral nostalgia of bygone tech—time spent listening to Retronauts and Pixelated Audio, watching Lo-fi Let's Plays, and reading I AM ERROR or GAMELIFE all function as the nerd-edition of Proust's madeleine. While the TRS-80 and the TI-99/4A have become as familiar to me as the Master System, I don't know the equivalent Video Game History Foundation for non-game machines. That is why I picked up Track Changes: A Literary History of Word Processing. And I was not disappointed.

I liked the subject matter but was not prepared to discover (and fall in love with) a whole new structure:

> I have therefore adopted a reverse chronological trajectory, generally working backward in time with my chapters. This maneuver, sometimes identified with what is called media

> archaeology, helps me avoid the temptation of lapsing into easy or self-fulfilling narratives of technological progress while simultaneously exposing the inherent strangeness of "word processing" through its increasingly remote—rather than increasingly familiar—incarnations.

This is far and away the most revelatory thing that I learned. Prior to this, my only real chronological survey was (surprise, surprise) Chrontendo, a video chronology of all Nintendo 8-bit games. I cannot help but now wonder how being able to structure historical narratives in a way to "*help avoid the temptation of lapsing into easy of self-fulfilling narratives of technological progress*" alter the feel of the work. Perhaps I am still in the honeymoon phase of this format, as this is my first brush with it, but I feel like it might enliven Talking Simpsons, and alleviate the worry of finishing the first half-dozen good seasons and being mired in the dregs of nostalgia-less modernity. Dark Money, which I am currently reading, shepherds the reader towards a future from which they cannot escape, the doom palpable as wave after wave of money buffets the system, breaking it down into our known dystopic present.

The reason studies like Track Changes are so important to read and understand isn't because of all the cool facts—though there are plenty:

> ASCII, the international standard of binary numbers designating various alphanumeric signs, was originally designed for use with teletype machines, and so to this day includes seven-bit codes dedicated to vestigial hardware features such as the ringing of the terminal bell. (The initial choice of seven bits for the electronic alphabet was—at least according to one account—a concession to the tensile strength of paper.)

It is important because the book gives historical context to technology without sanctifying or demonizing its use. Knowing what happened and why divorced from overt ideological leanings leads to recognition of the word processor as both artifact and deconstructed synecdoche of writing en masse. And due to the format choice of reverse chronology in Track Changes, even *un*intentional technological-utopian futurist ideologies are removed.

The book also helped release me from fear that references to "pop" culture are somehow diminutive to "real" culture. Citing books, literary reviews, and authorial biographies still seem cultured to me, while linking to Giant Bomb's Game of the Year Awards does not. But facts and reality don't follow the clean lines of what is couth. Take, for example, a few competing theories of the lengthening of the novel:

> Similarly, it is a commonly held belief across a number of different genres that novels became noticeably longer after the advent of word processing. But it is important to remember that the marketplace for science fiction (and other genres) was changing rapidly during the 1980s, and in addition to the rise of chain bookstores and the newfound demand for best-sellers came the popularity of film and television tie-ins, especially in the *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* franchises….such questions seem to me impossible to adjudicate without focused biographical and critical scrutiny, and I am suspicious of any claims to account for broad shifts in literary trends solely through technological factors.

Then take this headline from 2013:Children's reading shrinking due to apps, games and YouTube, contrast it with 2014's Millenials Are Out-Reading Older Generations, and realize in forty years the internet, like word processors, will be tech that can be blamed for whatever the prevailing narrative at the time will be. Track Changes adds this perspective, adding *threadbare mementos glimmering in recollection* to an increasingly ephemeral world of computer history.

Bookforum Magazine says

"As Kirschenbaum's history reminds us, the story of personal computers supplanting older systems dedicated to word processing–and writers' larger commitment to abandoning pens and ink and typewriter ribbons and correction fluid–was hardly the fait accompli that we sometimes think it was. His book attempts a full literary history of this shift."

–Eric Banks on Matthew G. Kirschenbaum's Track Changes: A Literary History of Word Processing in the April/May 2016 issue of Bookforum

To read the rest of this review, go to Bookforum:
http://www.bookforum.com/inprint/023_01

James says

Truly fascinating history of early word processing, with an emphasis on writers, how and when they adopted word processing, and how that may (or may not) have changed their writing. Kirschenbaum is very careful to not make strong claims on the last point, which is probably correct but a little disappointing. Everything else about this book is delightful, including pictures of some of my favorite writers posing with their now-archaic machines, stories of those early encounters, and more.

Andrew McMillen says

In this outstanding book, Matthew G. Kirschenbaum decodes the relationship writers have had with word processing technology since the literary world began to shift from typewriters to the personal computer. If this subject matter sounds dry, happily it is anything but in the pages of 'Track Changes'. Kirschenbaum, associate professor of English at the University of Maryland, takes on the topic with depth and an accessible prose style. The result should have broad appeal to a general readership and be of special interest to writers, for there is much here to excite the literary-minded.

Kirschenbaum opens by referencing one of the pop cultural touchstones of our time: 'Game of Thrones' — or, more specifically, 'A Song of Ice and Fire', the fantasy novels by American author George RR Martin on which the popular television series is based. As he told a talk show host in 2014, Martin chooses to write his books on a DOS-era computer with no internet connection, using an ancient program called WordStar. Describing this combination as his “secret weapon”, owing to its lack of distraction and isolation from any threat of a computer virus, the author also credits WordStar with his long-running productivity.

By opening with the work habits of a megaselling author and then travelling back in time, chapter by chapter, to the emerging typewriter-based storage technology of the late 1960s, Kirschenbaum eases the reader into a dazzlingly rich and absorbing history.

It is fascinating to note the reluctance with which computer-based word processing was first viewed by the publishing industry. Some writers were so wary of being outed as early adopters that they chose not to disclose their new toys to their employers, or even went to the lengths of having their finished manuscripts rewritten using typewriters before submission.

Although screen size and small memory capacities caused early concerns and frustrations, it was not long before science-fiction writers, in particular, thrilled to the ability to gain greater control over their text, as well as being freed from the tedium of retyping work. Kirschenbaum quotes a Harvard physicist who came to a realisation in the early 80s: “We all knew computers were coming, but what astonishes us is it’s not the scientists but the word people who have taken them up first.”

Once bestselling writers such as Stephen King, Isaac Asimov and Terry Pratchett adopted word processors and publicly noted the significant improvements in their productivity, it seemed there would be no turning back. As the technology matured, computers and their inner workings became a source of inspiration for writers, too: the likes of William Gibson’s 'Neuromancer', which popularised the word ‘‘cyberspace’’, for example.

'Track Changes' is based on five years of research and the author’s academic bent can be seen in the 80 pages of detailed notes that follow the narrative text, but never in the prose itself. This is a remarkable achievement. For a project that seems geared toward stuffiness, Kirschenbaum’s writing sparkles with well-chosen anecdotes and a keen sense of humour.

His enthusiasm for the topic is palpable. After a section profiling thriller author James Patterson, whose occasional media nickname is ‘‘The Word Processor’’ — owing to his prodigious output, produced alongside a half-dozen close collaborators — he wonders what type of technology The Word Processor himself runs. “Surely it must be a mighty one!” Kirschenbaum suggests, before revealing the answer: “He works his stacks of manuscripts longhand. How perfect is that?”

For the author, this subject is intertwined with his own experiences as a writer, naturally enough. It is dedicated to his parents, “who brought home an Apple”, and he notes in the preface that the book itself was written “mostly in [Microsoft] Word, on a couple of small, lightweight laptops”. The book is named for the incredibly helpful feature in Word that allows readers to see the revision history and minute variations between different versions of documents during the editing process. The origin of this feature is only addressed directly in the final chapter, where Kirschenbaum also writes:

"Writers live with and within their word processors, and thus with and within the system’s logics and constraints — these themselves become part of the daily lived experience of the writers’ working hours, as predictable and proximate as the squeak of a chair or that certain shaft of sunlight that makes its way across the room."

As that illustrates, the author has a way with words, not just an appreciation for how they are processed. The final paragraph is a thing of immense beauty, too, and may bring a tear to the eye of anyone who has sat and watched as fingertip pressure applied to a keyboard instantly became words processed on a screen.

Review originally published in The Weekend Australian, August 27 2016:
http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/...

Steven says

A very interesting look at the role of word processing in fiction (and some non-fiction). As a history, it's fantastic. The more theoretical textual analyses were outside of my wheelhouse, but in general, the book has a lot of fantastic stories.

Bastian Greshake Tzovaras says

Nope, this is not about emacs vs. vim. Rather you can learn about the long road that started at (electrical) typewriters, lead to typewriters that feature magnetic tape storage all the way to the first versions of MS Word.

If you're someone who spends a lot of time doing word processing - and if you're reading this the chances for that are good - then you'll find a super interesting history in this book.

John C. says

Found this in a B&N and was intrigued, returned the next week with a coupon to buy it, only to find that it wasn't on the shelf anymore, though it was still in the catalog. I asked a customer service person about it and, after a few minutes, she returned, book in hand. Apparently it had been marked to go back to the publisher and was sitting in the back room to be mailed later that day. "You're the luckiest man on the planet!" she said. Book rescue notwithstanding, I couldn't help but think "Hahaha, no I'm not."

I was expecting this to be slightly more brain-wrinkling than it was, something akin to Katherine Hayles' "How We Became Posthuman," a punishingly academic read on the Macy conferences interspersed with criticism of various cybernetic texts. Not that I understood it, but I remember being struck by what Hayles' called the "flickering signifier": whereas a handwritten letter is a record of a physical movement, digital letters are malleable ("flickering") arrangements of code, and so if the medium has changed, how has the message, etc. etc. While this book certainly touches on those implications, it is more concerned with the unique personal experiences of authors as they were introduced to word processing and the specific effects it had on their writing. Is it dry? Yes, but endearingly so, and while I struggled to get through it at times, I also found it oddly inspiring. As the personal computer has absorbed most facets of life, there's a satisfaction to be found in envisioning it as merely an austere piece of professional equipment, here only to take commands, not dictate them. As a result, what I'll probably remember most about this book are the images of authors, presumably Aviator-framed, hacking away at nicotine-stained IBM keyboards, words flickering white on matte black monitor screens. Makes me really appreciate the click of the keys as I type this.

That said, I sort of wish Kirschenbaum spent a little bit more time with authors who were committed to experimenting with this new form. I found the section on Kamau Brathwaite to be one of the most interesting and I, in keeping with what I thought this book was going to be, would have liked to read about authors who used word processing to explore the implications of word processing itself. I guess what I'm saying is that this could have used a chapter about hypertext. In any case, Kirschenbaum states in the introduction that he's not going to spend too much time on these subjects, so I guess that's on me.

A "good read."

Elizabeth says

The book is at its best when it uses its focus on literary fiction to provide close readings of computational

composition in fiction itself. Otherwise, I found it hard to understand/justify the exclusively literary focus (and, indeed, Kirschenbaum himself didn't stick to it as exclusively as his introduction suggested he might). This said, I appreciated the vast amount of archival digging that went into the monograph and was also pleased that Kirschenbaum erred away from the type of technological determinism that might plague a book of this nature.

Robert Daniel says

More literary history of authors and the word processors they used than of the word processors and computers.
A very well written wonderful book.
Others may love it. So I would recommend giving it a chance especially if you are interested in contemporary literature, the approach to writing and the impact that technology has had on writers - authors.
The introduction to the book is so wonderfully written. I just lost patience with it after a while.
That may be a poor reflection on myself rather than the book and its author.
