Seeds

The seeds of Dreaming Methods began in the mid-1990s on the Commodore Amiga. A group of young writers, including myself, formed a series of on-floppy-disk “e-zines” and anthologies which were then distributed for free through the Amiga Public Domain (PD). These programs auto-loaded into specially designed interfaces which presented short fiction for immediate reading from the screen. Font size, colour-changing and printing options were often accompanied by atmospheric graphics, short animation sequences and musical theme tunes.

Many of these electronic anthologies were picked up and reviewed in popular Amiga magazines such as CU Amiga, Amiga Format and Amiga Power. One particular collection, “Magnetic Fiction”, was submitted to a software company – F1 Licenceware – and accepted for sale and distribution at the cost of £3.99 per copy. Hybrid versions of anthologies were developed using early hyperlink software such as Amiga Guide (originally designed to assist in the production of “help” documents) and a handful of these – most notably “Forbidden” – made it onto the coverdisks of mainstream Amiga magazines.
When the Amiga finally lost popularity and everything became completely PC-focused, there was little communication between the original group of writers and no plans to try to emulate a similar electronic fiction “scene” on the PC. As a result of this, I lost direction and attempted a number of failed approaches. These included the production of “Cluster”, an on-disk SF anthology edited by Eileen Shaw which had UK Arts Council funding, strong graphical presentation and attracted a number of highly regarded writers, but ceased to exist after the second issue due to lack of reader interest.

Following a number of experimental print publications* and javascript-enhanced narratives (perhaps the most successful attempt of which was “Rune”), I started to learn Flash and explore its potential for getting beyond the restrictions of HTML and boxed-out Java animations. This eventually resulted in 2000 in the production of “Fractured” – a dark and brooding piece which mixed text with other media.

* The print publications created at this time often included the use of computer graphics to manipulate the appearance or presentation of text. The previously mentioned “Rune” website had an accompanying pamphlet of poetry with an insert of 4 full-colour computer generated images; other publications such as “Seed” and “Space” had fragmented, repeatedly-photocopied, multiple layers of text printed onto a range of different quality papers. Further experimentations with print design included “Margin” which was a tall, thin strip of a booklet, about the size of a school ruler; “Writing by Numbers”, a publication that took the form of a screwed up ball of paper; “Tapped”, which was printed on poor-quality bright green paper and purposely shredded at the edges with a knife, sometimes stealing away the fringes of the narratives inside it; and “Gone” which was an empty 30-page booklet printed on white paper comprising only of brief “footnotes” from short fiction that hadn’t actually been written yet.
Between 2000-2002 I worked for a publishing company producing literature-based websites and designing book covers for fiction titles by up-and-coming writers. During this time, a number of writers involved in having their work published/promoted expressed an interest in using the internet to “reach new audiences” and, in some instances, play around with the way their work was presented. This experience provided me with some valuable insights into the possibilities of online writing and, in part, helped to fuel the development of “Fractured” and other early Dreaming Methods projects.

In 2000 the Ilkley Literature Festival commissioned Martyn Bedford* to work with me to produce an online novel called “The Virtual Disappearance of Miriam” - a piece written entirely by Bedford in the form of a script which was then passed on to me to translate and develop into a Flash project. Whilst this project was great to work on, it was also somewhat frustrating, as I found the hard-cut divide between “writer” and “designer” uncomfortable, and the written element of the work all too easy to simply cut-and-paste into easily-digestable chunks on-screen.

In 2002 I worked with film-maker/artist Judi Alston, director of One to One Productions Ltd, on “Inside: A Journal of Dreams” which was the first Dreaming Methods piece to include video sequences, the potential of which I found extremely exciting. “Inside” was a far more mutual collaboration than “Miriam”, with both “authors” generating the written content as well as the other media, working together to generate a shared artistic vision.

Between 2002-2006 I became self-employed working increasingly closely with One to One Productions on a number of media/arts-based projects, all of which had a strong impact on the direction of Dreaming Methods. One to One’s philosophy is to “open up new possibilities and innovation in producing creative media with organisations, groups and individuals”, quite often bringing technology into unorthodox local/community settings and engaging with people on a grass-roots level.

Through One to One I have worked on the digital elements of social research projects for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, arts/disability and young people empowerment projects for Barnardo’s (most notably Realtime), international archive projects in China and Bhutan, many of which are still on-
going, and developed websites and print design through participatory workshops, a large number of them involving marginalised groups.

In 2007 I became co-director of the company and Dreaming Methods established itself as One to One’s experimental showcase, bringing a wealth of multimedia development experience into a new wave of cinematic projects such as “The Flat”, “Last Dream” and “Capped”.

One to One Productions has a strong working relationship with Opening the Book Ltd, an organisation which develops cutting-edge approaches to creative reading and aims to transform libraries into 21st century spaces. Through Opening the Book, One to One have produced a number of websites aimed at encouraging young people to share their reading experiences** and have also worked on the long-established site whichbook.net (recently designed in Norwegian for the Norwegian Archive, Library and Museum Authority) where recommended book choices are generated by the user/reader through a unique Flash interface***.

* Bedford wrote an interesting article about his experience of writing The Virtual Disappearance of Miriam for The Bookseller, available here on the Dreaming Methods website. His original scripts are also available to download.

** Some of these websites involved intriguing ways to get young people excited about reading, including “Book Brother” - a parody of Channel 4’s Big Brother TV programme, where fiction titles get nominated and “voted out” every week; “Blind Date” where the user/reader is asked a number of questions about what kind of “date” they’d like to go on and then allocated a “mystery” fiction title which they can then pick up from their local library. (Note that these websites, although accessible to explore if you follow the links, were time-specific and are no longer public or actively working.)

*** In 2004 the Man Booker Prize expressed an interest in the whichbook concept/interface and commissioned Opening the Book to develop a micro-version of the site to be linked into their nominated titles. Although prestigious to work on, the resulting web application didn’t particularly further the possibilities of creative reading since there were only around 30 titles in the database, as opposed to whichbook.net’s 6000.
Dreaming Methods is inspired largely by abstract concepts that would perhaps be difficult to capture using writing alone. The multi-layered complexity of dreams/nightmares and real/imagined memories that feature in many of the narratives are represented by a heavy mix of media that is designed to be compulsive and immersive. Projects are inspired by music, film and web design as much as literature, and attempt to take strands of each and weave them into something entirely new.

Writing for the screen according to Dreaming Methods has little to do with writing in the traditional sense. In the digital world, text does not have to stand still, can be superimposed against colourful backgrounds, animations and imagery with no print design restrictions or costs, and it can also change and mutate depending on a user/reader’s interactions. It is as if the physical entity that is text itself has changed from static to liquid, has learnt to move around and react in response to other media – and is thus able to form new narratives-in-motion which require different methods of both writing and reading*.

The initial Dreaming Methods project “Fractured” includes a narrative written across a “virtual diary” laid out on-screen (this, on reflection, has echoes of the graphical presentation of some of the later Amiga e-fiction interfaces). The text is purposely open-ended, broken into pieces, comprised of “glimpses” into what appears to be the protagonists’ disturbing domestic paranoia. Although now somewhat dated, “Fractured” still contains most of the basic elements of digital fiction that Dreaming Methods continues to develop: fragmented, “glimpsing” narratives; cinematic, often mouse-responsive animation sequences; the heavy use other media as well as text; and the recurring subject matter of memory, complexity, scrapbooks and objects.

Textual narratives are approached by Dreaming Methods as a key part of the multimedia mix rather than as the absolute central backbone – purposely open-ended, ambiguous, short, fragmentary – and are often additionally considered to be a powerful visual element: blurred, obscured, transient, animated, mouse-responsive. Reading from the screen is not the same as reading from the page, and being able to fully read-to-the-end and/or completely understand (or even properly see in some cases) the streams of text within Dreaming Methods projects is not considered a requirement for a piece to “work”.

* The specific media and techniques used in Dreaming Methods projects are described in more detail in the article. The asterisk indicates a note or reference to additional information not included in the main text.
In “Capped”, descriptive sentences are purposely blurred out as if they're too close to the “camera” in the foreground, intending to reflect the inability of the protagonist to fully remember every detail of his childhood. In “Dim O’Gauble”, the final sequence, walking down an industrial tunnel as both characters in the story attempt to communicate with each other, includes vaguely readable text which slowly gains focus as the end of the tunnel is reached. In “Spawn”, some areas of the poem are readable and others are completely taken over by computer-generated “interference” which warps, bulges and throws around the language, rendering it almost entirely un-readable.

Whilst Dreaming Methods has experimented with the extreme potential of letting users/readers contribute their own text/stories through “The Incomplete”, most of the pieces showcased do not allow any more interactivity than mouse rollovers, movement and click-throughs. User-“interactivity” might be better described as user-“discovery” here, with projects such as “Capped” requiring the user/reader to spend time exploring the graphical screen-space in search of fragments of the on-going narrative which reveals itself briefly in short sentences between bits of grass, rocks and bushes, sometimes in ways that are difficult to read in the traditional sense, but which give off a hint or representation into what is – or might be – going on.

* One common criticism of digital fiction or “e-literature” which includes other media elements such as sound, animation, video, etc. is that the text itself “wouldn’t be able to stand up on its own” as a quality piece of writing or literature. In other words, the “other media” is obscuring the fact that the writing itself is poor and “needs the other elements for it to even stand up”. This, I think, may be true in some instances, but is generally missing the boat. Writing and new media fused together can create, cliched or not, something “more than the sum of its parts”, where no single element could be extracted and expected to stand-alone and create the same impact. I think this is particularly true of digital fiction work which manipulates text using visual motion or interactivity, since under these conditions the long-established rules of what “writing” or “literature” actually is start to reach their fringes.
Dreaming Methods projects usually emerge from visual (sometimes cinematic) imagery rather than concrete storytelling ideas. The generation of a piece may begin with one particular “scene” that is programmed/designed/written/assembled together to a high degree, and which then acts as a gateway into a larger and more complicated narrative. A considerable amount of time is given to experimentation, particularly with the presentation of text, and most projects generate many more “scenes” or Flash movies than actually appear in the final works.

The writing is produced largely during the actual design and scripting process. Prose is keyed directly into ActionScript arrays or variable strings (the works rarely use technologies such as XML and are often hard-coded rather than done in any modular way**) and are often literally “attached” to visual “objects” lying around on the Flash “stage”. The writing can go through several drafts until it feels to fully work with the other media it is interacting or existing with; on occasion it is removed from the Flash environment altogether and copied into Word or Notepad for scrutiny on its own terms.

Multimedia content in Dreaming Methods is increasingly self-generated. Photography is often sourced from Absolutely Nothing (my brother - Tristan Campbell's - website) and film footage created by Judi Alston. More abstract material is sourced from freely available resources across the internet - from
royalty free computer-generated movie clips and Flash routines given away on magazine coverdisks to email subscription lists from commercial companies which offer "free weekly downloads". Often, freely obtained content is “layered up” and combined with other, self-generated media in applications such as Photoshop, After Effects and Flash; and the resulting material can have a huge influence on the direction of the entire project or its underlying narrative - the writing is not necessarily the main driving force behind the concept or subject matter of the finished piece.

The production of the “The Flat” - based on a series of photos taken by Tristan Campbell in 1995 - introduced a new technique for Dreaming Methods of displaying short bursts of narratives - and of exploring a fictional world generated using photography in a more immediate and realistic way. In “The Flat”, short fragments of text fade in and out of the screen triggered by invisible mouse-rollovers scattered across the graphics, which themselves continuously float around unless stabilised by the user/reader's mouse movements. The text is almost always revealed in pockets of 3-4 sentences but multiple instances can be displayed at the same time if the user/reader’s responses are fast enough. The writing is often associated to the locations and objects nearby, depending where abouts the user/reader is inside the project, and also has a “memory bank” of several different narratives to display depending whether or not that particular location is being re-visited. Some sequences in “The Flat” do not contain any writing at all, for example the final scene of the hooded figure in the garden; others contain too much text to be able to read in one “visit” to the project due to the constantly ticking countdown in the top right hand corner of the screen which, when it reaches zero, ejects the user/reader from the piece altogether.

The importance of the actual written element of a Dreaming Methods project has changed over the years. The writing has become much more intermedial by concentrating on allowing the “narrative” of a piece to be driven by the other media as well as the text. The Times Educational Supplement described the results of this shift in priority as “…a semi-literary, semi-cinematic blend of haunting visuals, music, click-and-point and floating text” whilst still considering the site to be primarily an exploration into the potential of online writing, “an artform whose rules are still being made and which already has a distinctive voice that couldn't be replicated in print.”

* The project “Last Dream” resulted in the generation of around 120 Flash movies, some of them self-contained “scenes”, others simply experiments with Actionscript. One of these movies, a pseudo-3D component which allowed the user/reader to move their way around a huge visual image by clicking on a series of arrow-shaped buttons, formed the entire backbone/interface for the project “Dim O’Gauble”.
Although I now work with object orientated programming (OOP) principles in Flash as much as possible, I sometimes slip back into leaving fragments of code all over the place. “Spaghetti” code with its tendency to become incomprehensible beyond a certain level of complexity and its uselessness to anyone else (sometimes even its own author) seems to have a sort of quirky “character” about it which I can’t help but like. “Streamlining your workflow” seems to be all the rage in today’s software packages, but I particularly like the feeling in Flash of having a sprawling stage cluttered with visual objects and components and fragments of text. To me, it creates a form of digital “jotter” in itself – like, traditionally, a writer may have previously used a series of scrappy notebooks and perhaps enjoyed their immediacy and roughness.

*** Madeleine Brettingham, TES Magazine, page 41, October 2007
Like digital fiction itself, Dreaming Methods is simply evolving - and, at the moment, very much enjoying its up-front claim of being purely experimental. Whether the work showcased on the site could, in the right circles, be classed as “literature” or not has ceased to be of much interest to both author(s) and reader(s), the projects themselves now generating their own atmospheres/experiences which involve the use of writing rather than being dominated by it.

Dreaming Methods does however have its eye on the (agonisingly slow) development of the e-publishing world and may soon experiment with the possibilities of reducing “back” to text-based documents in the form of PDF/.epub files; documents which contain technologically degradable multimedia content. At the moment, the limited widespread use of later versions of Adobe Reader combined with restrictive security permissions on Flash (SWF) content make this an unattractive proposition. In some ways Adobe Reader and Digital Editions have distant echoes of applications developed by that original group of writers on the Amiga to read fiction from the screen; hypertext
may add a powerful form of interactivity but any form of multimedia content seems to be boxed out – literally – and considered a separate, almost gimmicky (or indeed business, education or purely work-related) inclusion.

The most preferred vision for the future is the continued use of immersive multimedia, an increasingly challenging task for a single “author” in the traditional sense to undertake as the production of high quality material - graphics, 3D, interface design, programming, audio - splits into more and more specialised areas tackled by dedicated web development teams. Collaborative work generated by individuals with a shared artistic vision will undoubtedly become the only way forward if the production standards of multimedia-based digital fiction are to match those being continuously edged forward by professional design studios.

That said, in an age where a great deal of “creative”, narrative-based web content is generated to advertise/promote commercial products, TV series and movies, Dreaming Methods attempts to create self-contained “worlds” which override the technological sense of being within “a Flash movie”, “a document” or “a browser window”, not through brand-association or advertising, pixel-perfect 3D graphics or outstanding writing which could be extracted, printed out and read from a sheet of paper, but by trying to find that almost indefinable quality through a blend of writing and other media that gives a piece of work some form of “life”.