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Robert Pinsky

## A Brief Description of *Mindwheel*

First: each book reads its reader. That is, I may be comprehended by a text in a way that affects, even transforms me.

Second: each reader creates the book: I read the last chapter first, I deliberately or inadvertently reverse terms, I apprehend values in a way wildly different from the author's intentions, I misunderstand, I laugh at the sad parts or weep at the jokes, I skip some parts and reread others, and finally I remember the book in my own way.

*Mindwheel* is a narrative that strives to make these two figurative truths literal, as well, by using the computer's two powers, to interpret language and to store possibilities. As the story scrolls onto the screen or from the printer, it demands and then incorporates the responses and choices of the reader, who is also the protagonist. In order to see more text, one must "do" something by typing onto the keyboard some phrase that in effect completes the sentence "I want to . . ."

For example:

*Eat a peach.*

*Walk northeast.*

*Pick up the glass.*

*Go to the window and look out.*

*Look at the thug.*

*Go to the piano and examine it.*

*Kiss the frog.*

*Strike Benny with the pistol.*

*Read the label on the bottle.*

Or, one can address characters, as when a friend of mine, reading (or playing) *Mindwheel*, said to a character:

*Mona, you look like my mother.*

To which the text responded

*"Okay," answers the attractive singer, looking earnestly into your eyes, "I will look any way you want me to look."*

— dialogue which reflects that the program, serendipitously, interpreted "look" as an imperative, rather than a descriptive, verb. Contriving sentences that might incorporate serendipity was one of the most interesting aspects of work with my collaborators, program authors William Mataga and Steven Hales. The work's story

and indeed its title, *Mindwheel*, embody the interaction of will and chance.

“Interactive fiction,” one of the terms used to describe the genre of computer narrative, reflects the rather misleading impression of freedom: the autonomous reader can try anything, can leave the room, kiss the enemy and strike the friend, and so forth. Apparently, the reader is free of the linear, sequential tyranny of words printed in a determined order on methodically numbered and arranged pages. But in fact, behind this seeming freedom—and interaction, with its distortions and oddities, does in a way heighten the plot’s freely wandering, dreamy quality of romance—stands some of the autocracy of the riddle. Indeed, once or twice the reader / protagonist is confronted with an actual riddle, and even with a poem to complete. In other situations, violence is called for. To see the most interesting text sometimes requires an ingenious or resourceful action. The freedom of turning to whatever page the reader chooses has been replaced by a spatial and temporal maze, full of peculiar consistencies and demanding irrationalities. Even if the reader chooses to remain passive, events occur, so that the maze flexes and changes. It may drop a safe on the protagonist’s head, returning the reader to the beginning. Lewis Carroll would be the ideal author in this genre.

Having used the term “maze,” I should explain that Hales and Mataga have not simply provided a kind of scene-shuffling machine, like the dendritic pattern in children’s books that send the reader to a certain page number for a certain choice. Objects and persons in *Mindwheel* are programmed to have properties—transportable, intractable, edible, obedient, breakable, fatal, odorous, and so forth. The program combines text and incorporates reader input in ways that are sometimes surprising even to the authors, as when a leadable character is led into a scene where his presence had seemed impossible. (We collaborators had amusing discussions about such questions as whether a scene is in a room, or a room is in a scene.)

To approach this kind of possibility from the maker’s viewpoint, the kind of writing assignment I received from the program designers was, for instance, to write a verb-table: sentences describing two hundred verb-actions performed (a) successfully and (b) unsuccessfully by the reader / protagonist, leaving a “hole” in each sentence for the object (and with certain verbs, for the indirect object as well). Such assignments came mainly from Hales, who animated the narrative world I conceived. Mataga designed the

“parser,” the master program that lets *Mindwheel* read what the reader writes.

The story is a quest. Within the story, your civilization’s scientists have discovered that powerful minds leave permanent impressions upon the neuro-electronic matrix. Computers make possible re-creation of these landscapes of mental energy, and entry into them. Although the individual consciousness may not be immortal, its inward terrain is, and that peculiar, sometimes surrealistic terrain is the setting for the quest. The goal — “Your goal,” as the character Dr. Virgil tells the reader at the outset — is a mysterious, prized object, the Wheel of Wisdom, which resides in the mind of the Cave Master, apelike inventor of the lever and the rhythmical group chant. To reach the Cave Master’s mind and the Wheel, you must penetrate through each of four linked minds. These linked minds comprise the surviving emanations of: *Bobby Clemon*, an assassinated rock star and political figure; *The Generalissimo*, dictator executed for war crimes; *The Poet*, a mercurial, many-minded genius of the Learning and Art Era; and *Dr. Eva Fein*, the “Female Einstein” of the Late Technological Age.

The revenant mental images of these four figures supply the landscape and inhabitants which “you” must deal with on your quest. For the reader, these four figures are not characters, but designate temporal chapters and spatial ambiances: a concert stage, a Gothic landscape, a Dantesque grotto, an immense chessboard.

The quest plot supplies an abundant well of character and incident, in a way meant to embrace the interactive computer narrative, with its inevitable departures from naturalistic conventions. Since in the story it is scientists using computers who enable the humanist-adventurer to proceed on his quest, the work tries to include the question of its own endeavor, namely to use the power of the electronic memory to extend, however crudely, the capacities of art. *Mindwheel* in this respect shares some of the feelings and ideas, as well as some of the images, of poems I was writing at the same time, especially “The Figured Wheel,” the first poem in my book *History of My Heart*.

The texture of *Mindwheel* is not technologically sleek and minimalist, but eager and crammed, with colors thickly applied, a possibly sloppy flow of jokes, adjectives, violence, allusions. This stylistic direction comes largely from the tastes and encouragement of Hales and Mataga, and partly from my own idea of the fiction as resembling such accretive models as *Through the Looking Glass* or *The Fairy Queen*. My collaborators, extremely intelligent, in-

different to the prestige of canonical literature, vigorous and bold in the exercise of their literary tastes, were pleased or displeased with an image borrowed from Dante or Captain Marvel, according to their own lights only. This was also true of the professional play-testers who contributed valuable suggestions to *Mindwheel* as it developed. I am pleased to report that two sixteenth-century borrowings—a riddle by Sir Walter Raleigh, and a poem by Fulke Greville, Lord Brooke—were for these collaborators among the most attractive episodes in the tale. I hope Greville would forgive me for transposing his poem (which appears as The Fear Sonnet) from iambic pentameter to iambic tetrameter, so that it would fit into the eighty-column display of a video monitor.

By using a “bookmark” diskette, the reader or player of *Mindwheel* can save and resume progress made at a given session. By issuing the command “Printer On,” one can create a printed record of a given reading / playing. Because reader inputs will vary with each reader at each session, and because random elements are built into *Mindwheel*, each printing will represent, to some extent, a unique work. On the other hand, each of these works tends more or less toward a single goal or resolution: the final scene—expert players can reach it in their first twenty or thirty hours of play—wherein the Cave Master, a figure resembling both Jackie Robinson and Yvor Winters, presents the reader with the Wheel.

*Mindwheel* is a product of Brøderbund Software, 17 Paul Drive, San Rafael, California 94903, (415) 492-3500.