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*The Phantom Empire (6/19/2018)*<sup>1</sup>

Ts'ui Pên must have once said: *I am withdrawing to write a book.*  
And another time: *I am withdrawing to construct a labyrinth.* Every  
one imagined two works; to no one did it occur that the book and  
the maze were one and the same thing.

Borges: *The Garden of Forking Paths.*

..... beginning in the Nineties and for a long time afterward I went  
to the movies several times a week. I needed some kind of  
entertainment, but couldn't afford the things normal people could,  
skiing, taking long vacations to exotic destinations or for that matter  
even driving anywhere from which I couldn't walk back when the car  
broke down, eating out anywhere more expensive than Wendy's, etc.;  
nor did I have the time for any of that, since I had to work all night  
seven days a week. Movies were inexpensive, I could slip into the  
theater and sit in the dark and no one would notice I was a loser who  
couldn't get a date, and anyway I liked them.<sup>2</sup> Particularly after the  
excesses of the dancer-girlfriend era, when I was forced to sit through  
an endless succession of wretched amateur productions put on by  
earnest young women who systematically confused art with  
narcissistic confessional self-display,<sup>3</sup> it was really nice to see the work

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<sup>1</sup> To Lankton, long after the fact.

<sup>2</sup> "In one regard I must be a very modern person," says Wittgenstein, "since the cinema has such an extraordinarily beneficial effect on me. I cannot imagine any rest for the mind more adequate to me than an American movie. What I see and the music gives a blissful sensation perhaps in an infantile way but therefore of course no less powerful. In general as I have often thought and said a film is something very similar to a dream ... ." [From his diaries, published under the title *Public and Private Occasions*, ed. James C. Klagge and Alfred Nordmann, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003.]

<sup>3</sup> Though of course who am I, spendthrift ne'er-do-well heir to the Romantic anti-Copernican revolution, to complain.

of professionals for a change.

So since I was also trying to recover the ability to write<sup>4</sup> and this was pretty much all there was to my life and thus the only thing I had to write about, I started writing reviews of everything I saw. These began very simply, a sentence or two, but got longer as time went on ...

...the exercise gradually expanded into a short-form magazine format...

... it seemed as though the logical continuation was to put a website together. After which of course (if you build it, they will come) I would be instantly discovered and become famous for writing fart jokes about major motion pictures, or whatever it was I was doing ....

.... no, that wasn't really the idea. The idea was that the brave new world of self-publication made it possible to start my own little magazine, a place where I could always be published, indeed a place where I could begin by emptying the fucking trunk, all at once. And then continue by writing other shit, or making movies myself, or recording albums, or whatever I felt like. It seemed as though this was the permanent solution to all problems, in other words. Fuck you, William Buckley, Tim Berners-Lee immanentized the eschaton and there isn't anything you can do about it. So I had to try it.

Though I discussed the project with a number of people when I began to work on it, they naturally assumed it was just going to be an archive for movie reviews. But I was thinking of that part of it just as bait, a means of establishing an audience. After that I would come up with some kind of organizational principle that would create unexpected internal links from the parts that had, hypothetically, drawn people in, to other parts they knew nothing about.

Of course it should also look cool.

In fact that became the first problem. I'd written a couple of hundred

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<sup>4</sup> Completely erased when I quit smoking, and for several years afterward.

thousand words in reviews at that point, but it was all text, I'd never made use of production stills or the like, and in something more like a magazine format I'd have to find illustrations for everything. So was that worth the trouble?

Here insert the canonical example, a sonnet I had been vaguely wondering whether I could shoehorn in, in its final setting:



A fool for love (4/28/97)

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Ken addresses Barbie, in the pose of the melancholy lover:

Were there a thought within this empty head  
It would be you: your buff-blond fashionings  
Improbable — your form, your stylish things  
That fit you for the hunt, the ball, the bed.  
I'd fall on you like existential dread  
Tear off your several outfits, yank your strings  
And bunnyhumping bust the mattress springs.  
But surfaces deceive. Within we're dead.  
And void. Our plastic eyes mold vacant stares  
Nor beat within these silent plastic hearts.  
No plastic fingers run through plastic hairs  
Nor plastic organs try the plastic arts.  
One cipher to another, out of sight:  
As nothing is to nothing, nothing's right.

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High colonic, low ebonic (3/28/97)



The photograph and the sculpture were made by a surrealist named Hans Bellmer. I had been dithering about whether it was realistic to expect to find an appropriate photograph for every individual piece of text, and then stumbled across this picture by accident, knew instantly what it matched, and realized I had to go through with the rest. (As it

turned out with movies I usually ended up with the inverse problem: given the obvious still, to come up with an appropriate caption, frequently though not exclusively involving a bad pun. This is an interesting minor prose form, and I got good at it pretty fast. *Time* magazine had nothing on me.)

As for the control buttons on the right, they represent a dumbed-down solution to the navigation problem — from top to bottom: home, search the index, directory home (i.e. *Letters to Johnny Cocktail on the Cinema*) with entries listed in reverse chronological order, and the site map, about which more below, but anyway this was not at all what I originally had in mind.

What I'd had in mind was more like this: suppose I had a large database of short pieces with illustrations, individual pages, and I wanted to create unusual and unexpected links between them. What was the best way to do that?

If I were talking to someone about movies, for instance, I might be explaining what I thought about some particular film, and then the discussion might branch, because I might think of something it reminded me of — another movie, perhaps, but maybe something else that I had written about, or a picture, or maybe (if copyright issues could be evaded or obfuscated) an actual film clip. — So what was the principle involved here? clearly, that of the associative memory. I wanted to think of the entries, the individual pages, as nodes of a graph, and I wanted to create links between them based on various categories of criteria, some pretty distant from the safe waters of GREP or even Google Search: you would not believe the amount of time I spent trying to decide how formally to describe the visual pun represented by the association of the mammoth floats of one particular victim of runaway plastic surgery and the Graf Zeppelin in its hanger, for instance. — This meandered off into terra incognita rapidly; and correlations of text were little less problematic, since what would remind you of one piece in another would depend on semantics, not syntax. — Also, a critical point, the links should be generated

dynamically; the same association should never come up twice.

So what I wanted was something like a toy AI, in other words.

Obviously that was problematic at several levels. If I had been implementing this on a server in my basement, where I had complete control over what was running on the machine, I might have been able to handle everything (assuming I could handle it at all) on the server side. But in the real world of rented space on remote machinery running several zillion processes at once, that would be impossible. No dipshit Perl script was going to be able to do this. Even in a first draft I needed to be able to write something fairly sophisticated, and it should somehow run on the client side of the equation.

But — but! — this was theoretically possible. Because, lo and behold, a loophole had been left in HTML that allowed you to embed not only images and sound recordings and movies, but executable programs in the form of Java applets.

So this was the apparent solution: write the code, referencing as many data-file cribs as possible on the site itself but leaving the dynamic part of the process on the client. Could that be made to work? it depended on what could be done with Java.

An aside here on Java The Great Idea: as was always typical, the people who invented it didn't understand their own buzzwords. Was the network the computer now? if so, the world was my Macintosh, and the real question was how to arrange the icons on my desktop to represent the universe outside my own hard drive. — Well, no one thought about that seriously; except Thurston, I guess, who insinuated the idea of mapping the Web onto the hyperbolic plane into the discussion at some Minnesota think tank which, again typically, came up with some interesting subsequent developments that sank without a trace. — But (again) what was the point of a universal programming language? Write once, run anywhere? No, since that problem had already been solved — completely and definitively — by C, at least for

so-called “console” applications. The real problem, obviously, was to come up with a language as elegant that would give you access to a universal graphical user interface through a universal API; something that made all that portable. — Which really should have been simple: all they needed was to reproduce the original Toolbox, with some equivalents of Quickdraw, the event, window, menu, and control managers, a rudimentary text editor, and so on. After all everything had originally fit into 64K of ROM, it just couldn't be that hard. — As it turned out they didn't even manage all of that, and everything they did was so thoroughly overdesigned that it was much more difficult than the original to use. But my superficial first impression was that they might not have fucked everything up. — So I thought I had to study this. Worse fool I.

The first thing that was obvious, however, was that if you really had such a language, the browser should be superfluous and HTML unnecessary. Which would be a great leap forward, since HTML was notoriously a trivial hack that gave only minimal information about the way a page was supposed to be displayed; complicating the design process enormously, since you had to try to run your page in as many browsers as possible to make sure what appeared in the window bore some faint resemblance to what you had intended. (And then it all changed when the new releases came out, of course, and you had to do it all over again.)

But why should you have to worry about that? I remembered that one novelty of the original Macintosh interface was that you could double-click a file and the Finder would automatically fetch the application that would open it; this was effected by stashing a 32-bit app code in the resource fork. — But, wait a minute: wasn't an IP address also 32 bits? an interesting coincidence ..... couldn't any page on the internet have (say) a four-byte opcode that identified the location — anywhere, the network is the computer, remember — of the application that would display it? And if the application code was truly portable — write once, run anywhere — you could fetch it from Afghanistan, if you wanted. So pages on the web would load themselves simpliciter,

or more likely would consist of programs which made references to code libraries located elsewhere on the internet. And there would be absolutely no limit to what you could display or do, because you would be describing what you wanted to exhibit in a real programming language, not some chickenshit formatting hack that only had three fonts in it. — The browser, if it survived at all, would consist simply of a back button; which was, let's face it, the only good idea, the whole concept was there already in Mosaic and even that was unnecessarily complicated.

Ah, you say, but what about security. Foreign code is *dangerous*; like the women your parents warned you against. — Well, your parents coughed their way past the explanation of the efficacy of rubbers, and this problem, at least to someone used to thinking in terms of functional languages, seemed just as trivial: all they had to do was implement a sandbox, like they said they were going to do; a purely functional language would simply run on the stack, and make no references to the contents of local storage, but even if they insisted on this object-oriented bullshit that allocated storage at every step you could still run everything as it were in emulation. Wasn't that the point of the virtual machine? — Alas, as always happens, they didn't treat the principles to which they gave lip service as inexorable requirements of language implementation but as something more like planks in a political platform, security was compromised from the outset, and whatever preposterous kludge they have finally settled upon is so dysfunctional that (I am not making this up) code I wrote myself won't run on my own computer, because it lacks the appropriate security certificates. — Mainly, however, it was obvious, they didn't pay proper attention to security from the outset because all the blindingly obvious points I made in the last few paragraphs never occurred to them.

At any rate this was what I regarded as the correct basis for a design: it ought to be a Java program that would load onto the client and establish its own interface with its own rules, perhaps summoned by but then completely independent of the browser. That seemed a trifle

utopian for the first attempt, however, and I decided to start by trying to implement as much of the linking mechanism as possible by using the applet device, which was supposed to allow running programs within the browser; if it was too early for the Revolution, maybe I could at least start a trade union. — So I expended great ingenuity in trying to get this to work, and designed a series of applets of increasing sophistication which were intended to realize this vision. — Bear in mind that I was still very naive. I was used to thinking of a computer as a machine I could program to do anything I could imagine; the machine I had access to, filtered through the limitations imposed by the browser (and by Java itself), was very far from that, as it turned out.

I did without too much difficulty get the front page to work. I had pictured this as a collage of photographs, each representing one of the (eleven) major subdirectories, arranged within a rectangle (which naturally had to have dimensions determined by the Fibonacci numbers and therefore the proportions of the golden ratio, but let's not get into the labor this obsession cost me). When you passed the mouse over any particular tile, it would fade through in a lap dissolve to an underlying photograph — from black and white to color — which you could then select (typical pseudoproblem trying to get the cursor to change for this when they stashed the cursor types in a class on a separate branch of the tree and (all together now) no multiple inheritance) and move through to the front page of the category selected. The effect was beautiful, as I had thought it would be, and I assumed this meant I could get everything else to work as well; though the annoying little glitches that cropped up in practice should have warned me otherwise. — Actually only one or two browsers implemented the applet correctly: some required a preliminary click over the window to wake it up, some drew ugly boundaries around the tiles, some didn't fade through properly. Opera and Internet Explorer were the most reliable, but Netscape was usually hopeless; something (I now realize retroactively) like the robot in the corner of Tony Stark's workshop who wears the dunce cap, only not cute. (I think, seriously, this became the excuse for what is now standard industry



practice: “Sure, we crowdsource our betatesting to the public like everybody else, but at least we’re better than Netscape; every release up to 3.1 was still really alpha.”)

However even if I could get the front page to work, that came to seem like a sort of one-off; as if that was all the browser was going to *allow* me to run. I had a second-level page, for instance, with its own subdirectory, and I put the same code into that. But this only worked once or twice. After a certain point if I tried chaining from one applet to a page which ran another, the second wouldn’t load or everything crashed. — I say “after a certain point” because the behavior of this system was never reproducible, due to the unpredictable variation of unseen parameters the Wise Men of object-oriented programming had assured us we didn’t have to know about. — So this was a severe disappointment, not to mention a throwback to the Stone Age of Basic programs that crashed every time you called a subroutine without crossing yourself and making a burnt offering to the compiler gods.

I sucked it up and pressed onward nonetheless, and finally produced three distinct versions of the linking mechanism, respectively simplex, complex, and multiplex. (I found the old quote from Delaney this was based on and pasted it into the site, but now I’ve forgotten where; I was originally thinking the user could choose among the three modes by following the appropriate hyperlink.) — I forget what the intermediate solution looked like, but multiplex was spectacularly complicated: essentially every page came with a large photograph at the upper left that served as the main illustration, and if you did a mouseover on that it turned into a collage of seven subpanels, each with a thumbnail representing an Agent, what I thought of as a principle of association; the idea is illustrated by telling you that one of them was always Zippy the Pinhead, who represented the nonsequitur, and thus gave you a completely random link to another

location.<sup>5</sup> — I should also interpolate here that every page had a thumbnail photograph to represent it — actually three, one in each of the aspect ratios 1:1.618, 1:1, and 1.618:1 — and they were all selected to be visual teasers (yes, there was a lot of cleavage involved). So what would happen, if you waved the mouse around over the panels displaying the icons of the Agents, was that each one would wake up and fade through to a flicker-reel *movie*, a series of thumbnails representing possible links, and at any time you could select one of them and be transported to that page. — So, “multiplex” because it showed seven features at once, of course. — Okay, so I coded this, I did it all correctly, I got it to run at least once or twice, and this was *really* beautiful, in fact it was mesmerizing. I fell in love with it at once.

Well, add it to my long history of unrequited loves. — As it turned out this was the *reductio ad absurdum* of the Java-applet fiasco: when I tried it in Opera, it ran correctly and it could keep seven movies going at once; CodeWarrior crashed with more than four; Internet Explorer became confused and froze at six; Netscape (the Frenchman, the German, and then the Polack)<sup>6</sup> crashed immediately without opening anything at all. — Moreover though I held out hope that future releases would correct whatever faults were causing these mistakes in the implementations, because after all Java, the future of the internet, powerful gasbags pledged to support this standard, yadayadayada, it turned out what transpired was exactly the opposite. Everything ran perfectly in Opera, and only in Opera, under System 9, and then (false hope!) even better under 10.1 (I smiled the smile of the hopelessly delusional believer in progress when all the jaggies magically disappeared from the line-drawing routines in my test programs

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<sup>5</sup> Explicitly, pages could be viewed as nodes in a graph, and links between them as edges; an Agent would then be defined by a specific matrix of transition probabilities, determined according to some interesting rule. If Asia Argento appeared in a movie, e.g., her avatar might be exhibited as an Agent, which would link to her other movies. — Zippy, obviously, would just make all the transition probabilities equal.

<sup>6</sup> At the Institute these jokes were always told instead about the Mathematician, the Physicist, and the Engineer; with the Mathematician and the Engineer taking turns in the role of the Polack. The point perhaps being that I don't give a fuck whether this is politically correct.

because the calls now went to new improved OpenGL routines.) But then out came a new release of the OS, and then a new version of the JVM, and by 10.3 everything had stopped working completely. (Unkindest cut of all, the jaggies reappeared as well.) — It was at this point, I think, that I swore an oath to spend my declining years wandering the world with a lamp and a staff, and that whenever I heard someone utter the phrase “write once, run anywhere” I would club him over the head until the guacamole ran out of his ears. — And, of course, gave up.

I did have one or two brief flurries of enthusiasm after that, but they dissipated rapidly. I found out a few things that confirmed what were by then my suspicions: it turned out, for instance, that the original version of Java in which I had written most of my experiments was a sort of Potemkin village, and many features they claimed had been implemented actually were not — threads, for instance; Multiplex had tried to create seven of them, and God only knows what fake calls had been made in the process. — Also garbage collection never worked (this was never publicly admitted, but a document was accidentally leaked — it used to turn up first when you googled “Why Java Sucks” — that revealed Sun’s own engineers had decided against using Java in a major internal project for precisely this reason, and had chosen C++ instead; it turned out even they had no idea what was wrong or how to fix it) and the longer any applet ran the more likely it was to run out of memory and crash, and, worst of all for someone planning on attaching applets to every page, you couldn’t get the first one to quit before you started the next and the results were invariably unpredictable.

But the main problem, obviously — the one about which I had been in denial from the outset — was that, when you wrote Java in applet form, what the code did (or did not) do depended not only, as one naively wished, upon the operational semantics of the Java virtual machine, but also, in fact mainly, on how the browser implemented Java internally. — And, I need hardly add, invisibly and without accountability. — So everything crashed for reasons which were

hidden in the dark. I thought of this as the final triumph of the philosophy of encapsulation.

So, anyway, the only path forward was to start all over again with something like Flash, which [a] I already knew everyone hated and [b] did not provide the functions I required, insofar as I could determine from skimming the several thousand pages of required documentation looking for clues — it is not always impossible to do this, in fact I once scanned 3000 pages of Quicktime manuals in an evening to make sure they really hadn't thought of displaying a 3D movie and changing your point of view on it while it was running (no, they hadn't, and it wasn't more than a thousand lines of Java to get that to work, a rare story with a happy ending), but Flash documentation was obnoxiously opaque — or to give up completely and do what everyone else assumed was the only thing to do, i.e. hack separate bits of Javascript for every individual browser; not that the required functions appeared to be in that, either. — Obviously I had made the fatal error of thinking that I would be allowed to program my computer, a universal fucking machine, to perform a few simple fucking functions for a simple fucking purpose. — Oh, fuck me.

I omit an itemization of various other bizarre difficulties attendant on the Java experience — the fact that when I began trying to read it the book made no sense, and out of desperation I did something I had never done before, i.e. copied example programs out, and discovered that they *didn't work* — the fact that, apparently to provide a justification for the dense layer of network-transmission-hazard error-handling devices attached to even the simplest read/write routines, the likelihood of successfully reading e.g. an image file *from my own computer* was generally around fifty percent,<sup>7</sup> and I had to write additional code to retry everything after I Caught the inevitable Exception; in fact in one case I had to write a “while (stillfuckingup) do {}” loop which cycled as many as a hundred times (I installed a counter) before it finally managed to input the file — the fact that it

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<sup>7</sup> And success was random. It never did the same thing twice.

didn't allow multiple inheritance, which is [a] the only justification for introducing object-oriented-ness in the first place and therefore [b] the first thing jettisoned in nearly every purportedly o-o language — the fact that in complete contradistinction to every other experience I had of programming before or since the method I finally settled upon to get things to work was to take an existing piece of code which seemed to function albeit usually for reasons unknown and then modify it a line at a time, recompiling continuously, until it did something different — not to mention the fact that there were many things I could do in a line or two of Lisp that took a whole page of Java, if they could be done at all — not to mention half a hundred other exasperations I have thankfully forgotten. — But, what can I tell you, at the time it seemed to be the only game in town.

(Perhaps I should add that in the process of “fixing” all the mistakes they never admitted they made in the first release, they made everything ten or a hundred times as complicated, so that it was never worth the effort to try again with New Improved Java With Secret Ingredient O-O-70. The last time I opened the Java template in Xcode, e.g., the code for “Hello World” was more than 300 lines.)

So multiplex and complex were out. That left simplex, i.e. hard-wired links between the nodes; meaning chronological order for the old posts and nothing else; meaning most of the effort I had put into making thumbnails had been wasted, since there wouldn't be any photographic hooks into a page after all. — So much for all those late nights poking through Russian film sites at three in the morning looking for usable shots of Marisa Mell in *Danger: Diabolik*. — But there were still a couple of possibilities.

I never bothered to learn HTML. I figured that was beneath the dignity of a scholar. But the syntax of the language, what there was to

it, was pretty obvious,<sup>8</sup> and I wrote several tools that did things like read my text files (prepared in suitable me-friendly formats) and compile them into HTML. — Since now I had left the never-never land of Java programming, I was able to write everything in Lisp again, and it was always easy to figure out what I needed to do and everything worked the first time.

I thought at first I would insert a lot of metadata by hand, lists of principals and IMDB links, for instance, and had a general syntax for that which I have for the most part forgotten. I think this was a typical, albeit abbreviated header, for instance:

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(  
  "Now you see him, now you don't"  
  "The Amazing Transparent Man."  
  "http://us.imdb.com/title/tt0053593/"  
  "[Edgar Ulmer, 1960. Written by Jack Lewis.]"  
  "http://us.imdb.com/name/nm0880618/"  
  (7 14 2002)  
  template  
  ((233 377 "..."))  
  ("cocktail"  
   "alphabetical"  
   "chronological"  
   "imdb"  
   "edgar ulmer"  
  )  
)
```

However this was simply too much trouble, entailing as it did a vast

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<sup>8</sup> I should probably add that I figured this out because my original Clever Plan was to use a tool provided by Adobe (GoLive, I believe) that was supposed to generate HTML automatically, but fucked up constantly, and in attempting to figure out why discovered that, even without knowing the language, I could correct its mistakes; which led in fairly short order to simply writing my own translation engine.

additional investment of labor with questionable returns. (I think I left in the mechanism that generated the data files that went with the metadata, however, and they're still cluttering up the site directories. Compare the genome, if that wasn't already obvious.)

At any rate I finally settled on a general scheme for the site, basically back to the all-too-obvious directory-of-separate-directories organization I had been laboring all this time to escape, and wrote a site compiler that took my updates as input and wrote everything out to be uploaded. This also generated a massive alphabetical index (preferable in my view to the dysfunctional standard search tools, which I viewed with contempt) and, at least in principle, a visual index. — This was my last attempt at trying to get a Java applet to work as advertised, and was never properly realized. I could, for a while, generate a map like this:



(by some freak of fate that's Stormy Daniels herself in the center, incidentally, right next to the shot of Eisenstein holding a skull; I reviewed her in *The Witches of Breastwick*)

— in which you could, in theory, pick out a thumbnail that looked promising, select it, and be directed to the page in question. That part of it worked for a while. What I really wanted to do, however, was [a] map the thumbnails into the hyperbolic plane and then [b] rotate that and turn it into a nonEuclidean movie: infinitesimal thumbnails would migrate in from the perimeter, grow as they approached the center, and then recede to infinity while new ones moved in. I figured that would look pretty cool, but Java of course [1] was way the fuck too slow, and then [2] some new update to the JVM slipped into my computer when I wasn't looking and then all this shit abruptly stopped working too. With which I reluctantly abandoned such ideas for good.

The elaborate site update mechanism was necessary because, unlike sensible blogging trolls who just added new diary entries on top of whatever they had already posted, never deviated from chronological order, and never looked back, I was continuously redesigning and always rediscovering (or inventing) old posts I wanted to insert in the back archive and thus (having been forced to settle for the static network) having to update all the internal pointers; moreover I kept proofreading old entries, correcting typos and even rewriting. Since the copy of the site directory on my hard drive was edited continuously in this fashion, periodically I had to rebuild it to keep the links valid. After which (critical disadvantage of failure of dynamic linking) I had to upload the whole thing to update the web version. This got harder and harder as it all got bigger. — Also Comcast started blocking uploads to discourage what they considered wrong-way traffic, meaning that the last time I tried a complete update it took all night and I had to manually reboot the FTP client every couple of minutes, not exactly the background process all this was supposed to be.



The current version on my hard drive, representing a lot of additions I never uploaded, is about a gigabyte, and has about 760 separate pages in it. The version on the web (unedited in years) is 400-500. I have no idea what a completed version would look like, certainly in excess of a thousand pages. Several more man-years of labor, I expect.

So you see the other difficulty here. The sheer size and mass of the project by itself makes it practically impossible to get done. Whenever I contemplate it I am amazed at my folly. It was like trying to build the Great Pyramid all by myself.

So does that happen? Has anyone really built the Great Pyramid all by himself? Yes, that has happened, and it is a cautionary tale. — There was a movie that came out in 2004 called *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow*. I don't know that it made any impression on you, but I must have watched it thirty or forty times; it represents the perfection of a sort of Flash Gordon sensibility that even Lucas never captured quite so perfectly (not however for lack of trying). It was a Major Triumph of CGI at the time, though now of course when Major Triumphs come along every couple of weeks it's hard to take them so seriously, but, really, it was just about the first time a whole movie was shot on greenscreen, with a few name actors (Jude Law, Gwyneth Paltrow, Giovanni Ribisi, Angelina Jolie, they didn't stint in that regard — also, Great Moments in Copyright Trolling, one in a series, this was the movie in which a simulacrum of Laurence Olivier appeared fifteen years after his death and the filmmakers were forced to pay off some corporation for the use of his likeness and acknowledge them in the credits)(a separate transaction, I note, from the routine payoff for use of stock footage of Sir Laurence, acknowledged elsewhere in the credits) and the visual conception was rich with elegant impossibilities; when you think of the movie you usually think of giant robots striding down the avenues of Thirties Manhattan. — Anyway

this was the work of an eccentric genius (another product of that famous Flint, Michigan gene pool)<sup>9</sup> named Kerry Conran. He went to one of the west coast art schools (I think Hertz may have known him), but he'd never worked in the industry before, and hasn't since. The way the movie came about was this: he had the ideas of an opening montage in which a Zeppelin flies over the city of New York and docks at the Empire State Building, e.g. in one shot framed by statues on a clock tower past which the virtual camera shoots upward from a low angle; also the marching robots (a slight steal from an old Superman cartoon of the Forties), a classic aviator hero in a flight helmet/jacket flying a P-40, an evil mad scientist, a girl reporter, etc. So he composed this vision, the trailer for an imaginary movie, six minutes, all by himself, starting on Mac Quadras and gradually upgrading his hardware and software, but anyway just to put together this brief précis all by himself took four fucking years, most of it taken up by rendering time on desktop computers in what was still the age of megahertz. He figured he would need twenty more years to finish the whole thing. — Then some friend with connections saw his work and hooked him up with a producer at a major studio. — Money flowed, an army of CGI artists were enlisted to assist him, and he and his brother (the production designer, no minor talent himself) argued over the design of the ray gun until the last possible moment. It was a heavy lift in the early Aughts, and it took a couple of years to get everything done (the work they did on previsualization alone was groundbreaking), but when they finished they had something which was uniquely beautiful. Nonetheless despite awestruck appreciations from aficionados of the genre like myself it didn't do much at the box office. He was subsequently attached in industry rumor to other, similar, projects, e.g. the onagainoffagain film of *A Princess of Mars*, which eventually (as *John Carter*) in the hands of one of the Pixar guys became a calamitous bomb. But basically he hasn't done anything since. — So what we are looking at here is a guy who was consumed by a grand artistic vision, made immense sacrifices of time and effort

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<sup>9</sup> Other products included Stephen Smale, Michael Moore, and Nancy Kovack, who played Medea in *Jason and the Argonauts* and was once my babysitter — because, guess what.

to realize it, and afterward would just as soon not make movies any more, thank you very much.

(Angelina loved her space-helmet costume so much that she wanted to wear it out on the town in London, incidentally. So there are Chicks Who Get It, after all.)

Summary anecdote: there is an artist named Zoe Beloff (look her up) who was, in the early Nineties, one of the first people to figure out the internet: she created a series of short films called *Beyond*, all in the flickering postage-stamp Quicktime-movie format of the day, and published them on her website; I collected most of these and watched them with great fascination, since it was obvious to me, as it was to Ms. Beloff, that this was the future of Underground Film. — Fast-forward a bit more than a decade, when one evening Celeste drops by to try to patch things up and suggests we go out to the University avant-garde film series, which has been hauling guest artists in once a month or so to lecture and show their work. When we get there I discover to my amazement that this evening's guest is none other than Zoe herself. "You're kidding me!" I exclaim. "This chick is a fucking genius!" With which I explain who she is to Celeste, who seems rather taken aback at my enthusiasm. — We watch a new movie in some experimental format or other (I have vague memories of 3D glasses and multiple screens), very interesting of course, and afterward I am so psyched that I drag Celeste along to talk to Zoe herself after the show. I explain that I had admired *Beyond* and had been impressed with her grasp of the history and philosophy of film, not to mention the fact that she had figured out the possibilities of the internet before anyone else. I get her email address to order the final edition of *Beyond*, which, Zoe explains, had ended up taking the already-retro-seeming form of an interactive CD. Finally Celeste and I split and she says somewhat ruefully as we are walking out talking about Zoe, "She seemed rather smitten with you." So flag that as the only time I succeeded in making Celeste jealous.

Anyway I get the CD a couple of weeks later and load it into my old laptop and pass a pleasant hour or two punching the buttons that lead from one short film to another. I still love the opus, but what is my net impression? — that sure, it is interactive, and sure, the way she has put it all together is brilliant, but, wait a minute, it is already a piece of digital archaeology to get this thing to work, because it only runs under System 9. At the moment I still have this installed on a separate partition, of course, but how long will it be before these turn into the Dead Sea Scrolls? Maybe the ingenuity she has lavished on creating this ephemeral hypertextual object might have been better invested in making a few sixteen-millimeter films?

And that pretty much sums up my present attitude toward the brave new world of computer presentation: it is too easy, it sucks you in, it burns you out, and it leaves you with nothing that has the permanence of real art. Yes, I could now easily realize my original design with an iPhone app; yes, I could see real sales! 99 cents at a time! surely at least one or two of them; yes, it would be easier than what I did before and wouldn't take as long. But no, there's no guarantee the software I use won't be deprecated, in fact this will doubtless go on continuously, necessitating constant tweaking to keep the fucking thing from breaking, problems multiplied by the number of platforms and versions that have to be supported (I love the connotation of a truss) at any given moment; no, the iPhone itself won't last forever, in fact after 5G rolls out and wearable computing breaks the cool barrier (see: Google Glass; would Steve Jobs have tried to sell anything that looked this stupid?) there will be a massive transition to augmented reality interfaces that will make smartphone apps displaying photos and text look like Sumerian pictographs scratched into mud bricks; so, no, the huge effort this would entail would not be a one-off, but an ongoing full-time job which preferably should be held by somebody who still gives a shit about keeping up with shifting fashions in hardware and software; and no, none of this has anything to do with writing. Which was supposed to be the object of the exercise.

So my feeling about the current project is that if I had the old Underwood and a couple of reams of paper I'd just type the motherfucker out by brute force, write in all the equations and make sketches in the margins, cross out the mistakes and correct them with pen and ink, and clip real photographs to the pages where I wanted illustrations. There would be a bit more effort involved, but ripping sheets out of the typewriter and hurling them across the room is therapeutic, and in the end I would have something I could put into a safe and anyone could open it in ten years or a hundred and it would still be readable. (Note incidentally that this is why real film will probably always retain its archival function even when it has been eliminated everywhere else in motion-picture production.)

So, in answer to your original question: yes, it would be clever and not too difficult to interleave the whole thing with a series of porno reels, and arrange it all like an interactive game that rewarded diligent readers with moments of excitement; yes, it would indeed illustrate our favorite theme of the dialectic of the ridiculous and the sublime; yes, you can indeed take any linear piece of text and make it arbitrarily complicated by splicing branch instructions into it, and in some respects that is the secret of the universe. On the other hand this is just one more way to ensure nothing is ever really finished, and, what the fuck, everybody reads and even more so writes in extremely nonlinear fashion anyway, for instance when I mentioned the John Carter turkey I took a moment to admire once again my favorite specimen of Dejah Thoris cosplay:



And what could follow that.

Later.

{...}

*Addenda*

— I wasn't kidding:



Cut to an interview with a Randian capitalist, viewed in profile, lean, eagle-eyed, gazing off and away from the camera into unfathomable depths perceptible only to billionaire Übermenschen. — Maybe he does look a bit like Mallory. — Question, put in tones of awe: “What made you think of it? How could you conceive of purchasing the rights to Sir Laurence Olivier, long after he was dead?” — Answer: “Because they were there.”

— Screen shot of the now-deprecated front page, before rollovers:



Of course everything had to have precise dimensions. Trying to hack the browser into opening a window of exactly 987 by 610 (later 1597 by 987) was hopeless, the one place I lapsed into the loathsome Javascript. (And of course it didn't work as advertised.)

Keaton, e.g., dissolved through to a picture of Laetitia Casta with a Bolex, which in turn was supposed to lead to a film library, mainly unfinished like everything else. The rest is too complicated to explain in detail, but the typewriter, e.g., led to a screenplay cache, the telescope to the site index (alphabetical and containing every film title, page heading, caption, etc. referred to anywhere within the site), Donne to a section titled "Author" which consisted mainly of quotations, Zarkov at the radio to an elaborate moving-picture dissolving-slide-show photo gallery display which was cool, showed eleven changing slides at once, and worked for a while anyway, the Emperor Ming and Princess Aura to excerpts from *The Notebooks of Leonardo Garbonzo*, the thing at the lower left<sup>10</sup> to I forget what, the

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<sup>10</sup> A Doré illustration for *Orlando Furioso*.



thing at the lower right<sup>11</sup> to the film review archive, etc. — I think the old shot of the MANIAC led to the protein movies, among other things, but I forget. — The shot of the dwarf on a motorcycle comes from a famous old Herzog film, *Even Dwarves Started Out Small*, cast entirely with little people, and I intended here to stash either a site user manual or an extended flame against Java or perhaps both.

— This was the top side of the scenarios page:



which was supposed to work the same way as the front end, but couldn't, of course, because chaining one Java applet to another contravened the laws of God. — Remember that the next time you make a function call.

One idea which still rather intrigues me is that of an updated version of the illuminated manuscript: suppose a screenplay with illustrations

<sup>11</sup> I think that came from Athanasius Kircher.

— I picture a sort of palimpsest effect — which actually dissolve through into pieces of a movie while you are looking at them. — Again I think we skip over trying to devise some web-based version of this, and just make it a sort of smartphone app. — One might think of it as a means of dissolving the distinction between screenplay and film, and try to develop the idea of the screenplay as a coded description of a film which can be loaded onto an appropriate machine and executed like a program. — How many things are wrong with this picture? oh, who knows, I can't take myself seriously when I come up with these things any more, but I can't resist mentioning it.

— The navigation panel of Agents was supposed to look something like this:



though with seven panels not nine. — I had, naturally, routines that would automatically generate random dissections of a rectangle with sides two successive Fibonacci numbers into  $n$  subtiles either squares or golden rectangles, because at some point in the pursuit of this obsession I went batshit crazy. [For a long time, to my embarrassment, if you googled something like “233-377.jpg” an image search turned up nothing but page after page of thumbnails from [thephantomempire.net](http://thephantomempire.net); fortunately they tweak the algorithm continuously and the results eventually disappeared.]

— Delaney (from *Empire Star*):

Charona laughed. ...

“Perhaps I can explain it in purely technological terms, though painfully I know that thou wilt not understand until thou hast seen for thyself. Stop and look above.”

They paused in the broken stone and looked up.

“See the holes?” she asked.

In the plating that floored the bridge, here and there were pinpricks of light.

“They look just like random dots, do they not?”

He nodded.

“That’s the *simplex* view. Now start walking and keep looking.”

Comet started to walk, steadily, staring upward. The dots of light winked out, and here and there others appeared, then winked out again, and more, or perhaps the original ones, returned.

“There’s a superstructure of girders above the bridge that gets in the way of some of the holes and keeps thee from perceiving all at once. But thou art now receiving the *complex* view, for thou art aware that there is more than is seen from any one spot. Now, start to run, and keep thy head up.”

Jo began to run along the rocks, The rate of flickering increased, and suddenly he realized that the holes were in a pattern, six-pointed stars crossed by diagonals of seven holes each. It was only with the flickering coming so fast that the pattern could be perceived...

He stumbled, and skidded onto his hands and knees.

“Didst thou see the pattern?”

“Eh...yeah.” Jo shook his head. His palms stung through the gloves, and one hand was raw.

“That was the *multiplex* view.”

— Quoting an old letter in which I was bitching about the cursor problem: “You may have noticed that web pages employing Java applets exhibit counterintuitive behavior in that when the mouse pointer moves over the region you’re supposed to select, the cursor’s shape doesn’t change to a hand, as per browser convention. The reason (I am not making this up) is that the cursor shapes are defined in Java/awt/image/Component/Container/Window/Frame, and applets extend Java/awt/image/Component/Container/Panel. Give me a fucking break.”



So the fundamental principle involved here is that “object with wheels and chassis” is different from “object with chassis and wheels.” Great.

What else is wrong with this? Well, we might appeal to the example of the tree of evolution: developments on separate branches are independent, and “extend” what is closer to root; that does seem to work the same way. — But of course this is precisely why the eye had to be invented at least three separate times. And wasn't one of the supposed justifications of this approach that it eliminated the duplication of labor?

— Monumental hooter:



— One final anecdote: as it happened I was wandering along the creek one afternoon with my dogs in late 2012, on my way to the office space where we were illegally sleeping at the time, when I was accosted by a guy who turned out to be a student filmmaker trying to cast his

semester project, some kind of latter-day exercise in German Expressionism; apparently I was giving off a pretty good Steppenwolf vibe at that particular moment, and he wanted me for the lead. I had no idea how to respond to this (my first thought, typical of my situation, was that I couldn't take an afternoon off because I had no place to park the dogs), but gave him my email address so that he could get hold of me. He got somebody else to appear in the film, but called me up to go and see it at the class meeting when everybody showcased their work, and I talked to him for a while. It developed that he had accessed my website, maybe the first person besides myself to poke into all the nooks and crannies, and he was really impressed with a few of the tricks I had pulled and wanted to know how I'd done them. I explained as best I could, but the experience was strange and rather embarrassing: all right, so even in its unfinished form the work had made an impression on somebody with talent and critical acumen, but the technical details were so recondite that I hesitated to share them with someone with a narrower education (weird though it may seem, I am always reluctant to go all polymath on somebody's ass) and a lengthy explanation of why everything I had done was essentially pointless — what I have given you here — was clearly out of the question.

Still, it was validation of a sort. It might have all worked.

The guy's film was very good, incidentally. I composed a favorable notice and sent it to him later.