

Critical Commentary on *Saving the Market Way*

This commentary uses the Dreamer/Maker/Critic processⁱ as a template. I experienced something akin to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's "Flow" (1997)ⁱⁱ in the Maker and Critic phases, both in creating the story and in telling the story of the story: clear goals, focus, loss of self-consciousness, distorted awareness of time, direct feedback enabling appropriate adjustment, balance between challenge and skill, feeling of personal control, and ease of action. In the process, I realised that creating a critical commentary may be in its own way as creative as creating a story. It has its own aesthetics of idea-synthesis, word choice, narrative structure and rhythms and may be more or less pleasurable to read, depending on the skill of the writer.

Context/Influences - Dreamer mode

Saving the Market Way was originally a 500-word piece for a writing course in July 2005. The task was to convey the atmosphere of a local market or other event. It was never quite right and I had put it aside. In November 2008, the MACWNM Online Workshop required an under-1000-word submission of work needing critique. On 4th November 2008 I increased the story to 832 words for review by fellow students. Stimulated by their feedback, I submitted on 13th November a revised 875-word version and an MP3 audio version.

I had visited the market specifically for research, making mental notes of its colour and chaos, and the incongruities of its wares and its people. For writing models, I revisited the gently amused, compassionate style of Gerald Durrellⁱⁱⁱ and James Herriot^{iv}, who transformed ordinary happenings into humorous anecdotes that have delighted millions of readers.

I aimed to describe simple scenes with slightly "purple" verbosity for humorous contrast, to convey my amusement, to touch on themes of social irony and to trigger laughter or at least a smile in the reader. I wanted the result to be publishable.

My challenge was to enable the reader to see the scene through my eyes and sense its energy by empathising with my perceptions. I was also interested in whether a story originally written for print should be transliterated as a new media piece.

Making - Maker mode

When I returned to my computer, my experiences flowed easily to the page. Deciding on sights and incidents to include was a case of editing mentally a wealth of perceptions from actual experience rather than inventing any. This process was easy, but time-consuming, as I weighed each point and sought words that convey colour, feeling and humour.

I like a story with a twist in the tale and the parking ticket incident gave me a frame with a beginning, middle and end, from my over-confident arrival in the parking lot, through various market experiences, to my return to the lot with a modified perception of the value of those experiences. The main thrust was that the parking ticket had negated any savings.

In 2008, global warming and the credit crunch were two very hot topics. I included these stronger motivations to re-contextualise the piece. This led me to revise the ending to strengthen the sense that the experience had been worthwhile despite the financial loss. My

focus was still on the storyline. I did not notice that my descriptions were almost all visual.

The final version incorporates the valuable feedback I received from other students. I pruned several sentences and inserted references to sound, smell and texture. The storyline is similar, but the style is tauter and the descriptions richer. Subsequent feedback indicated that these changes much enhanced the piece. I discuss some examples below.

Revisions - Critic mode

While writing, I reviewed each phrase or sentence for spelling, grammar and punctuation. I think in paragraphs, so each paragraph had internal consistency, but sometimes I found duplicated thoughts, or sentences that would fit better elsewhere. I deleted some and moved others around to create a stronger narrative. This suggested new avenues that had not previously occurred to me, so I then added extra sentences.

On finishing the first draft, I checked it for cohesion, a sense of conclusion and stylistic issues such as active versus passive constructions, use of adjectives and adverbs, length of sentences, variation in sentence construction, word choice, etc. I revisited the entire text many times to change a word here and there. For more significant changes, I saved another draft.

Once I had a passable draft, I asked my long-suffering husband to read it aloud. This exposed difficult constructions which, even though grammatically correct, were unwieldy or ambiguous. Then I modified word order and choice to convey my meaning more smoothly. This reading aloud sparked me to create my own MP3 version. Aware now of a different audience, I improved the text several times during seventeen re-recordings.

[60 sec Excerpt from Audio Version \(Market Magic\)](#)

In the Online Workshop, I was privileged to have several reviewers confirm points, making it easier to assess suggested changes. The following are selected examples of feedback I received and my responses (Azulay, 2008)^v. The numbers in brackets indicate how many of six people commented on the listed items:

Positive feedback:

- The piece was colourful and vivid (3), descriptive and poetic (3), funny (5), ironic (2) and made people laugh out loud (2).
- The T-shirt-related descriptions were particularly funny (4).
- The opening paragraph was effective (2) and the ending satisfying (3).
- The mixture of registers and styles, adjectives and alliteration was effective (2).
- It was easy to relate to the context and motivations of the protagonist (2).
- The piece is publishable in a magazine (3) and as audio (4).

Constructive feedback:

- Use all five senses (2).
—After I added “smell and touch” to a sentence about fruit and vegetables, a reviewer who had not previously reported engagement of her senses said, “I loved the way you wrote about the organic stall. Was your objective ... to make the reader’s mouth water?”^{vi}
- Invite identification by describing temperature, clothes, motivations, etc. (1).
- Remove redundancies such as repetition of words (2), unnecessary adjectives and adverbs, e.g. “long snake” (1), etc.
- Be cautious with unusual devices like “hasty trestle tables” (1).
—I decided to retain the transferred epithet because I like the visual image it conveys.
- Review title choice (2).
—I changed it from *Saving the Market Way* (preserving market-shopping and saving as market-goers do, but ironic here as there was no saving) to *Market Magic* (shorter, alliterative, catchy), but later reverted to the original title.

Insights

All the feedback was useful, but I really valued the comments exposing my neglect of the non-visual senses. In future, I will engage several modes of perception in scene-setting, using the five senses and characters’ motivations, physical comfort levels, and practical concerns. These enable the reader to become immersed in the story and must be suggested verbally in written texts, whereas, in new media works, although the same principle applies, immersive experiences are enabled via various channels, such as sound, images and interactive options.

Following Anna Pitt’s^{vii} suggestion that the story could work well as an i-story like *Inanimate Alice*^{viii}, Jaka Železnikar^{ix} disagreed, saying it was complete in itself and “sounds or images would probably be only illustrations to the text and not really engaged in unfolding of the narrative”. It is true that it was written without expectation of assistance from other media so descriptions are full and events carefully placed and tightly woven. This led to a discussion of the commonly held perception that textual stories are linear whereas digital narratives are nonlinear. Examples exist to challenge these assertions^x, but I have assumed this model for the following video discussion.

[See video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yI55iNR3dSk>]

Besides the storyline, other aspects of textual expression, such as humour, may be chronologically dependent. For example, the reference to the “one-pound-T-shirt veteran” caused at least two reviewers to laugh out loud. However, this line would not have been funny at all if they had not previously read the paragraph about the experience of buying T-shirts.

Linearity is intrinsic to the concept of “story”, but, in some ways, [digital narratives](#) are non-linear due to interactive technology (Miller, 2008)^{xi}. The reader’s choices can affect the story’s outcome, or at least the order of its elements. Although a market scenario is arguably a good one for rich new media stimuli and choices between various elements, *Saving the Market Way* is a traditional linear story and would have to be extensively rewritten, even reconceived, to facilitate such choices.

(1400 words, incl. titles)
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- ⁱ The Dreamer/Maker/Critic model of creativity is an organising principle behind many of the creative and reflective exercises suggested in the Online MA in Creative Writing and New Media's Methods Module Workbook 200809. See especially WB1 Creative Practice, pp 6-12,6-13; WB2 Practice-Based Research, p 7-12 (Thomas & Pullinger, 2008).
- ⁱⁱ Csikszentmihalyi coined the term "flow" to describe the pleasurable state of concentration experienced by someone involved in a productive activity that provides an appropriate balance between capacity and challenge. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).
- ⁱⁱⁱ See, for instance, Gerald Durrell's first book, *My Family and Other Animals*, about his experiences as a budding teenage naturalist on the island of Corfu, has been reprinted many times and in many translations since it first appeared in 1959 (Durrell, 1959).
- ^{iv} James Herriot's collections of short stories about his life as a country vet in Yorkshire, beginning with *If Only They Could Talk*, have also been reissued in several formats and translations and remain hugely popular (Herriot, 1975).
- ^v For the source of these examples, see all posts in the discussion Thread: Tia Azulay: Saving The Market Way, The Online Workshop Forum, Methods Module Discussion Board (Azulay et al, 2008), (accessed multiple times in November 2008). I collated all the feedback received and analysed it in a 12-page Feedback Action Plan which I redesigned from a template provided in the course. This enabled me to consider what each comment really meant, the extent to which I agreed with each, and the actions I would take in response to enhance my writing. For the purposes of this essay, I have selected observations made by more than one person, or more than once by the same person.
- ^{vi} See comment by Author: Sukai Bojang, Post Date 16 Nov 08 18:50 (Azulay et al, 2008).
- ^{vii} See comment by Author: Anna Pitt, Post Date: 11 Nov 08 14:29 (Azulay et al, 2008).
- ^{viii} Inanimate Alice is an online story by Kate Pullinger and Chris Joseph of a girl who grows up to become an animator (2006). The story is told via a combination of text, images, sounds and interactive options and was conceived and executed as an online piece, rather than being converted from a pre-existing text-based story. See <http://www.inanimatealice.com/> (accessed 11 November 2008).
- ^{ix} See comments by Author: Jaka Železnikar, Post Date: 15 Nov 08 22:20 (Azulay et al, 2008).
- ^x For an example of a linear digital narrative, see *Inanimate Alice* (Pullinger & Joseph, 2006) and of a nonlinear text-based story, see *Ulysses* by James Joyce (Joyce, 2000).
- ^{xi} Carolyn Handler Miller summarises the key characteristics of digital storytelling in her undated article 'Tales from the Digital Frontier: Breakthroughs in Storytelling'. See http://www.writersstore.com/article.php?articles_id=50 (accessed 08/12/08). She expounds these principles in her book *Digital Storytelling: A creator's guide to interactive entertainment* (Miller, 2008).
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