

EMERALD CITY

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Editorial

Wow, scarcely a month since the last issue and already I've got so much to write about that I feel obliged to put fingers to keyboard and produce another one. I guess that's what going to conventions does for you. So, without further ado, one 'zine thinly disguised as a con report.

ArCon - Overview

So there I was, barely off the plane, and thinking I ought to get in touch with all the nice Melbourne people that I had met at Intersection. I phone Beky and enquire about the Friday night SF Group meetings. She gives me the gen, and then says "but I won't be there this week because of the convention". This was too good to be true, a con on my first week back. So I wandered along to see what was going on.

ArCon is short for AussieCon Reunion, that is an excuse for all of the people who were at previous Australian WorldCons to get back together and relate embarrassing stories about each other's antics at said events. Not that you had to have been at one though: they let me in didn't they? But one needs an excuse to have a convention, and one doesn't want to have to put too much effort into dreaming one up.

The con was incredibly small compared to Intersection: probably no more than 100 people, on the grounds that I got badge number 100 and I doubt that anyone signed up after me. Which is not to say that there was nothing going on. I actually went to far more programme items at ArCon than I did at Intersection. Of course you had to be interested in the things they were talking about, but it so happened they got me well and truly, as evidenced by this issue of *EmCit*.

I would like to give a report on the Saturday night party, but I didn't make it. Being utterly boring, I went home to watch *All Good Things* instead. Well, it was unlikely to be on TV here again for a few years and I don't have a video. More of this later.

ArCon - Electronic Publishing

Two of the panels at ArCon were given over to the Future of Fan Publishing. Inevitably these days, this means the Net. Seeing as I had just started out on Net publishing myself, I thought I ought to go along and learn. The discussion was somewhat disjointed due to the varied interests of people on the panel and in the audience, and it quickly became apparent that there were many different approaches to producing an electronic 'zine. In addition there was argument as to whether a paper version should be available (and if not, was this elitist?). Some people wanted to talk tech, others wanted anything but. Poor Roman Orsazanski desperately wanted to talk about design of Web pages, but no one else cared. And, of course, there were people in the audience for whom the mere word "computer" was anathema and who were keen to expunge the Great Satan from fandom at the earliest opportunity.

The first panel was quite interesting and I learnt a lot about the possibilities for electronic 'zines. The second quickly degenerated into a long ramble about putting old 'zines onto CD-ROM so that in the future learned papers could be written about the history of fan publishing. <Yawn>. I'm sure the people who do this sort of thing are very nice, very dedicated folk, but in my book it classes alongside trainspotting, stamp collecting and other forms of retentive obsession. Fanzines, for the most part, are ephemera and should stay that way.



Now here is where I could definitely do with a hypertext link because I am just about to digress onto a completely unrelated subject. I guess it proves what an untidy mind I have.

All this obsession with fannish history worries me a little. As with any community, fandom has its divisions, and it is quite interesting find out where all the little factionalisms lie. It seems clear that there is something of a division between the traditional "SF literary" fan, the media fans and, separately but with much cross-over, fantasy readers. Most young people coming into fandom do so via TV, films, comics or fantasy. The fact that older lit fans are becoming obsessed with the past at this point seems to me worryingly ostrich-like. The world hasn't ended, guys, just changed a bit. It is still livable in, honest.

But enough of this controversy stuff for now. What was I talking about?



The most useful thing I got out of the panels was a much clearer understanding of the options open to someone embarking on electronic publishing. It occurred to me that others might be interested too. I'm sure that there are other possibilities than those I list below, and that technology will produce new ones, but hopefully this is useful as a start.

Electronic mailing

Jean Webber and I were of one mind here. Envelopes, stamps and postal authorities are going to become just a bad dream. Nowadays we can post our 'zines by email. It saves money too. For example, *EmCit* costs \$US 0.16 to send anywhere by email and \$A 1.20 (about \$US 1.60) to send to the UK by ordinary post. No contest.

But it isn't that easy: there are formats and binary transfer protocols to worry about. I'll try not to get too technical here, but you need to understand the problem.

In saving any document on a computer there are many choices of format. The simplest is pure text (known as ASCII). This is understood by all forms of PC, but is unable to carry much in the way of layout information. That means no pictures, no lines, no fancy fonts. Word processors and desk top publishing programs can store more complex data, but each one uses a different format, and you need the program in order to read the resulting file.

So, for example, I can save *EmCit* as a Word 6.0 file, which is the way it is created. If I were to send it out in that form you would need a copy of Word 6.0 of your own to read it, otherwise it would be useless. If you don't have a copy at work this will set you back quite a substantial sum, and you need a pretty powerful PC on which to run it.

At this point the discussion reminded me very much of the old debate between mimeo and litho 'zines. In those days the question was always Form or Content. The mimeo editors maintained that it was what they wrote that was important, and that fancy layout and pictures were unnecessary. It seems clear that the litho guys won, because my suggestion that you could mail 'zines in ASCII form, with no graphics or layout, was greeted with howls of derision. I note in my defence that the emailed version of *Ansible* is an ASCII document.

There are other options. For example, there are formats which look like ASCII to a computer but which contain special code words to indicate layout instructions. These make them unreadable to us, but with special software they can be displayed in all their glory. Quite often a bit of technical knowledge is required as well as the right software. More interesting is a program call Acrobat which allows you to create formatted documents (with hypertext options) and has a separate reader program (a "browser") which you are allowed to give away to your friends. But again you need a fairly powerful PC to run the Acrobat browser.

And then there is the transfer problem. All email systems can transfer ASCII files. Any other format (collectively known as "binary") requires a special protocol, and there are a lot of different ones. It is an absolute nightmare trying to get one email system to send a binary file to another. This problem will be solved by technology in time because it is so inconvenient for business users, but in the meantime it is a pain.

Uploaded issues

An alternative means of distributing your 'zine is to store it at some point on a networked system (such as the Internet) and allow other people to obtain a copy if they wish. This is rather like putting your 'zine in a library or shop and hoping someone will buy it. *Ansible* is also distributed in this way. Putting a file in an electronic library is known as "uploading".

This method does nothing to overcome the formatting problem. You must still decide which format you are going to use for the stored document. But it does help the binary transfer problem as the communication is between you and the library, and separately between the library and the reader. Such libraries will commonly support transfers in a wide range of protocols.

What uploading does do is bring into sharp focus the question of “who pays”. This can affect emailed ‘zines as well, as some email systems allow you to specify that the receiver will pay the postage charge. To me this is grossly anti-social, especially as you often cannot get any idea of the content of a message until you have paid to receive it. But with an uploaded ‘zine the reader has a choice. The library where it is stored should have a directory of some sort with a brief description of each stored item. Readers can choose what to download, but they must pay that cost. All the editor has to pay is the cost of sending the document to the library, and perhaps a charge for storing it there.

Uploading also fundamentally changes the relationship between editor and readers because most such libraries are public. Anyone who can gain access to the library may obtain a copy of the ‘zine. Mailed ‘zines, whether electronic or paper, only go to a known circulation list.

Web ‘zines

My final category of electronic ‘zines is that of the full-blown Web page. The Web is, in effect, a special sort of hypertext library in which documents may be viewed as well as downloaded. The file format for Web documents is (more or less) standard, and everyone who has access to it needs a “browser” program that understands that format. The document can be downloaded, but it can also be read on-line. A surprising number of fanzines, including *Ansible* again, are already available in this form.

The exciting thing about Web pages is that they have full support for hypertext links. This means that you can put special highlights in your document which, if clicked by the reader, take her to an entirely different part of the document, or even to another document entirely. My little digression on fan factionalism above could have been on a separate page accessible by clicking on a highlighted word in this article. Or my mention of *Ansible* could be highlighted with a link that takes you direct to the latest issue. The possibilities of such a system are endless and fascinating. But they also pose new problems.

Firstly, because of the multiplicity of types of PC able to access the Web, and the range of different browsers on sale, it is impossible to know exactly how your ‘zine will appear on the reader’s page. A good Web designer knows how to format her document in such a way as to be readable by a wide range of different systems. But you do lose a lot of control. In many areas the reader can change things herself. If you don’t like that gothic font, swap it for something sparse and modern. Many editors find this prospect distinctly uncomfortable.

But the main problem with a Web zine is that hypertext is almost impossible to represent on paper. Once you have gone for all this fancy design, there is no way that you can just print it off. To create a paper version of the ‘zine will require quite a bit of work and the result will be a different entity.

Another interesting feature of Web ‘zines is that you can edit them from time to time. It is quite possible that the content of a Web ‘zine will change on a daily basis. This is enough to give librarians a coronary, and it may not be much fun for readers either, especially as they will have to pay to find out of the ‘zine has changed.

Conclusions?

Electronic publishing is still very much in its infancy. Many new technologies are doubtless just around the corner, and people will come up with new ideas for using them, and existing ones. We need to play, and try out new concepts. I don't want to pontificate on the future at this point, but a few words on the future of *EmCit* would be appropriate.

For now I have neither the time nor the expertise to produce a full-blown Web 'zine. Also I wish *EmCit* to be available to the widest possible audience. This means not doing anything that will make it difficult to produce a paper version. Uploading seems to have few advantages except pushing more of the cost onto you guys, which hardly seems fair. So that leaves me with simple emailing.

What I need to do now is spend a bit of time addressing the formatting and binary transfer issues. This may mean saving the basic document in a variety of formats (e.g. I could do a Mac version for some readers) and perhaps signing up for more than one email system so that I have multiple options for binary transfer protocols.

In the meantime many of you will have to put up with receiving an ASCII version. Which means it is down to me to make it so interesting that you don't mind the lack of fancy layout. That sounds like a good challenge to me.

ArCon - Children's Literature

The other panel that caught my imagination at ArCon was one on SF/fantasy literature for children. This really is the pits as far as the literary establishment is concerned. Not only are you producing non-realistic, and therefore, by implication, non-serious fiction; you are doing it for kids who, of course, wouldn't know good literature if it hit them on the head. Add to that the fact that kids books are often written by women (as if we didn't write adult novels as well) and you have a perfect subject for looking down one's nose at.

The truth, of course, is quite different. SF and fantasy are valid means of getting a message across (remind me sometime to write a piece comparing magic-realism, which is respectable, with fantasy, which is not). And writing for kids can be very difficult. Sometime or other I will also do something on children's literature, but there is a book on the subject I want to finish reading first. For now I'll just concentrate on the panel.

Sometimes when you go to a panel like this you get people who really understand the industry in which they are working. The one on writing role-playing games at Intersection was like that. Other times you wonder what world the panellists are living in. The ArCon panel was one of the latter.

Firstly there was considerable wailing and gnashing of teeth about the fact that children are reading "horror" novels these days. OK, so they will read Stephen King and the like if they can get their hands on such stuff. Kids have always had a penchant for the gory. But I do not believe that stuff like the Goosebumps series is doing unmitigated harm to the youth of the world or, to go back to a much longer running debate, that Roald Dahl is too scary for kids. Besides, what the panel didn't seem to realise is that horror is simply the latest kid fad. At other times it might have been Batman, Fighting Fantasy or Roy of the Rovers, and there is some evidence that cyberpunk will be the next big thing. Fashions come and go, and in 2 years time no kid will want to be given a Goosebumps book.

The other subject that caused the panel substantial grief was that there was little market for “good quality” literature these days and plenty of “rubbish” produced for formula series such as TV spin-offs, RPG spin-offs and so on. Marco dear, please stop breathing, you are a disgrace to serious kiddy-lit.

Now just hang on a minute. There is an industry out there, and I’ve spent long enough discussing the requirements of Fighting Fantasy and Shadowrun novels to understand it a little. OK, so the people who write such stuff often have to do so at almost Fanthorpe-like speed and for very poor returns. This doesn’t make it automatically crap. Besides, if people really want to improve the lot of bookish kids, why don’t they get on and write the stuff that kids want to read instead of busying themselves producing serious works of art.

What really surprised me was the assumption that, because most of the series were produced by American firms, this meant that they were taking the market away from Australian authors. But Marc Gascoigne and Carl Sergeant have now written three Shadowrun novels. They are not Americans, they simply got off their backsides, hassled FASA and produced books. Writing is a business, and people seem to forget that many of the “great” Victorian novels were written as newspaper serials and were effectively the equivalent of modern-day soap operas.

ArCon - A Trekkie Confesses

Yes, it’s true, I went home to watch *All Good Things* rather than go to the ArCon party. I must be a Trekkie. I should be ashamed of myself. Right? OK, I shall wear sackcloth and ashes for the rest of the year. Provided, that is, that someone manages to produce a convincing argument that Trek has significantly less literary value than, say, E.E. Doc Smith.

But I’ve had enough of complaining for one issue (even we Poms get fed up of it eventually). What did I think of the program?

Really, I am not sure that it deserved a Hugo, although it was no doubt made on a much tighter budget than some of the competition (e.g. *The Mask*). And it had Q in it, which normally serves to put me completely off a Trek episode. But it was good fun, the actors did a reasonable job, and, soap-opera wise, it was good to get a view of the characters’ possible future development before saying goodbye to them.

What was most interesting, however, was that Channel 7 decided to segue straight into a re-run of the entire series. They have bought *Voyager*, but it isn’t scheduled to start until February. So we were treated to 2 hours of *All Good Things* on Saturday night, closely followed on Tuesday by 2 hours of *Encounter At Farpoint*. I was astonished to see how much better the series had got in seven years.

Obviously in all long-running series actors settle into their roles. Pickard, for example, has clearly developed as a character. Gone is a lot of the tetchy behaviour of early episodes, to be replaced by a much more believable aura of command. The detestation of children has gone too (doubtless aided by the departure of Wesley), and this was nicely worked through in a couple of episodes. Ryker has grown from a fresh-faced kid into someone who might actually make Admiral one day, and Beverley from a worried mother into a starship captain.

Other things have also improved a lot, the most noticeable being the quality of Worf's make-up.

On the other hand, seeing *Farpoint* again also threw up some of the weak points of *Trek*. Of course, when the series started, the producers had no idea how successful it would become, but a lot of things have grown as it developed, rather than being planned from the start as in *B5*. A good example is the relationship between Ryker and Troi. They knew, in the beginning, that the characters had met before and had a relationship, but the exact details of that, and why it failed, were probably not thrashed out by the scriptwriters until they came to do *Second Chances*. Certainly there was no evidence of the story being known from the way the characters behaved in *Farpoint*.

All in all, *Trek* is a well-produced, good fun TV series. It amazes me why so many fans get so hot under the collar about it.

Reflections on Australia - The Footy

Last issue I promised that I would do an article or two on my impressions of Australia. After all, we Poms are not allowed to assimilate here. Just about every other culture is welcome and integrated, but a Pom has to remain a Pom. You need someone to look down your nose at. I'll try not to return the favour - I like Australia. But it is different, and many of my readers are overseas and would be interested in this sort of thing.

Give that Australians are famed world-wide for being obsessed with sport, and that we recently saw the biggest sporting event in the Melbourne calendar, the "Footy" would seem to be as good a place as any to start.

Footy is not soccer. Nor is it rugby, gridiron or Gaelic football, though it seems to have borrowed elements from all of these. Footy is an Australian invention, and suitably Australian in nature. It is fast-paced, often stylish, and seemingly without much in the way of rules at all. One of its less endearing factors is that pitch brawls are commonplace. And whereas John Motson would tut-tut about red cards and suspension, and Bruce McLaren would go on and on about the poor example set to those schoolboys watching the game, the Footy commentator is more likely to come out with something along the lines of "aw, did ya see that beauty; he could give Mike Tyson a run for his money, couldn't he". Then again, Footy crowds are heavily populated by kids, girlfriends, even grannies. There may be violence on the pitch, but not on the terraces.

The other thing that you should know about Footy is that it is not really an Australian game: it is a Victorian game. OK, so the other major cities now have teams, but only Perth's West Coast Eagles have developed into a side capable to challenging for top honours. The Sydney Swans are a joke, but Sydney people play Rugby League, not Footy.

So out of a league of 16 teams, 5 come from interstate, one from another Victorian town, and the other 10 from Melbourne. In today's business-oriented atmosphere, the strain of the lack of potential support base is beginning to show, and many of the smaller, less successful teams are talking merger.

The best things about Footy are the Mark and the speed at which points can be scored. The former is a cross between the rugby concept of catching and claiming a kick, at which point you get an uninterrupted hoof, with the gridiron forward pass. It is the great

glamour play. What everyone loves to see is the ball being kicked down field into a crowded forward area and Gary Ablett rising several feet above the other players to claim the mark, which he then uses to kick a goal. Footy players get a lot of knee injuries from awkward landings.

The speed of scoring means that often a game that seems lost can be turned around. I particularly remember a game between Hawthorn, my local side, and Collingwood (hiss, boo), the Arsenal of the AFL. Mid-way through the third quarter, Collingwood had a 42 point lead (there being 6 points for a goal). With 12 seconds to play, Hawthorn were only one point behind. They won the ball from the centre bounce (sort of like a hockey bully-off, but with the ball in the air) and sent it flying down field where it was marked by their captain, Jason Dunstall, right in front of goal. It was almost a famous victory, but the umpire ruled that the hooter had gone whilst the ball was in the air. Now that is what I call a close match.

One feature of Footy that might usefully be considered by soccer is the "Behind". Footy uses rugby shaped goal posts, although the crossbar has no function: the ball can go through at any height. But to either side of them are two other posts. If the ball misses the goal, but goes between the side posts, this counts as a 1-point behind. Soccer suffers dreadfully from boring draws because scoring is too difficult. There have been discussions about enlarging the goal, but people worry about historical comparisons and stuff. Something like a behind, which would not count as a goal but could be used to resolve ties, might get soccer away from those awful penalty shoot-outs. Anything to stop teams playing for a draw because they think their team has less talent but their penalty kickers have more nerve.

The bad points about Footy are the speed of scoring and wet weather. Because scoring can be so fast, a superior team can run away with a game, and that gets very boring. And the whole game becomes a mockery in the rain because the ball is leather (probably a synthetic one would not bounce properly) and it becomes impossible to catch.

So there we were: Grand Final day, the culmination of the Footy season, and Melbourne goes Footy-crazy. Channel 7, Melbourne's local station, is determined to put on a good show. Those of you from the UK who, like me, are not soccer mad, are doubtless irritated by the fact that on FA Cup Final day Des Lynam and his cronies arrive on our screens at around 11.00 on Saturday morning when the game doesn't start until 15.00. Channel 7 is nowhere near as restrained. Coverage starts on Friday night at 22.30 with a chat show. It continues all through the night with highlights of previous finals and the past season. On Saturday morning there is a special Grand Final Breakfast, followed by the under 18 game, the reserves game, and finally the big match... (pause for breath and the news) ...followed by lots of post-game commentary and more chat shows.

Nor are the presenters anything like the BBC crowd. There is no suave, debonair Des, no sleek, professional Hansen, sharp, stabbing Hill or charming, boyish Lineker. Footy coverage is provided by a mixture of media pros who were probably children's TV presenters until they got too old to be made up to look 14, and ageing players who appear to be in the George Best or Gazza mould. The chat shows, in particular, can only be enjoyed if you are a) male and b) as drunk as the presenters appear to be.

So much for the coverage? What about the match?

To date the playoffs have gone to form, and the two sides with the best records over the season are in the big game. One the one side, Carlton, a glamour side going for a record

16th title. On the other, Geelong, the only non-Melbourne Victorian team, going for a record number of years in the league without winning it. Both sides have been regular challengers for the title for several years and are starting to age. Carlton, in particular, has several key players over 30. For them it is probably a last chance. Geelong's stars are ageing too, but this year's team has some promising youngsters. It is Geelong's fourth final in recent years, and they have a record of non-achievement equalled only by those paragons of failure, the Buffalo Bills.

So who is it to be? The ageing local stars or the talented outsiders? The bookies, romantics to the core, made Geelong the favourites.

The bookies needed their heads examined.

Footnote

It has occurred to me whilst writing this that a lot of you will not know a lot of the people mentioned. This, I'm afraid, is inevitable. If you are writing for people on three continents you either restrict yourself to mention only of the universally famous or you carry on regardless and hope your readers will cope. I've gone for the latter approach. After all, some of my readers don't even know who Dave Langford is. If you find this irritating and really want to know more about someone I have mentioned, let me know.

And if you have been mentioned and you don't want me writing more about you, the price is.....

Finally, a cautionary take for those of you with literary pretensions. Spare a thought, if you will, for the poor, impoverished Hugo winner, struggling home from the Worldcon by economy class flight with a 20 kg weight limit on his luggage, only to discover that the Hugo trophy weighs in excess of 5 kg all by itself. And when one has two of them, well, the hand baggage makes that magical transformation from being fully "portable" to being merely "luggable". It remains to be seen if Reading will survive the strain or, more likely, sink gracefully into the Thames, weighed down by the collective mass of neutronium in the trophy cabinets of London Road.

Next issue, BasiCon, a convention on a shoestring, my impressions of Melbourne and, if I ever get any time to read, something on Jeff Noon.

See you then,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl