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Serial Reader: How the Internet Caters to Reconfigured Reading Habits.

<http://www.tekka.net/01/?Serial>

Pepys Diary

I am finally reading Samuel Pepys' diary. Yes. I've wanted to read this book since I saw the Great Fire display in the London Dungeon (please -- I was 16!) to the accompaniment of atmospheric readings from the Diarist with underpaid students swinging foam-rubber axes. I never bought the book, afraid that its 12 volumes would be the foundation of my bedside pile for the next fifteen years. This 17th century clerk's diary opens up an detailed view into lives and thoughts 340 years past. But Pepys was also a rather meticulous (and sometimes dull) chronicler, and at times the *Diary* seems to consist of walking from one end of London to the other.

This year, Phil Gyford has started to publish the 1893 edition of the [Diary](#) on his website - serialized, as a weblog. I take a snack of Pepys before starting work every morning (and wonder how people back then ever got any work done at all with the amount of walking they had to do to get to talk with a business contact). I also wonder if I really intend to make this a habit of the next 10 years, but even if I don't, I won't have to trip over that pile of volumes at night. Gyford delivers the just-right dose of Pepys for the day - every day. And for readers with low self-discipline, there's even an [RSS feed](#).

According to futurologist Matthias Horx ([Zukunftsinstitut](#)), being under "high stress" has turned into the status symbol of the day. Stress, he says, is the imminent failure to reconcile the demands of job, family, friends and personal interests. People push their time management to the limit, and so snippets must suffice. Using up a whole weekend to read a book will seriously impair your time management. Sometime soon, no doubt, novels will open with an executive summary.

With tastes swinging toward the bite-sized and chunky, some half-forgotten genres will merge with state-of-the-art methods of delivery to cater to a stressed audience. The diary, the epistolary novel and the comic strip come to mind, because these genres fall quite naturally into small self-contained units. And when the reader is no longer willing or able to make space for the text, the text must be pushed to the reader through email or RSS feed. But mere serialization of linear content is not the point: once the series goes digital, it can use genre-crossovers, linking, even interaction and reader-involvement.

The Dark Nile

Take Jesse Kornbluth's e-mail thriller *The Dark Nile*. *Dark Nile* reaches the reader as gone-astray e-mail and transcripts from instant message- and cellphone-conversations between a group of researchers and FBI agents who go after nuclear terrorists in Antarctica. You know the cheap thrill of coincidentally receiving e-mail that was meant for someone else - and the speculative daydreaming about the contexts and lives in which this cryptical two-liner might make sense. *Dark Nile* works with this attraction of the unexpected, erratic glimpses into the lives of people racing against a polar tragedy. The mode of delivery ties in with the development of the plot and the plot itself lends credibility to the fact that the reader receives the story at all. Tension arises from the alignment of the reader's and the characters' struggle to make sense of the situation amidst failing communication channels.

[The Dark Nile #36] Transcript, Maggie Hess

X-Flags: 0000
Delivered-To:
Reply-To: <replies@darknile.com>
From: "MobCom Sniffer" <OpsSecMCSniff@cia.gov>
To: "Operations Log" <OpsSecLog@cia.gov>
Subject: [The Dark Nile #36] Transcript, Maggie Hess
Date: Sat, 19 Nov 2005 03:30:00 -0400
X-SMTPExp-Version: 1, 0, 2, 10
X-SMTPExp-Registration: 00B0320C107602006905
X-OriginalArrivalTime: 10 Jun 2002 14:45:38.0906 (UTC)
FILETIME=[7CBE13A0:01C2108D]

ROL Moviefone Presents The Dark Nile
<http://www.metamail.com/click.asp?u=1565&id=993610760&c=419>

Transcript of Instant Message conversation
(via mobile communicator)

MaggieH: Mom?
Grace9: Hi, my love.
Grace9: you've been quiet - I was worried
MaggieH: I love you Mom... we failed...
Grace9: I love you too...
MaggieH: I am with Jean, but something terrible is going to happen - the nuke.. we can't stop it
Grace9: nuke? What are you saying Maggie?
MaggieH: I love you very much... goodbye, Mom... I love you

Helping People Make a Difference -
<http://www.metamail.com/click.asp?u=1783&id=993610760&c=419>

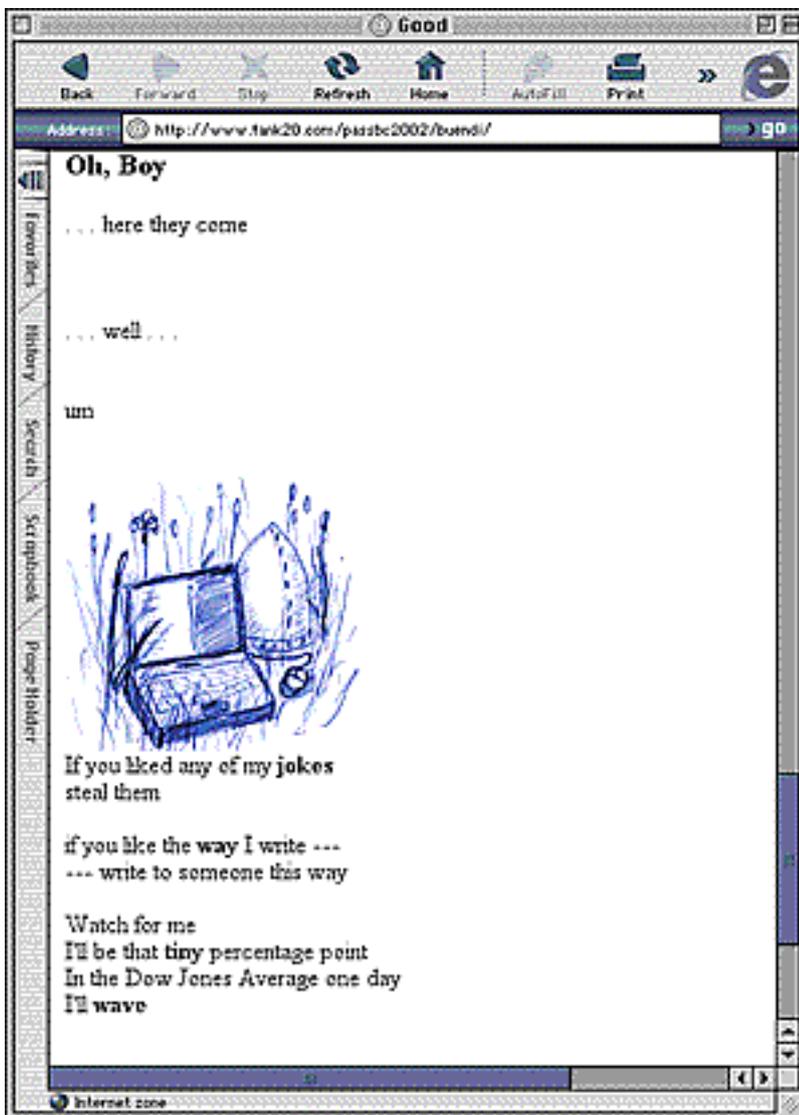
MGI Software - <http://www.metamail.com/click.asp?u=1781&id=993610760&c=419>
MGI Video Wave 5, featuring DVD Authoring, lets you capture, edit, produce & share with ease

Metamail - <http://www.metamail.com/click.asp?u=1782&id=993610760&c=419>
Experience The Dark Nile with the Metamail Reader

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Blue Company

Tank 20/Rob Wittig's *Blue Company* goes the opposite way. *Blue Company* arrives in e-mails addressed directly to you, (formally) the reader, and (fictionally) the writer's new lover. These love-letters bridge 600 years: their author was just sent on a business trip to the late Middle Ages. A rather fitting metaphor for the distance between two people who are getting to know each other in mediated communication. Boldly at times, and sometimes tentatively, he gauges the depth of a relationship that wasn't much more than a one-night-stand when he left for 14th century Italy. For the month of its duration, *Blue Company* skillfully guesses and meets the reader's/lover's reactions towards this uncanny story/love-affair: flattered, skeptical, enamored, enervated, touched and - hooked.



Pepys' Diary, *The Dark Nile* and *Blue Company* are examples of successful modes of delivery of literature for the short-of-time. But form alone is not enough: after some initial excitement, *Dark Nile* fails to hold the reader's attention. It spends too much time introducing more and more

characters whom the reader cannot remember or tell apart, and spends too little time building tension and (false) tracks. 30 installments over a month seem to call for minimalism and a fast pace. (The makers of *Dark Nile* disagree, but I'd also say the too overt product-placement, writing a story around the communication tools the sponsors wanted to advertise, was not really conducive to the reading-experience.) *Blue Company*, on the other hand, succeeds because it fundamentally and very candidly woos the reader. Besides, it's funny, quirky and beautifully designed -- and short!

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