

Structure and play

Eric Blair

28 December 2005

One of my fave hobbies is writing personal ads.

A good short story is typically more about good characters than good plot, and even the plot-driven stories are more about what characters do to respond to the situation. Even *programmers* will tell you that well-developed objects are more important than involved procedures .

So writing a personal ad cuts to the chase: here is how a character describes him/herself, and here is what that character is looking for. If it hasn't been done already, one could readily write a short story in personal-ad format.

My favorite character was one who was writing from prison.

- In my bedroom, you'll find: A cot, a toilet, bars.
- Best (or worst) lie I've ever told: Not guilty.
- Fill in the blanks: [] is sexy; [] is sexier: erotic asphyxiation when she recovers is sexy; erotic asphyxiation is sexier.
- Who I'm looking for: You're trusting. You've been hurt a few times before, but are still out there looking. Also, you like to warm up to a relationship with four to eight years of correspondence before meeting in person.

I got a good number of responses in the way of "That was hilarious! Will you be my pal?" and one that totally didn't get it: "So you're into metal stamping? Tell me about that."

So my advice to those of you writing personal ads: think outside the darn box already. Everybody is already trying to stand out with half-baked witticisms as a veil over a core of raw earnestness. Give me something so over-the-top that I can't help but read you. [[Notice, by the way, that all of this is aiming for colorful, blatant play that not-dumb people will recognize as such, or to which readers will at least say 'really, is he serious? Really?' a few times. Embellishing and otherwise lying is something entirely different, which some are in to but I'm not so sure about. And while I'm disclaimer text, I don't mean to disparage those who use these systems with full heart-on-sleeve earnestness; that's just not the form of play I'm looking for here.]]

A pal of mine put up two linked ads: the first was from her nice underwear, complaining about how its owner never had a chance to wear it, and the second was from plain_cotton, bragging about all the fun things it got to do. She got tons of responses and wound up marrying a nice Macedonian boy she'd met via her underwear.

Some reviews

Or, to put it another way, the structure of a web text entry box allows for an incredibly wide range of forms of play—but some systems discourage or strictly prohibit play.

FastCupid This is what absorbed Spring Street Networks after SSN went out of business, and began as a paragon of strictly structured play. First, each user can have one and only one profile, so our pal's pairs of underwear are already out. I'd had more than ten profiles on SSN, mostly short essays like Section ??, below, and they deleted them all in the transition. [Don't worry, I had backups of the half-decent ones.]

The system also earnestly tries to provide features—in the context here, structures for structured play. The oddest is the “network”, that lets you see who is connected to you, Friendster-style. For a dating site, this seems supremely odd: do I really want people I'm dating to meet other people I'm dating? Perhaps this feature was sponsored by the CDC.

More generally, we don't *really* want that many features. Getting back to the rule for writing a good novel, we come to a site like this to see faces and characters, not to click buttons and watch Flash animations. There are other web sites for that.

There are two drives toward over-structured content. The first is common among all programming, known affectionately as *creeping featurism*. It is a tendency for the coders to say “we could spend our time making what we have perfect—or we can branch it out in entirely cool ways!”, and jump on the second choice with the full vigor of doing something new. The coders tell management how Friendster has a network feature and is very popular, so this site should clearly have one too.

The second driving force is that many users have no idea of what to do with a blank page. Thus, the leading questions about your favorite books. But there is a balance to be struck here, and I have never learned anything about anybody from check boxes.

Text and photos. Everything else gets in the way of the character. [Hey, here's a thought: why not leading questions for photos: ask users to upload one photo of them with pals, one of them underwater, one of their favorite landscape, et cetera. I expect non-novelists could do some pretty novel things with this. It may also discourage people uploading fifteen photos of them at the bar with their eight best friends.]

Oh, and you have to be a member to view profiles, which means that if you're doing something fun that you want to show off to your pals, you can't. That's right: there are still people who disallow linking to their web sites.

Overall verdict: despite a terrible overstructured start that basically vacated the network of interesting people, FastCupid has tried to reform, and is still the most flexible venue for unstructured, character-driven play. Just get yourself a lot of email addresses from gmail, forward them all to the same account, and get writing.

Friendster Here's somebody who shares my sentiment that more fun can be had through fictional characters. Too bad, she continues, that Friendster deletes fakesters for not being in the spirit of the site. Apparently, the founder of Friendster is kind of an unfun guy.

I have an a/c on Orkut (I was invited within two days of its opening, thank you very much) and myspace, but never really bothered. If you've used them, leave comments

about their play value below.

OKCupid This is a project by some misanthropists who went to Harvard. It is primarily built upon a series of algorithms to match people and rate them on various personality scales; internally they track such scales as desperation and Radcliffyness. You won't appear on anybody's radar unless you've answered about a hundred questions, so there's a serious investment in check-boxing before your character is relevant. I've seen one or two profiles that I'm convinced are fake, but maybe those people were really just like that. Overall evaluation: the structure is great if you're primarily looking to be matched, but it generally attracts the sort of people who like to fill out personality tests.

LavaLife I could barely get a membership to this one, because the censors are so harsh. There's a 2000 character limit, so I had to cut the story to begin with, but here's the first two paragraphs that I could fit into the text box; LavaLife's censors rejected even this much:

When I woke up in the morning, I wasn't quite sure what to do. Early in the night, I worked out that she was a heavy sleeper. You know how it works: you start off trying to cuddle, and she puts her head on your shoulder and you negotiate something with your knees, and that lasts for about three minutes and then she tilts over in the other direction, and then you try spooning for a few minutes, but then one of you gets too warm and you give up on that, and then you spend the rest of the night alternating between being passed out but not in contact and being in contact but not quite passed out. You nudge them and they nudge back, and in the morning you don't remember anything but a bit of warmth.

She spent most of her time in the passed out part, snoring. Which I don't mind at all; I certainly can't hold her accountable for things she does while unconscious, and it's probably the price I pay for sleeping with somebody with a cute nose. But once it was morning, I wasn't entirely sure what to do.

So that didn't fly. Final verdict: they don't want my kind there.

Jdate A font of earnestness. Also, you have to pay to see who has written to you, which I found offensive. [Remember, dear vendors, that I'm not just a customer: I'm also a content provider whose writing other customers are paying to read. The hundred or so responses I got on SSN was a hundred bucks in the SSN bank.] I've basically abandoned my profile there. Another friend who did actually subscribe to it says that it is overwhelmingly "very clean-cut, straight and narrow types who may have once been in a Jewish fraternity at UPenn or some place like that." So if you're looking for an earnest mainstream Jewish beau, there's your spot. [Pal also notes that the boys seeking boys and girls seeking girls sections on Jdate are completely unpopulated. So add hetero to that too.]

Match Never tried it. My impression is that their marketing shoots for quantity over quality, and most of its members wouldn't get Huizinga references. I'm probably just being an elitist and somebody should put something in the comment box about how their experiences there were great.

Of course, there are other media. ebay is always a favorite. One guy sold the shirt that he was wearing when he was stabbed; the description was much more about the mugging than about the shirt itself. I once tried to sell a box of Sominex, gently used, but got no takers. [Yes, people really do earnestly sell Sominex on ebay.] If you don't like sleeping pills, you can try a book about the history of jstor.org; check out the customer reviews on Amazon

Oh, and there's the missed connections section of Craigslist, but that's no fun because you know exactly what you'll get. If there's a big sign that says "think outside the box here, in this box", it kills the buzz, no?

There's a constant conflict between those who put a web form online for a very specific purpose, and those who want to engage in new and creative play with that web form. The English term for 'comprehending and accepting forms of play different from one's own' is *a sense of humor*, and we find that some web vendors have a much better-developed sense of humor than others. Fortunately, the World Wide Web is a big place, and we can be confident that people will continue to create new venues for our unstructured enjoyment.

PS: If your PDF reader allows you to click through to links, check out this profile. Indeed, that's how it's done.