

Digital Winter is Coming

By Sean McCormick

Many industries experienced a golden age prior to the internet, but the sudden capability to turn once-tangible products and services into a series of 1's and 0's, rendered many companies obsolete, or at least ill-equipped to remain competitive. I had a front row seat during one such transition. This paper provides an overview of what my life was like in a relatively nascent multimedia department at a large educational publisher, featuring a peek at an incident I witnessed immediately upon being hired, a good early example for me to observe regarding how disconnected our department was. It was also a metaphor for how this company (as well as other educational publishers) operated in general.

The Biz

Holt, Rinehart & Winston was a 6th-12th grade educational publisher with roots going back to 1866. They were acquired by Harcourt in 1985. While they offered most disciplines, Language Arts was their wheelhouse. There was a saying at Holt, "nobody ever got a trophy for saving this company money." Prior to the internet intruding, this was true. When Holt had a good adoption cycle, it was very good. There were three regions that decided the fate of textbooks nationally back in the day, New York, California, and of all places, Florida. HRW's culture was rabidly book-based, as their book sales were what filled the coffers. The encroaching internet was largely viewed as a nuisance. This wasn't a Holt-specific attitude, all the other players (McGraw-Hill, Pearson, etc.) were cooling their heels as well, waiting to see what the competition would do. It became a pretty high-stakes game of chicken.

Ch-ch-ch-ch-Changes

Around Y2k, I had decided that the IT world I had been toiling in was a bit dry for my liking and I wanted to find something more multimedia-adjacent. My fiancée at the time was a short, blond, pit-bull of a QA supervisor for HRW, who frequently traveled to the U.S.-based printing press locations (it's all done in China or Vietnam these days, I believe) to make sure the books were meeting specifications. In the spring of 2000 there was an opening in their multimedia department and she managed to land me an interview. This interview was unique for me, as I had zero idea what the job title was, let alone any other details, i.e., duties, salary, etc. With chutzpah as my co-pilot, I met with two multimedia department supervisors in a nice conference room. I plastered on my best immigrant smile and nodded dutifully at their opening salvos until it became clear what it was they were looking for – a low-level web monkey to assist the marketing department with updates to the corporate web presence. Thankfully these two were more of the project manager stripe and had near-zero technical knowledge of anything internet-related. While I had no professional web-development experience, I had dabbled a bit and knew enough jargon to keep them at bay. Having done time at Dell and a small software company helped me clear their hurdle, and it didn't hurt that I was engaged to someone in the organization. The next step was a technical interview, which was scheduled for a week later. This was a terrifying proposition, as I would not be able to BS my way through that. I resolved to simply try to make the case that I am a quick-learning self-starter, which was true enough, I had taught myself enough to go into tech support and IT work a few years before. My fears wound up being for naught, as the developer I met with was pretty jaded about the company and spent the entire 45 minutes bitching about the place. I received an offer letter a few weeks later and was slated to start June 7th, the week after my honeymoon cruise. I spent an hour a day on the cruise frantically studying an HTML book in a Hail-Mary attempt of preparation. Upon arriving for my first day of work, I learned

that the guy who gave me my “tech interview”, and who was supposed to be my Yoda the first few weeks, had left the company. This was during the tail end of the dot com boom and I found out several people had left Holt during these days, where you could have the words “flight risk” watermarked on your resume and someone would still hire you. It was a real testament to the perceived fecundity of the computer boom era that several HRW employees had abandoned the notion of changing HRW’s rigid caste culture to the point of giving up perfectly good jobs to attempt to create their own via startups. A few of them would come crawling back over the next few years (including my ersatz Yoda), which I will revisit in a bit.

New Toy

Several of the denizens of HRW’s multimedia department were old-school broadcast TV folk who had a pretty limited grasp on digital technologies, which kind of led to the equipment-purchasing decision that is the crux of this paper. Right before I began working at HRW, the multimedia department decided to allot money for new equipment to capture, transcode, and repurpose legacy video content. We had many ancillary videos that resided on Sony Betacam tapes (and DigiBeta) that would eventually be needed to be available on the web. The person in charge of selecting the hardware/software for the upgrade had also left before I got hired, so I had missed out on the chance to chime in on the upgrade items, as I had been dabbling with capturing and streaming video for a few years already. They had linked up with a local hardware vendor who happily provided the costly gear and performed the installation. The total cost wound up being over \$40,000 dollars! A large line item indeed, but as I mentioned previously, no one got a ribbon for keeping costs low back then. What was unfortunate was that the “solution” was way off from being the right one, and by the time we (the folks tasked with actually using the equipment) realized this,

it was too late to hit the undo key. What arrived was a beefy (for Y2k) Apple G4 tower, with Avid Xpress non-linear editing software, Sorenson transcoding software with an ICE board for optimizing video transcodes, a couple monitors, a Sony DVCAM digital video deck, a Canon XL-1 DV camera and a nice patch bay for interfacing all of the above, in addition to our older Sony Betacam SP decks. Good stuff, if you are wanting to head back out to tape for broadcast, but woefully inefficient for large queue transcoding purposes. As I previously mentioned, TV people, not digital folk were running the rodeo back then. Working with video back then was tricky due to the high processor and memory usage, commodities that were still very expensive at the time. We wound up spending a wildly inordinate amount of time attempting workflow workarounds, while our render queues were stacking up due to the glacial output pace. We went round and round with the equipment vendor, looking for ways to make life easier, largely to no avail. Spending any more money was out of the question, so we were going to have to make due with our \$40k albatross. To use author Robert Putnam's terminology from *Bowling Alone*, deprecations about the configuration eventually devolved into derogations. My colleague's account of what happened included the perfect foil, the employee who chose all the equipment no longer works there (Putnam, 2000).

Dance Dance Evolution

Wait, I was supposed to just be a web-monkey at that company, right? How did I wind up involved with video issues so early on? As I was an orphan upon arrival, thanks to no longer having a mentor, the village did their best to raise me, but everyone was stretched a bit too thin to be much help. As someone well-acquainted with the rigors of secondary socialization, I was pretty comfortable bootstrapping myself into the fold. My wife at the time (now ex) used to kid me about how it seemed I was always paying dues somewhere, which is pretty apt, as I've been blessed/cursed with so many

interests over the years. I'm certainly a believer in earning one's spurs, regardless the size or complexity of the organization. Becoming multistranded with fellow employees is usually a first priority, whether it's attending a company-created team building event or creating one out of whole cloth myself by throwing a party (which I've done a few times). Coed softball leagues work great as well. The resulting social capital can be invaluable when times get rocky. This lack of direct supervision gave me some latitude to seek opportunities that weren't initially advertised. My weekly marketing meeting and the website copy corrections that I was tasked with only ate up about 40% of my available bandwidth. Things got a bit more challenging when the design team started giving me layouts to make web-friendly and I had to quickly figure out how to make Photoshop and Macromedia Dreamweaver play nice together. Once I learned how to keep my web wolves at bay I got involved with our video transcoding conundrum. I had more current digital media chops than my colleague there (another broadcast video vet) so no one groused about me putting in my two cents regarding the new workflow issues. To invoke Putnam again, my Johnny-came-lately diagnoses of the situation met a quick and painless death, as nothing was going to be altered at that point, plus with me being such a noob in the company any formal complaining about it would be heretical at best (Putnam, 2000).

Failing Upward

Our department's "manager" was a fantastic introduction to the concept of the sacred cow in a corporation. I learned there were several such "cows" in the company pre-Y2k, before everything caught on fire. He was famous for either filibustering through meetings or being completely checked out and just repeating a couple things others said at the end. I peeked into one once and he was just staring blankly and digging into his ear. At least once a day he'd corner someone in their cube just to talk their ear off, amazingly one-sided

conversations that were completely irrelevant to the business at hand. We had a standard procedure, if anyone noticed a colleague being pinned in by the boss, we'd call the captive's phone and tell them they were needed in the front lobby. Nine times out of ten this technique was successful in extricating them. He also borrowed the department's brand-new video camera to film another sacred cow's daughter's softball pitching audition for her college application and managed to get a fast pitch right in the eye for his troubles. Our first question upon seeing him the next Monday with a black eye was, "is the camera ok"? I put his filmed mishap to music and that video clip was super-popular amongst the rank and file for a while.

The Salad Days

The expensive addition to our multimedia equipment arsenal was a decent metaphor for the corporate culture at the time. More \$\$\$ than sense. It wasn't just our department, or even our company. All the large publishers at the time were giving away jaw-dropping amounts of gratis materials to try to curry favor with school districts, a crazy race to the bottom approach to success, instead of making the digital world a company-wide priority. While the lack of specific technical expertise in our department caused some ongoing headaches, it provided me a fertile playground in which to try out new and interesting technologies in a corporate setting. Before the company's looming troubles began, they were sending various personnel out to Ojai, California for training in Macromedia products at Lynda.com's classroom facility (back when companies had budgets for such things, I would say the vast majority of Lynda.com's business is all online these days), whether it was necessary or not. This included staying at the Ojai Valley Inn and Spa, of course. I got to go on one of these junkets at the beginning of 2001. Some of us also got to attend DV Expo, a digital video training-based trade show that was based in Los Angeles, for a couple of years before things dried up. While it was costly to send a few of us, these were actually

inspirational outings, getting to learn techniques from the actual folks who wrote the book on things, like Chris and Trish Meyer teaching Adobe After Effects and hearing about DVD authoring directly from Jim Taylor. I came back from these experiences really jazzed up and I'd immediately harass my managers to think about adding new services for the department. These company-funded perks would qualify for what Putnam refers to as human capital, "tools and training that enhance individual productivity" (Putnam, 2000).

New Digs

All good things come to an end (or get outsourced). HRW and its clumsy parent company, Harcourt, was acquired by global publisher Reed Elsevier in 2001. This occurred right as we were making the move to a fancy new building in North Austin. This was a huge deal as everything and everyone suddenly wound up under a new level of scrutiny. This started our company's culture wheel to turn at a faster speed than was comfortable for most. Right before the move, some of the aforementioned sacred cows found themselves to be endangered species. Our dubious leader was amongst the first to go and one of our mid-level managers was put in charge temporarily. A nice enough fella, but still pretty unaware of what exactly a few of us did. I decided the move to the new building was a huge opportunity to make some Madonna-esque reinventions for myself. The corporate website was really outdated and needed a major overhaul, but the process to transform it involved too many decision makers so it kept stalling out. I requested that the AV room in the new building have an enclosed space with a glass window to use as a vocal booth for voiceover, and happily it was approved. The person in our department that had been project managing all the voiceover work at foofy studios in Austin and abroad was none too happy about this addition, and initially tried to thwart it, but I made it clear we were only going to do light lifting with it: glossaries, world language stuff, etc. so the editors could come and knock out

stuff without having to go offsite. The heavy stuff, like textbook narrations, etc., would still go to the big boys, and those line items were six-figure doozies every year. Alas, we were still stuck with our \$40k “investment”, however. This would change soon enough.

Meet the New Boss, Same as the Old Boss...

Once we were settled in the new campus, we finally got a new manager to go with it. Actually, she was the old manager who had left to form a startup company during the boom prior to my arrival at HRW. She was held in much higher regard than the previous fella and one of my first encounters with her involved her having to settle a weird turf war over the marketing website I was involuntarily having with a couple of the marketing folk. It was nice to know she had my back from the get-go. While she wasn't terribly technical, she did understand how the company functioned and was pretty hands off with those she trusted. She hadn't been there when the department blew all that dough on the previously described “upgrade” so the timing was perfect to request a proper slew of toys for the new facility. I made a thorough, well-researched, well-documented case for the additions and got it all approved! We switched from the Avid world to the Apple Final Cut Pro one, acquired hardware and software to begin rolling our own DVDs and a couple of decent microphones and hardware to run Pro Tools for our new onsite voiceover services. I had a colleague who pre-dated me by a couple years at the company who shared the AV room with me and we were suddenly able to take on and deliver way more project offerings than when we had been previously able to.

Last Call

This era of growth for us lasted a good few years until our European overlords Reed Elsevier got frustrated with the erratic financial cycles that educational publishers have. It was always a mystery to me that they didn't seem to realize

that financial growth in the educational publishing space isn't some easy-to-chart linear thing. They eventually gave up and began the process of trying to sell us out to an Ireland-based tech company and the outsourcing and the bloodletting began in earnest around 2007. The impending sale certainly achieved the unintended goal of busying "giddy minds with foreign quarrels" (Weeks, 2003), in fact, we were so giddy that a huge chunk of our time was spent polishing resumes and attending surreptitious job interviews. In describing the concept of oscillations, Meadows writes, "this situation of information insufficiency and physical delays is very common. Oscillations like these are frequently encountered in inventories and in many other systems" (Meadows, 2008). Employee uncertainty causes oscillations within many elements of a larger system that can directly affect productivity and diminish various types of stock. Our department lasted longer than I had imagined it would, but in August of that wonderful year 2008, our entire group was let go at the same time. The HR folk tasked with showing us the door were all crying. The hubris of the old sacred cows, all being in denial of the information age, finally had come home to roost. Back in the 1990s, not one of the educational publishers wanted to lead in the digital realm, which ultimately wasted a lot of resources and money trying to play half-assed catch-up, as whoever could have planted a robust e-learning flag first would have created an enormous advantage, and I might not be typing this now. The music industry also paid dearly for their denial back then and is now a shadow of its former self. An enlightened developer in our group said back in 2006, "We're on a ghost ship and no one realizes they're dead." He was only off by a couple of years.

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