

THE STORYIST STORY

By Amos Jessup

The writer's task is not simple, and it is not easy. Faced with the grand cascade of imagination, reflection, insight and gibberish that fills an overcrowded mind, he must reduce the roaring waters to a single neat and presentable goblet. To do so he must make thousands of decisions and put hundreds of possible thoughts into actual words in good order. Storyist—a software program for Mac users who write—can actually help him or her do all this. It helps by making the whole writing project appear in one useful interface from which the writer can plot, figure, research, invent persons, assemble notes, dream up scenery, define motivations, and craft unpredictable twists of fate at will, and assemble them into a submittable format.

#

Features

The first valuable feature Storyist provides is pre-designed templates which match industry standards for novels, stage plays, or screen plays. The templates are customizable, as well. Built in keystrokes enable the screenplay writer, for example, to instantly start a new bit of dialogue or a scene setting.

The second really valuable feature is the project environment. You can create Section Sheets that describe each twist of plot, each character

down to the details of his grimy subconscious motivations, each setting on each abandoned island. You can subdivide a chapter into as many sections as you prefer. You can shut everything out except that page you are writing now and with a keystroke or a mouse-click jump back to a handy cork board layout of all your intended sections. There's a place to collect pictures, which you can then link, for example, to your characters. You can collect bookmarks from the internet or create bookmarks within the manuscript or other parts of the project. All this adds up to a nicely manageable writer's environment, if the writer is already adept at software interfaces or is willing to learn to become so.

#

The User Experience

To a writer, the greatest help a software program can offer is to help with the thinking he must go through to be able to write well. To help consistently the software must be nearly transparent so that the writer is not continuously having to think about the software when he should be thinking about his writing. There are certain features of Storyist that fulfill this “invisible friend” criterion. For example it is possible to add a chapter with a single click, to split the page and look at a side-by-side view of the text and, say, the outline. These instant powers help speed the teasing out of plot and character while not invading the creative thought-bubble.

There are other aspects of Storyist, however, which fail this test. The relationship between the page and the Project listing of elements is counter-

intuitive, with chapters, sections, and main title showing up under a project title which is separate from the main title. The behavior of sections and chapters requires some extensive familiarization even if you are used to outlining tools, because they operate a little differently and can swallow a chapter or section unexpectedly if you make the wrong assumption about how they work.

It is clear great effort has gone into making the user interface available without being intrusive. In the ordinary course of writing, this succeeds—the major tool icons are pleasantly lined up but do not overcrowd the visual space of the page. And the features that are available, such as attached bookmarks, comments, images and section sheets for plot, character and scene details, are potentially very valuable and helpful. The full-screen mode allows you to hide all the bells and whistles and focus solely on the page you are writing, and it can be turned on with a flick of the wrist.

The drawback to Storyist is that to make it transparent to the user, as it must be to help the writer in work, a significant learning curve is needed. The map of the tool has to be acquired, and the reasoning and use of the various features has to be absorbed in order to make the tool both useful and invisible. This interjects a learning phase. The materials provided to get the writer through the learning process are well-constructed and helpful. But it takes getting used to. One example is the layout of the project elements, as mentioned—they reflect the program's structural needs more than the writer's instinctive sense of his project, at least for this writer.

In addition, Version 2.1 (which has now been updated) produced

sudden program quits unexpectedly under certain conditions. It is clear from the version release notes that the people at Storyist are taking their job seriously, correcting bugs and working to improve the product.

On Balance

Storyist is a powerful program, and one which may turn out to be extremely valuable. In the current market, it goes head-to-head with Scrivener, a tough competitor which seems to have a highly similar set of features, based on a short exposure only, and a more direct learning curve for some reason. This may be only subjective, of course, but I found Scrivener faster in trying to ramp up to normal production speed. One main reason was the more intuitive management of project components and chapters. To be fair, Scrivener also requires learning the ins and outs of the program, and both programs have extensive feature sets. If Scrivener seems to impose slightly less on the writer's thought processes at the outset, Storyist may be found to meet his or her needs better once learned. I would recommend trying a version of each of them to see which one molds itself the most easily to your own writing processes. At present Scrivener is slightly cheaper—\$39.95 to Storyist's listed price of \$59 (download with PDF manual).

File Size: 6.1 Megabytes

Requires Mac OS X 10.5 (Intel or PPC) or 10.4 (Intel)