The Future of Text: More Questions than Answers
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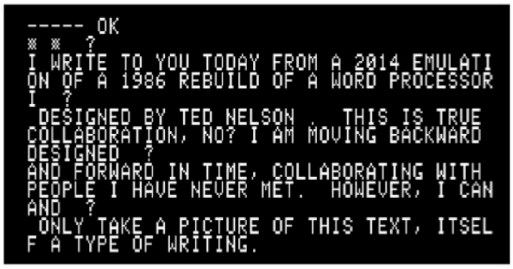
The text processors we use today are, in their functionality if not in their appearance, shockingly similar to those actually developed in the late 1960s and 1970s. At that time, there were serious hardware constraints that had to be addressed in order to develop even the most basic text processing applications. Today, we have access to so much storage memory and processing power that we hardly know what to do with them. Yet, many of the same constraints are still evident: cut or deleted passages and words disappear rather than being automatically stored and presented AS deletions; projects are separated into files that do not communicate with one another; the desktop space is, for most users, so limited that it is difficult to open and view several files at one time. What is still missing from even the most sophisticated text processors is the ability to synthesize multiple sources and new textual combinations in ways that actually facilitate and assist a human writing process. The making of connections is ultimately what propels a writing process forward.*

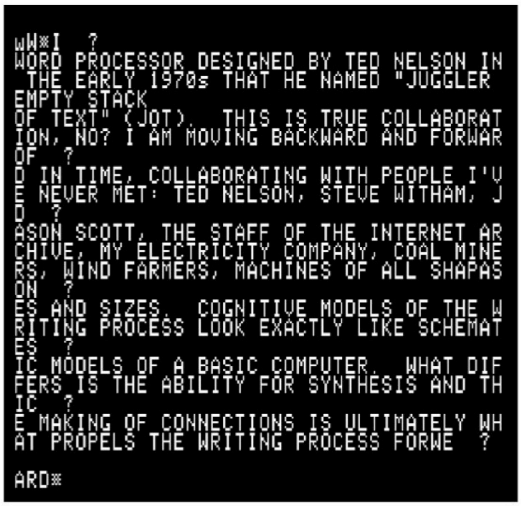
There were and still are compelling visions of how text processors could function. One of the most intriguing can be found in Ted Nelson's 1965 article "A File Structure for the Complex, the Changing, and the Indeterminate," in which he envisions how a text processor could be used to enhance a human's alphabetic writing process by facilitating multimodal communication across multiple document types. In this vision, machine languages (coding) function in the service of human alphabetic language processing (writing). However, in the text processor that he and others actually developed in the 1970s, alphabetic language processing is not only separated from machine language functions but must conform to their structures and limitations. Although named "Juggler of Text" (JOT) in reference to his original vision, JOT functioned much more like other text processors, which, if they are text jugglers, actually juggle only one type of ball, not several, and even then in ways that often distract from, rather than enhance the writing process.

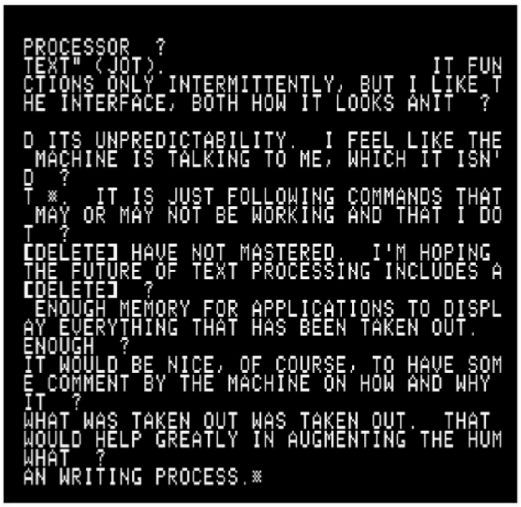
In a human writing process text manipulation is functional, not functionless, as it has been traditionally modeled in text processors. In other words, the moving of textual components around in space and time and their combination and associations with other texts create meaning. Humans process alphabetic language associatively and in a productively ambiguous manner that generates new insights and ideas and connections. It is sometimes said that it is in the "wording process" that one is thinking; but, the "wording process" has to do with more than words. Representing alphabetic verbal language for humans is a multi-sensorial process that involves seeing, hearing, touching, and smelling. It is also a recursive process guided by the search for a representation that addresses, at the very least, several thousand criteria.

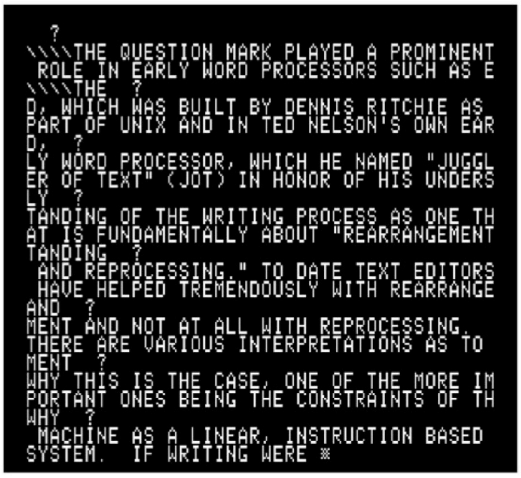
"Writing," defined as a human cognitive activity involving multiple drafts and a revised finished product that has only the barest resemblance to the notes and drafts from which they are derived is a searching for a very particular representation that is realized only in the process of its materialization and articulation. As such, it is a distinctly human act. My hope is that the next generation of text processors has more to do with facilitating the human process of writing and less to do with the production, management, and circulation of text as a material object.

*As one example, compare Illustration 1, which contains screen shots of notes used in the preparation of this text with the printed text you are reading, itself only one version of the possible texts contained in these notes. The notes were created using a 2014 web based emulation of a 1986 version of Ted Nelson's "Juggler of Text" (JOT) application (https://archive.org/details/jot_0.53_ted_nelson).









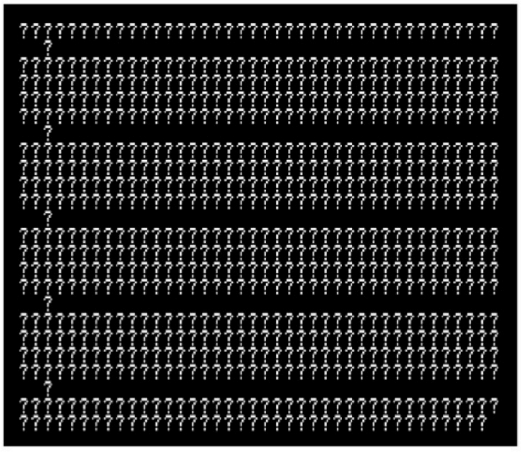


Illustration 1: Author's Notes, Created With a 2014 Web-Based Emulation of a 1986 Rebuild of Ted Nelson's "Juggler of Text" (JOT) Text Processing Application