Hard Up for a Plot? Get With the Program.

By EDWARD ROTHSTEIN

FADE IN: IT IS A DARK AND stormy night. Streaks of lightning rip through the sky, casting shadows against a weather-beaten Victorian house. The camera pans up over its rain-battered walls, zooming in to focus on an attic window. Strips of light peek through the slats of Venetian blinds.

Inside sits a bleary-eyed music critic staring at a computer screen. Surrounding him are empty coffee mugs, mounds of doughnut crumbs and crumpled papers. A Bartok string quartet is playing on the stereo. The critic is writing a screenplay and realizes, with some dismay, that he has no ideas, no plot and no characters.

He does, however, have a few thousand dollars worth of computer programs designed just for such circumstances. They bear names like IdeaFisher and The Idea Generator, Collaborator and Plots Unlimited. They promise to suggest ideas, generate stories, even make sure a plot follows Aristotelian rules of dramatic form. There are also programs like Scriptor and Movie Master, which will take the result of all this fishing and generating and plotting and make it look good on paper. They set up the screenplay with precisely the right indentations for camera instructions, scene descriptions and Academy Award-winning dialogue.

Such programs, the critic has been told, are used by the wannabes and already-ares of screen and tube, often in conjunction with traditional word processors. Nicholas Pileggi used the word processor Microsoft Word along with a special script-writing program, the Warren Script Applications, to write "Goodfellas." Barry Morrow has used Collaborator to clarify his thinking in writing the screenplay for the forthcoming "Super Mario Brothers." There are some screenwriters, the critic has heard it suggested, who don't want to admit they use some of the idea-generating programs.

The critic is ready to stake his future membership in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences on the assurance that these floppy disks will also be of some help to him. These programs were developed by entrepreneurs for a small and specialized market. The Writers Guild, composed of successful writers for television and movies, is only 7,000 members strong; a sale of a few thousand copies of a screenwriting program is considered a triumph. The programs are designed for weekly sitcom writers as well as epic-movie authors, for playwrights and perhaps even for critics sitting late at night at a computer screen.

The critic has also been reassured by descriptions of testimonials that grace the walls of the Writers' Computer Store in West Los Angeles, the only such specialty store in the country. There, at oak chairs and tables, near piles of Variety and The Hollywood Reporter, he imagines entertainment industry aspirants and veterans poring over the library of computer manuals the store owners keep available for the ever-growing group of computer-literate screenwriters.

So the critic puts aside his pride and tries IdeaFisher ($595 for I.B.M.-compatibles or Macintoshes) — a program that is not specifically for screenplay writers but is, as the manual puts it, "designed to help speed up the creative process."

One method of thought-fishing offered by the program is through the QxBank, an "organized storehouse of more than 3,000 questions." Some of these questions are best for people devising an ad campaign or reorganizing a corporation; others suit the critic's purpose. They help "clarify" or "modify" or "orient" or "evaluate" a project or a set of ideas. But they also tend to ask the very questions the critic is having trouble answering in the first place, questions like: When does the story take place? From whose point of view? The critic is stuck. What story?

Moving the cursor desperately, the critic begins idea fishing in the program's more lushly designed IdeaBank — a "hierarchical structure of 28 Major Categories, 387 Topical Categories and more than 60,000 Idea Words and Phrases" — a giant dictionary of free associations designed to lead the fisher into unexpected waters.

Typing in the word "script," he half hopes to find one already written, waiting for him. Instead there are other choices to be made, sets of related associations — "language/speaking/speeches" or "literature/stories/books/writers" or "movies/the theater/live events." Choosing the last, he is led to yet another list: genres of films, titles of films, kinds of actors, movie abstractions. And under abstractions comes another list: 228 words associated with movies — words like "cameo role" and "dream" and "budget." Backpedaling to "literature/stories/etc.," he finds a list of genres including "chronicle," "ghost story," "narrative poem," "sob story."

The words are meant to stir startling associations; he even contemplates for a moment a "sob story" about a "budget," in which the

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Need a Plot? Here's the Program.

Programs for the fledgling screenwriter—IdeaFisher suggests ideas; Scriptor makes scripts look good.

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critic plays a "cameo role." But despite the $3.5 million and 12 years of research said to be behind these lists of mental connections, the critic's own mind works with other sorts of metaphors. At this late hour they are all ineffective. His eyes are on the clock, his ears on the rain, his mind on the unwritten tale.

What he needs, he thinks, is not a set of associations, but a collection of characters and conflicts, relations and resolutions. What he needs is a plot. He turns to Plots Unlimited, which offers almost that — not one plot but 13,900 possibilities ($399 for the I.B.M.). Somewhere in there, he is sure, is the old standard: "Boy Gets Girl, Boy Loses Girl, Boy Marries Girl." But there are also plots like: "A, trying to expose treachery, falls in love with B, suspected of the treachery." Or, more ornately, "A's romance with B is going nowhere, so A buys an aphrodisiac and mixes it secretly in a cup of tea — which B's maiden aunt, AU-B, mistakenly drinks."

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There are even plots for the overly imaginative: "A loves B and dates her regularly. One night when he calls on her, he discovers her house has vanished and in its place stands a musty old tomb — the tomb of B, who, according to the inscription, died 100 years before A was born."

A smile comes to the critic's face. An illusory romance with a dead woman, a love-stricken maiden aunt, a Hitchcockian affair of treachery. What more could a plotster want? He can even choose six different ways to start generating a plot of his choice. The Masterplot option sets up a sort of Chinese menu of basic plots, each containing an A clause (a person), a B clause (a conflict) and a C clause (a resolution). "A person in love," for example, might be "trying to prove" love's power by a test of courage" until that person finally "gains a spiritual victory."

One of the authors of the program, Tom Sawyer, who has used the program to help create television plots, got the idea from a 1928 book called "Plotto" — a directory of 5,600 plot fragments to be pieced together into stories. The critic also thinks of Vladi-

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mir Propp's study of the Russian folk tale, which reduced hundreds of folk stories to a menu of ingredients and relations, presenting the structural anatomy of folk fantasy.

And wouldn't this program provide the same? Tales for large audiences must be ornamented versions of primal plots, elaborations of fundamental and simple relationships. It hardly matters that when the critic asks J. Michael Straczynski, the executive story editor of the television series "Murder, She Wrote," about the computer program, he calls it a "blight upon the earth." Others are ready to acknowledge the spurs it offers to the imagination ("For a beginning writer, it's absolutely tremendous," testifies another screenwriter, Steve Hayes).

The critic, very much a beginner, recalls the maxim, "Write what you know" and chooses clause A carefully. The subject of the plot would not be "a criminal person" or "a resentful person" but — thinking he has leanings in that direction — "an intellectual person."

The program even proposes the heart of a plot: A (the intellectual) would receive a "mysterious communication" that would lead to "bizarre complications." This cryptic suggestion sets the critic's mind going. Perhaps A is trying to understand something beyond his usual experience, something that leads him into alien territory. Perhaps he is bewildered or

confused. But then what could be the result of such close encounters of a peculiar kind?

The program makes a suggestion: that A, after his "bizarre" experience, finally rejects the mysterious communications and "recognizes the foolishness of attempting to be other than one's true self."

But this is not quite enough; the plot needs filling out. So another part of the program also comes in handy, suggesting "lead-ins" or "lead-outs" from the basic plots, events that might proceed from it or precede it. The program suggests, for example, a subplot, that "reading medical novels makes A eager to become a doctor. A confident of his ability, starts a new line of work despite having had no practical experience." Or, it suggests that A might face other problems, reaching a "breaking point" as the "line between reality and illusion blurs."

Feeling that line beginning to blur as he delves deeper into the mysterious communications of screenwriting software, the critic turns to yet another program, Collaborator, one of the most intelligent and cogent of them all ($299 for Macintosh and I.B.M.). Collaborator simply interrogates, forcing the requirements of structure onto the loose ideas of a story, demanding to know every aspect of the script. ("In Act II, what conflicts and obstacles have the antagonist provided to the protagonist?") The program raises queries about genre and tone, the unity of the theme, the nature of the protagonist's triumph or defeat.

As each answer is typed in, it becomes part of the outline of the story, a guide through its thickets. This self-described "analysis tool" has been used by Kathleen Kennedy, president of Steven Spielberg's Amblin Entertainment in conjunction with a film course; she considers Collaborator "great for beginning writers." But Barry Morrow, who won an Oscar for his work on the screenplay of "Rain Man," uses it to establish a sophisticated "discipline" for examining his work.

Collaborator also focuses the critic's attention. After all, he has become bewildered by some of the alien messages he has been receiving from computers on this rainy night. And like A, who read medical books and found himself attempting surgery, the critic is being tempted by his messages to transform himself. Collaborator tempts him to proceed.

The critic is so enamored of his programs' suggestions that he is already making plans to format the finished product. Scriptor ($295 for I.B.M. and Macintoshes) will elegantly take a script produced by any of three major word processing programs and turn it into a printed masterpiece of correct margins and page-breaks. Or he might choose Movie Master ($345), a word processor, now being used at many studios, specifically for writing screenplays. But as a longtime user of Microsoft Word, he has been sold on "The Warren Script Applications" ($95 for I.B.M.), which allows the powers of Word to be harnessed for the peculiarities of script just as the program Superscript ($99) serves users of WordPerfect. The critic, tasting victory, can hardly wait to begin printing.

Yet, in his self-important musings, the critic has forgotten one thing: his script has almost no dialogue and only one slightly self-indulgent character. The "line between reality and illusion" has been crossed: he has been deluded into thinking he had become a screenwriter. It is time, even the critic realizes, for him to recognize "the foolishness of attempting to be other than one's true self." Software does not a screenwriter make.

With that obvious revelation, the critic looks up from the keyboard. The rain has stopped, and the sky is graying with the light of dawn. The critic, sighing in relief, turns off the computer. His plot unraveled, he falls into a deep, sound, restful sleep.

FADE OUT. □