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## "Unfair" Interactive Multimedia CD-ROM

Adam Justin Creighton  
*Utah State University*

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**"UNFAIR" INTERACTIVE MULTIMEDIA CD-ROM**

**by**

**Adam Justin Creighton**

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree**

**of**

**UNIVERSITY HONORS  
WITH DEPARTMENT HONORS**

**in**

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**1997**

Adam Creighton  
Honors Thesis Project  
June 5, 1997

**Honors Thesis Project: "Unfair" Interactive Multimedia CD-ROM**

My honors thesis project involved turning one of my short stories, "Unfair," into an interactive multimedia CD-ROM. In adapting the story to this new medium, I struggled with what could be included in the project (both original text and new, multimedia elements); what had to be omitted; how the story was to be organized and other implications resulting from the shift in medium. My original goal for this project was to modify a traditional text story, creating a version that was enhanced; that is, better than the original. After dealing with the technical and conceptual issues inherent with a project like this, I don't think I've succeeded in my original goal. Rather, I think the CD-ROM version of "Unfair" is weaker in emotional impact than its prototype.

"Unfair" is a story about loss, framed within the slice of life belonging to Mike, the fireman (see attached story). At the beginning of "Unfair," Mike loses his newborn baby girl in childbirth, with his wife dying moments later from grief. This twofold loss hangs over the fireman as he is called to rescue residents from a burning house. In the course of searching through the house, he rescues a baby girl, only to discover, once escaping from the house, that the little girl is already dead.

In adapting to this computer-generated medium, I had to decide what of the original story should be included. Originally, the story started with this scene:

He was a man in heavy black rubber parka crashed through the flaming door, followed by a half a dozen of his fellows.

"Get them out! Get them all out!" he shouted over the roar of the blaze.

But the story was incomplete for three reasons:

1. Roberta Stearman pointed out to me that the story itself felt thin and incomplete as a short story
2. For me, the story was obviously too short to stretch into the satisfying multimedia project I envisioned
3. The fireman's grief didn't seem as poignant as I had hoped

I then wrote the hospital scene, adding the young wife who had diabetes and the newborn child. By adding the element of grief brought on by losing his wife and child, the fireman's *need* to save the baby from the burning house becomes apparent. It's more than a job — it's his chance vicariously to save the girl he lost. This change was made purely for the purpose for enhancing the story itself; I was not concerned about how the change affected or enhanced my (at that point) theoretical CD-ROM.

However, once I started building the actual multimedia project, I found the additional content added five computer screens. The additional content also intensifies the emotional component of the story, and this second child's loss thus becomes all the more poignant. By answering the first concern — Roberta's criticism about the thinness of the story — I answered the other two, creating a multimedia project of satisfying length and closer to the appropriate emotional depth.

It was interesting to me that I didn't have to leave anything out of my story, *per se*. I laid out the story, screen-by-screen, carrying over to the next screen exactly as I would carry



over to the next page in a printed work. I then filled in the pages with multimedia elements — sound, video, animation and static graphics of every sort — where appropriate. No major scenes were cut out, though some were edited. This editing was distinct to the multimedia project, and different from my adapting a short story or novel to another visual medium, such as screenplay.

As I pulled the project together, I changed scenes, but only in small ways. The scene where the fireman enters a room in time to see one of his men blasted across the room, as seen in Figure 1, originally read like this:

The front doorway had collapsed. Rubble and two eight-foot beams blocked his way. He ducked into another room and saw one of his newer men sobbing in a corner. There was a still-intact picture window four feet off of the ground. And the body.

I changed the scene for two reasons. I wanted to focus on the fireman's pain, and this breakdown by a compatriot detracted from the protagonist's inner grief. Secondly, it seemed maudlin. I deleted the scene in the multimedia project, not sure with what to replace it, until I ran across the scene of a firefighter being blasted across a room in the movie *Backdraft*. Wanting to use this highly visual video clip served as the impetus to rewrite the scene into what it now stands. The addition of the violent act toward the compatriot, added to the dead older gentleman in the armchair, the previous loss of wife and baby, and the ultimate loss of the second child, heightens this struggle with loss. The scene also has the double effect of increasing the sense of the absolute violence of the fire.

I did a similar change in the opening scene, which now reads as in Figure 2, but originally read

He was a man in heavy black rubber parka crashed through the flaming door, followed by a half a dozen of his fellows.

"Get them out! Get them all out!" he shouted over the roar of the blaze.

I made the change merely because I wanted to incorporate the video sequence, which I felt was particularly appropriate for the character I was describing.

Another area I changed was not the result of adapting the piece to the new medium, but its effect was more blatantly obvious because of it. Throughout the course of the story, the fireman puts on his mask and removes it a number of times. Originally, the fireman put his mask on once, just after entering the building and yelling to his compatriots, and it didn't come off until the end scene, after it shatters, and he is examining the dead child.

However, I received criticism from firefighters, saying a firefighter would never leave his mask on during so long and intense of a fire. In order to save oxygen, a firefighter puts his mask on only when needed, conserving when it is not. This element of realism is present in *Backdraft*, when Kurt Russell turns to Alec Baldwin, after they've just entered a fairly low-key fire, and says, "Hey, save your f\*\*\*ing air, man." At the advice of these firefighters, I incorporated the removal and replacement of the mask at key points when they said it would be logical.

Unfortunately, this is overly obvious in the multimedia version, where one picture of the fireman has a mask, another doesn't, the next does, etc. I'm not sure I'm happy with the realism, and am wondering if the perception of reality (leaving the mask on) would be better

than the actual reality. Notwithstanding, I did make the most of the on/off motif, as I was able to incorporate multimedia elements (video and still image) with the fireman's mask both on and off, as in the scene where the fireman is enveloped in a cloud of steam after shattering an aquarium (Figure 3).

This entire revision process was different than adopting a novel to screenplay. Take as an example Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and the film, *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*. The two stories have only the most basic elements in common; literally, I would argue that the only two common elements are the creation of a creature that goes violently awry, and the name of the two stories. However, given these differences, the *novel* remains the same. The screenplay is a new work made *in addition to* the original, traditional text, which remains untouched. However, with my multimedia project, which includes the original text of the story, it is the *original text* that changes. In making changes within the multimedia project, both the original *and* the new versions change.

Jan Roush asked whether this multimedia endeavor affected how I wrote traditional short stories. I haven't had the time to write a traditional short story since completing this thesis effort, but it raises an interesting question: "Will I write so that particularly affective scenes are more easily rendered with multimedia elements?" That is, in writing a scene, will I be more concerned with how a scene will render on-screen, with all of its companion elements, than I will with just how the event fits in connection with its other, traditional story elements?

From my work with screenplay, I would say that I would indeed change the way I

write, knowing a piece was going into a visual medium. Currently, when I work on a screenplay, I'm concerned with viewable elements, envisioned camera angles and transitions, points of view, and viability of rendering particular sequences. If I sit down to write a poem after working on a screenplay for an extended period of time, the process is much more cumbersome than it would be had I not first worked on the visual work. The words often don't "flow," as I'm worried about how things will look visually. I imagine the same problem will come from this multimedia experience, and may be even more intense, as I've actually seen the visual representation of "Unfair"; before, in screenwriting, it was only conceptual mockups of the piece that affected later, separate writings.

Organization was a major hurdle in designing the project. The advantage of Computer-Based Training (CBT) and interactive multimedia is that is not limited to linear progression. Users can jump from one section to another, or one module to another, in any order, or in a prearranged, non-linear series of orders. There are a number of experimental hypertext fiction pieces on the World Wide Web which incorporate this trait. Examples of this type of hyperfiction are John McHales' piece (<http://www.princeton.edu/~jamchale/>) and "Wingspan" (<http://www.gleeful.com/Wingspan/>), by David Micko and Julieann M. Brown-Micko. Both of these esoteric fantasies are excellent pilots of hypermedia, showcasing both the benefits of non-linear presentation, and the inherent problem.

I was going to try to take advantage of this benefit of multimedia by rewriting "Unfair" into stand-alone chunks that could be read in any order. However, I found that even with leaving the very beginning and very end of the story in their respective places, rearranging the



other segments damaged the impact of the story too much to make using this element of multimedia worth it.

"Unfair" is tragedy. Though the story fits the dictionary definition of a tragedy — "a serious drama with an unhappy ending" — it fits the genre more completely than merely by being "sad." In the beginning of "Unfair," Mike loses his wife and his child. Later, an old man dies, as does the child he tries to save. Not only do these people die, but Mike's hope and trust in God dies as well, intensifying the tale as a tragedy. Since "Unfair" is, in essence, a tragedy, the inability to focus on the thread of anguish countermines the intensity of the emotion. Instead, I settled on the capacity to incorporate multimedia units, while keeping the traditional linear progression I felt was necessary to maintain the impact of the story. I feel that the ability to move non-linearly in multimedia is one of its prime strengths, but in the area of multimedia fiction, I think this attribute is better suited to comedy, opera and some avant-garde genres (such as "Wingspan"), than it is to tragedy. The non-linear attribute gives a disjointed feel that interrupts tragic feeling, but seems like it would be appropriate to comedy.

This project had a number of technical and conceptual problems. The technical problems were of the kinds of things that should be expected in pushing bleeding-edge (beyond cutting-edge) hardware and software to their technical ends. Problems included software performance and integration, getting multimedia elements to play correctly, keeping such elements from interrupting companion elements, getting hardware to perform correctly and preventing both the development and delivery machines from crashing. This finished CD-ROM venture pushes computers' speed, memory and video resources to their utmost. When

running from the CD-ROM itself, rather than from the hard drive, many computers might experience problems with inadequate memory (computer locking up); speed (long pauses between screens) or video card smoothness (jerkiness of video and animation clips).

Though the technical problems were numerous, annoying and — in many cases — not avoidable, I was able to accept them as far as a result of “how things were going to be.” The technical problems were concrete, and therefore had concrete solutions. The conceptual problems, dealing with the look and mood of the piece, the choice of the multimedia elements and how to structure reader interaction, were more ambiguous to solve. I’m not overly pleased with some of the solutions.

“Unfair” is, again, a tragedy. It is a somber tale of lost life, hope and trust. In keeping with this dispiriting mood, I had to give the project a look that was in keeping with the emotional milieu of the story. In so doing, I broke many of the traditional rules of interface design.

Traditionally, interface design rules call for a light interface with obvious navigation buttons. As far as on-line text, design rules suggest dark text on a light background, akin to a printed page, for ease of reading and reduction of eye strain. In trying to keep the piece’s somber attitude, I broke all of these rules.

I wanted a dark interface. My first attempt was a black interface with beveled borders and black text and media stages. I abandoned this, because on some monitors the interface came across as a solid black screen with seemingly arbitrary text and multimedia “spots” on a blacked-out computer monitor. My second attempt was a textured and beveled dark blue



screen, which gave the desired dreary feel to the project, and this is the interface I decided to go with. Though the interface is dark, I feel it is aesthetically pleasing, and appropriate to the story's content, which justifies my breaking this first rule of multimedia interface design.

Likewise, I didn't want navigation elements that detracted from the story's content, message or mood. The buttons are, therefore, very subtle, being slightly darker in color, and raised from the surface of the interface. The buttons brighten in color when the mouse cursor is dragged over them, and the cursor changes from the Windows 95 pointer to the hand cursor. This color and form inversion is obvious enough to alert the user to the presence of the buttons, but the buttons, by themselves, are nicely understated, and don't interrupt the flow of the story.

Finally, a light page with dark text would have been too bright, undoing the effect generated by the dark interface. At the same time, I didn't want to cause eye-strain discomfort normally associated with putting light text on a dark background. I solved this by keeping the black text and media stages, and using an off-white text, which is comfortably readable. Overall, the text area (stage and text) comes across as a dark "gray," so speak, in looking at the screen for visual balance. Though the combination was at one time considered a design no-no, I feel it is justified.

My choice of multimedia elements was in no way arbitrary. There were several sequences in the text that I wanted to illustrate, and I went about procuring elements to illustrate those particular sequences. I picked sequences that I thought would be perfect to enhance with sound, video, animation or stills. I chose not only visual episodes, but added

elements to enhance the mood, and added philosophically related elements as well.

Mike's rushing from the hospital after his wife's death represented to me a concrete, visual, and emotion-charged crisis. To illustrate this, I used a dynamic photo of Mike running, a video clip of the fireman rushing after the engine from the movie *Backdraft*, and driving, computer-enhanced music.

To enhance the mood, I had to incorporate elements that got under the skin of characters. As an example, take the beginning of the story, where there is a flashback scene in which Mike is arguing with his wife about the benevolence of God. I used the clips I used — a base-relief of Jesus with his ministering apostles and the sound of angel choir — because I wanted to show *Mike's perception* of God. Since Mike sees God as a lofty, busy and uncaring (or even sadistic) being, I wanted to show Mike's agnosticism in the multimedia version of the story. I think I did so with the combination of elements that I used.

Another way that I enhanced the mood was by using graphics as inverse foils. Most notable are the pager and electro-cardiogram pictures. These pictures are both sterile, vapid and apparently incongruous items, when juxtaposed with the artsy depression of "Unfair." However, as Brian McCuskey noticed, the use of the elements has a twofold effect. First, it shows how absolutely uncaring and ineffectual technology is in situations of loss. Secondly, it almost makes fun of a reader who is emotionally involved in the story. Rather than providing an "expected" image (say, an understated pager on Mike's belt), the user is provided with almost catalog-type pictures, as if to say, "hey, lighten up -- it's just a story!"

I also added multimedia elements to introduce philosophical ideas in the story. As an

example, note the white horse/knight holding the maiden. I used this to portray the idea of an ideal hero who always saves the damsel in distress. By using this graphic again at the end — this time surround by flames, the sound of a match flaring and the phrase, "Every one I know goes away in the end" — I invert this archetype, showing the ideal hero does fail, with often terrible consequences.

In adapting my traditional text story to this new medium, I was presented with a host of challenges, from what to include, what to omit, how to organize the story and other implications resulting in the shift in medium.

Overall, I'm happy with project, though, as Brian McCuskey so aptly said, "Academic projects such as this are doomed to failure." I would admit that the story has lost something in the translation. As I mentioned before, the disjointed feel inherent in multimedia is perhaps better suited to a comedy than a tragedy. I feel tragedy, in order to be effective, should have a coherent thread. The tragic elements (*i.e.*, the death of Mike's wife, child, the old man and the second infant) must build, each becoming more and depressing. Comedy, on the other hand, often relies on short quips and puns, or visual "snippets" that don't rely on the story as a whole for the effectiveness. Comedic elements may be more effective if they build upon each other, but can be amusing as stand-alone sequences. A prime example is the banter between characters in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*.

Though I did keep the linear aspect of storytelling, I feel like the use of multimedia elements still "shocks" users, keeping them from staying totally focused on the story. So, even by avoiding the disjointed problem associated with non-linear progression, there is still some

disjointed feel from the story's interruption by multimedia elements. This, unfortunately interrupts the intensity of emotion.

In addition, my choice of interface design and which sequences would be illustrated with which multimedia pieces necessarily limits the reader's imagination, which would be less limited in reading traditional text. As to whether the story is better in one form or another, I would argue that the answer is not the same as when it is often asked of a movie adaptation and its original work; that is, "it's not necessarily better, it's just different." Rather, since the multimedia version *is* different, there is obviously a value attached to that difference. I would say that the original is better, because of the freedom it allows readers, and the freshness human imagination allows in re-readings. I think the multimedia project, though impressive in its own right, limits imagination and re-readability of the story, giving it a shorter "shelf life," so to speak.

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The front doorway had collapsed. Rubble and two eight-foot beams blocked his way. He ducked into another room in time to see one of his newer men blasted across the room. There was a still-intact window four feet off of the ground. And the body.



Figure 1

He was a man in heavy black rubber parka rushing up the flooding stairway, followed by a half a dozen of his fellows.

"Get them out! Get them all out!" he shouted over the roar of the blaze.

He was drenched in sweat and foam and soot. Fire exploded from a doorway as he removed his mask, engulfing him in flame and smoke and pain. He jumped up as he smelled his hair burn --



Figure 2

from the instantly vaporized water. A steam cloud enveloped the fireman as brilliantly colored fish flopped for a moment before curling, brittle, in agony.

He never stopped moving. In one motion he recovered from his roll and turned toward a burning crib as the shattered aquarium glass sparkled prism images. He grabbed the tiny blue-wrapped bundle and headed out the door, strapping his mask to his face as he searched for other trapped residents.



Figure 3



# Unfair

"Mike," his wife whispered from the hospital bed. He leaned toward her, placing his ear almost against her lips, and still he struggled to catch her raspy words through the respirator.

"Mike," she said again. "Why haven't they brought her to me?"

The fireman sat back slowly, listening to the beeps, clicks, whirrings and other unhuman sounds in the room. He looked at his wife. She was so young, so beautiful, so loyal. Such perfection couldn't go unblemished, and she had been cursed with diabetes. He didn't think it was fair.

"Of course it isn't fair," she'd said, laughing in response to one of his bitter tirades. "Nothing's fair. Life is just a big joke, and when we get to heaven, we'll figure out the punch line."

The fireman had told his wife he didn't think there was a heaven. If there was, he didn't want to share it with a God that had given the woman he loved an incurable disease. His wife took his hands and looked into his eyes.

"God is good," she said. "I don't know why I'm sick, but I know he's not doing it to me."

"He's letting it happen to you," he said. His pager went off, and he rushed out of his home, leaving his expectant wife alone, praying for more than his safety.

He was a fireman. He had always dealt with what was unfair. Old people burned to death. Kids scarred for life. Livelihoods and lives shattered beyond repair.

His wife brought him back to the present.

"Mike, where's our little girl?" she asked again.

The fireman glanced at the doctor, hovering anxiously at the other end of the bed. The doctor glanced at the gauges on the machines, then back at the fireman, shaking his head vigorously. The fireman ignored him, covering his wife's tiny hand in both of his huge palms.

"She's gone, honey," he whispered.

"Gone?" she whispered. She tried to pull her hand away, but Mike held on. "It isn't fair, is it, little girl?" his wife whispered. Her eyes widened. "Gone!" she said as her cold hand slipped away.

The first machine screamed, protesting its disuse. The doctor jumped over the corner of the bed, slapping a large button.

"Blue! Stat!" he barked into the intercom.

Instantly, the room was filled with a half a dozen doctors and nurses. The first doctor stopped CPR as a second brought a set of paddles forward. He rubbed them together briskly, and the smell of electricity stung the fireman's nose. A nurse ripped open the front of his wife's hospital blouse, and the fireman caught his breath as he looked at the perfect skin, motionless. The second doctor put the twin paddles above his wife's breasts.

"Clear!" he shouted.

A spark. His wife's body jerked as her spine arched. Hope stung the fireman's eyes. One by one, the other machines in the room added their varying whines, forming a mournful wail. A moment later, the paddles were put back on the bare flesh.

"Clear!"

Arched back. Closed eyes. No life. The perfect skin was mottled red-blue. The subtle smell of singed flesh made the fire fighter want to wretch.

Again the shout. The arch. The closed eyes.

The team stepped back. They turned toward the fire fighter. A woman put a hand to her mouth. The first doctor shook his head slowly. The second opened his mouth to say something.

The whine of the machines had become a rushing, roaring sound in the fireman's ears. He saw people's mouths move, but couldn't hear their words. He saw one of the medical team step towards him, bump a table, send the paddles tumbling to the ground. He couldn't hear anything but the roar in his skull. Then a second sound cut through the roar. At first a high pitched squeal, coalescing to a persistent, rapid beeping. The fireman looked down at his waist, at the pager hung on his brown leather-braid belt. He looked at the people standing motionless before him. He looked at his wife, motionless and naked on the bed.

He turned and rushed from that bed, that room, that building. He ran the two blocks to the fire station, suiting up, and grabbing the rail of an engine as it stormed from the garage.

He was a man in heavy black rubber parka crashed through the flaming door, followed by a half a dozen of his fellows.

"Get them out! Get them all out!" he shouted over the roar of the blaze.

He was drenched in sweat and foam and soot. He snapped his head upwards in time to see a portion of the ceiling collapse, engulfing him in flame and smoke and pain. He smelled his hair burn -- acrid stop-the-lungs reek -- felt his skin tighten as his oxygen mask grew white-hot against his face. Placing his hands under his chest, he pushed himself into a kneeling position, plaster rolling off of his shoulders. He hurled his massive frame into a wall-mounted aquarium. Glass shattered and a shriek sounded from the instantly vaporized water. A steam cloud enveloped the fireman as brilliantly colored fish flopped for a moment before curling, brittle, in agony.

He never stopped moving. In one motion he recovered from his roll and turned toward a burning crib as the shattered aquarium glass sparkled prism images. He grabbed the tiny blue-wrapped bundle and headed out the door, eyes burning as he searched for other trapped residents.

Halfway down from the third floor, fire ate through the stairway. Keeping the child wrapped tightly in his parka and shielded by his own body, he crashed through the second story floor, finally landing on his back in the middle of a dining room table.

He snapped to his feet and coughed blood on the inside of his mask as he ran towards the front of the

building.

The front doorway had collapsed. Rubble and two eight-foot beams blocked his way. He ducked into another room and saw one of his newer men sobbing in a corner. There was a still-intact picture window four feet off of the ground. And the body.

An old man, sitting peacefully in his easy chair, looking no more surprised than if someone had cancelled one of his regular television show; a look of surprise caused by the glass embedded in his face by the explosion of his TV set.

The fireman gave a guttural sob as he picked up a burning magazine rack and hurled through the window. He hoisted up his crying companion and pushed him through the

broken frame as the ceiling collapsed on the old man.

Still holding his small blue charge, the fireman took a step back and hurdled through the opening.

Water from a broken hydrant struck his mask as he hit the pavement, and he closed his eyes as the protective plastic shattered. Paramedics and fellow firemen rushed into the torrent of water and tried to take the small child from the protector's arms.

"Take her!" he snapped as he handed her to a frightened paramedic.

The medic stood for a moment as he held the child. Flame glinted off of his glasses as he peered into the blue cocoon. He tried to swallow.

"It's too late," he whispered through chattering teeth, "she's gone."

For the first time in ten minutes, the massive fireman stopped moving. He stood, water and blood dripping down his face, his only motion the tired slumping of his shoulders.

"She can't be gone," he said plaintively as he held his arms out toward the small bundle. Hesitantly, the paramedic handed her to him.

He looked at the bundle critically, held at arms length, then brought it closer. Unwrapping the charred blue chrysalis, he looked at the pink-sleepered infant.

Tears joined blood and sweat and foam, sliding down his cheeks as he kissed the rapidly cold forehead and said a prayer for the soul of the deceased child.

"It's not really fair, is it, Little Girl?" he asked into the lifeless skin.

With one hand he raised the child above his head as he shook the other and shouted into the soot-filled sky.

"It isn't fair!" he screamed. "I want them back!"

He lowered the child to his breast as he fell to his knees amid the foam and waste of the conflagration.

"It isn't fair," he sobbed, rocking back and forth, cuddling the tiny bundle. "I want them back."



Behind him, still burning, the house collapsed onto itself, a roar among the wail of sirens and the tears of the survivors and the silent pain of a lone fireman.

**End**

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