

SOMETHING IN THE STORYLINE

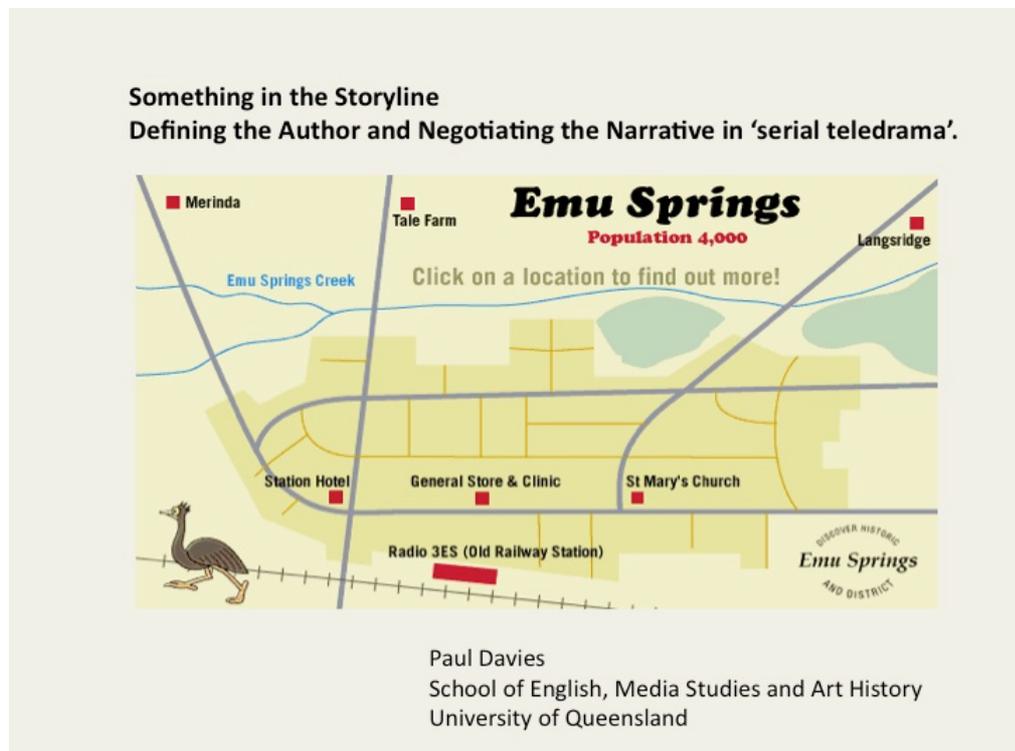
(Finding the “Author” in Serial Teledrama)

Paul Davies

“Works In Progress” Conference

University of Queensland, Brisbane (August 24-25 2012)

Something In The Air, a rural soap opera set around a country radio station in the declining but fictional town of ‘Emu Springs’, screened four nights a week at 6pm on ABC television from January 2000 to May 2002. This was commonly understood as the ‘*Bellbird*’ time slot and was designed to deliver the ABC’s heartland audience, the ‘grey cardigan brigade’ (and others), into the 7pm news. *SITA* won an AFI award for the best Australian Drama series in 2001, and ran to a total of 320 half-hour episodes. Despite its serial nature, each episode was given an individual title and the original ‘bible’ for the show invited writers to have ‘significant input at storyline stage’ and then take ‘the screenplay through to second draft’. While welcoming the unusual amount of creative freedom being offered, in mid 2000 the writers took the *SITA* producers (Beyond Simpson Le Measurier) to Arbitration, arguing that they were being denied 25% of the base fee due to them for creative input into the ‘storyline’. The producers countered that they did in fact “provide writers with a fully developed storyline”. In his judgment, the Hon. R.J Garlick found “broadly in favour” of the writers and ordered that they be back-paid the requisite 25%. Taking as a case study one episode of *SITA* written by myself (Block 9, Episode 33, *Rotten Eggs*), this paper seeks to use the issues raised by this industrial dispute as a lens for examining and unpacking the complex web of creative inter-relationships that necessarily take place in the production of scripts for long running television series. These are narrative artifacts that can now spin out to hundreds and thousands of hours of scripted drama. The paper briefly outlines the structure of a typical, contemporary ‘script department’ such as the one operating on *SITA*, and touches on questions of *originality*, *appropriation* and *interdependence* in such an intensely *collaborative* and *creative* working environment - one which effectively industrializes the role of author. *Rotten Eggs* and its sequel episode, *Return Of The Prodigal* (Episode 34) were awarded an AWGIE (Australian Writer’s Guild Award) for the best ‘TV Serial’ scripts in 2000.



This paper examines the nature of authorship in the production of scripts for the ABC series *Something In The Air (SITA)* which screened across 320 episodes from January 2000 to May 2002.

As such, it is more a work-long-finished than a “work-in-progress” but it’s a story I’ve wanted to tell in some way for a long time and it seemed to me to be a neat fit for the conference themes of *originality* and *authorship* as it specifically here as it relates to writing television drama - something which necessarily involves the *mixing* and *sharing* of creative roles in an increasingly deconstructed and diversified writing process.

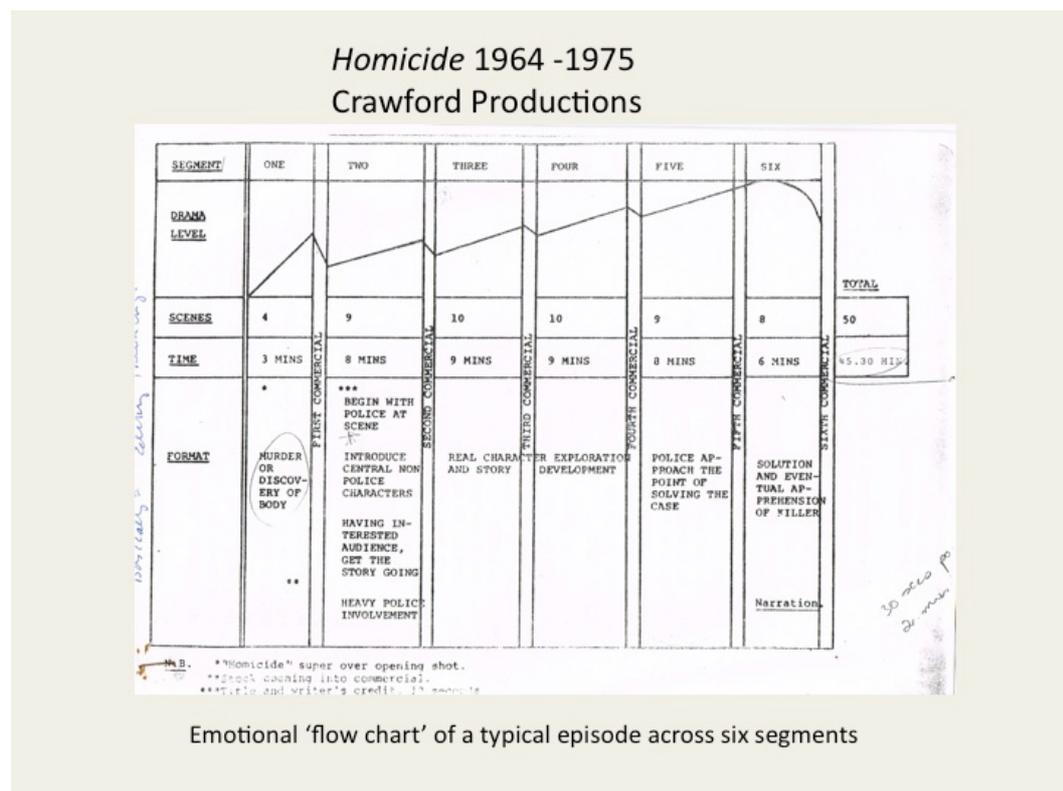
This is not an argument about or against collaboration. Personally, I’m very happy to share the writing process with fellow actors, directors or script editors, being a playwright or scriptwriter can be much more fun than being a solitary poet or novelist stuck at home in the garret. And in any case, in television you have to leave the authorial ego behind. A relentless production machine dictates that you are inevitably part of an extended team.

It also poses the questions: where does collaboration end and appropriation of the role of author begin? Does “groupthink” necessarily lead to a kind of industrialization of the creative function?

And it is strange to be asking these questions here now, looking back on a body of work that was the direct outcome of my being here (at the University of Queensland) as a student in the first place, reading the Great Tradition of English literature and being seduced by the drama side into a career writing for performance across a number of platforms. To that extent ‘the work’ is ongoing. It is a work-in-progress that only finishes when I do.

THE ROLE OF THE SCRIPTWRITER

The tendency to systematize the role of the scriptwriter can be seen in the earliest forms of Australian television drama including the foundational police series *Homicide* which ran to 510 one hour episodes from 1964 to 1975. Here the requisite emotional template (‘Drama Level’) for a typical *Homicide* story was laid out graphically in the *Homicide* bible:



This graph describes a narrative arc of building ‘emotional intensity’ across six segments of action running to a total of (more or less) 50 scenes across exactly 45 minutes of screen time. This leaves room for 15 minutes of ads in the so called TV hour (sic). A *Homicide* episode almost invariably begins with the discovery of the body in the short, 3 minute “teaser” at the

beginning of the episode and follows the step by step police investigation of the murder, to the “eventual apprehension of the killer”.

Obviously, the need for a large number of scripts to service the production of an on-going television series requires not only an in-house ‘Script Department’ but also a number of freelance writers – all working to a particular set of guidelines relating to genre, style, character, physical location, historical setting, budget etc.



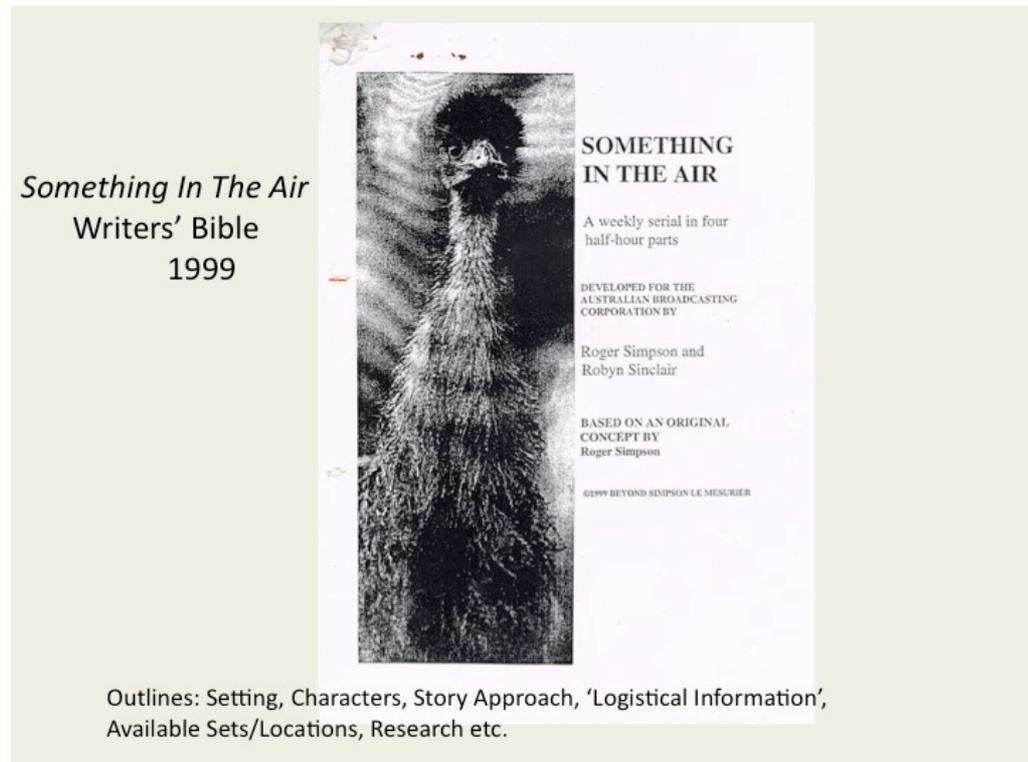
The Script Department hierarchy

Here the Script Department (producers, story editors, script editors, consultants and researchers), are responsible for the original “story engine,” as Roger Simpson of *Beyond Simpson LeMesurier* (BSLM) described it. This is the dramatic combination of characters, setting, style and themes that drives the series as a whole. It allows for the broad narrative arc of the series to be mapped out and mined for individual stories.¹ The writers work within this story engine (and the regular characters available for their episode) to produce an initial ‘storyline’ before proceeding to an intermediary ‘scene breakdown’ stage. Finally, various drafts containing detailed action and dialogue are written (usually two) and these are then timed and finalized by the script editors before being ‘released’ to the director and their production crew (who in turn may produce a shooting draft that can then be scheduled and budgeted).

¹ “Looking For The Story Engine, Breakfast with Roger Simpson” *Metro* 135 (2003): 186-195. Print.

The most salient point of intersection of this authorial binary of macro storytelling and micro character development therefore is to be found in the initial, original storyline.²

The background information to a series (characters, setting, story engine, style, genre etc) is supplied in the form of a ‘writer’s bible’.



As part of its ‘logistical information’ section, the original bible for *SITA* invited writers to provide ‘significant input at storyline stage’.³ and this clause became crucial in the industrial dispute that occurred in March 2000 between the Australian Writer’s Guild (AWG) and the Screen Producers Association of Australia (SPPA) over what exactly constituted a ‘storyline’ for *SITA*. This was especially important given that the provision of such was equivalent to 25% of MBUF (Minimum Basic Use Fee).⁴ In the “Series and

² In some series such as *Neighbours* and *Home and Away* the writer is provided with an already completed scene breakdown and paid only for the draft (s).

³ Beyond Simpson Le Mesurier. *Something In The Air*. “Writer’s Bible” Melbourne: ABC, 1999. Print.

⁴ In the standard *SITA* contract at this time the Minimum Basic Use Fee (MBUF) was \$2,186.88 for a half hour episode of which \$546.72 was deducted for the storyline. With additional remuneration for repeats, foreign rights, attendance at the story conference and a ‘personal margin’ (of \$1355.07), the total income to a writer for a single, half hour *SITA* episode in 2000 was \$5,048.07.

Serials Agreement” (SASA) on which the *SITA* writer’s contracts were drawn up, the storyline was defined as the “written synopsis of the story in narrative form, providing sufficient detail so that the essential dramatic development and main characters can be identified, and from which the writer can develop the scene breakdown.”⁵

The Storyline

- * Most basic narrative outline
- * Establishes the “Beats” in the Story

(Beats = Key Moments of Action)

- * Demonstrates: Set- Up
 Conflict
 Resolution

SPAA (the Screen Producers Association of Australia), on behalf of BSLM (Beyond Simpson Le Measurier), argued in the Arbitration hearing that the *SITA* script department *were* providing the “written synopsis of the story in narrative form” prior to the initial story conference for each Block (of four episodes) and therefore had the right to deduct 25% of the fee otherwise due to the writer.

The AWG Australian Writer’s Guild, on behalf of the writers, argued that what BSLM called a “storyline” was essentially only a set of “pre-plot notes” in point form, and in any case the writers contributed to the basic “narrative” through their active participation in the story conference that initiated each Block.⁶

In his judgment, the Hon. R. J. Garlick found “broadly in favour of the writers” and ordered that they be back-paid the requisite 25%. However his honour made the following significant observations:

⁵ The definition is quoted in Garlick, Hon. R.J. “The Australian Writers’ Guild and the Screen Producers Association of Australia” Decision. 19.6. 2000.

⁶ According to a submission from *SITA* writer Ysabelle Dean “If the storyline is the document that came out of the two day plotting meetings, I contributed very heavily to its creation... the notes provided to me before the meetings [were] simply a loose collection of pre-plot ideas with which to get the ball rolling.” (Paul Davies Script Archive, Fryer Library, University of Queensland, Brisbane).

This has serious practical implications... For the Producer consideration has to be given as to whether they wish to have in-house writers clearly writing a Storyline and not expecting writers at a Story Conference to do more than listen and offer views and suggestions. In the latter situation writers of course would have to accept that they did not have a *recognised creative role in writing the Storyline...* it is difficult to be didactic, let alone legal, about *identifiable phases in that process*. The reality may be that *the basic structure of the creative writing process envisaged by SASA, that is Storyline, Scene Breakdown, First Draft, Final Draft, is no longer meeting the realities of the production needs*. (emphasis added)⁷

SOMETHING IN THE AIR (2000- 2002)

The realities of the production needs of *SITA* were quite stark. Basically, four half-hours of television drama were produced every five working days requiring almost twenty minutes of screen time to be shot per day, using a handful of sets (radio station, pub, general store and the living rooms of two farm houses) in a barely sound-proof studio.⁸ Such a schedule allows little time to do more than one take of any particular shot, and puts considerable strain on all aspects of the creative process from story concept through to finished ‘deliverables’.

⁷ Garlick, Hon. R.J.. Decision. 19.6.2000

⁸ An additional constraint on the storytelling process was the limited number of guest roles available (one or two per block) plus the contractual complexities resulting from different actors being available for only one, two or three episodes per week.

Something In The Air 1999-2002
ABC and Beyond Simpson Le Mesurier



L-R (standing) Tom, Joe, Ryan, (unknown) Julia, Doug, Mon.
(sitting) Helen, Harry, Sally, Megan, Dr. Anne, Wayne.

The regular (recurring) characters of *SITA*, First series (2000).

SITA was based around a radio station in 'Emu Springs', a small, fictional town with a gold mining past and a declining population. It screened at 6pm on the ABC network in what was commonly understood as the 'Bellbird' time slot and was clearly designed to deliver the ABC's heartland audience, the 'grey cardigan brigade' (and others), into the 7pm news.



Block 9, Episode 33, "Rotten Eggs"
(Director: Richard Jasek, Producer: Roz Tatarka, Writer: Paul Davies)

In the case of my first episode “Rotten Eggs”⁹ the theme for the week was to be initially, “Letting Go”, and then “Beliefs” both of which related to the imminent demise of Len Taylor (played by Ray Barrett).



Ray Barrett ('Len Taylor') Anne Phelan ('Mon Taylor')
Owners and operators of the Emu Springs general store.

(Len's exit from Emu Springs formed the narrative basis for Episode 33)

Nothing incites the creative energies of a script department quite like the removal or introduction of a major character. Block Nine provided both. But Len Taylor's exit had long been prepared for by failing health (irritatingly persistent bouts of coughing) and deep personal shame over his son, Wayne's imprisonment for 'car jacking'.¹⁰ Wayne is a superb footballer and Len the coach of the local team ("the Emus") who have virtually never won a game.

⁹ Originally I was commissioned to write two episodes of 'Block 10' but an earlier block of episodes had 'fallen over' and were dumped so Block 10 became 9 in the running order.

¹⁰ Ray Barrett had only agreed to join the show on a limited basis and so his death was prepared for from day one of the series. This was unlike Eric Bana's sudden exit to make Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down*, which resulted in a quick switch of actors playing the Joe Sabatini role from Bana to Vince Colossimo. In this case the script department, given the entrenched nature of television production, was unable to incorporate such a sudden exit within an already pre-determined narrative arc.

It was almost pre-ordained therefore, that Len's final exit from Emu Springs would coincide with Wayne's surprise return (Episode 34 "Return of the Prodigal") framed by a bitter/sweet moment of triumph for the 'Emus' over their bitter rivals the Bullandra 'Bulls'.

In 'teledrama' parlance this was the 'A Story'. The 'B Story' (which can have its own narrative thread, but must also relate back to the overall theme), invoked memories of the death of another father: young Harry's dad, Warwick, tragically killed in a car accident some years prior to the show's narrative start date and who, therefore, we have never seen (except here as a ghost).

An additional 'C Story' revolved around the father/daughter contest between single dad and local publican, Stuart McGregor, and his growing concerns over the social habits of his daughter Megan, a young radio announcer on 3ES. The studio set for this local radio station is, along with the pub set, the main hub of action in the show, with characters constantly turning up and passing through both. Megan, as the publican's daughter, is of course central to both.

Megan McGregor
(Mariel McClory)
Trainee Radio
Announcer/
Casual Barmaid



THE AWG/SPPA STORYLINE DISPUTE.

Two parts – the A and B stories of this tripartite narrative scaffolding was first outlined in the ‘pre-plot notes’ for Block 9 supplied to me by the *SITA* script department and summarized in eight sentences.

The pre-plot notes supplied for Block 9 (Episodes 33, 34, 35, 36) by BSLM are as follows:

1. “Beliefs”: *The final footy game of the year is imminent and LEN wants to go out with a win.*
2. TOM indulges himself with anti-football views while HELEN tries to provide what consolation she can to HARRY who is having to face the reality that his old mate LEN is teetering towards the big black hole.
3. When LEN and MON’S son, WAYNE, returns to be with his father, LEN realizes the footy team is in with a chance. WAYNE is not only a great player but also a major hunk who causes female knees to tremble wherever he goes, despite an obscure recent past.
4. But there’s unfinished business between WAYNE and his parents which has to be resolved.
5. And unfinished business as well between HELEN and HARRY to do with Warwick’s passing.
6. As the final siren sounds on the day of the great match, the Emu’s are in front. LEN’S ticker, however, gives way in the excitement but he dies a happy man.
7. FATHER BRIAN helps MON deal with her loss while HARRY has already arranged for LEN to take a personal message to his dad.
8. As the rest of the town celebrates LEN’S life and their great victory on the field, HELEN comes to terms with Warwick’s death and dances a slow tango with his ghost before finally letting him go.

Basic storyline provided for Episodes 33, 34,35,36

B STORY: A STORY: (No C STORY at this stage)

"Beliefs": *The final footy game of the year is imminent and LEN wants to go out with a win*

TOM indulges himself with anti-football views

While HELEN tries to provide what consolation she can to HARRY
who is having to face the reality that his old mate
LEN is teetering towards the big black hole.

When LEN and MON'S son, WAYNE, returns to be with his father,
LEN realises the footy team is in with a chance.

WAYNE is not only a great player
but also a major hunk who causes female knees to tremble wherever he goes,
despite an obscure recent past.

But there's unfinished business between WAYNE and his parents which has to be resolved.

And unfinished business as well between HELEN and HARRY to do with Warwick's passing.

As the final siren sounds on the day of the great match, the Emu's are in front.

LEN'S ticker, however, gives way in the excitement but he dies a happy man.

FATHER BRIAN helps MON deal with her loss

While HARRY has already arranged for LEN to take a personal message to his dad.

As the rest of the town celebrates LEN'S life and their great victory on the field,

HELEN comes to terms with Warwick's death
and dances a slow tango with his ghost before finally letting him go.

In BSLM's view the above document constituted a 'storyline' for the purposes of the SPAA/AWG industrial agreement (SASA). The question confronted by judge Garlick was whether these eight sentences amounted to a "written synopsis of the story in narrative form" with "provision of sufficient detail" so that "the *essential* dramatic development and main characters" could "be identified" (emphasis added).

To be fair to BSLM, the eight sentence outline was followed by an additional page of notes in which the A, B and C stories were fleshed out across my two episodes (33 and 34). From these notes, and after a discussion with the Script Department (the story Conference), I was then required to construct a Scene Breakdown for both *Rotten Eggs* (episode 33) and *Return of the Prodigal* (episode 34).

Script Development	
Pre-plot Notes	---Story Editor
Storyline	---Writer/Script Dept.
Scene Breakdown	---Writer
Drafts (1-2)	---Writer
Final Draft	---Script Editor
Release Script	---Script Editor
Shooting Script	---Director
Editing Script	---Director
ADR (Additional Dialogue Recording)	---Script Editor

A ‘Scene Breakdown’ is defined in the SASA as “an outline or synopsis of scenes in narrative form of the entire story indicating the fuller structure and development and characterization of the plot.”¹¹ In “Rotten Eggs” the Scene Breakdown distributes the action outlined in the 8 sentences of the pre-plot notes, via the story conference, across 24 individual scenes, each a paragraph long, which effectively conflates BLSM ‘storyline’ of around 800 to approximately 6,000 words.¹² After further feedback from the script department (filtering in turn, feedback from the BSLM and the ABC’s drama executives) a draft script of around 8,000 words is produced with fully formatted dialogue, scene headings and descriptions of action. If the storyline equates to a poem, and the scene breakdown resembles a short story, the finished draft of a half hour episode might be considered similar to a one act play.¹³

The Hon. R. J. Garlick. found that “[o]n any reasonable reading of the material before me the Writers have made a substantive contribution at the Story Conference [following on from the pre-plot notes] even though it is a

¹¹ Quoted in Garlick, Hon. R.J.. Decision. 19.6.2000

¹² Examples of these and other materials including first and second drafts of these episodes, and DVD copies of the finished product can also be found in Paul Davies Script Archive, Fryer Library, University of Queensland, Brisbane.

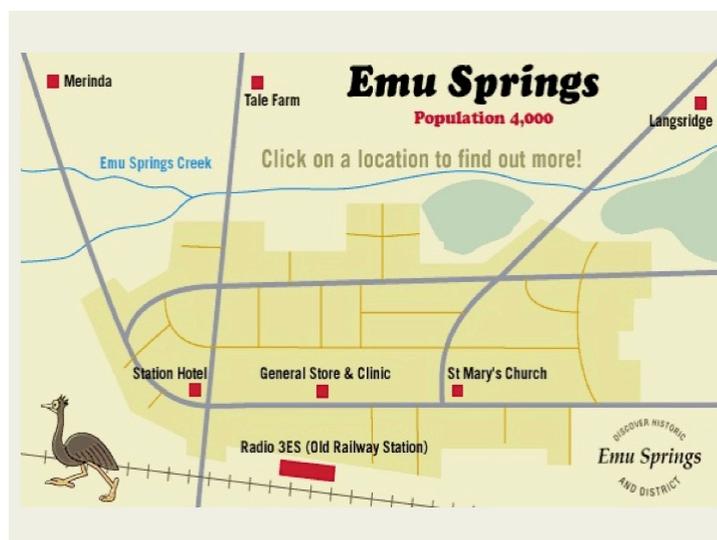
¹³ The Release Script of Episode 33 was timed at 23 minutes 15 seconds of drama content. Nor does the process of script writing end with this “Release Script”. Almost invariably significant additional amendments are made to the “Final Draft” by the in-house script editors as further (sometimes technical) issues arise and director and performer reactions feed through. Even after principal shooting has finished additional dialogue may be required to cover mistakes or problems that occur during the actual shooting. This is called the ADR (Additional Dialogue Recording) script.

contribution [which] cannot be apportioned in exact percentages between them and others.” He went on to say that the “...opposed positions of the parties exemplify *the difficulties of assessing the value of contributions to the creative process in sophisticated but meaningful terms* for the purposes of the arcane world of the law of contract” (emphasis added).¹⁴

It is easy to empathise with his honour’s perplexity. The world of compartmentalized authorship he confronted is one in which the threads, once sewn by various parties to the plot (literally) are almost impossible to unravel. In accepting the AWGIE for “Return of the Prodigal” I acknowledged my gratitude to Roger Simpson for “the lend of his characters”. To be honest and in retrospect, any working ‘teledramatist’ could have made a reasonable story out of the pre-plot notes supplied for “Rotten Eggs”, but it may not have been in conformity with the over-arching narrative for the show. The issue therefore comes down to narrative control.

Yet as any series grows and develops it necessarily incorporates and processes the input of many dozens of story tellers engaged along a lengthening chain of narrative creation. Characters and events grow in complexity as back stories are added and embellished, and (literally) new territories explored.

COLLECTIVE AUTHORSHIP IN A SHARED IMAGINARY.



(<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/something/> accessed 11/8/2012)¹⁵

¹⁴ Garlick, Hon. R.J.. Decision. 19.6.2000

¹⁵ Only parts of the *SITA* website were accessible on 11/8/2012.

The map in Figure 6 above can now be viewed as a kind of cartographical palimpsest on which the dramatic action of *SITA* unfolded: a starting point to be fleshed out and written upon by a number of writers and editors using additional (guest) characters, with their own back stories and places of abode – locations and events that feed into the burgeoning collective imaginary of the show, something available to all who work on it as much as those who watch the final result.

By the end of the first series of *SITA* it became necessary to consolidate this growing narrative database with a twenty five page ‘Scripted Guide to Emu Springs’ containing updates on the main characters, including their families, friends and associates, as well as an evolving ‘history’ of the town, its main businesses, social clubs, ritual celebrations, neighbouring towns, clan rivalries etc. Such a document can be incorporated into an evolving show bible and in turn becomes the basis for additional stories, by other writers, further down the track.

CONCLUSION

AWG V SPAA - A PYRRHIC VICTORY?

One outcome of the *SITA* storyline dispute saw a number of writers back-paid for a number of episodes where the pre-plot notes were deemed to be inadequate. However, BSLM and the ABC decided that henceforth the provision of a ‘storyline’ would be a legally unassailable document and to that extent the writer’s basic income from an episode remained unchanged (at around \$5000). But of course, it’s never about the money, because the *SITA* writers also lost the opportunity to shape individual episodes from their inception as narratives in their most nascent form (the storyline).¹⁶

Two questions remain: was this a good or bad thing? And when does ‘collaboration’ tip over into mechanisation of the creative function for the purposes of streamlining and control by an in-house team. After all a storyline has to be paid for one way or another, whether it goes to an individual writer or an in-house team. Curiously, but not surprisingly, the business of storytelling on television needs both its structured and its anarchic elements (plot and character/editor and writer/teams and individuals).

The irony, by way of answer, is that a production which started from a desire to encourage writers into the process of script generation, ended up

¹⁶ In a revised bible for *SITA* the invitation for the writer to have “significant input at storyline stage” was changed to “the storylines will be generated in house”.

emphatically freezing them out. The initial high hopes were duly acknowledged in *SITA*'s first year with an AFI award for best Australian series. In critic, Simon Hughes' words, *SITA*'s "not inconsiderable achievement" was to couch "hard matter within the airy nothing of a nightly soap".¹⁷ Corrie Perkin also saw it as a "rare TV opportunity" where "the scriptwriters [were] released from the shackles" to "explore more completely the make-up of their characters".¹⁸

One year after the *SITA* writers had been 'released' from the storyline, their characters were described as "the most uncharismatic on TV" with "unsubtle dialogue" and "trite, plotting...soap – not drama".¹⁹ And if, finally, as AWG advocate David Rapsey argued, the *SITA* storyline dispute was all about getting "better television,"²⁰ then alas the strategy would appear to have failed.

And as a post-script to the question of who "authors" a TV serial, it is curious that, while the National Film and Sound archive lists Roger Simpson as the co-writer of virtually all 320 episodes of *SITA* (and it's true he created the concept, many of the characters and the "story engine") but in the estimation of the Australian Writer's Guild, the AWGIE for best script of a TV Serial of 2000 went to...

Paul Davies breaks off reading out his paper...

PAUL DAVIES: Just let me check...

He bends down and picks up a large silver nib-like sculpture (an actual "AWGIE"). He holds it out in front of him, reading off the inscription.

PAUL DAVIES: Ah Yes... it looks like there's only *one* credited writer engraved here for Episode 34 *Return of the Prodigal*...

He holds the Awgie up next to his face, the camera moves in, he smiles.

PAUL DAVIES: (humbly) Thank you so much...It's a great honour.

(3464)

¹⁷ Hughes, Simon. "Soap In Hard Water" *The Age* (13/3/2000): 7. Print.

¹⁸ Perkin, Corrie. "Bellbird, Recast and Revisited" *The Age* (16/1/2000): 16. Print.

¹⁹ Hooks, Barbara. "TV Highlights" *The Age Green Guide* (1/3/2001): 28. Print.

²⁰ Middendorp, Chris. "Drama Behind The Scenes" *The Age Green Guide* (13/7/2000): 14. Print.