



RUSSELL QUINN



Russell Quinn at work on The Silent History. Photos by Brian Frank / Wired.

In some ways, Russell Quinn has spent his life running from technology, in search of connection. The son of a punch-card-era computer scientist who died three months before he was born, Quinn grew up an only child in Cheltenham, a small town in Southwest England, with very little to do. So in 1984, when he was 5, his mother bought him a BBC Microcomputer — one of the United Kingdom's earliest PCs — and Quinn taught himself how to program. "The BBC computer found its way into every school," he says, "so I ended up staying after class and teaching my teachers how to use them. It was second nature to me."

But as he grew up, Quinn became disheartened by how solitary an activity programming was in the pre-internet era. "I wanted to do things that had more connectivity in the world," says the 33-year-old, who has the shaggy Nordic profile of Max von Sydow in black-rimmed nerd glasses.

He found himself drawn into storytelling and design, and he stuck with it, even when the internet made coding more social. In 2009 he developed the publishing industry's first subscription-based iPhone app — for the influential literary quarterly McSweeney's — and then a groundbreaking news reader app for the nonprofit journalism venture ProPublica. "We loved the design," says ProPublica editor Scott Klein. "Just clean and very readable."

Now after a string of behind-the-scenes successes, Quinn may be about to transform the art of storytelling itself. This summer he will launch The Silent History, a sprawling electronic novel that plays with the mechanics of how stories are told, taking full advantage of the tablet's GPS and touchscreen, along with platform features like in-app purchasing.

It will be the first release from Ying Horowitz & Quinn, the San Francisco publishing house Quinn co-founded in January. Judging by samples shared with Wired, The Silent History is part book, part multiplayer game, part Google map, and entirely revolutionary.

"I love the printed book," Quinn says. "But I'm not romantic about the book, either."

Quinn met his co-founders Chris Ying and Eli Horowitz at McSweeney's. He'd come there by a circuitous route. In 2005, Quinn launched a web agency, called Spoiled Milk, with a friend in Copenhagen, and taught himself graphic design. "I was shunning technology," he says. "Everything we did was grounded in our love for the handmade, DIY, quirky aesthetic." It was an immediate hit, and a few years later, Quinn opened a satellite branch in Zurich that landed some of Europe's earliest app projects, including the Phaidon Wallpaper City Guides.

As Spoiled Milk prospered, Quinn became increasingly restive. After taking leave of the company in 2009, he was at loose ends. He tried to write a novel, but that felt even more isolating than programming.

Then, one afternoon, sitting in a coffee shop in Zurich reading the latest issue of McSweeney's with his iPhone nearby, it suddenly dawned on him what he wanted to do next. He sent an e-mail to a generic "contact us" address at the Quarterly's website, saying he'd make an app for them if they'd share the profits.

He didn't have high hopes. "McSweeney's seemed purposefully anti-technology," Quinn says. "The whole thing was about shirking computers — Flash websites and stuff." Still, Quinn was sure there were people out there like him who wanted to read digital versions of the quarterly's stories.

Within hours, Quinn got a response from Eli Horowitz, the publisher.

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RAW MATERIALS



THE SILENT HISTORY Quinn settled on a split-screen interface for the app. In the top half, you scroll from left to right to navigate through chapters of the novel; at bottom, a map of geolocated Field Reports updates dynamically.

Visit The Silent History Website



Quinn at home in Cazadero, California. Photos by Brian Frank / Wired.

Working remotely on their first app, Quinn decamped to the McSweeney's offices in San Francisco in 2010, and overhauled its popular website, the Internet Agency. It was there that he, Horowitz, and Ying — who'd just launched an innovative food quarterly with chef David Chang of Momofuku called Lucky Peach — began talking about a new kind of book, one tailor-made for how we read now: on mobile, geo-located Retina displays.

Quinn's lifelong search for connection echoes in his first e-book. Written by authors who will be familiar to McSweeney's readers, the plot of The Silent History hinges on a generation of children who do not speak, but may communicate in other, mysterious ways.



The trailer for The Silent History, narrated by Ira Glass, Miranda July, and Thao Nguyen.

7 FAVORITE SPONSORABLES

- 1 Chris Ware, creator of the Acme Novelty Library series
2 Jonathan Goldstein, of CBC radio show WireTap
3 David Foster Wallace, author of Infinite Jest
4 Stewart Lee, author and stand-up comic
5 Vince Gilligan, writer for Breaking Bad
6 David Lynch, filmmaker who made Twin Peaks
7 Paul Auster, author of The Invention of Solitude

One key difference in how this e-book works is that the narrative is serialized — reminiscent of the days when novels were introduced in magazines and newspaper episodes before they were published in full. The serial is broken into six parts, each one spanning several years in fictional time. (The story begins in the summer of 2011 and ends in 2043).

Readers can join at any time and absorb the back-story. A new episode is quietly synced with your device every weekday for a month and each piece is designed to be read in 10 to 15 minutes — on your commute to work, say. There's a month break in between each of the six parts, so the entire project will take a year to unfold.

Then there are Field Reports. These digressions from the main plot are geolocated, meaning you have to go to a specific location to unlock the story. For example, the app might direct you to a house protected by a chain-link fence. Once there, the app would pop up a first-person account of an angry mob that rattles the fence.

"It's a really powerful thing reading this short fragment of text and actually seeing the objects that you're reading about," Quinn says.

Eventually, users of The Silent History app will be able to submit their own Field Reports, turning the experience of reading into a collective "choose your own adventure."

Quinn knows that others have tried to reinvent publishing for the mobile Internet Age, with mixed results: Most e-books still amount to old wine in new bottles. But in the long run, he's confident in a future in which interactive books connect the reader to something beyond the page. "I'm pretty skeptical about the current state of e-reading," he says. "But I still believe that the technology solution will become better."

