Stefanie Syman, head of strategy and business development at The Atavist, pointed out that e-singles aren’t really new, but actually resemble a form of magazine writing that’s become nearly obsolete. “This used to be a more common format. Never as common as the dime novel or the thriller, but it was certainly out there in the media landscape,” said Syman.

Pressures on the magazine industry made publishing longer stories more difficult, she said. Although only a handful of publishers are willing to publish long stories, the public appetite remains for articles that are longer than most magazine stories but shorter than a book. “You get the kind of depth of a book but you don’t have to make quite that level of commitment. We’ve seen a tremendous uptake of our stories,” said Syman.

Like Byliner, The Atavist is driven by narrative. But Atavist’s approach to its non-fiction e-singles also employs the sort of rich media that works well on tablets like the iPad. “The medium does affect the message,” said Syman. “We have all sorts of ways of telling stories, and Atavist is definitely one of those ways. We look for good stories that are well-written. Usually there’s a real sense of drama and character. Beyond that it’s pretty wide open. Our stories tend to be pretty cinematic, so you can imagine them being adapted for film. But it’s less about the subject than the quality of the story and the characters.”

For example, the first chapter of one of The Atavist’s e-singles, “Baghdad Country Club” by Joshuah Bearman, consists of an anime-style cartoon video that sets the tone for the rest of the book. Another e-single, called “Lifted,” by Atavist CEO Evan Ratliff, tells the story of “one of history’s most elaborate heists, and the race to unravel it.” The book begins with grainy video of the thieves and the helicopter they used, taken by a rooftop security camera. As with “Baghdad Country Club,” consumers have the option of listening to the book instead of reading it. Readers can also post comments in the books themselves and read comments other readers have made.

The production process is similar to that of text-based books until it’s close to the final written form. At that point, The Atavist’s editorial producer starts to incorporate the “extras,” including photos, videos and maps, that they layer into the story for the iPad and other enhanced versions, said Syman. “Once we have totally closed copy, we’ll record the author reading her story” And because we sell stories individually, we do have to get each one approved by Apple before it appears in the App Store,” Syman said.

Tomorrow’s authors might well supply their own rich-media content, further blurring the distinction between media and books. “The generation that’s in school now is going to be providing all of that,” Syman said. “The expectations for being conversant in multimedia is so different for people who are under 25.”

Every Picture Tells a Story

By Chuck Lenatti