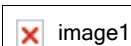


a Journal of Entertainment Media (ISSN:1447-4905)

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Multimedia and the Narrative Frame: Navigating Digital Histories – Paul Arthur

Published Jul 4th 2006



Introduction

Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997), a landmark text written nearly a decade ago, set out to investigate the potential for interactive story forms at a time when digital interactivity was, for the first time, in the hands of the mainstream. Her book, which analyses a range of non-

linear narrative models, continues to inspire those who wish to imagine the future of digital narrative textuality. The study of interactive narrative is now a vast field in its own right. Today there is extensive, vibrant debate on the evolution of digital narrative story forms, with theoretical commentary coming from perspectives as diverse as new media theory, literary studies, cinema studies, media arts and humanities computing.

New forms of narrative *history* are also evolving as a result of the experimental possibilities offered by interactive digital media. This paper investigates the status of narrative in digital expressions of history. By addressing the following questions it provides a framework for future criticism in the digital history field: How readily does the content of history lend itself to representation in non-linear and/or interactive digital forms?; How appropriate is a non-linear mode for telling and reflecting on the past, given that the past itself is thought of in terms of chronology, sequence, progress, evolution – all of which are highly linear?; At what point can a digital text be considered an historical narrative rather than an informational resource, and should we be concerned with this distinction in this time of convergence of technologies and overlapping of knowledge disciplines?; How applicable is the work of narrative theorists concerned with interactive plot structures and digital storytelling to the study of digital histories?; and, How is it possible to gauge the success of these experimental narrative histories?

The discussion proceeds from the observation that there is a high level of awareness of the sheer volume of historical *information* now available online – access to which has re-invigorated the study of history and made it reach much wider audiences – but that there is very little critical discussion on how the *narration* of history is being transformed in the digital domain. Discussion of digital history, when it does take place, is generally dominated by the very practical aspects of information preservation and retrieval. In particular the emphasis tends to be upon: digitisation of resources, for the purposes of archiving and increased public access; and the creation of networked information standards, for the development of searchable online databases to meaningfully organise historical resources. The changing status and significance of narrative modes of historical interpretation using digital media has been eclipsed by debate around the

online provision of information. In other words, there has been a tendency to focus on the technicalities of providing easy and convenient access to an ever expanding range of information, rather than on the modes of narration which inescapably underlie and colour all information, whether delivered seamlessly through traditional narrative texts or in loosely connected fragments within experimental digital arenas.

The first section of this paper reviews the transformations in theoretical understandings of narrative, and in particular historical narrative, over the past three decades. This provides a context for considering some issues that have been neglected in the rush to welcome the expanded possibilities opened up by the rise of digital narrative forms. The second section discusses interactive historical forms in terms of genre, theory, reception, criticism, and multimedia design and makes links with game theory.

The third section discusses three highly visual, digital history works which experiment with modes of narrative construction and require different degrees of interactivity on the part of the user. Each represents a different kind of textual production in the digital history field. These are internet based and experimental CD and DVD based works (as opposed to cinema, television or other kinds of digital production). The first example is *South Seas: Voyaging and Cross-Cultural Encounters in the Pacific 1760-1800*, an online information resource made available through the website of the National Library of Australia (launched in 2004). This resource contextualises the information it presents within a complex narrative frame. It is particularly significant for the fact that it deals with the highly linear subject matter of historical discovery voyages but presents that material in a non-linear framework. The second example is a DVD work entitled *The Dawn at My Back: Memoir of a Black Texas Upbringing, An Interactive Cultural History* (2003). This is a record of one woman's life as represented in a navigable mosaic of memory fragments, photographs and documents, assembled as a tribute by a daughter to her mother. It portrays the anarchic qualities of memory, with an interactive interface that allows the user to navigate through photographic scenes which generate segments of voice-over narration. The final example is an audiovisual installation work, *Translating Hiraeth* (2005). It documents the artist/filmmaker's personal exploration of her past, focussing on her attempts to trace her birth mother in Wales. The work is not interactive but is striking for the way it has the capacity to engage and draw in the audience. It is testimony to the power of conventional linear narration and is included in this discussion to provide a point of comparison and contrast.

Broadly, the discussion of these three works demonstrates the importance of narrative strategies within digital histories, even when, or perhaps especially when, the narrative 'line' appears to have been shattered by the sheer variety and complexity of available digital pathways and choices. In other words, far from being superseded by digital techniques, narrative strategies are alive and well and potentially more powerful than ever now that their power appears to have been handed over to the multimedia designers and producers on the one hand, and on the other, to the audience – viewer/navigator of the historical materials.

My interest in this area was sparked by experimental interactive cinematic works, which showcase the most advanced techniques for viewer immersion and participation. Interactive cinema has often utilised historical settings as a background and context for experiments in narrative form. Particularly inspiring was the *Future_Cinema* exhibition held at the KIASMA Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki in 2003 which showcased projects that narrate subjective histories and creative representations of identity in visually rich and innovative ways. [\[1\]](#) The exhibition provided a powerful demonstration of the ways in which highly visual multimedia production has the capacity to enrich the academic and the popular appreciation of history.

One of my roles as a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Murdoch University is to coordinate an 'Interactive Histories' research program at the Centre for Social and Community Research. The aim of the program is to explore innovative ways of making history accessible to wide audiences by designing multimedia projects with experimental narrative formats and modes of digital

delivery, such as touchscreen kiosks, handheld devices, websites, CD-ROMs and DVDs. The research almost always involves local communities, including regional and Indigenous communities, as partners. The focus to date has been on oral history projects (including virtual tours of heritage sites, museum installations and multimedia documentaries). Planned projects include digital storytelling in regional communities and the development of Indigenous and cross-cultural digital resources. This means that the questions raised in this paper emerge from real issues that are being confronted by researchers in the Centre as they enter this relatively new field of digital history and create new 'products' for public consumption and navigation.

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Historiography, Postmodernism and Interactive Narrative

Over the course of the past three decades there has been a revolution in the academic understanding of the textuality of the past. Debates running through most areas of the humanities and social sciences have shown that

Western knowledge systems had become particularly rigid. The postmodernist deconstruction of Western knowledge systems resulted in a widespread reassessment of our understanding of the past and the modes through which it was conveyed. Narrative forms have been at the centre of these debates.[\[2\]](#) To summarise the developments in broad terms, there was a new understanding that chronology and the representation of a simple sequence of events could not transparently be related through narrative forms as a set of agreed readings of the world, but that perspective itself was something that could be multiple and conflicting at any given moment (Certeau 1988; Young 1990). It came to be recognised that despite the passing of time and the linear flow of sequences of events, the past could be re-authored and re-imagined at any given time. Narrative is perhaps the most powerful organising factor in Western knowledge systems. Because narrative in its various forms is the dominant means of representing human experience – whether through history or scientific discourse or other disciplines – it also plays a key role in shaping the way people view their own place in the world (Bhabha 1990). It is widely accepted that narrative itself was linked with the dominance of colonial powers through its powerful encoding of the European right of place outside of its own physical boundaries (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989; Brydon and Tiffin 1993). In the fields of narrative theory and historiography, it is recognised that narrative has often conveyed more through its ordered form than it has in its content (White 1987). I would argue that digital forms of history are just as capable of subtle influence and coercion, and perhaps more so, because of the appearance of freedom of choice that they give, and that this is an issue of narrative structure and framing that has not yet received much attention.

The postmodernist critique of knowledge formation began long before widespread access to the internet or even the personal computer. Postmodernism signalled and was then mirrored by (or even helped to create the conditions for) the new kinds of representational narrative possibilities opened up by interactive digital forms.[\[3\]](#) This process, of technological change taking place hand in hand with changes in social understanding and modes of textual representation, is not unique and in fact has its own history. Early modern narrative genres, for example – including forms of narrative history and the early novel – emerged during a period of unprecedented travel, exploration and the development of technologies for navigation, and so those concepts of narrative were closely linked to the human traversing of physical space.[\[4\]](#) Not surprisingly, narrative forms are continuing to adapt to the new ways in which people now 'navigate' the world. There is no doubt, for example, that the computer has "reshaped the spectrum of narrative expression" (Murray 1997, 10).

Narrative continues to be a defining motif of meaning generation that now has arguably more rather than less significance in the larger equation of how readers make sense of the material they engage with, especially in digital contexts. With the emergence of cyberspace as a virtual arena for creative production in a plethora of different forms, a new palette of possibilities was made available to writers, designers and thinkers.[\[5\]](#) Experiments in hypertext narrative introduced to textual theory a new set of variables (Landow 1992).

With these new developments, textual analysis has become remarkably tangled. The mainstays of literary analysis – stable notions of character, plot, reader and author – no longer apply to a textual experience in which the participant plays a very direct role in controlling the outcome. Interactive narrative texts resist analysis using narrative reading strategies drawn from conventional literary theory. Established traditions of narrative criticism and textual theory are not straightforwardly adapted to the study of interactive narrative forms, even though key concepts in the reading of textual material embedded in digital works remain relevant.^[6] Perhaps Deleuze and Guattari, with their concepts of “desiring machines” (“Desiring machines are binary machines.... Desire constantly couples continuous flows and partial objects that are by nature fragmentary and fragmented” and “rhizomes” (“a rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organisations of power, and circumstances...”)) came closest to imagining, just prior to the digital revolution, the chaotic experience of the reader/viewer/user in a digital age (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 5; 1987, 7). More recent theory work on digital narrative and interactive plot structures has focused largely on practical methods for digital storytelling.^[7]

It can be said that the work of postmodernist critics, like that of all radical movements, presented very strong views to shake the system, to force new ways of understanding, new perspectives. Their approach centred on exposing the myth of the ‘certainties’ of knowledge. In the eyes of some, however, postmodernist approaches to narrative led to texts being “deconstructed into absurdity” (Murray 1997, 5). So, while it is now generally accepted that any historical narrative account can only be a partial representation, and that ‘certainties’ are ideological constructions, the critical focus, if anything, has turned towards the limitations of deconstructive readings.

Against the backdrop of easy access to overwhelming quantities of historical information and materials via the internet and digital media more broadly, a parallel trend has become apparent. In the wake of the fragmentary impulses of postmodernist theory, narrative is coming to be recognised as more important than ever before. Why is this so? Perhaps, having revolted against the strict confines of linear narrative, and now being faced with the endless possibilities offered by digital media (and its notable lack of established genres), the reliable coherency of the story is attractive once again. The patterns of television viewing in the past few years back this up. Audience taste has made the historical epic more popular than it has been since the mid twentieth century (Burleigh 2002; Poole 2003). In this case it seems that audiences are responding to the simplicity and linearity of the crafted historical tale as a form of entertainment combined with historical education. As I suggest in the following pages, in the face of the double attack on linear narrative (first, systematically, by poststructuralism and later, more accidentally, by the digital information ‘explosion’), narrative is becoming desirable again and narrative *framing* is becoming increasingly important and taking new forms in multimedia works.



Narrative History in Digital Environments

Before the widespread uptake of digital media, the representation of history took a variety of discrete forms such as the book, documentary, photographic archive and oral history interview. Individually, each of these modes of delivery has been understood as a specific kind of historical narrative. Multimedia allows these formats to be brought together in various combinations, with differing degrees of emphasis, within a single narrative frame. This is allowing new scope for experimentation in ways of narrating history. It is also complicating the reception of the resultant hybrid texts because it is no longer a simple matter of understanding and evaluating them within an established critical trajectory related to a given mode of delivery or genre. Indeed, the situation is further complicated by the fact that these digital forms cannot be seen in isolation; they are intimately connected with the earlier genres and media from which they developed, and need to be considered in terms of their own relationship with former modes of representation.^[8] Whether new forms are seen as revolutionary and subversive, or simply as continuities of earlier technologies for representation, they must be thought of in terms of what has come before.^[9]

There is not yet a body of theory relating to the critical interpretation of digital histories. However, there are many theoretical approaches that can be drawn upon to help understand interactive media texts. Some have grown out of movements in literary textual analysis which were mainly based on analysis of how we read printed texts. Others have developed out of visual traditions such as film studies. It is relatively straightforward to look back to the separate traditions that can inform the theoretical and practical discussions of history in the new composite digital forms – written narrative, screen narrative, media theory. But at the point when one considers how these traditions are interanimating one another when history is being represented in multimedia forms, then major complexities arise. This is a new interactive field in more ways than one – there is interaction between the digital history and its audience and there is also interaction between the various contributing media and genres. It requires an interdisciplinary approach informed by historical expertise, knowledge of screen documentary traditions, understanding of media design and production, and a critical awareness of narrative strategies in digital environments.

There are two main formats for digital history works. The first follows the format of web pages, with the goal of being highly useable by conforming to the conventions of presentation of web based material. This accounts for most of the material available on the internet. The reasons for designing web pages in a particular way stem from evolving conventions and also from technological standards, as well as constraints. The second common format for digital history is defined by its non-adherence to the web based formula. This is often because the works are available on fixed media and so are governed by a different set of constraints. Also, because there are no issues of bandwidth, there is room to have more graphically intensive content. Significantly, as interactive narrative design increasingly sees itself as serving entertainment as well as information purposes, it is taking its lead from today's advanced computer game design. Just as for games, *entertainment* and *access* are becoming core concerns for digital narratives.

To create a versatile digital environment, narrative strategies need to be selected from a repertoire of possible approaches.^[10] These can include: the user as co-writer of the text; the user as participant in a simulated past; the user as observer of an historical character re-enacting a past; the user as viewer of privileged information (as voyeur, in much the same way as for reality television); the user as onlooker (purposeful detachment). In each case the user plays a key role in the process of narrative construction. To be considered an *interactive* work, the text itself must be able to react to user input in meaningful ways (Montfort 2003, vii). The terms 'interactive' and 'interactivity' are often used very flexibly, so much so that they run the risk of losing their specificity. Nevertheless, they continue to be the most common way of describing this process of user engagement with digital texts (Landow 2006, 41). The most popular, and most technically complex, examples of interactive narrative are seen in computer games. Many games contain historical content as a background to a game narrative (this is worthy of a study in its own right). 'Cyberdrama' is a newer term used to refer to the kind of engaging experience with a digital text that gives users the experience of agency and participation – that their actions will influence the outcome of the narrative game world (Ryan 2006).

The novel and the game share the common feature of seeking out a final destination, an endpoint, as the ultimate reward or goal of the textual experience. The first interactive novels and experiments in hypertext were applauded for the way they drew attention away from that fixed endpoint. These interactive narratives could offer a variety of endpoints, a number of options for narrative fulfilment, or they could even deny the reader that fulfilment by creating a never-ending reading experience.^[11] In terms of structure and framing there are many different kinds of novels and there are many different kinds of games (Finn 2000). The edited collection *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance and Game* investigates the entangled connections between story forms and computer games and surveys other experimental narrative works (Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan, 2004). Henry Jenkins's chapter in *First Person* is an excellent overview of the different options available to those he calls 'narrative architects' in designing game spaces (2004).

Narrative theory and game theory offer different (sometimes competing) perspectives on the narrative qualities of texts. Some critics argue that games are not narratives, that trying to link the structures of stories and of games is simply fruitless. They argue that new kinds of theories are required to describe and understand the narrative at play within digital environments, whether the focus is on games or stories. In this debate, hypertext, interactive cinema and nonlinear narrative have become the ‘traditional’ forms which some proponents of game theory argue are being inappropriately mapped onto computer games as a means of explaining how they work.^[12] A major issue is whether the experience of playing a game involves user interpretation or simply *configuration* (Moulthrop 2004, 60). Henry Jenkins tries to tread a middle ground, “examining games less as stories than as spaces ripe with narrative meaning” (2004, 19).

The factors involved in narrating history in digital formats are quite different, even while many of the narrative and technical considerations are the same as those that are relevant to novels or games. Most notably, history is different from a novel or a game because narrative resolution is not the key to pleasure and fulfilment. And yet, the current discussion about the future of computer games points to the kind of discussion I believe we should be having about the future of historical representation in digital forms. For games, argues Jenkins, “the goal should be to foster diversification of genres, aesthetics, and audiences, to open games to the broadest possible range of experiences” (2004, 120). While history is a more serious matter, there is no doubt that it can benefit from sharing the same goals in a digital environment. In other words, in the face of the challenges presented by dynamic digital environments, history has found itself an unlikely, but, in its own sphere, highly successful and interactive role model.



Digital Pasts: Three Examples

Example 1:

South Seas: Voyaging and Cross-Cultural Encounters in the Pacific 1760-1800 (<http://southseas.nla.gov.au>)

The interlinked nature of online multimedia works means that the distinctions between primary and secondary sources are effectively being broken down. This is happening in a range of ways and to varying degrees. In the most straightforward sense, it is occurring because of the use of hyperlinks that provide seamless connections between primary and secondary sources (allowing the user to follow the same route between research materials that may be taken by an expert – compiling, comparing and interpreting while juxtaposing in a particular order). The breakdown between primary and secondary sources is occurring in a more complex way in the case of online searchable archives. Contextualising within the website structure results in the material being presented becoming much more than a simple collection of information and archival documents. The information, the content, is a mixture of clickable entries brought together with a framework that helps the user make sense of those entries within an interpretative context. This provides what I refer to as a *narrative frame*, a space filled with the potential for a user to draw narrative meaning from the selection of material accessed. One outcome of the welding together of information with interpretation is that the narrative qualities of digital texts are being obscured. This is because digital works often seem ‘purely’ informational. The sheer volume of information made available eclipses the narrative ‘voice’ (whether overt or implied) which ‘tells’ the material in a particular way.

South Seas: Voyaging and Cross-Cultural Encounters in the Pacific 1760-1800 is a web based project hosted by the National Library of Australia, launched in 2004, and created by Paul Turnbull, Chris Blackall, Alan van den Bosch and Christine Winter. It is primarily an online informational historical resource for the study of the most significant European voyaging and cross-cultural encounters in the Pacific. The site includes the full text of the holograph manuscript of James Cook’s *Endeavour Journal*, the full texts of the voyage journals of Joseph Banks and Sydney Parkinson and the three volumes of John Hawkesworth’s *Account of the Voyages undertaken...in the Southern Hemisphere...*(1773). The goal is for the user to be able, within the

one web based interface, to juxtapose the events of historic eighteenth century voyaging in the Pacific as interpreted variously by Cook, Banks and Parkinson. The complete text of the 1780 edition of William Falconer's *Dictionary of the Marine* is also included, along with scanned historical maps, presented in high resolution and in a user navigable format.

I begin with this example because the subject matter is highly linear – following the routes and reportings of key figures in the history of exploration. The interactive narrative experience is actually determined by the very traditional historical subject matter of the voyage of Cook, a familiar, linear kind of event – Cook traversing the seas. It represents, and textually resembles through its navigable interface, a linear narrative experience, both of the explorers themselves, and for the user. However, *South Seas* is much more than an online information resource. The discovery voyage involves sequential steps from the known into the unknown. The voyage of exploration requires that each place is compared with what has come before, forming a narrative sequence of contrasts and comparisons as a means of enabling the process of discovery and interpretation. The places discovered are not simply 'there'. They have to be imagined, grasped and made sense of – interpreted. *South Seas* is an example of how narrative framing can help to demonstrate this complex process to the reader/viewer, and involve them in its contradictions and choices, while retaining the traditional linear flow of individual narratives.

This example brings up a crucial distinction between *non-linearity* and *interactivity*. These terms and concepts can too easily be confused and conflated. Of course a text can be highly interactive – demanding much engagement from the user, but at the same time produce a largely linear textual experience. For some critics, the very concepts of textual linearity or non-linearity are too general to be informative, implying a rigid distinction between being structured or structureless (Bernstein and Greco 2004, 169). In this case linearity is embraced because it is part of the very character of exploring and discovering. And yet the assemblage of information does more than present that linearity; it effectively constitutes a form of composite historical narration. It acts to contextualise and guide the user through a diverse store of information, and it does this in a way that constructs a coherent narrative experience out of what otherwise may appear to be a random assortment of linked historical information. The point to be made is that the interface itself is working as a complex narrative frame, allowing the database of material to be accessed in a meaningful way through the activity of the user generating their own passage through the material. In some kinds of history, narrative in its full linearity is particularly important. To miss out on this linearity of narrative would be to lose the significance of the history being told.

The user accesses *South Seas* by selecting a range of entry points, with the titles Voyaging Accounts, Voyaging Maps, South Seas Companion, Cultural Atlases, Indigenous Histories, European Reactions, Reference Works, Research and Using South Seas. The narrative framing is most effective in this work when the user chooses to view the high resolution maps of the voyages and to then use them as a means of delving deeper into the history of a particular stage of the voyage through following links to journal entries, cultural atlases, and swapping between these as part of the process of user navigation. A conventional printed book may not appear to be so different. It may be said that a reader can dive in at multiple entry points, learn about the context of a chapter, for example, and then go on to take in the material in that context. And yet, the user experience in this digital work is different. The narrative the user constructs is coherent, but varied with each selection of material. It leaves one with the sense that a unique journey has been taken through complex material, but using a remarkably simple and intuitive interface. This example contrasts with the majority of online database works, which tend to follow a now familiar encyclopaedic search facility model, accessing fixed layers of digitised resources and selections of related information – but returning to a 'start' page to begin the new search.

Example 2:

The Dawn at My Back: Memoir of a Black Texas Upbringing, An Interactive Cultural History

The second example is an interactive cultural history work presented on DVD. It is a mosaic memory piece, which allows the user to explore the history of influences on one woman's life through a 'quilt' interface that resembles and allows access to the many aspects of her world living as a Black Texas woman. This is an account of a life story, or rather a pastiche of life experiences and places of physical importance to the woman. The work was created by Carroll Parrot Blue, the woman's daughter, in collaboration with Kristy H. A. Kang and The Labyrinth Project at the Annenberg Center for Communication (University of Southern California). This highly interactive work is akin to recent experiments in interactive cinema.

The Dawn at My Back (2003) begins with a cut scene which becomes a clickable menu interface. 'Cut scenes' or 'cinematics' often feature as opening sequences in computer games, to propel the narrative further in a non-interactive way – and this work is clearly based around a navigable format that is much like a computer game. Many players find this interrupts the gaming experience because it is non-interactive but is intended to be a reward for reaching a particular goal or level (Pearce 2004). In the case of *The Dawn at My Back*, the opening sequence includes music of the deep south of the USA, and a textual introduction combined with narrated voice-over introducing this woman's life. It sets the scene for an intimate experience of biographical narrative construction through which the user glimpses the proud life a woman who has now passed away.

The user enters the work through the 'quilt' interface, the many patches of which lead into different parts of the woman's life. There is also a simple text-based menu. The narrative frame is therefore based around two distinct modes of user navigation. One resembles a clickable website format, with entries presented chronologically, featuring main links and sub-links to the selection of entries. The second mode of navigation opens up a narrative frame that is full of surprises and unexpected interlinking of material – and this represents the most innovative aspect of this digital history work. The interface is framed around physical places and objects of historical significance to this life story. Each point in the narrative accessed by the user in the process of navigating the work resembles a discrete space to explore. Hovering over objects shown in archival photographs activates hyperlinks that give access to the next discrete space. Sometimes the hyperlinks do not take the user very far. A photograph on a mantle piece, when clicked on, may only offer a closer look at that very photograph. Or else, the hyperlink may take the user to a completely different space. Many of these spaces are visually larger than the computer screen interface, and when the cursor is placed near the margins, the photographic frame itself moves in that direction. The user has the experience of exploring hidden corners of these photographic spaces, which are sometimes and sometimes not then linked to the next discrete space. The effect is that the user has the sense of uncovering hidden parts of a personal past.

Non-linear narrative forms perhaps lend themselves most naturally to the fragmentary or symbolic forms of history – history shown and known through memory, dreams, and cultural imagining. And yet it is important to note that it is uncommon even for the most linear, conventionally structured films (or novels for that matter) to be completely linear. There are typically asides, reflections, tangential storylines, sub-narratives with different time schemes. So the preoccupation with linearity versus non-linearity is perhaps overstated, although it is useful to maintain the essence of the distinction for the purposes of this discussion. In one sense, the stand alone DVD format of this work is a missed opportunity. In the future, with greater bandwidth and speed, these kinds of highly visual works will be interlinked with online informational resources and so the narration will be accompanied by backup resources that give further context to the historical material presented. In another sense, its stand-alone nature allows the work to exist as a coherent tribute to memory and personal history. In the case of *The Dawn of My Back*, the interface is actually relatively awkward to navigate. It is difficult to know whether one has in fact viewed all the material on offer. However, this is part of the mysterious opening up of this person's life. It is an intimate way of exploring; the user must be patient, must be interested and engaged. Most importantly the experience enacts and reinforces the understanding that a life can never be completely known and that a life history is never static or fixed or final, not even after death.

Example 3: *Translating Hiraeth*

The final example I refer to is an audiovisual installation work exhibited at the Fremantle Arts Centre, Western Australia, as part of the 2005 Perth International Arts Festival. *Translating Hiraeth*, created by artist and filmmaker Judith Durey, is a 45 minute visual narrative work with spoken dialogue, shown on four screens and presented on DVD. It is included here as a point of comparison with the previous two examples. This work is not interactive in the sense that the user or, in this case, more properly the viewer/participant, is not required to respond physically to the work. There is in fact no opportunity to interact to change the outcome of the textual experience (except that the viewer has the chance to leave the exhibition space, and to re-enter it at another point in the narrative). Nevertheless the work creates the kind of engaging experience that makes one aware that the linear simplicity of a well crafted historical account can truly rival interactive modes of representation.

This work, like the second example, *The Dawn at My Back*, explores personal memory and identity, this time autobiographically. The subject of the work is a retracing of the artist's life history back to its point of origin: her formerly unknown birth mother, and then further again, to her father. In the artist's words, "The work explores the emotional complexity of excavating family silence, over time...The piece suggests a contingent yet ambiguous process of translating 'the self' across discontinuous, and dispersed identities" (Durey 2005, 'Artist's Statement', 1). Following a change in the 'closed adoption' regulations that allowed adopted children to trace their origins, the artist's journey was to discover her Welsh identity, in the process making contact with her birth mother, discovering her birth name, learning the Welsh language, and visiting the physical places of her early life. The Welsh word 'hiraeth' carries meanings of nostalgia, desire, wish, longing, and return (Mishra 2005). The adoption took place 42 years previously. The mother was contacted through an intermediary, but she died before a physical meeting could be arranged. She was 81, had never married, and had no other children. She was still living in the family home where the artist was conceived.

This is a linear, narrated work but I am including it here to present a contrast: to show that sometimes the best solution may be to foreground a linear thread, even when, as in this case, the history is presented on multiple screens and uses digital strategies to immerse the viewer in the narrative experience. In *Translating Hiraeth* those strategies include the four screen mode and an audio accompaniment to the work, consisting of a continual low vibrating noise that suggests the intensity of the experience of personal revelation. It is difficult to imagine that this work could have had the same impact if it had been constructed as an interactive work that gave the user power to only experience some parts of the narrative, or to privilege some over others. The linear narrative Durey presents in *Translating Hiraeth* is a complex personal narrative in its own right, documenting a personal route from one known identity to another. In this case it seems right that the work has no interactive features, that the audience has no control over the outcome of their experience. The subject matter is delicate and complex; it is woven together in a crafted form that conveys to the viewer the circumstances of its production. Interactivity in historical representation has its limits; it must be treated carefully.

Finally, in using this example, I want to return to the observation that however fragmentary and shattered human experience may be, and however fragmented and segmented information is in this digital era, there is nevertheless a need to frame and order that experience or that information into forms that hold together and tell a story, if it is to be communicated effectively.



Conclusion

How then should one approach a digital historical work from a critical perspective? I would answer that, firstly, there must be an eye for content – how does this work stand as an historical record for decades to come? Is the material

historically authentic, engaging, evocative, well selected, well crafted, well presented? In other words, the effort should be made to apply the same kind of critical framework as to a book. Secondly, the work needs to be considered from a media production and usability perspective, asking the question, How accessible is the content? Is the work designed and structured in a way that brings out the significance of the historical content? Finally, I would argue that it is essential to consider the function of narrative within the multimedia work, both at the micro and macro levels. What are the narrative strategies that have been chosen *within* the various segments of the work? How are the segments linked into a larger narrative structure? To what extent is the viewer engaged in a process of active narrative construction? Is there a high degree of freedom or is there a set of controlling constraints? How is the information coloured or influenced by the overarching narrative structure? What are the messages that the *structure* delivers?

Often the production of these works is carried out by multimedia producers without input from historical specialists. History is seen as the ‘content domain’, simply as the information that populates the digital text. Aspects of technique, structure, presentation, design, look and feel are considered the work of IT specialists. In the hands of technical specialists, these issues can dictate the whole creative process, and yet this controlling aspect is usually invisible and undeclared. There is very little published material on the narration of history in digital environments. The absent voice in this larger debate is that of historians and cultural critics concerned with the way in which history is being presented through these new forms. I would argue that there is an urgent need to focus both on the quality of the historical ‘content’ and the effect of new narrative structures on the reception of historical material. As a ‘content’ domain, history has some peculiar characteristics that need to be put first when designing digital historical works. History lends itself to linear representation.^[13] That is because it is concerned with the passing of time, the causal flow of events, the process of evolution, change and adaptation. Memory is different; it tends to be haphazard and fragmentary. Narrative forms need to reflect these differences as well as recognising the mutual dependence and inseparability of memory and history.

For all the innovation in this field of digital history, we are not yet at a stage where we can speak of genres. Genres actually allow greater experimentation even when they appear to be restrictive. They lay out the expectation of textual ingredients in established quotients. They set up parameters, boundaries to be pushed, crossed, or done away with entirely. There is not a neat balance of one tradition or element in any new articulation of history in digital form. There is not yet, for example, an expectation that there will be a certain amount of text or a certain balance between still images or moving images in a ‘multimedia documentary’ – one of the most promising of emerging digital forms in the field of historical representation. Works may be highly visual, may even include no written textual elements at all, whereas others may include almost no visual imagery and use instead complex hypertext structures. All are brought together by the fact that they feature historical content and experiment with modes of digital interactivity that require the viewer to participate in the process of narrative construction. However, it must not be forgotten that the reader has always participated in narrative construction through the act of reading itself (Ruthrof 1981). The difference in the digital domain is that the active participation of the user/reader is heightened through physical and technical moves that initiate choices and determine the shape of the narrative pathways.

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Notes

[1.](#) For an overview of this exhibition, see *Future Cinema* (Shaw and Weibel 2003).

[2.](#) See Edmund Smyth, *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction* (1991) and Patricia Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism, Reading Postmodernism* (1992).

[3.](#) See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, (1983) and Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991).

[4.](#) See Paul Arthur, "Capturing the Antipodes" (2002) and "Imaginary Voyages and the Romantic Imagination" (2001), Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: An Essay in Spatial History* (1987),

Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (1989) and Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (1974).

[5.](#) See Jay David Bolter, *Writing Space: The Computer in the History of Literacy* (1989), Michael Benedickt, ed., *Cyberspace: First Steps* (1992), and Aarseth Espen, *Cybertexts* (1997).

[6.](#) For example, consider Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction [1935]” (1968), Roland Barthes, “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives” (1977), Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1978), Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production* (1978), Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader* (1979), and Paul Ricoeur, “Narrative Time” (1981).

[7.](#) For example, Maia Engeli, *Digital Stories: The Poetics of Communication* (2000) and M.S. Meadows, *Pause and Effect: The Art of Interactive Narrative* (2002).

[8.](#) See N. Katherine Hayles, *My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts* (2005).

[9.](#) See Rasmus Blok, “A Sense of Closure: The State of Narrative in Digital Literature” (2002, 167), and Carolyn Handler Miller, *Digital Storytelling: A Creator’s Guide to Interactive Entertainment* (2004, 4).

[10.](#) See Chris Crawford, *Chris Crawford on Interactive Storytelling* (2005).

[11.](#) See Mark Bernstein and Diane Greco, “*Card Shark* and *Thespis*: Exotic Tools for Hypertext Narrative” (2004).

[12.](#) For a range of perspectives, see Markku Eskelinen, “Towards Computer Game Studies” (2004), Ken Perlin, “Can There Be a Form between a Game and a Story?” (2004, 15), and Michael Mateas, “A Preliminary Poetics for Interactive Drama and Games” (2004, 19).

[13.](#) Here I am referring to a traditional understanding of history that continues to have currency despite post-structuralist attacks upon it.

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