Distributed Narrative:
Telling Stories Across Networks

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Abstract

A new kind of narrative is emerging from the network: the distributed narrative. Distributed narratives don't bring media together to make a total artwork. Distributed narratives explode the work altogether, sending fragments and shards across media, through the network and sometimes into the physical spaces that we live in. This paper begins an investigation into this new narrative trend, looking at how narrative is spun across the network and into our lives.

Introduction

We're used to narratives that have clear boundaries. Books have covers, feature films have title sequences and credits, and fairy tales have "Once upon a times" and "Happily ever afters." We have developed many ways of marking Aristotle's beginning, middle and end, both material (the darkening of the theatre, the title page of the book) and stylistic (the exposition, the denouement). Even as hypertext theorists began talking of books without ends (Douglas 2000), early hypertext fictions were published on diskettes, with covers and a limited number of nodes. Even on the web, most electronic literature today is self-contained, with few if any external links.

Distributed narratives are stories that aren't self-contained. They're stories that can't be experienced in a single session or in a single space. They're stories that cross over into our daily lives, becoming as ubiquitous as the network that fosters them.

This paper attempts to provide a map of distributive narratives. This is not an easy task, because it is hard to describe and locate things that are not *things* but connections. Trying to see how narratives can be split open and spread like this is important, because narratives are one of our main ways of understanding ourselves and of understanding our world. When the world changes, our ways of understanding it must change too, and as distributed

narrative becomes increasingly common, we need to try to understand this new and sometimes invisible way of seeing and communicating who we are.

Providing a complete definition of distributed narratives is unlikely to be possible, or productive, because the very nature of this way of telling stories is to escape the boundaries we have been used to. Instead, I'm going to start this initial survey or map of the field by thinking about the ways in which we've usually demanded that narratives and drama should have *unity*, the opposite of distribution. Finding possible contraries to these unities may help describe some of the qualities of distributed narratives.

Dramatic Unities

When Aristotle described Greek drama in his *Poetics*, he saw unity as imperative. His three unities are also known as the dramatic unities, and can be summarised thus:

1. The Unity of Time: The action depicted in the play should take place during a single day.
2. The Unity of Space: The action depicted in the play should take place in a single location.
3. The Unity of Action: All action within the play was to be directed towards a single overarching idea.

Although English dramatists like Shakespeare couldn't give a toss about such guidelines, and Aristotle himself formulated them as descriptions rather than as normative rules, the French classicist dramatists took this description as law. The dramatic unities remained law until the late nineteenth century, when Ibsen, among others, struggled to fit these laws to a modern world. Twentieth century dramatists, like Brecht and Beckett and Müller, still shock us with their flamboyant disregard for the dramatic unities. Hollywood cinema still follows versions of realism that have much in common with the guidelines outlined by Aristotle over two thousand years ago.

The web, and our networked culture, nurtures the breaking down of a different side of unity: the unities of distribution and of delivery. Although modern drama – or Shakespeare – may break each of the dramatic unities, the work usually remains identifiable as a unity. Most drama is still performed on a stage, with a beginning, middle and end, and the audience is rarely in any doubt as to the exact positions of the boundaries between the play and that which is outside of the play. Books are likewise clearly delimited by their

covers; feature films by the ritual positioning of screen opposite seats for the spectators. Even television has clear boundaries between channels and between shows, marked off by title and credit sequences and by ad breaks.

In this paper I begin exploring the ways in which the *distribution* of narrative works is fragmented, with a particular emphasis on how networked technology such as the web, email and text messaging nurtures this kind of distributed narrative. Of course literary works have always been distributed either by a publisher or by being hand copied and sent to an individual or kept in a library. I'm talking about the kind of distribution you see when something we have thought of as whole is spread across the world.

Thinking about things that aren't *things*

It is difficult to think about distributed narrative. Our languages have developed to name discrete objects. It is far easier to talk about a river or a human than to discuss the system of molecules or cells that make up each of these "things".

As Steve Himmer writes of weblogs, "This absence of a discrete, "completed" product makes the weblog as a form resistant to the commoditization either of itself, or of any one particular interpretation." (Himmer 2004) Or, in codework writer and artist Mez Breeze's words:

> it seems evident that various web/net/code artists are more likely to be accepted into an academic reification circuit/traditional art market if they produce works that reflect a traditional craft-worker positioning. This "craft" orientation [producing skilled/practically inclined output, rather than placing adequate emphasis on the conceptual or ephemeral aspects of a networked, or code/software-based, medium] is embraced and replicated by artists who create finished, marketable, tangible objects; read: work that slots nicely into a capitalistic framework where products/objects are commodified and hence equated with substantiated worth. (Breeze 2003)

So it's not simply that we lack the words or even, perhaps, the grammar to think clearly about things that are not *things*, it's also that culturally we're used to products and commodities, objects that can be sold and maybe mass-produced.

There have been exceptions, of course. Some theatre has involved its audiences, or stepped into the street, hiding its performativity. Graffiti artists work across spaces with no need for institutionalisation of their art. Live role-players in games like *Vampire: The Masquerade* have mixed their gameworld

with the everyday world. Literary construction workers invaded Seattle in the eighties .

Another problem when we try to think about distributed narrative is that works of literature and art and journalism have never been entirely self-contained. There are always allusions and references and inspirations and shared ideas: intertextuality doesn't require links. In the essay where she coined the term, Julia Kristeva wrote that "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (Kristeva 1980: 66; 1967). Intertextuality is obviously related to the idea of a distributed narrative, as is Eco's concept of the *open work* (Eco 1967), but both Kristeva's and Eco's terms refer to the connections and openings of ideas rather than the physical disintegration of the artifact in which a narrative is presented. I'm interested in a distribution that is more literal than these theoretical concepts of the sixties, although it is possible that they might shed light on the physical distribution of narratives as well.

We are used to discussing things that we can name, and point at, even as we recognise connections between these things. It's difficult to stop looking for "works". Even writing this paper, where I'm consciously trying to see the connections and the movements rather than the objects, I seem unable to completely leave the idea that there is, indeed, a work I can refer to. In some cases, the work is simply that which is bounded by the idea of one or several responsible authors, yet "[t]he word 'work' and the unity that it designates are probably as problematic as the status of the author's individuality" (Foucault 1988).

You might also point out that I'm slipping from using play to work to narrative. Narrative has clear, formal definitions, most of which agree that a narrative consists of events ordered in time, with some kind of causal connection between the events (Genette 1980: ; Bal 1997: ; Prince 1987).

I am not going to try to solve all these problems or untangle all these connections in this paper. Instead, I'll start by describing three kinds of distributed narrative, hoping to show you these new kinds of stories and hopefully working towards constructive new ways of thinking about them.

A Starting Point: The Unities of Distribution

As a starting point, let's imagine a three-point description of the ways in which a narrative can be fragmentarily distributed, following Aristotle's dramatic unities. The first two are easy.

1. The Unity of Time: The action depicted in the play should take place during a single day.
2. The Unity of Space: The action depicted in the play should take place in a single location.

These easily translate to:

1. Distribution in Time: The reader, player or viewer experiences the narrative in bits and pieces over a period of time.
2. Distribution in Space: There is no single place in which the whole narrative can be experienced.

The first is not a new kind of distribution of narratives: we are familiar with this from print stories published serially and from television serials and soap operas. The second is a far more radical break with our ideas of unified narrative.

The third is a little trickier. It has never been entirely obvious how to tell whether all action in a play is directed towards a single overarching idea, though we're often able to say when that's *not* the case. Anyway, if we're talking about the way in which a narrative is distributed – defining the term according to structure rather than content – then it makes little sense to talk about an thematic unity of plot or action. Let's try following Foucault's point that the notion of a distinct author, or group of authors, is what makes us able to think about works at all (Foucault 1988), and see what happens if we think about narratives in which authorship itself is distributed. That leaves us with:

3. Distribution of Authorship: No single author or group of authors has complete contol of the narrative.

Again, here I'm not talking about interpretation of the narrative, which authors are never in control of, or about the ways in which readers can of course always tear up a book and reshuffle it or change it or parody it or write a new book inspired by it, which has also always been possible. I'm talking about a much more literal form of control, or lack of control. I'm talking about narratives which may be deliberately created collectively, as in games of exquisite corpse, or in the stories that develop in MUDs and role-playing games, or between weblogs. Distributed authorship can also be seen when

content is gathered from the web according to variables of an algorithm and a narrative, of sorts, is produced from scraps that were never deliberately intended to form part of a larger story.

There may well be different or better ways of thinking about these kinds of narrative. Since the main purpose of this paper is to provide an initial survey and a basis for further exploration, I think these loose categories will suffice, and hopefully bring out problems that can be further examined in future work. Let's look at some examples of narratives that fall into each of these groups.

Distribution in time

There is a long tradition of narratives that are intended to be read, listened to or watched over a long period of time rather than in one session. Only short narratives, like feature films and short stories, are intended to be experienced in a single session. Most novels and story-based games need several sessions to complete, like *Mrs Dalloway* or *Neverwinter Nights*. In works like these, the time of reception is episodic, though the work as a whole is clearly delimited. Some works are also published serially, like the soap operas and sit coms we watch on television or the original publication of Dickens' novels, with episodes released at regular intervals and an overall story that may or may not have a planned ending.

Episodic narratives are particularly well-suited to our style of reading on the internet. Usability guru Jakob Nielsen has notoriously pointed out that users *don't* read on the web, they scan and skim (Nielsen 1997). Although it has become a commonplace to claim that "I hate reading on a screen," we're certainly spending more and more time with texts on screens. Emails, online newspapers, weblogs, shopping and other familiar screen texts don't usually follow Nielsen's 1997 rules for bullet lists and bold keywords, but they do provide reasonably brief nuggets of text that each make some sense on their own. We may not be happy reading 500 page blockbusters on our computer screens (though a really *good* ebook reader might change that) but we spend hours reading and moving between fragments.

Weblogs are an obvious example of the success of serial narrative on the web. Most posts in weblogs are short enough to be read in a few minutes.

Instead of watching a twenty-two minute long episode each week, a weblog is read in two- or five-minute sessions once a day or once every few days or at irregular intervals. Added up, regular readers of a weblog spend a considerable number of hours perusing their favourite blogs over the years.

There are of course many non-narrative weblogs, weblogs that report on specific products, or discuss politics or an academic field or knitting or they offer advice on time management or dating. Even many of these slip into narrativity, with some posts being micro-narratives, or simply by the leakage of personal voice and experience into the "objective" reporting on facts and events. For example, Julian Dibbell's blog *Play Money* (Dibbell 2004) tracks his experiment of making a living from selling items earned in Everquest, but now and then he hints at marital problems or writes warmly about fatherhood (see, for instance, his entry for April 10). Narratologist Mieke Bal argues that focalisation is the most important means by which a *fabula*, or chronologically and logically sequence of events, is presented as a story. Focalisation is one of the foundations of most blogging: it is "the connection between the events that make up the fabula and the one or more subjects whose "perspective" or "point of view" on–or whose subjective engagement with–the events is represented in the narrative" (Bal 1999: 176).

Justin Hall's blog *Justin's Links* is a far more deliberate narration of the blogger's life. Hall is a pioneer of online journaling, and began writing his life online in 1994. (Hall 2004) As Rob Wittig relates in a review of *Justin's Links*, the temporality of the site was always a major narrative hook:

> I'll never forget the Monday morning in the mid-90s when I rushed in to work (my only Internet connection at the time, imagine!) and hurriedly pointed my browser to www.links.net to see if Justin Hall had broken up with his girlfriend over the weekend. I didn't know Justin personally. Still don't. But I had been enjoying his groundbreaking Web diary for several months, had turned some coworkers on to it, and all of us had gotten swept up in Justin's inner (and quite public) turmoil as The Big Conversation loomed. (Wittig 2003)

Wittig continues by noting how when he returns to reading *Justin's Links*, years later, the freshest posts have elisions that whet his curiosity, pushing him to read more in order to fill in the holes in the narrative as best as he can: "Who is the new "her" of "her mom?" How long has he been in Japan? I must read on!" This is real-time narrative in the first person, as Elouise Oyzon has called blogging, and it fascinates us. One of its main fascinations is that the

narrative moves in the same time-frame as our own lives play out. This is a rich field for further exploration.

Another example of networked narrative that is distributed in time is *Online Caroline* (Bevan and Wright 2000). This web drama is the story of Caroline, a (fictional) twenty-something-year-old who wants online friends. If you give her your email address, she'll let you read her web diary, watch daily two-minute segments on her webcam, look at photos of her boyfriend and she'll send you emails every day, personalised with the details you tell her about yourself. *Online Caroline* only takes up five or ten minutes of your day, and the twenty-four episodes take place over as many days, or if you don't read your email for a day or two, and don't click on the link to the latest version of her website, the narrative is postponed a little for you. *Online Caroline*, which I have written about elsewhere (Walker 2004: , 2003), is a clearly bounded work conceptually and narratively, but its presentation is distributed: to read it you have to look at a website and also read emails. In addition, you can dial the number to Caroline's answering machine and listen to her voicemail.

Tim Etchell's *Surrender Control* is the title of another distributed narrative that merges narrative time with the real time of the reader. The reader of this piece received SMSes over the course of 72 hours with instructions to do many strange things, thereby spreading the narrative into her physical surroundings. Invitations to sign up were both advertised on the web and distributed on unsigned fliers in London, combining physical and networked space much as *Implementation* does. Here are some of the text messages I received, numbered and dated according to the order in and times at which I received them:

> 28. Write the word SORRY on your hand and leave it there until it fades. (21/11/01, 00:01)
> 29. Look at the stars. (21/11/01, 00:59)
> 30. Think about an ex-lover, naked and tied to a bed. (21/11/01, 10:00)
> 31. Call someone. Tell a lie. (21/11/01, 13:15)
> 32. Call them back. Admit that you lied but do not tell the truth about why. (21/11/01, 13:30)

Surrender Control is not a narrative in the formal sense, but it may enact a narrative with the recipient of the text messages.

Finally, email narratives are an increasingly common kind of narrative that is distributed in time. Emails are sent out to readers who have signed up, usually emails that purport to be from the various characters in the story. Rob Wittig's *Blue Company* (2001)*,* and Scott Rettberg's sequel, *Kind of Blue* (2003), are examples of this genre. Unfortunately they can now only be read as archived, so if you read them, you'll need to imagine what it would be like to receive these emails day by day, at the same pace as the plot unfolds.

Distributed in space

Some narratives quite literally consist of fragments that are distributed across the globe. Nick Montfort and Scott Rettberg's *Implementation: A Novel* (2004), asks readers to not only read stickers printed with fragments of the narrative but also to post the stickers in their surroundings. Fittingly for a story about "psychological warfare, American imperialism, sex, terror, identity, and the idea of place", *Implementation* not only seeks to be read, it asks its readers to colonise the world with it, to paste its fragments everywhere, inserting it into their everyday lives and spaces. Although the authors publish selected photos of pasted stickers on their website, ultimately they surrender control of how their work spreads and is pasted in new contexts giving new meanings.

A reader may encounter the work either by coming across one of the stickers or by finding the website. Readers who merely read a single sticker may never realise that they are reading a part of a larger story. Some fragments are almost self-contained. If you have read a few stickers, you will know that the character Frank runs a box factory that in the course of the story starts to produce cardboard coffins for sending dead soldiers home from Iraq. You can still happily read many of the stickers about Frank without knowing any of that:

> Frank was twenty-seven years old when he got his hand cut clear off with a circular saw that had no guard. Surprising how little pain. The disbelief and wailing. The bag of ice. The gurney. Recovery that took only weeks. A microsurgeon was on duty–the reattachment was a cinch. It seemed like some surreal sitcom episode to him now; he was embarrassed to relate the experience, even when someone noticed the hairline bracelet of a scar. (Installment 1)

A reader might perhaps encounter this fragment stuck on the wall of a bus shelter, or outside of a factory, and think that that was all. She might scratch her head and forget about it. Most people simply walk past stickers not even noticing they're there.

Most of the fragments, however, give a sense that there is more, somewhere, that this is part of something larger:

> They looked for the contact lens for twenty minutes and finally started laughing about it. "We're going to miss the movie at this rate," Frank said. "Can't you wear your glasses?" "I didn't bring them." "We could go … get them." They'd always gone to his place. He had no idea where she lived. (Installment 6)

This sticker gives a clear sense that something has happened before this, and that something will happen, and indeed, a sticker on the same page of the instalment, right next to this sticker in fact, continues from the moment when Frank and Samantha arrive at her house: "Worse than he'd imagined, but not a slum. Not even a trailer."

This is exactly the same technique as Rob Wittig points out is used in *Justin's Links*. As posts in a blog point to other threads of the story that an individual reader may or may not have already read, so each sticker in *Implementation* contains implicit links to other stickers, links which are not usually necessary to follow in order to appreciate the sticker in question, but which signal to the reader that there is more here.

This technique is different to the recap of many television serials, because the viewer of a television serial is not usually able to follow such implicit links. A cliffhanger at the end of an episode is common, in order to make the viewer come back next week for more, but the implicit links of distributed narrative are instead invitations that encourage the audience to go and find more. Now. They are promises that there is more to find, or perhaps more that is not being said.

Figure 1: A photograph from Nick Montfort and Scott Rettberg's *Implementation*. The sticker is from the first installment; the surroundings are a street in Bergen, Norway, in January 2004.

A reader who encounters *Implementation* in the wild, so to speak, will see the sticker in a very different context to a reader who downloads the PDFs of neat sheets of stickers arranged two across and five down. If you read the sticker quoted above without access to the stickers that surround it on the PDF, you would obviously read it differently. Neither does the sticker shown in Figure 1 in itself suggest that it is part of a larger narrative:

> Samantha makes stickers. Stickers from aluminium plates, velour stickers, velvet stickers–feelies, collage stickers with lists from the *New York Times*, lists from the *Implementation Star*, crushed glass stickers that change color in sun and rain, stickers of onion peel and orange skin, stickers that mention revolution, stickers that pay tribute to Japanese films and Afghan women in burkas, stickers recounting what talking Barbie dolls say, stickers made from locks of hair. (Installment 1)

Instead, it would seem natural to read this sticker as commenting on sticker art in general, given its position next to other stickers. If other *Implementation* stickers happened to be nearby, for instance the sixth installment one about the lost contact lenses, a reader might be able to piece a narrative together. Yet without Googling, or a great many stickers in close

proximity to each other, it seems unlikely that a reader seeing stickers in the wild would really see a whole narrative.

That need not be a problem. Shelley Jackson's *Skin* is another example of a distributed narrative, but this narrative is distributed in a way that ensures that the whole narrative can not be read. *Skin* is a short story that is literally tattooed into the skin of its readers, one word at a time. Each volunteer is assigned a single word, and has the word tattooed somewhere on his or her body in a standard serif font chosen by the author. After tattooing, each participant will be known as a word, and as words die, the story will disintegrate. While tattoo art has a long history, distributing a story word by word on peoples' bodies is a new development, and *Skin* has been received with a lot of attention. The author has received more requests from would-be-participants than she has been able to process.

Sticker art, like tattoo art, has existed in the art world for decades, and while tattoos are committed to skin individually, stickers can be produced in huge or small quantities, they are easily replicable and they can be distributed similarly to *Implementation*. The artist creates stickers and applies them to urban surfaces him- or herself, sometimes enlisting friends and strangers as distributers. One of the most well-known sticker art campaigns is Shepard Fairey's *André the Giant has a Posse*, later known as *Obey Giant*. One of the *Giant* stickers can be seen just above the *Implementation* sticker in Figure 1. The original stickers were printed by hand using paper cut stencils and distributed by the artist – or by the writer, as graffiti artists refer to themselves. Today these images can be found in almost every city on the globe, either in their original form (Figure 2, left) or in one of the stylised versions Fairey developed as *Obey Giant* after the real André the Giant's lawyers threatened to sue him.

Figure 2: Original André the Giant motif alongside a more recent, stylised permutation.

The words and the image of the original stickers both stand as statements: "André the Giant has a Posse". Alongside this is a rough image of a large, lumbering man's face. To the right, his astonishing height and weight are recorded.

The first time I saw one of these stickers was in my home town, Bergen. I noticed the sticker for its strangeness. I had no idea what it meant. New to the idea of sticker art, I thought perhaps it was an ad for a rock band I'd not heard of, and thought no more of it. I must have stored the memory of it more carefully than I realised, though, because when I several months later saw the same image in New York I recognised it instantly, and knew exactly where I'd seen the previous sticker. A quick google provided me with the *Giant* series' full history, and since then I've seen the stickers in several other cities, always with a secret joy of recognition.

My initial wonder at the sticker, grounded in an utter lack of understanding, was exactly what Fairey wanted. In a manifesto for the project, he writes:

> The OBEY sticker campaign can be explained as an experiment in Phenomenology. (..) The FIRST AIM OF PHENOMENOLOGY is to reawaken a sense of wonder about one's environment. The OBEY sticker attempts to stimulate curiosity and bring people to question both the sticker and their relationship with their surroundings. Because people are not used to seeing advertisements or propaganda for which the product or motive is not obvious, frequent and novel encounters with the sticker provoke thought and possible frustration, nevertheless revitalizing the viewer's perception and attention to detail. The sticker has no meaning but exists only to cause people to react, to contemplate and search for meaning in the sticker. Because OBEY has no actual meaning, the various reactions and interpretations of those who view it reflect their personality and the nature of their sensibilities. (Fairey 1990)

Stickers posted in cities are deliberately pushing the boundaries of the traditional exhibition space just as they push the boundaries of the notion of a work. Although one could choose to view each iteration of the *Giant* sticker as

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a work in itself, it is through repetition the image gains its power. Perhaps the reason for this particular sticker's great success lies in the harmony between its wording and its distribution: whether or not André the Giant has a posse, the proliferation of the stickers themselves certainly suggests power in numbers and an unseen horde of followers.

Although the *Obey Giant* campaign has developed a series of related images, the basic effect of the project relies on a repetition of identical images. Another distributed art project is *Space Invaders* by the artist "Invader". Invader has glued hundreds of tiny mosaic patterns around cities of the world, starting with his hometown Paris. Each pattern is inspired by the simple pixels of the space invader game, yet each is slightly different from the previous. Invader also sells stickers, proposing a "reality game" where buyers can earn points by attaching as many space invaders as possible to their home towns. Yet the main thrust of the project is the individual, artist-created mosaics, sometimes performed illicitly and sometimes commissioned by cities open to alternative forms of art.

Finally, any discussion of words on stickers must mention Jenny Holzer's *Truisms* and other work. Holzer began her career as a text artist in the late seventies by writing out phrases–truisms–on stickers and posting them around Manhattan. Later her truisms and subsequent writings have been displayed on tickers on Times Square, they've been carved in granite and published in books and posted on the web. Holzer's works sometimes present micronarratives, but open, viral distribution by the general public has not been a focus in her work. Instead, she herself has planned each new spot her words are displayed.

Neither *Obey Giant* nor *Space Invaders* uses narrative in the formal sense as defined by narratologists. The images and words displayed weave layers of connections, but the emphasis is on the act of sticking, in the posse of people who put up stickers and the game of winning more points the more Space Invader stickers you can put up. This game-like act of claiming urban spaces for a group you identify with is certainly one of the attractions for those who spread *Implementation* stickers as well.

Distributed in time and space

Many distributed narratives are distributed in both time and space. In addition to projects that are literally spread across several physical spaces, like *Implementation* or *Skin*, many narratives are also distributed across several media, for example combining telephone, websites and email. Even using several distinct websites can be a form of spatially distributed narrative.

Immersive games, or "unfiction" are prime examples of how a story may be distributed both in time and across many websites and many media. Immersive games present a series of puzzles that the audience must collectively or individually solve, and while they are not narratives as such, their method of distribution and the ways in which they attract their audience have much in common with distributed narratives. Even the audience is distributed – not at all a mass audience but a huge, dispersed group of individuals that come together to collaborate on solving the mystery. the immersive game *The Beast* used the tagline "distributed biological processing" to characterise the ways in which thousands of players participated in solving the puzzles of the game (for discussions of the game, see McGonigal 2003: ; Salen and Zimmerman 2004).

Another way in which narrative can be distributed access media is by combining a website narration, like a weblog or online diary, with textual performance in other media, as when Isabella V., the possibly fictional protagonist of *She's A Flight Risk*, steps outside of her weblog to ping her readers in iChat or to participate in interviews. Kaycee Nicole, the famously fictional teenaged web diarist who "died" of leukemia in 2002, parallelled this exactly. "Kaycee" participated in chats and email conversations in addition to writing frequent diary entries at her website. Of course the same is true of completely "real" webloggers, like myself: if my various self-representations on the web can be read as a narrative (and that may not be the best descriptive term), then this narrative is distributed across my own website, emails, chats, MUDs and conference papers. Both fictional and non-fictional weblogs tend to have narratives spun across sites, through comments in other blogs, mentions elsewhere, participation in discussion sites and chats, and sometimes

interviews and the like. These are personal, distributed stories, stories for a new time.

Tracking these distributed narratives is what fascinates us about reading weblogs from day to day, week to week, year to year. We follow Justin Hall's story as he publishes it, but we not only read his self-narration on his own website, we also come across his name elsewhere. When he links to an article he has written or the website of a place or event that he has visited, we can read these as a background or extension of the main story. More striking, though, are the links to the narratives of other people in his life. We can read about Justin on his friends' blogs as well as on his own. When a blogger breaks up with a girlfriend or boyfriend, readers often get to follow the story from both peoples' perspective. Justin himself may comment on other peoples' sites, narrating bits of the story that may not be explicit on his own site. Others may narrate parts of the story that he has not told himself. The story splits, spreads, continues.

This distribution of narration is typical of weblogs. In closeknit communites, like LiveJournal, the narration of weblogs sometimes seems like a group autobiography. In clusters of academic weblogs, which my blog belongs to, narrators sometimes visit each other, or visit the same conferences, and so new constellations of narratives grow forth.

This is the aspect of blogging that is completely missed when writers attempt to cash in on the genre's popularity by selling books written as "blogs". On the surface the idea of a book written as a blog seems reasonable. After all, epistolary novels have a rich history that is integral to the development of the novel itself. If letters from many of the characters in an epistolary fiction are collected, as they are in *Liasons Dangereuses*, for instance, the narrative is certainly dispersed across several different narrators. Blog novels miss out on links, of course, but just as importantly, they miss out on the blogrolls of links to related blogs, they miss out on the RSS feeds of other bloggers who were at the same event and wrote about the hero of the first blog, they miss out on the temporality of only being able to read a blog in the tempo that it is written, they miss out on the active searching for a distributed narrative.

Unfortunately, this distribution of narratives across blogs is not only elusive and difficult to catch and describe: with blogs that are not fictional, it is also ethically problematic. I've mentioned Justin Hall's blog because he has narrated his life online for so long, and so explicitly in public, that I see his blog as a publication as much as an autobiography published on paper. Yet to really trace the shapes of the distributed narrative around his site would mean studying the stories narrated by his friends. Although these sites are public, and their authors are well-aware that their words are read by many, my pinpointing connections and analysing relationships by the words in which they are told seems to cross a boundary that should not be crossed.

Distribution of Authorship

One of the ways in which the story of a weblogger is distributed is by the story being told by several different narrators, on their independent sites. An even more radical distribution of authorship is that which is automated, where an algorithm or search is the only thing that draws the narrative together.

Perhaps these aggregated narratives are not true narratives. Certainly the story is more in the eye of the reader than in the design of the algorithm. Yet looking at them suggests that this very new form may lead somewhere in the future. These emergent narratives, or self-organising narratives, perhaps, require algorithms and interfaces designed by humans for us to see them.

One system that draws narratives together like this is Flickr, a photo-sharing system where individuals upload images, mark them as viewable by the general public or by friends or family only, and tag them with whichever words they see fit. One fascinating effect is that you can view images from *all* users that are public and tagged with, for instance, the word "train".
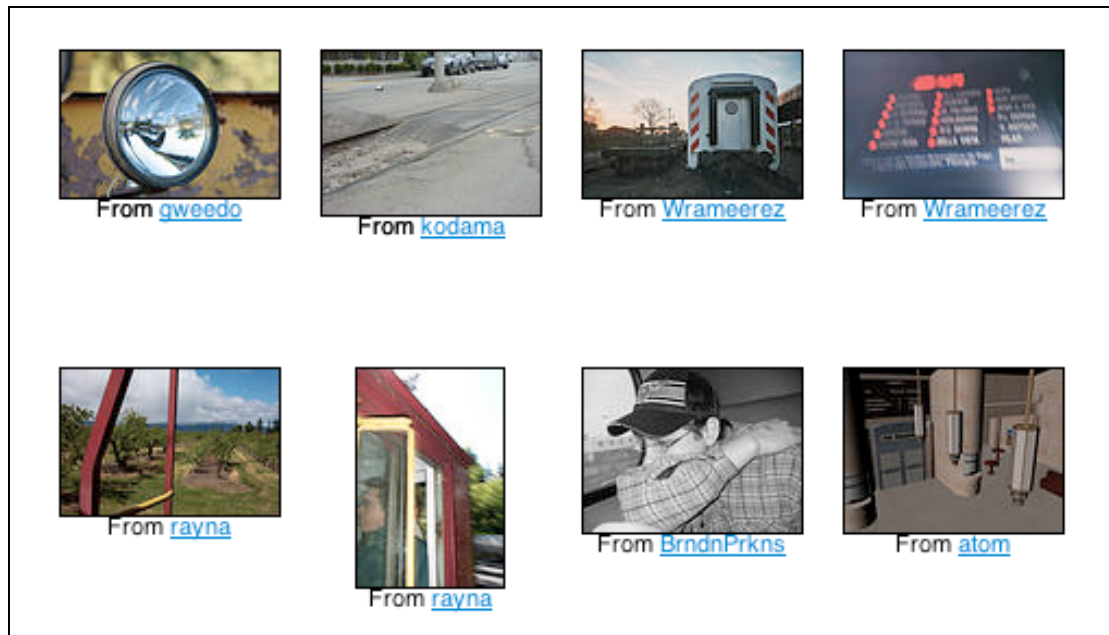
Figure 3: Photos tagged with "train". Flickr.com, accessed 18 September 2004.
Figure 3 shows the most recent photos that happen to have been uploaded
with the tag "train". Though this is certainly not a planned narrative, it is easy
to use our expectations that a linear sequence can be translated to "first this
happened, then this happened" to interpret this as a kind of narrative. Not a
very explicit one, it's true. Certainly the positioning of the photos in a
sequence is familiar to us from comics and video storyboards. If two images
are placed one after the other as part of a sequence we assume that their
juxtaposition means they are taking place either one after the other or
simultaneously in different locations. This basic sequence makes us look for
and probably invent a narrative structure that could explain the images and
their sequence.

Perhaps, also, the concept of train itself carries with it such a strong
sense of forward movement, a transition from one place or state of being to
another, that a sense of narrative springs more naturally from this tag than
from others. The pool of photos tagged with "Cloud" and "baby", for instance,
have very different feels to them. "Cloud" is poetic and calm, while "baby"
seems a commentary on shared humanity, the repetition emphasising the
sameness of what is perhaps the most intensely unique and personal
experience we have, that of parenthood.

A different kind of collective or aggregate narrative is demonstrated by
search engines. There are many websites that will transform a phrase of your

choice into a poem of some sort, using Google for part of the poem generation. A lower tech method of creating a Google poem is to simply enter one or more phrases and combine the top search results, reading them as literature rather than as random gibberish. In Rob Wittig's blog fiction robwit.net, the character 'wordsman posts a Google poem as a cryptic form of correspondence with his fictional co-bloggers:

> ... I don't know." "She is in **Tokyo** for the ... The **phone** is working, but please just let the answering machine ... I'll just be a second," he **heard her voice** from the ...
>
> ... posture had transformed the moment he **heard her voice**, his strange ... house, was still in her apartment in **Tokyo**. ... lacquered table sat her cell **phone**, its handset ...
>
> ... it is my second day in **tokyo**, and it is just the most amazing place. ... She surprised herself as the **phone** suddenly flew ... But when I wasn't looking at her, and **heard her voice**, I knew it was her. ... (Wittig 2004: : May 1, 2004)

Scripts that gather data in this way are becoming more and more common, as people experiment with different ways to use RSS feeds and syndcation, and ways of instantly gathering related data. At the moment, the "narratives" we see in this kind of collected fragments are mostly in the eye of the beholder, but perhaps in time the patterns created by common topics, motifs, word use or style will create kinds of collective narrative we can't imagine today.

To be continued...

This paper marks the beginning of the research I plan to do on distributed narratives. Already I see some problems. To write about these works that I claim are not unified, not things, not even, really, works, I've succumbed to traditional attempts at definition and categorisation. Perhaps this is necessary; perhaps it is something to pass through on the way to better ways of thinking around and using that which cannot easily be handled or commodified. Or perhaps simply performing the connections is the best way of exploring the field. As Greg Ulmer writes in *Internet Invention*, "performance may be to electracy what definition was to literacy." (Ulmer 2003: 38) I started with Aristotle, inventor of definitions. Ulmer would probably have recommended I begin with Diogenes instead, who when Aristotle defined man as a "featherless biped" held up a plucked chicken and declared, "Behold, your man!" (Ulmer 2003: 38)

What this paper has helped me do is clarify the field that I'm interested in. I hope that it has also helped others to see some of the connections between new kinds of narration, and that it assists to build a ground for new kinds of questions.

In further work, I want to explore the mechanisms of stories that are told in fragments without links. What are the differences between *Implementation*, which can be downloaded in eight episodes of thirty stickers each, and is also physically spread around the world by its readers, and a loose-leaf book in a box, like Marc Saporta's *Composition No. 1* (1963) or B. S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* (1999)? How do these unlinked fragmented narratives relate to hypertext fictions? What about the episodic nature of email narratives and fictional weblogs? Even more fascinating, and even harder to grasp: how can we talk about, think about, see the ways in which narratives *cross* weblogs? Is there still any point in thinking of them as narratives?

Or imagine a single blog. All alone. There are no other blogs. There may be readers, but there are no commenters, nobody discussing the same issues for the blogger to link to. No links leading to the blog. Is it still a blog? Or can blogs only exist as one of many, as part of a crowd? I want to read blogs closely and write their connections, tracing the ways in which narratives evolve. I want to think about how this connects with ideas of emergence, of memes and of viral or contagious media.

Distributed narratives demand more from their readers than reading or suspension of disbelief. They ask to be taken up, passed on, distributed. They seek to be viral, the memes of narrative, looking for readers who will be carriers as well as interpreters.

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