

## **Distributed Narrative: Telling Stories Across Networks**

### **Introduction**

Until recently, narratives have been constructed to achieve unity. While postmodern narratives open out into fragments and bricolage in content, plot and style, distributed narratives take this further, opening up the formal and physical aspects of the work and spreading themselves across time, space and the network. You see your first fragments of *Implementation* on stickers posted on signposts on your way to work and find the rest online when you google a remembered sentence. *Surrender Control* sends you text messages regardless of where you are or what you're doing. You read *Online Caroline* and *Blue Company* in a series of emails arriving in your inbox amid spam and work mail. A character in a fictional weblog sends you instant messages and appears in the comments of a political weblog you also happen to read. This paper is a first mapping of this new field of narrative.

Mapping distributed narratives is not an easy task; it is hard to describe and locate things that are not *things* but connections. 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.

Understanding 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.

### **Dramatic Unities**

Unity has long been an aesthetic ideal. The three unities with which Aristotle described Greek drama in his *Poetics*, are 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.

These unities are unities of content. They describe constraints for theme, plot and for the place and time of the story. 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. Ibsen, among other nineteenth century dramatists, struggled to fit these laws to a modern world, and even though twentieth century dramatists and novelists defy the rules, mainstream Hollywood cinema and television sitcoms still tend to obey the dramatic unities.

A second way in which the idea of the unified work has been challenged is through theoretical concepts like *intertextuality* (Kristeva 1967) and the *open work* (Eco 1967). There are always allusions and references and inspirations and shared ideas between works: 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).

Thirdly, the *form* of a narrative work can be released from the conventional boundaries and constraints. Instead of a novel being contained between two covers, it may be printed on stickers or spread across websites. There have been plays that make spectators into actors. Instead of being shown in a cinema or being sold on a DVD, a film may be released in fragments on the net, as described in William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* (2003). These are the kinds of narratives I want to map in this paper.

### **Narrative disunities**

As a starting point, let's imagine a three-point description of the ways in which a narrative can *lack* unity, reversing Aristotle's dramatic unities while concentrating mainly on the form of the narrative. The unity of time could then translate to distribution in time:

1. Distribution in Time: The narrative cannot be experienced in one consecutive period of time.

The unity of space can similarly be converted into distribution in space:

2. Distribution in Space: There is no single place in which the whole narrative can be experienced.

For the third, let's try following Foucault's argument that the notion of a distinct author, or group of authors, is a precondition of our idea of a whole work (Foucault 1988), and see what happens if we think about narratives in which authorship itself is distributed. That leaves us with:

1. Distribution of Authorship: No single author or group of authors can have complete control of form of the narrative.

### **Distribution in time**

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, online shopping sites 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 on the network.

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 episode each week, a weblog is read in two- or five-minute sessions once a day or once every few days. Regular weblog readers spend a considerable number of hours perusing their favourite blogs over the years in this fragmentary style of reading.

Justin Hall's blog *Justin's Links* is a 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 has always been a been an important part of its appeal:

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](http://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 that 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.

Another example of a 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 and look at photos of her boyfriend. 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 it is distributed across both time and several genres of networked media.

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 both physical and networked space. 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)

Email narratives are another 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. Here too the temporality of when the emails were sent was closely connected to realtime events in politics, seasons and the world in general.

In contrast to conventional serial narratives like *Friends* or *Harry Potter* 1, 2 and 3. these narratives all move in sync with our own lives. In effect, this is exactly what Aristotle's Unity of Time attempted: there should not be too large a gap between the fictional time and the time of the audience. If today's audience accesses media and narratives in fragments, making the narrative time correspond to the reader's time provides a new kind of dramatic unity.

## Distributed in space

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” (Montfort and Rettberg: ‘Project Description’), *Implementation* not only seeks to be read, it asks its readers to paste its fragments everywhere, colonising their everyday lives and spaces. The authors surrender control of how their work spreads and is pasted in new contexts, as each new context produces 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.



**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 sticker from Shepard Fairey's famous *Obey Giant* series is seen above.**

If your first encounter with *Implementation* is by seeing a sticker on a post, for instance, as shown in Figure 1, the words on the sticker have a very different context to you than to a reader who downloads the PDFs of neat sheets of stickers arranged two across and five down. The sticker shown in Figure 1 does not 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 one from the sixth instalment about lost contact lenses, a reader might be able to piece a narrative together. If you saw several such stickers you might feel compelled to do some searching online, which might lead you to the complete set of stickers. If you didn't see other stickers, you probably wouldn't realise that you had read a fragment of a larger narrative.

That need not be a problem. Shelley Jackson's *Skin* (2004) is another example of a distributed narrative, but this narrative is distributed in a way that ensures that the whole narrative cannot 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. 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 far more requests from would-be-participants than she has been able to process. Sticker art projects, such as Shepard Fairey's *Obey Giant* and *Invader's Space Invaders*, have a lot in common with distributed narratives like *Implementation* and *Skin*, although they are not narrative in intent. Jenny Holzer's *Truisms*, scattered across billboards, stickers, benches and tickers, are another related phenomenon.

Unlike *Obey Giant*, *Truisms* and *Space Invaders*, whose prime tropes are repetition and variation, most of the fragments of *Implementation* project a sense 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. (Instalment 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 to fetch her contacts: “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 that the reader need not follow in order to appreciate the sticker in question, but that like a cliffhanger at the end of an episode of a television drama signal to the reader that there is more to the story. While the television viewer must simply wait till next week’s episode, the reader of an *Implementation* sticker is invited to go and find more.

Weblogs are the sites of another kind of distributed narrative. Many weblogs are not primarily narrative, of course, but there are also many that explicitly narrate an authentic or fictional life. Any weblog is distributed in time, but the narrative can also be distributed in space when the narrative on an individual weblog is combined with textual performance in other media, as when Isabella V., the possibly fictional, fugitive protagonist of *She’s A Flight Risk*, steps outside of her weblog to ping her readers in iChat or to participate in interviews, the story spreading across the web much as immersive games or “unfiction” does (for discussions of the game, see McGonigal 2003: ; Salen and Zimmerman 2004).

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

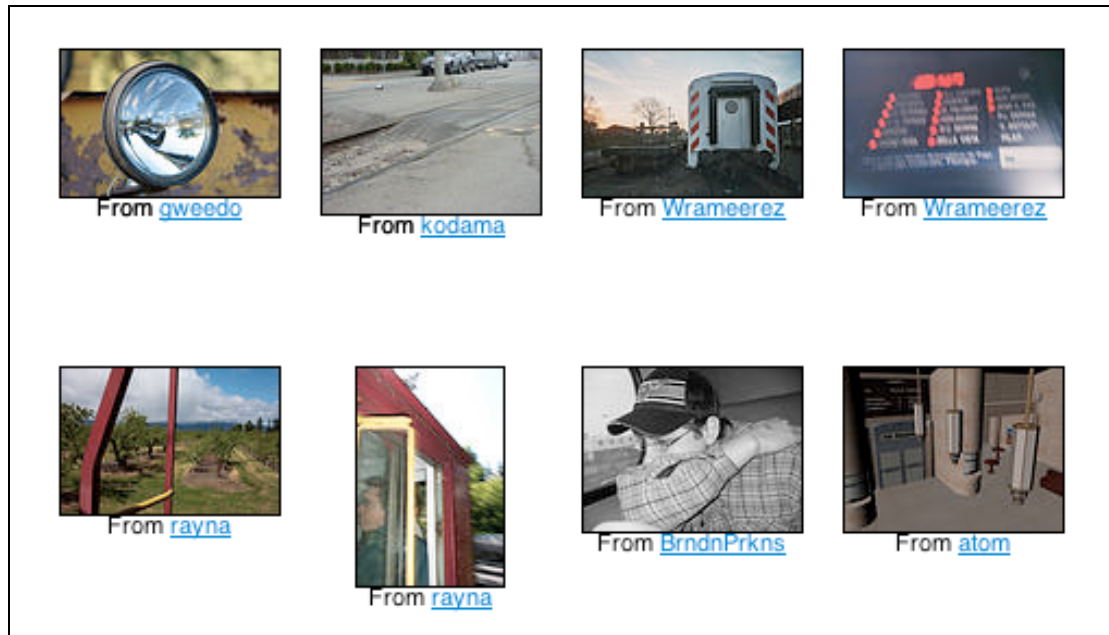


own website, we also come across his name elsewhere. When he links to an article he has written or the website of a place or event that he has visited, we can read these as a background or extension of the main story. More striking, though, are the links to the narratives of other people in his life. 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 Justin has not told himself. We may narrate our own part of the story, if we choose. The story splits, spreads, continues across multiple sites.

### **Distributed 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. These aggregated narratives or emergent narratives require algorithms and interfaces designed by humans for us to see them.

One system that aggregates narratives 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 2: Photos tagged with "train". Flickr.com, accessed 18 September 2004.** 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, and our familiarity with the genre of journey narratives allows us to see a narrative structure that can explain the images and their sequence.

Finding patterns in a mass of data is something humans are good at, and identifying narrative patterns have always been one of our main strategies for understanding the world. The temporality of the train photo narrative (if narrative it is) is similar to that we saw in the narratives distributed in time: it is on the same scale as that of the audience. The individual photos are fragments collected from many spaces, only here presented as belonging together. There is a trace of Aristotle's Unity of Idea, but it is momentary, temporary.

### **To be continued...**

This preliminary map raises several questions, that need to be considered in future work on distributed narrative. How can we define and categorise a phenomenon that consists of connections rather than discrete objects? How do we tell and read stories that consist of fragments without explicit links? 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?

Distributed narratives break down the aesthetics of unity we have followed for millennia. They take this disunity a step further than the bricolage of postmodernism, by collapsing the unity of form as well as that of content and concept. Yet perhaps they also point to a new kind of unity: a unity where the time and space of the narrative are in sync with the time and space of the reader.

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