Creating Metatextual Histories in Virtual Space:
Strategies for Artists Working in New Media

Abstract.

Beneath the text of any narrative is a history. If a narrative is itself a history or is nonfiction then it is based on a metahistory that consists of the historical record, i.e. texts and artifacts that preserve a narrative of historical events, lost to passing time and forever hidden, and of those events themselves. The metahistory of a fictional narrative will include both real and imagined events. This paper first outlines various historical underpinnings of texts in traditional media. It then analyzes potential strategies for creating metahistories in new-media texts. Finally, it postulates ontological implications of these new historical strategies.

1. Introduction.

1.1 Terminology. To avoid ambiguity I need to make it clear how I will be using certain terms that can have multiple meanings. I refer to "text" in the sense of a group of symbols that can convey information. This includes but is not limited to text in the literary sense i.e. writing. It is become common and useful in postmodern thinking to interpret almost everything as text, but, for the most part, I will limit the term to works by an author or artist in print or other media that are narrative in substance. I will use "author" or "artist" for the creator of a "narrative", that is any text that tells a story or conveys some chronology. A "chronology" is some sequence of events that occur in time. A "narrative" chronology is this sequence as contained in the story; "real time" is time as ordinarily delineated by clocks and calendars. "Subject" will refer to the person to whom the work is directed, as in the sense of the word "subjective", not to the subject matter of the text. The subject exists in real-time. "Reader" is a role created for the subject by the text. The reader exists in narrative time. "Narrator" is a role created by the text for the author. "Authorial" time is the approximate point in real time when a text is created. Subjective time is the subject's location in real time.

1.2 Narrative Chronologies. Narrative works in traditional media depend on fixed chronologies determined by the author or artist. The order of these is always linear in that it is dependent on the unfolding of the narrative over time. One event follows another in the subjects time frame. This may or may not correspond to the narrative time frame. The order of events in the movie, *Memento*, is reversed in narrative time with respect to real time. The film editor fixed this order for the theatrical release but some versions of the DVD allow subjective control. This represents a shift from a traditional medium to an interactive medium.

With new media narratives strategies of shifting chronologies become possible. These can be controlled by the author deliberately or with intervening

mechanisms, by the subject, or by the text itself. Events in the narrative can shift position in the chronology, can be repeated, or even omitted.

1.3 Narrative Histories. No narrative can be entirely self-contained. For historical and nonfiction texts the presence of background histories apart from the text is obvious. Works of fiction create narrative chronologies using various strategies. These imply histories that exist outside of the textual narrative. Events described or implied by the text are part of its narrative history. Other texts described by the text are also part of its history.

In the next part of this paper I will establish the ways narrative histories are formed.

2. Temporal Settings and Narrative Histories

2.1 Time-History Contexts. Ordinary experience of time, as defined in western culture, is past, present, and future. Although we may only exist in the present instant, our experiential present includes an unquantifiable piece of the immediate past. The past is the future as decided by the present. Views of physical and metaphysical time are variable but these are beyond the scope of this paper. Just as the subject is fixed in a real present, the reader is fixed in a narrative present, but the narrative present is not fixed between past and future. Narrative histories are anchored in the narrative past. It is important to understand their forms in the context of traditional media in order to make new uses of histories in new media.

2.2 Ordinary Histories. The setting of the narrative with respect to real time may be past, present, future, imaginary time or some mixture of any or all of these. Regardless of the setting in time, written narratives are almost always told in grammatical past tense. When time is unspecified it can be presumed to be the present. Narrative histories include event histories and character histories. Unless a narrative indicates otherwise we can presume a correspondence between the narrative event history and ordinary reality. Some sort of character history is implicit in the narrative.

Kafka's *Metamorphosis* begins, "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect."[1] The setting is in the present but the first sentence establishes certain facts in the narrative history. Gregor Samsa had previously been asleep, had been dreaming uneasily, and had not been an insect. The line between narrative history and narrative can be fuzzy. "Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendia was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice."[2] That distant afternoon is introduced as part of the narrative history, but soon *One Hundred Years of Solitude* revisits these events and they become part of the narrative itself. Set in an undefined time Garcia Marquez's novel moves into its past and then forward in narrative time.

2.3 Future Histories. With its real time setting so definitively fixed in the title Orwell's *1984* allows us to examine by example the different time contexts involved in narratives. Written in 1949 it is set 35 years in the authorial future and remained, until the year 1984 actually arrived, a grim projection of a subjective future. Real history as it existed in 1949 can be presumed, while the next 35 years pass in subjective future and narrative past to provide a history for the dystopia of *1984*.

In 1984 as *1984* moved into the subjective past its power dimmed very little. It provides a parable whose relevance today, far from being erased by what has not happened, lies in the predictions that have to some extent come true. This has served to alter the narrative history in ways Orwell may have foreseen when he anchored the novel so firmly in a not so distant future. With the embedding of words like "newspeak" and phrases like "big brother is watching you" in our language *1984*'s narrative history has changed.

2.4 Alternate Histories. Historical fiction by its very nature mixes the real with the imagined. Historical figures interact with fictional characters. Real figures are often given imaginary histories, but seldom are events altered to the extent that they contradict the subject's notion of reality. Occasionally a work can plausibly challenge historical reality. Phillip Roth's novel, *The Plot Against America* creates an alternate history beginning in 1940 when Charles Lindbergh is elected president and enters into an understanding with the Third Reich.

2.5 Historical Records. Accounts of history are based on primary records, which include texts created contemporaneously with the events they describe, historical documents, narratives of participants or observers of the events, and historical artifacts, and on other secondary accounts. As new media become available they are quickly put to use recording news. With the passage of time news becomes history and these texts become part of the historical record. In its infancy photography recorded the Civil War. Records of more recent events are archived in movies and video. New media change the distribution of older media. Printing made books accessible, photography and offset printing made paintings accessible through reproduction, video media have made movies and television records accessible on demand, while the internet has made the process almost instantaneous. But these kinds of changes tend to remove the connections between the information and the primary sources. All records become secondary.

2.6 Metatexts. Within a fictional narrative histories are based on the real histories when appropriate, or on histories created by the author with various devices. Real histories can be detailed in the text or simply assumed as part of a collective cultural consciousness. Authorial histories can be told through a characters thoughts or memories, described or shown in flashbacks, or can exist in metatexts, which may or may not be accessible to the subject. In creating a situation or a character an author must imagine background information that is

not included in the text. An actor must know a character's background to establish motivation. Texts in a series develop histories from one work to the next. Sometimes a text requires some knowledge of previous texts for understanding. Reading the Odyssey does require having read the Iliad. Each Sherlock Holmes story stands on its own. But knowledge of previous texts often enriches later ones.

The first part of *Don Quixote* serves as a metatext for the second. Not only does the story continue, but part two includes the conceit that Don Quixote and Sancho Panza have been made known by publication of the first part. Many of Jorge Luis Borges' tales revolve around fictitious texts. Texts can be part of their own histories. Poe concludes *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* with a note that the last chapters have been lost. Umberto Eco begins *The Name of the Rose* with the claim that it represents a found manuscript. Italo Calvino addresses the reader, "Your about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveler*,"[3] a text that turns out to be about the reader's encounters with other texts.

3. New Media Narratives

3.1 Other Media. We don't normally think of painting as a narrative medium, but artist Sandow Birk's exhibition, *In Smog and Thunder: Historical Works from The Great War of The Californias*, tells the story of a war between Northern and Southern California through a series of pseudo-historical paintings and posters that create an alternate history. Many of Birk's individual evoke the spirit of the great history paintings of the past, while others represent the genres of the heroic portrait and propaganda, all of which are really narrative forms in themselves. In the context of the exhibition as a whole they constitute a greater narrative when "framed by a network of didactic wall texts, sketches and diagrams, and even an Acoustiguide tour. Collectively, these pedagogical tools activate the entire exhibition space in the service of an elaborately sustained lie."[4] But is it a lie or is it simply fiction based on an elaborately constructed narrative history?

Birk takes this work beyond the exhibition in a pseudo-historical-documentary in the manner of Ken Burns, that uses the art works as images in a video presentation. Birk's created this exhibition and the video using his paintings and posters as simulacra, but he did not include constructions or pseudo-contemporaneous texts in his materials. Since, the individual paintings are now distributed among various collections, the exhibition must be seen as a performance that only remains in recorded in documents. This leads to the question that is at the heart of this paper; what would it mean if the artifacts themselves had never existed?

3.2 Virtuality. Information technologies have changed our fundamental perception of the world.

"(I)nformation is increasingly perceived as interpenetrating material forms. Especially for users who may not know the material processes involved, the impression is created that pattern is predominant over presence. From here it is a small step to perceiving information as more mobile, more important , more *essential* than material forms. When this impression becomes part of your cultural mind set, you have entered the condition of virtuality."[5]

Since new media texts are virtual rather than material, new media narratives can be constructed on virtual histories. Because these texts tend to be more subjective than traditional media texts and can be completely interactive, these histories can be elaborately constructed fictions in themselves, with various degrees of subjective access.

4. New Media Texts

4.1 Strategies. With this background we can now look at strategies for creating narrative histories using electronic media. These are not intended to be shortcuts. Quite the contrary they include tools that make it possible to create very elaborate historical records. The purpose should be to create virtual fictions rather than forgeries, although when a work of art is essentially conceptual the distinction lies with the intent of the artist rather than the perception of the subject. I will illustrate these strategies using examples drawn from my own work, and will show how they can be applied to works in various media. The virtuality of these histories does not necessarily imply that the narrative texts themselves need be virtual.

4.2 Virtual Documents. Digital tools offer endless possibilities for creating and manipulating documents, but we must distinguish between these and ordinary illustrations. Traditional texts usually include illustrations, if at all, only in a supplementary role. Within the genre of children's literature we find illustrations that are integral to the text, but even in the most classic cases the texts remain coherent with the removal of the illustrations. *Alice in Wonderland*, *Winnie the Pooh*, and the works of Dr. Zuess can all be read without the pictures. Works by well known illustrators can take on a life of their own independent of the texts they illustrate, e.g. works of Edward Gore. In non-narrative works illustrations can become essential to the text. Leonardo's manuscripts combine text and illustration on an elementary level; academic works and nonfiction can often depend on illustrations and diagrams for full meaning. The relatively new genres of the comic book and the graphic novel combine image and text in an elementary way, but until recently these have seldom been taken very seriously, and when they have, the text has been seen as secondary to the graphics.

Umberto Eco's recent work, *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*[6], bills itself as "an illustrated novel", but the illustrations are not conventional in the sense that they picture some event in the text as imagined by an illustrator. The

illustrations are facsimiles of documents described in the story. For the most part they are real documents that are made accessible to the reader by inclusion.

Taking this idea further, I am suggesting the actual creation of metatextual documents that are referenced in some way by the text as an essential part of the narrative history. These can include appropriated images, real or simulated photographs, facsimiles of real or pseudo texts, and real or simulated art works. These can generate illustrations or in the case of interactive texts can be referenced through hyperlinks. What distinguishes these references to these virtual documents from ordinary illustrations is that these documents must be treated as if they were real. This is not to say that they are forgeries or frauds, but simply fictions. It is not the role of fiction to continually remind the subject that it is indeed fiction. It is here that the distinction between subject and reader becomes critical. In fact fiction often enhances its reality by offering devices served to convince the reader that it is real, as does *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* and part two of *Don Quixote*.

4.3 Virtual objects. Computers, also, make possible the creation of virtual objects. These can be as simple as a box, as complex as a city, or as complicated as the power of the computer allows. Virtual objects are distinctly different from virtual documents in that they are three dimensional and can be explored as such. These explorations can be made subjective and interactive with methods like VR, or they can be purely authorial, generating images that are made part of the narrative. In either case the objects themselves exist in virtual space, just as real objects exist in real space, and, as such must be treated by the narrative as if they were real.

Much of my own work to date has involved combining images generated using virtual objects combined with text in traditional media. In many cases the objects themselves have suggested the text.[7] For the work, *Abducted By Aliens, I Was Flown Through A City Of Mirrors*, I created a virtual city constructed of mirrored buildings and animated the voyage of a UFO through it. I extracted a number of images from the animation and added descriptions of pseudo-abductions to create a number of prints. Although each block of text is a mini-narrative, there is no narrative continuity to the text as a whole. What gives the piece as a whole narrative continuity are the images which are each captioned with the title of the piece and the frame number including the word "frame". This makes it clear that there are many more frames that are not included in the printed work, the implication being that the work itself is the video.

I had been working with mathematical objects and wanted to construct a virtual Klein bottle. (A Klein bottle is constructed from a single continuous surface with no edges.) In the course of this I discovered what was apparently a new construction using two tori. The idea of a bottle suggested a container for a Genie, and the torus shape suggested a doughnuts. I created a printed work titled *Inside Klein's Doughnuts, I remembered a new bottle*, each page of which

includes a frame from an animated trip into the Klein bottle and a frame from an animation of its construction. The text, whose narrative time begins before the big bang, tells the story of the universe as seen through the eyes of a Genie in the bottle, and includes many references to language, mathematics, science, and pop culture. From the point of view of the reader the bottle must actually exist. A hypertext companion piece serves as an introduction to the concepts involved, details the construction of the Klein bottle, and includes the construction and exploration videos, as well as the entire "printed" work.

4.4 Metatexts. When a text makes reference to a real text, this is accessible to the subject. The contemporary mystery novel, *The Rule of Four*[8], revolves around the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, a rare an little understood book that has only recently been translated. This work is nonetheless real and can be considered accessible. If the referenced work is fictitious, it does not exist and therefore is an inaccessible part of the narrative history. The works of Borges are filled with references to fictitious texts. In the case of nonfiction works all references create a metatextual history accessible to the subject. In new media works access can be made as simple as a hyperlink. Given this simplified access, it is possible for an artist working in new media not only to create a work as a text and metatext. There is no inherent reason why the metatext should not be made more complex than the text itself!

As we have seen, the narrative history of traditional texts is not always accessible to the subject. The author knows this history and writes accordingly. An actor must know things about a character that affect but are not included in a performance. In these cases access to the metatextual level is not subjective but is under authorial control. This leads us to realize that control of access to metatexts can be an authorial strategy with a very broad range of levels. A artist might want to create an entire history including documents and objects, only to deny subjective access entirely as a conceptual move. On the other hand, a whole virtual world could be created for the subject to explore. Between these two extremes, exist a whole variety of tool of access available to the artist, from obvious hyperlinks to "Easter eggs".

The strategy of controlled access is not limited to texts executed in new media. For the print version of *Inside Klein's Doughnuts* I limited subjective access but I created the hypertext companion piece to allow it. My work *Of Smoke and Mirrors* consists of six framed pages, seemingly torn from an academic journal. If these were actual pages then they would be printed on both sides. Four of them would be backed with other pages of the same text, but two would have different pages on the reverse. They would need to be taken out of their frames and examined to find these hidden pages. This work also references fictional metatexts which are not accessible but refer to real texts which are. It includes virtual documents and objects and includes self-reference, thus becoming part of its own narrative history.

4.5 Parallel Texts. The story within a story is nothing new. The tales of *A Thousand Nights and a Night*, can stand independently but are framed by Shahrazad's story. Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Blind Assassin*, contains a novel named *The Blind Assassin*, as well as numerous letters and documents, but it is an ordinary self-contained text. Neither the framing story, nor the interior story can stand alone. Stories have often been continued through series of texts, such as serials, a format once used in the movies and now a standard of episodic TV and multiple part stories.

Because new media have changed the way texts are distributed as well as the way they are produced, I would suggest that it is now possible to create multiple works that are interconnected, yet independent. If a work makes reference to an imaginary text, why not create that text as another work with its own metatextual history.

5.

---

[1] Franz Kafka, *Metamorphosis*
[2] Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*
[3] Italo Calvino, *If on a winter's night a traveler.*
[4] Claudine Isé, in the catalog for Sandow Birk's *In Smog and Thunder: Historical Works from The Great War of the Californias* (San Francisco, Last Gasp, 2002)
[5] N. Katharine Hayles, *How We Became Post Human*
[6] Umberto Eco, *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* (New York, Harcourt, Inc. 2004)
[7] Michael Mahan, *Computer Animations as Image Generators for Conceptual Art* and *Using 3-D Models as Image Generators for Digital Fiction*
[8] Ian Caldwell and Dustin Thomason, *The Rule of Four* (New York, Dial Press, 2004)