Call for Proposals: D|N|A Post-Symposium Publication

Database | Narrative | Archive: An International Symposium on Nonlinear Digital Storytelling was held in Montréal, 13-15 May 2011. D|N|A attracted over sixty educators, artists, filmmakers, scholars and technologists from North America, Europe and Australia. (Documentation here: www.dnasymposium.com.)

D|N|A was conceived in light of some emergent practices in the digital arts and humanities centring on interactivity, the web, documentary, and 'new' media. During what proved to be a highly successful gathering, almost forty of the participants gave lightning talks: highly condensed, 5-minute presentations focused on a 'burning question' they each wanted to open up for discussion.

As a way to further explore these questions, we invite expressions of interest for a post-symposium, peer-reviewed web publication that will be produced in Scalar, a nonlinear experimental publishing platform. This Call For Proposals is divided into seven separate calls (see below), each one conceived and written by one of our contributing editors (Sheila Schroeder, Kim Sawchuk, David Clark, Will Luers, Dayna McLeod, Chris Hanson, Adrian Miles), drawing on some of the most pressing questions raised during D|N|A. Responses can be in any medium suitable for publication on the web: linear scholarship; nonlinear creative writing; hypertext; photography; sound; video; film, or any combination of these media. The contributing editors will make their own editorial selections, which will be overseen by the project editors, Matt Soar and Monika Kin Gagnon.

Prospective contributors are asked to prepare an expression of interest (up to 300 words) responding to one of the questions below, and send it in the body of an email to the respective contributing editor and cc the symposium organizers by **Sept. 15th 2011.**

Questions in brief:

1. **What new ethical considerations arise for producers/directors of nonlinear digital storytelling?**

2. **What new inventions, tools and methods can be used for digital and database narrative?**

3. **What about the Plot?**

4. **How do we give shape to a user's cognitive and emotional engagement with database narratives?**

5. **How do we think about the lifespan of a web-based project?**

6. **How might scholars explore interactive and digital technologies as forms of "procedural scholarship"?**

7. **How do directors, audiences, and texts change as a consequence of database narrative?**

Questions in Detail:

1. What new ethical considerations arise for the producers/directors of non-linear digital storytelling?

STORYTELLERS, especially those in the non-fiction realm, have long been aware of ethical issues. According to The Center for Social Media's publication, **Honest Truths: Documentary Filmmakers on Ethical Challenges in Their Work**, contemporary filmmakers express ethical pressure in "three conflicting sets of responsibilities: to their subjects, their viewers, and their own artistic vision and production exigencies."

In the world of filmmaking, in which non-linear digital narratives partly reside, ethical issues have unfolded with each new filmic mode (Nichols, 2001, 2010). From the ethics of informed consent in films like Frederick Wiseman's **Titicut Follies**, (1967) to more recent controversies expressed in relation to Errol Morris's **Standard Operating Procedure** (2008) and the added exposure of already humiliated detainees at Abu Ghraib, ethical decision-making is at the core of documentary filmmaking. This call asks for proposals related to the following question: What new ethical considerations arise for producers/directors of non-linear digital storytelling? In other words, what additional ethical considerations do filmmakers/creative artists need to be cognizant of when their work is database-driven and expressed on the world wide web? Do viewer feedback tools put subjects at greater risk? Does informed consent necessarily change because these works reside on the internet? Proposals may

choose to analyze existing work(s) as a case study and consult the work(s) creators. Proposals may also consider a new framework of ethical considerations for creators of interactive documentaries.

Email: Sheila.Schroeder@du.edu
And cc: dnasymposium@gmail.com

2. What new inventions, tools and methods can be used for digital and database narrative?

DESIGNING a non-linear digital story in multi-modal form often means that, as research-creators, we are collecting a myriad of materials in multiple formats: bits of video, sound, scans of images, photographs, textual documents etc etc. The ability to create an interactive narrative that mobilizes these "digital assets" is increasingly dependent on the ability to find, sift, and sort through what we have collected, not only as an individual producer, but as creative collaborators and co-producers. Organizing, tagging, creating keywords, deciding on protocols for versioning are part of the challenge, and nightmare, for digital media producers.

How might we fashion ways to share information collaboratively and across multiple networks of dispersed users united only by their commitment to contribute to a project? How might we do so without losing our minds, or drowning in a veritable sea of information? How do we create an effective database that can foster creative collaboration and innovation? What expertise, from what other disciplines, do we need to

nurture and develop to know how to build an effective database and an archive that can be mobilized to create database narratives? How do we systematically archive this database? Who do we allow access to the raw resources, the "assets" we collect?

These are pragmatic questions that affect the conditions for creative collaboration and innovation. Open source software for managing a collective bibliography (eg Zotero) to digital asset management programs, like Resourcespace, are more than simply tools but structuring devices for creative collaboration. This call for proposals invites you to reflect on the tools and methods that you have used for digital archiving, database-building, and creative collaboration. It invites stories of both successes and failures in collaboration and 'tool-making' as a response to the question "what tools and methods can be used for the creation of digital archives and database narratives?" It also invites you to be speculative: what tools or methods do not yet exist? What features could, should, might it have?

Email Kim Sawchuk: kim.sawchuk@sympatico.ca
And cc: dnasymposium@gmail.com

middles, and ends. This means that our pleasure in the cinema has been derived from our submissive position within an essentially masochistic relationship with the cinematic apparatus.

Now that stories can be interactive, threaded, and accessed through a database, we are creating a new ways of using narrative material. What, then, is the role for traditional plot devices like the MacGuffin, or the plant, or rising action in this new situation? Which plot devices work in a non-linear world and which don't? What are the characteristics and distinctive features of some new narrative devices that can be deployed in interactive narratives? Can we name them and start to identify the new psychological states that they might explore? This call asks for suggestions and discussion about what are the characteristics, advantages, and imperatives of the new dramatic devices that propel us through interactive and database narratives.

Email David Clark: dclark@nscad.ca
And cc: dnasymposium@gmail.com

3. What about the Plot?

THE ROLE of the plot as a narrative device is central in much filmmaking. The ubiquitous presence in Hollywood films of the boilerplate 'Hero's Journey' plot, as discussed by Joseph Campbell, is a testament to this. Traditional narrative film has optimized plot devices for passive audiences who are subjected to an inherently linear progression of stories with beginnings,

4. How do we give shape to a user's cognitive and emotional engagement with database narratives?

AS AUTHORS of database narratives, how do we give shape to a user's cognitive and emotional engagement? In linear forms, a narrative voice can shape and control point-of-view, patterns of cohesiveness, levels of reflective distance, pace and anticipation. In data-

base narratives, much of this control is handed over to a user. How can we use link structures, metadata, navigation and interface design to reinvent an authorial voice? What are the strategies for turning our database narratives into more human artifacts, thick with multiple paths, but still aware of the incompleteness and artifice of any telling?

Email Will Luers: wluers@gmail.com
And cc: dnasymposium@gmail.com

5. How do we think about the lifespan of a web-based project?

HOW do we think about the lifespan of a web-based project whether it is a website, a Korsakow database film, Scalar book or interactive work? How does funding (or lack there of) impact the lifespan of a web-based project? How does DIY culture thrive/survive in this environment? With evolving digital storytelling, is there ever an end in [site], can it be traced and what kind of projects is this transparency critical to? Digital projects can now have multiple versions of themselves in which their evolving intent and process is preserved in each new iteration. We see this type of content management in wiki projects where edits and changes are corrected, tracked and traced, preserving a level of transparency that allows creators to revert to previous content. Likewise, software developers use revision control to enable multiple users to make changes to the same active files, which can then be compared, marked, labeled stored and merged. All of these changes affect the final outcome, but are these

iterations integral to a "final" version? Can there ever truly be a "final" version of a web-based project in this context, or is that end marked by when the money runs out?

Email Dayna McLeod: dayna@videotron.ca
And cc: dnasymposium@gmail.com

6. How might scholars explore interactive and digital technologies as forms of 'procedural scholarship'?

INNOVATIVE publishing platforms such as Scalar facilitate the production of multimodal and non-linear scholarship and allow authors to build multiple paths through their writing; Scalar also serves as the software environment for this publication. How do this and other technologies and tools shape and extend our own understanding of what academic argumentation is—and could be? Despite the availability of a growing number of software tools and hardware platforms that assist digital research and scholarship, the vast majority of the presentation of such work remains linear in its construction. At best, "multimedia" scholarly work often consists of briefer than article-length writing accompanied by images, audio, and/or video to enhance or elucidate the writing. While these are unquestionably constructive in their application of interactive technologies, many of such scholarly works are remarkably similar to the printed books and journals that preceded them.

Conceptions and implementations of non-linear schol-

arship are by no means a recent development, yet instances of such scholarly projects still remain few and far between. However, new technologies and practices are engendering a radical shift for academic authorship and argumentation, in part the product of the increasingly expansive capabilities of digital tools combined with a simultaneous easing of the learning curve necessitated for their use. Tara McPherson describes the multimodal scholar, who not only uses digital tools for the purposes of research but also leverages such technologies for authoring interactive scholarly works; in a similar vein, Janet Murray argues that electronic narrative employs what she terms "procedural authorship" whereby the author establishes the rules of the texts and the rules by which the reader or user engages with the text, effectively allowing the user to weave her own narrative thread according to the author's rules.

As we confront the challenges and embrace the possibilities inherent to the construction of non-linear scholarly argument, it is useful to combine Murray's concept of procedural authorship with McPherson's multimodal scholarship. In this nascent form of procedural scholarship, the author may construct a far more elaborate framework for the reader/user to traverse in order to create multiple threads through the author's research and lines of reasoning. How might scholars benefit from interactive and digital technologies and simultaneously help further the same tools? What rhetorical possibilities are afforded by the tight integration of video and aural elements into academic texts beyond the normative models already offered in standard multimedia scholarship? What lessons should scholars learn from non-linear storytellers and documentarians and what mistakes should they not replicate? What are the pitfalls and possibilities of

such scholarship? How do the relationships between author/reader, form/content, and presentation/argumentation shift in procedural scholarship?

Email Chris Hanson: cphanson@syr.edu
And cc: dnasymposium@gmail.com

7. How do directors, audiences, and texts change as a consequence of database narrative?

MAKERS and audiences have largely been taught to expect stories to have a beginning, quite a lot of middle, and a particular end. However, in database driven architectures, while there will always be something that must be a beginning, we seem to have systems that create stories consisting largely only of middles. These middles have shots, sequences, and episodes that form the basis of the database from which computational systems and audiences are able to make selections. As a consequence of this what counts as a story, as a 'whole' story, and what it means to direct such stories appears to be very different from the traditional forms that we are trained in, and acculturated to. This raises interesting questions about being a director and viewer of database narratives, as well as for narrative itself. For example, as a director of such works, how do you ensure key information is made available, at the right time, to your audience? Is there even such a concept as 'key information' and a 'right time' given the possible fluidity of database narratives? Can stories still move, inexorably, towards a final point if that final point is now mutable, plural, even possibly audience defined?

For audiences, how do we know if we have seen all of a work? Is this even a meaningful question? If not when is enough, enough? What does it mean as a director for this to be decided by a viewer and not the creator? If a story is largely middle what strategies do I need to understand and enjoy such stories? Do database narratives require a new poetics of narrative? Is it just a different one? Is such a poetics best suited to what might be characterised as 'ambient' narratives, stories that describe, situate, explore, and list but don't necessarily 'tell'? Is nonfiction more suited to such a poetics than fiction? What examples can we use from existing traditions to outline, sketch, propose, and provoke this poetics? If such works don't have and end, or endings, in the usual sense are they even stories? Are we asking too much of the term? And, finally, do we need new terms for all of this? Are readers now co-creators? Are directors now facilitators or guides? Is the terminology of cinema now inadequate as while we still have shots these keep reforming into different sequences, which in turn produce sequences of sequences! This call for ideas encourages you to contribute papers, manifestoes, propositions and experiments that want to investigate how database narrative conceives of the director, the text and the audience where none are sovereign.

Email Adrian Miles: adrian.miles@rmit.edu.au
And cc: dnasymposium@gmail.com