New Media Methodologies, applied

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Abstract

I have observed that within the new media ecology there are currently three research approaches: developing media specific poetics for digital works only (e.g. ludology for computer games); revising and development of traditional discourses and media through consideration of new media works within the same media thread (eg: internet movies for film studies); applying to all works — traditional and new media — a new media filter. The last, a 'new media approach' is a spectrum of conscious application to theoretical and practical investigation. The researcher can utilise methodologies developed in response to the use and influence of electronic technologies and can apply new media design principles and poetics to criticism of traditional works whilst the artist can apply new media design and poetics to traditional media. This presentation will outline the new media methodologies I am utilising in my thesis.

Introduction

I have observed that within the new media ecology there are currently three research approaches: developing media specific poetics for digital works only (e.g. ludology for computer games); revising and development of traditional discourses and media through consideration of new media works within the same media thread (eg: internet movies for film studies); applying to all works — traditional and new media whether pure or hybrid — a new media filter. The first approach, the emergence of various new media poetics, has utilised traditional media poetics whether within the media thread or not (e.g. using literary criticism on films) but is directed towards emancipation from the past. The second, developing traditional media through comparison, is an effort to test and clarify past poetics and therefore traditional materiality as a veracious endeavor. The third, a new media filter, is an inevitable occurrence but is distinguished from cultural studies — for instance 'cyberculture' (Tofts, 1997, 1999, 2003), 'interface culture' (Johnson, 1997) and so on — by being a conscious understanding and application on all analysis and design. As Alan Sondheim has posited:

> 'What I would honestly propose is that new media is not a _field_ but a _filter_. In this sense, fifty years from now, there would still be new media — not as a discipline, but a loose domain critiquing and producing within and upon whatever has come along at that point.
>
> In this sense, new media is not a discipline or noun or product or production but an ongoing process.' (Sondheim, 2004)

It is the awkwardly dubbed 'new media approach' that I recognise as my own in my exegesis and creative work.

The New Media Approach

Sven Birkerts, an active campaigner for the conscious understanding of the negative impact of the electronic on society, recognised that we are going through a 'millennial transformation of society' (Birkerts, 1994, p.5). This transformation affects all, including the literary: the linear system from writer, editor, publisher, bookseller to reader is being 'bent into a pretzel' and reading and writing is altered to the point that 'the old act of slowly reading a serious book becomes an elegiac exercise' (Birkerts, 1994, p.5-6).

For Birkerts, 'literary practice, mainly reading, registers and transmits the shocks of the new' (Birkerts, 1994, p.3). Not only is shock inflicted or imprinted in text and text reading, but so too do 'changes in the immediate sphere of print refer outward to the totality; they map on a smaller scale the riot of society forces' (Birkerts, 1994, p.3). Birkerts contests that because the 'medium affects the message' society needs to be conscious and wary of its electronic transformation (Birkerts, 2003). Birkerts acknowledged that it is possible for one to experience a work beyond the medium, elevating us beyond the ludicrous assumption that all anyone can do now is think electronically: a 'skilled and serious reader' can 'peel away the husks or otherwise read compensatorily in order to get at the pure word (rather, its chimera). But to manage this requires discipline and a high degree of awareness, and the ordinary reader generally lacks both' (Birkerts, 2003). Researchers and practitioners are not ordinary readers and are therefore able to not just look beyond the husk, but also understand what a husk is made of and drape it over alien content.

Long before Sven Birkerts, Walter Ong noted the technological influences on a culture with his theories on 'primary orality,' 'literacy' and 'secondary orality' (Ong, 1982). Similar to Birkerts, Ong notes that the orality-literacy shifts have been most keenly registered in narrative studies. But unlike Birkerts, Ong identifies traits of the electronically influenced culture — secondary orality — that are 'remarkably like' primary orality (pre-print): 'its participatory mystique, its fostering of a communal sense, its concentration on the present moment, and even its use of formulas' (ibid.,p.136).

Through these examples it is clear that writing, publishing and reading in the new media ecology has changed, but have been prefigured before new media. It is only now that they are being recognised, developed and enacted in the present new media ecological environment after a long incubation throughout previous media and theoretical systems.

The 'new media approach' therefore is a spectrum of conscious application to theoretical and practical investigation. The researcher can one, utilise methodologies developed in response to the use and influence of electronic technologies; and two, apply new media design principles and poetics to analysis of traditional works; whilst the artist can apply new media design and poetics to traditional media.

For my thesis I am employing the principles behind the methodologies developed in the new media ecology and applying new media design and poetics to traditional media. Today I will outline three new media methodologies and give examples on how I have applied them.

New Media Methodologies

Heuretics

Gregory Ulmer has researched methodology in the new media ecology for two decades (1989, 1994, 2003). The dynamic, user-directed phenomenon of hypertext and the confluence of multiple media in a computer, hypermedia, influences the experience of reading and the writing process. The logocentric rhetoric of academia — of argumentative writing — does not espouse the phenomenon of 'intuitive', 'multinodal' thinking which was indeed prefigured by Vanneaver Bush in 1945 with his 'memex' machine (Bush, 1945). In the era of 'electracy' (Ulmer, 1994, 1996, 2002), 'secondary-orality' (Ong, 1984) and the electronic transformation of society (Birkerts, 1994, 1996, 2003) methods that bridge the writing and thinking in print and electronic technology are needed along with methods that recognise the changes to communicating invention in academia. Ulmer's *Heuretics* is the method of invention from theory. It 'is intended as a means to achieve that transition in the most productive way, including using book strategies to help with the invention process and revising paper practices in the light of new possibilities of thought manifested in electronic technology.' It 'contributes to what Barthes referred to as "the return of the poetician" — one who is concerned with how a work is *made*. This concern does not stop with analysis or comparative scholarship but conducts such scholarship in preparation for the design of a rhetoric/poetics leading to the production of new work' (Ulmer, 1994, p.4). It is intended to facilitate the creation of new work. Indeed the method should be continually revised and be co-created along with the investigation. The writing method to actuate this approach is 'chorography'.

Chorography

Ulmer's 'chorography' is a pedagogical method for learning electronic writing to retrain the academic (Ulmer, 1994). Argumentative writing delivers one path to a result, however in the electronic apparatus the user uncovers rather than follows, and so:

> 'Chorography is designed to introduce into the narratives and arguments of the print apparatus a Heuretic code, to supplement and replace the Hermeneutic code and its drive to reduce enigmas to truth. The rationale for disengaging curiosity from "truth" in this way derives from the transformation of literacy underway in the electronic apparatus.' (p.106)

The assumption behind Ulmer's hyperrhetoric is that with an illocutionary force capable of espousing the multinodal traversal peculiar to electronic technology and research it is possible to embody the 'eureka experience' so that readers may transform into 'active receivers'. Therefore, the method requires a particular way of writing by the researcher, now a chorographer, that reveals 'intuitions' and 'paradigms'. To facilitate this inscribing the chorographer reads texts in the same manner. For Ulmer, a 'chorographer reads disciplinary texts the way a Method actor reads a (screen)play' (Ulmer, 1994, p.118). In this sense the investigator suddenly has an intellectual and textual approach that reveals the practice of invention. Another methodology that enacts the process of discovery is found in the field of Artificial Intelligence.

Critical Technical Practice

Philip Agre, in his discourse on method in the field of artificial intelligence, *Computation and Human Experience*, comments that technical practitioners are, like all of us, 'products of places and times' (Agre, 1997, p. 23). For Agre, it is for this very reason that a 'Critical Technical Practice' is needed and should be modeled on 'the impossibility of foundations, guiding itself by a continually unfolding awareness of its own workings as a historically specific practice' (ibid.). Science is obviously seeking to recognise the individual, the subjective and cultural influence on investigation — an awareness that arts, with its recognition of the ambiguity and complexity of art, is familiar. For Agre, 'critical self-awareness' is a necessary condition for the progress of technical work' (Agre, 1997, 23).

As an artist and technician, an 'artech' or 'artest' perhaps, my inquiry and creation can benefit from the hybrid adaptation of arts and science methodologies, fields that are in fact participating in their own hybrid discourse.

In AI and Art we have two disciplines that are concerned with phenomena that can never be fully explained. They are both reliant on the understanding of the self. Contributions will always be incremental and directed towards a goal that is not understood and can never be controlled. Both require ongoing theory and application in a cyclical process. As Schank and Reisbeck observed:

> 'Thus, for us, theory creation is a process of thought, followed by programming, then by additional thought, with each serving the other. Thus AI really operated under a novel view of science. Normal scientific method holds that first a theory is postulated, and then tested and found to be right or wrong. But in AI our theories are never that complete, because the processes we are theorizing about are so complex. Thus our tests are never completely decisive. We build programs that show us what to concentrate on in building the next program.' (Schank and Reisbeck, 1981, p: 4)

New Media Methodology Applied

Inspired by Ulmer's call for paradigms that encompass all meanings of keywords and Agre's call for acknowledgement of a 'historically specific practice' I have observed that the object of inquiry, of invention in my case, can be a microcosm of a larger context. *The Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines 'polymorphism' as 'the occurrence of something in several different forms' (Moore (ed.), 1997, p.1040). The use of 'polymorphic' therefore, is intended to be directly attributed to the narrative model proposed — the abstract structure of one storyworld over multiple media; and semaphoric of the fluidity and constancy of narrative grammars — indicating how narrative has many schemas.

The literature considered will therefore be a necessary review of narrative grammars for the purposes of researching what narratological inquiry has delivered and has not thus far. The review will also illustrate the secondary concern of 'polymorphic narrative' — that of changes to narrative grammars over time and media. The structure of literature review is informed by the 'concept explication' system developed by Steven H. Chaffee. For Chaffee, 'theorizing, consists of an interplay among ideas, evidence, and inference'

(Chaffee 1991). This approach continues the methodological thread of heuretics in that the review is the 'generation of invention out of theory' and is delivered chorographically to facilitate a heuretic mode in the reader.

The Invention

The creative work of my thesis, the invention, is an experiment in creating a transmedia fiction that adheres to the polymorphic narrative grammar I propose. It consists of two media channels: print and the web. Specifically, the print is a long-short story and on the web is a software agent. The software agent used is a chatterbot, which is also known as a 'chatbot' but more commonly as a 'bot'. A bot is a software program that uses natural-language processing to 'hold' conversations. The print story and the bot join together through the use of the polymorphic narrative to form a new multichannel story type, as a subset of transmedia: transfiction.

Role of Creative Work

The creation of the transmedia fiction was created parallel to the proposed narrative model. The polymophic narrative model is therefore the result of the theoretical investigation and practical application. This was necessary since there are no previous transmedia narrative models with which to begin with as a 'sheet of assertion'; the mix of channels is highly experimental and has not been implemented before in fiction or non-fiction settings; the creative process facilitates decisions not stimulated in a non-practical environment; and the research is human-centered. The model is then tested, informally through my own and fellow researchers use. There are two stages in which the creative work is present therefore: during development of the narrative model and then during the testing. The role of the creative work during the development of the theoretical model is to:

a) provide a workbench with which factors such as limitations of the software, the programmer and current narrative grammars can be identified and then are either worked around, adopted or transformed;
b) facilitate the capture of decisions, approaches and problem-solving techniques only stimulated in the creative creation process;
c) allow informal micro testing of the human response to the transmedia navigation and storyworld.

The main objective during the testing of the transmedia fiction is to see if the human tester does navigate the print and bot text as per the prompts provided. To do so means the cues are working, the human wants to follow the prompts and so could be seen to be in 'flow' — which is the combination of immersion and engagement (Yellowless Douglas and Hargadon, 2001), and that the bot has been programmed effectively to facilitate transmedia navigation.

As you have probably gathered the methodologies presented here are fluid and inchoate. They are in-formation and I suspect will always be. What is clear in the new media

ecology is that like technology and our use of it, there is never a final state and completion of expertise. It is indeed exciting and a new experience to be in the midst of this emergence of hybrid approaches to research and design. As Donna Haraway, a thinker familiar with, and the champion of, the cyborg recommends:

> '"for *pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries, and for *responsibility* in their construction."'
> (Haraway, 1991, p.150 as quoted in Aarseth, 1997, p.183)

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