

Storytelling, narrative and the digital database

– an unfinished project

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This paper presents information about a series related artworks which constitute a single, and as yet, unfinished project that raises questions about current artistic activity concerned with representations of the past.

A prominent art critic recently told me that it was a bad idea for artists to offer explanations of their work as they risk either grandiose claims or reductionism. In presenting information about this research I have confined myself to a small number of related topics. If space allowed I could identify many other issues arising from the work and so balance the reductive approach and the grandiose.

Within the theory of narratology a distinction is made between story and plot, between the sequence of events which happen within the narrative, and the structured and expanded presentation of those events as narrative. This paper discusses two artworks which investigate these concepts when both events and structure are subject to the organisational and conceptual potential of digital databases.

Manovich (2001) identifies the database as one of the two main forms within media design and describes how the nature of databases has been altered by digitisation. The structured collection of information in a card-index is transformed when it has been inputted onto a digital database which allows almost instant access to the information, but also provides the means for using many sorting, ordering, and reordering systems. He observes that “these computer-based forms migrate back into culture at large, both literally and conceptually...a computer database becomes a new metaphor that we use to conceptualize individual and collective cultural memory (p 218)”.

Furthermore, he asserts that “database and narrative are natural enemies” (p225), and while a database “can support narrative...there is nothing in the logic of the medium itself that would foster its generation” (p228). These statements raise a number of questions. How do database forms migrate into the real world? How are these database forms changed in the real world? In the loop between the digital and real world characterised as “transcoding”, how do these changes migrate back into the digital world? If we use the database to conceptualise cultural memory and narrative is the enemy, then what will our cultural memory consist of?

The two artworks under discussion – *Surveiller* (2004) and *reports from an agent in the field* (2007) – utilise the information from two databases holding information about visual art events held in Belfast, Northern Ireland, during particular time frames. The first of these, which was used in the artwork *Surveiller*, was compiled in 2004 and contains details of visual art events – exhibitions, performances, interventions etc. – which took place between March 1968 and March 2001. For the second database, used in *reports from an agent in the field*, the existing material from 1968 to 1995 was updated and augmented and new material for the period 1960 to 1968 was added.

The information in the datasets - over 3500 records - was compiled from primary sources including newspapers, magazines - listings, reviews and advertisements - and ephemeral material such as invitations and press releases held in various libraries, archives and public and private collections, including the National Irish Visual Arts Library.

The database record for each event consists of information entered in a number of fields: type; start-date; end-date; artist/group name; title of exhibition; venue; source 1; and source 2. The “type” field records if the event was a one-person, two-person, etc. up to six-person exhibition, or a group exhibition. One of the objectives in building the database was to name as many artists as possible, within reason, if that information was available. The number six was set as the upper limit in naming individual artists, after which the event would be considered a group show and the individual exhibitors were not named. These databases provided the source material for the artworks, but are not themselves artworks.

When the art events database was initiated as the basis for the *Surveiller* installation, the intention was to build a parallel chronology to that published in each issue of *Fortnight*, a political and cultural magazine published in Northern Ireland from 1971. The *Fortnight* chronology, and those compiled by Deutsch and Magowan in 1973 and 1974, related to

political events in Northern Ireland. These were a form of database, providing dates and details of the circumstances of violent events such as murders and explosions, plus political reports organised in chronological order. *Fortnight* is still published and each issue contains a chronological list of events from the previous month. The accumulated data is available online through the CAIN project. This accumulation of information acts as a repository for multiple narratives. The chronological structuring of information about random or unrelated events can also have the effect of implying cause and effect when none in fact exists.

The multi-media work *Surveiller* presented the data in both fixed and searchable formats within an installational setting. The data was screen printed onto Perspex panels, one for each year, and is mounted along one wall of the gallery. The panels were of a uniform width but the height of each individual panel depended on the number of records for each year. The effect visually was like an audio wave-form, as activity expanded and contracted during the period. An office – with table, chair, computer and filing cabinet was set up at one end of the gallery. The information from the database was available in a searchable form on the computer. Visitors to the exhibition could search the database, but as they did so they were being filmed up by a surveillance camera, which was transmitting these images to a monitor mounted at the entrance of the gallery.

In *reports from an agent in the field*, an audio visual installation, a different approach to the use of the database was taken. It was possible for the viewer of *Surveiller* to construct narratives from the contents of the database, but in this second work Manovich's statement that "the database represents the world as a list of items, and it refuses to order this list" (p. 225) was examined. This installation explored the possibilities of exploiting the digital database to resist narrative, and how this might manifest itself in the real world.

The information in the database was ordered, according to date, in descending order, from December 1995 to January 1960. The information for each year from four fields - date, artist/group name, exhibition title, and venue name - was then exported separately, providing four separate scripts for each year and 144 scripts in total. These scripts were read aloud by four individuals, and recorded live in the gallery where the finished work would be later presented.

All the readers started reading the scripts for each year together, but depending on the amount of information in their individual script, finished at different times, the person reading the information on dates always being last to finish. During the reading of each script one word (black on a white background) appeared on the screen. The words – date, artist/group, title or venue – indicated the subject matter of the script. The subject matter for each reader changed with each year in sequence through the four available subjects. As each reader finished the individual year information, their screen went dark. In the blacked out gallery space, as the last reader finished the gallery was momentarily in complete darkness until all the screens lit up again as the readers started on the following year's scripts.

In many respects *Surveiller* and *reports from an agent in the field* conform to the parameters identified by Foster in his 2004 essay, *An Archival Impulse*, which illustrate the distinguishing characteristics of some artists activity in the archival field. These include an intention "to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present" (p 40), the use of installation as a format, and the use of informal archives as a source and also an outcome of the process. Smith (2007), writing about Heather and Ivan Morison and Jamie Shovlin, also relates these processes to the creation of narratives and fictions which result in a form of "paraliterature" (p. 16) The types of artwork discussed by these authors results in "an unstable and personalised ordering of the world" (Smith p. 13) arising from alternative systems for ordering the material.

Both *Surveiller* and *reports from an agent in the field*, with their accumulation of disparate facts presented as installations, conform in part to these descriptions. However, in several important respects they deviate from them. In order to extract the data quantities of original and photocopied documents were assembled creating a distinct collection or informal archive, but these were not exhibited and remained hidden. The methodology used in amassing the information for *Surveiller* and *reports from an agent in the field* has more in common with

traditional humanities research than the “quasi-archival logic” described by Foster (p5). Neither is there any fictive element, as described by Smith, at work. Foster explicitly excludes databases, and digital databases in particular, from the realm of artists’ archiving practices. He makes reference to the tension between narrative and the database as identified by Manovich but does not explore this.

Kinder (2002) has defined database narratives in relation to film as arising from “the selection of particular data (characters, images, sounds, events) from a series of databases or paradigms, which are then combined to generate specific tales” and through their structure expose the selection process, revealing “the arbitrariness of the particular choices made, and the possibility of making other combinations which would create alternative stories”. This definition embraces the notion of a unified process and output which results in something called “database narrative”. Manovich questions this combination of “database” and “narrative”, suggesting that they are incompatible components in storytelling.

Prior to making the first of these works I had produced a number of video and audio works which explored memory. When we use the word “memory” we often use it in the sense of personal, autobiographical memory, a form of narrative we tell about ourselves. Alternatively it may denote shared or collective memory, from the informal reminiscence of a group to the officially sanctioned history of a country. In all of these cases there is an underlying process of construction at work – the shaping of events to produce some coherent story. The personal, autobiographical, storytelling memory in which the exact time and place associated with events are recalled, is classified as episodic memory in cognitive neuroscience. Semantic memory, which together with episodic memory constitute declarative memory, “is concerned with information that typically is retrieved independently of recalling the time and place in which it was acquired (e.g., word meanings, general knowledge, scientific facts)” (Bechtel, 2007, p54). My personal interest in memory was in the mechanisms of the brain, how memories are laid down, replayed, stored and retrieved. The separation of the data inputted in the databases from its sources, provides a parallel with the concept of semantic memory and a distance from autobiographical narrative.

The content in both *Surveiller* and reports *from an agent in the field* was derived from digital databases, which provided an additional layer of distance between the events in the past and the present. This distance was achieved through the migration of the database logic from the digital to the real world. In order to complete this process the next step will be to migrate these altered visions from the real world back to the digital world, creating a stand alone digital object.

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