Are New Media Narratives Inhuman(e)? Over-Lubricating the Frictions Between Theory and Practice

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Two threads of our collaborative activities in the past year have led us to question the status of the self, the body, and narrative in emerging new media. The first thread was the posting of a Web site in January, 1999 that brought together many aspects of the research we have been conducting over the last decade. As we will describe below, this research looked at the boundaries between humans and technology and the narratives that get produced at this interface.

This same issue of the human/machine/narrative interface was made even more explicit for us six months after our Web site was posted. On June 4, 1999, we participated in a meeting at The University of Southern California billed as a "National Conference on Interactive Narrative" (see the conference Web site at http://www.annenberg.edu/labyrinth/conference.html). Titled, "Interactive Frictions: At the Pressure Point Between Theory and Practice," the conference was described in press releases as a meeting which "brings together an international array of more than 75 scholars, visionaries, and artists to investigate the language, art, culture, and theory of interactive narrative and to explore the impact of new media technologies on the construction of personal and public narratives, histories, and memories."

The conference was part of a three-year initiative called the "Labyrinth Project" that called for "expanding the language of interactive narrative." According to the project's Web site, the goals of the overall Labyrinth Project were:

> To expand the language, art, culture and theory of interactive narrative.

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> To create experimental story spaces, database narrative networks, and multiple-user interactive fictions that are emotionally compelling, that combine filmic language with interactive storytelling, and that continue to push the envelope of new digital media across multiple platforms.
>
> To establish USC as a primary training ground for new talent in this medium and as an R&D site both for experimental artists and industry. (see http://www.annenberg.edu/labyrinth/conference.-html)

The conference featured some of the key figures in new media scholarship and cyberculture (including Brenda Laurel, George Landow, Sandy Stone, and Janet Murray) who, with their contrasting styles and variable success with actually using new media technologies, presented a telling—and confusing—picture of this point where theory and practice meet. Whether the presenter gave a standard academic lecture illustrated by new media examples (Landow and Murray) or created performances based in personal narratives with no mediated components (Stone and Laurel), the result was something other than an interactive event. From the opening introductions through the round tables (which offered little opportunity for dialogue—another interactive absence), there was little that suggested a rethinking of how media, presenter, and audience might interact. Ordinarily, we have only a kind of voyeuristic interest in critical reviews of conferences; in this case, a critical examination of our experiences at the Interactive Frictions gathering foregrounds some of the essential issues at play in discussions of the "new media" and their (potential) relation to things like narrative, interactivity, mind, and body.

"We are thrilled and terrified that human beings have grasped the power to represent the world in a way they have not done before," explained Janet Murray about the potential of new media narratives. But when Murray began her articulation of the 'different pleasures' that media professionals seek from new media, the confusion of the 'multiple methodologies' and 'multiple aesthetics' they bring to their new media projects was discouraging, if only because of the distance it seems to put between us now and some distant future where new media are no longer new but finally fulfill their narrative promise. Murray referred several times to new and different pleasures made possible by the new (and presumably different) media, but was not specific about these pleasures.

At least one specific pleasure punctuated the next presentation. Following Murray was Sandy Stone who offered an unmediated performance about her life with technology. The odd stories were quilted together into a narrative that was presumably an example of *enlacement*, a French term Stone applied to the "relations in new media environments," presumably another form of web weaving or connecting disparate elements. At the end of the narrative, Stone reviewed her tiny note sheets and felt she had to offer one more story. Stone proceeded to "remap" her body so that her clitoris was in her hand and she could masturbate in collaboration with the audience who had been asked (begged, actually) by Stone to cheer loudly and "with abandon." A breathless and satisfied Stone left these two members of the audience wishing for a more mutually satisfying relationship between narrative, new media, and body/self. A colleague, to whom we'd described this event, remarked that it sounded "distastefully voyeuristic." We concur. Indeed, the issue here is that Stone's performance, despite its pretense of 'interaction' with audience members, was an example of how inadequate understanding of the new media circulates even among those presumably working in those media.

George Landow's attempt to discuss hypertext narratives was sidetracked by the failure of the technology. At least sixteen examples of the failure of the machines or the media programs themselves to do the work they were designed for raised a crucial question: what has to happen to make narratives partners with the technology and not a competing interest? The failure of the projections to be large enough or bright enough or designed with the correct contrast between text and background required Landow to read all the sample narratives himself, something he could have done more easily from a piece of low-tech paper. It made him the only necessary form of media, the translator and the machine at the same time.

These featured speakers and others in the conference should have, in some ways, defined the territories of interactivity, computers, narrative, and maybe even identity, the body, the self. When narratives were strong, media disappeared. When media was strong, it refused to cooperate with narrative, disrupting it with calls of, "I know this is hard to read," and "Is this microphone on?"

(As we are typing this, we are also sitting at Louise's desk, looking at three monitors, on two of which are the panoramic QuickTime Virtual Reality images we plan to import into our Web site. For several days, we have been playing with the technology, experimenting with image making and its connections and discon-

nections to the material already in the Web site. We have been pushing the technology—and frequently crashing it—in the effort to discover what it, and we, can do in this 'new medium.')

The difference between your own computer crashing while you're exploring the new media, and technology that fails to work for public presentations of cutting edge narrative forms is that the presenter in front of a room with 300 people ends up becoming the embodiment of the narrative. When the technology doesn't work in public, it's irrelevant whether the narratives were made with the new media because the presenter ends up doing the work of the translator and is the locus of the narrative, the shaman, the storyteller doing an old-fashioned transmission of a story to an audience. The presenter is certainly human, certainly fleshy, but is unable to provide entry into the very medium in which the narrative is supposed to dwell. We are not objecting to any individual's inability to use the technology effectively; rather, we are suggesting that any discussions of the 'new media' must also include an exploration of the ways in which these media do—and do not—lend themselves to public use, public understanding, common knowledge. That is, the connections between the deployment of the new media and the flesh and blood embodiment(s) of the creators of the mediated narratives remained, at a conference putatively devoted to both, largely unexplored. Media failure should have been discussed theoretically and practically, not dismissed with apologies.

Our role in the conference was to present our Web site in one of the breakout sessions that were designed to give more examples of new media in action. We presented a discussion of the Web site we had designed because the conference seemed to promise more and better ways of understanding the same connection between theory and practice that our ongoing research had been addressing. While our session was plagued by the same refusal of the technology to cooperate with the live presenters (hardware and software installed by the conference directors broke down or were incompatible with the materials scheduled to be used on that particular computer), we did present some of the issues we have encountered in this world of new narrative and new media by, of course, using our own personally configured machine.

On January 4, 1999, we published a Web site as part of the *American Quarterly* Hypertext Scholarship experimental online issue. As the editor of this special edition of the journal of the American Studies Association explained, the project "tried to bring together something rather old-fashioned and established—the scholarly journal article—with something new and still emerging—

the networked and digital space of the World Wide Web" (Rosenzweig, 237).

Roy Rosenzweig, in asking, "How might hypertext and new media change the nature of scholarly argument, communication, and publication?" (238) provided us with a forum for examining and challenging the traditional form of the academic narrative. It is curious that this has been, even with the development of new media, so difficult to do or at least so rare. Rosenzweig explains, "Although there has been much theorizing about hypertext and scholarship, there are very few concrete examples of scholars using hypertext and new media to present the results of sustained inquiry into the subjects that they study. Rather than invite more theoretical statements about the possibilities of on-line publishing, we wanted to see what electronic publication might mean concretely for American studies scholarship" (238). One of the reviewers of the online projects aptly summed up the difficult connection between hypertext and scholarly narratives when he asked, " Can you make an argument in hypertext? Can you create something that moves forward *toward* an overarching idea (or set of ideas) in an environment that intrinsically lends itself to digressions, juxtaposition, dissolution, interconnection, and supplantation?" (Bass 277).

Using subject matter and an approach which are both out of the academic mainstream, our Web site, called "Dreaming Arnold Schwarzenegger," explores the analogies between dreams and hypertext, dreams and investigative research, the personal and the professional, and between traditional media and what has, increasingly, been referred to as "the new media" (see http://www.ssc-net.ucla.edu/ioa/arnold.html). We wanted to consider the relationships between these elements in theoretical as well as practical terms (in the sense of finding ways to connect theory to practice) because the very basis of our project seems, at first, to defy both theoretical and practical approaches to scholarship. This is because the online project has grown directly out of the 150-plus dreams about Arnold Schwarzenegger that we have had since we first started studying him as a cultural phenomenon in the late 1980s.

In practical terms we had the peculiar, perhaps unprecedented, situation of having dreamed so extensively about the subject of our research. But we also had a unique opportunity to put together a form of narrative that does justice to the material we encountered in a decade of investigating one of the primary icons of American culture. In theoretical terms, we had the opportunity to test out ideas that have rarely been put together before: the scholar as

dreamer; the definition of collaboration; hypertext and the history of the academic paper; dreams and forms of narrative navigation. And we had the opportunity to do this by presenting both the argument and much of the supporting materials that nurtured those arguments.

In recent years there have been countless discussions about hypertext and cyberspace, about the changes taking place in the culture as a result of the Internet and the virtual communities it spawns. But little has been said about the possible connections between the ways in which hypertext promotes the disruption to, and reconfiguration of, something even more basic: our categories of thought. When it occurred to us that dreams may, in fact, do the same thing, we decided to put dreams and hypertext together. We wanted to explore the idea that, put together, dreams and the new media that deliver hypertext projects might very well constitute one of the most provocative ways we know to explore the interconnections between technology and fleshiness, the fears (and thrills) of disembodiment and the desire to more and more fully enter the virtual worlds that hypertext seems to offer.

Our work is intended to counter the prevailing notion that technology in general, and the Internet with its hypertext culture specifically, tends to create disembodied experiences. In his survey of "cyberculture at the end of the century," Mark Dery points out that a major theme of much of cyberculture is "the growing irrelevance of the body as sensory experience" and its replacement by "digital simulation" (16). "I sing the body obsolete," as Dery paraphrases a cyberpunk artist, is the ironic view of people who actually extensively use their bodies to interface with technology in often bizarre ways. More relevant might be the statement that if you alter the body and its connections to the outside world through technology, you will inevitably alter perception. It is that alteration, based on a notion of prosthetic culture in which machines extend us into the outer world, that we favor over disembodiment. As Dery concludes, "The dream of software without hardware—mind without body—runs aground on our profound ignorance of the nature of consciousness and its relation to embodiment" (317).

At Interactive Frictions, the notion of the disembodied experience of technology was expressed several times by different participants, Landow and Murray among them, through the idea that new media create a 'liminal space' in which the connection between the body and the self become at least temporarily lost. Indeed, as happens at many conferences where 'buzz words' circulate, the term 'liminality' seemed to be on many lips. It was

never clear to us how the word was being defined except as a pseudo-space which users of the new media would 'enter' as disembodied, virtual interactors. As one participant described it, the mental body does not match the external body.

Our understanding of 'liminality' comes from an anthropological perspective. Liminality is a term popularized in the social sciences by anthropologist Victor Turner for his analysis of rituals in the 1960s and 70s. Using the writings of Arnold van Gennep on rites of passage, Turner described three phases of the ritual process: separation from everyday life, entry into a liminal world, and then reintegration into the social order (*Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* 231). An example might be a birthday party in which the celebrants gather at a friend's house for a 40th birthday party; they enter the liminal party phase in which the change from being 39 to being 40 is acknowledged with singing and presents and is joked about and lamented. When the guests leave, the 40 year old now must get on with this new phase of life; staying in liminality would be immature.

Liminality temporarily creates entities that are ambiguous, "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner, *The Ritual Process* 95). These liminal creatures may be forced into uniform behaviors, may take on passive roles, or may experience loss of rank and status, but there is nothing inherent in anthropological liminality that suggests the disembodiment metaphor so popular in new media critiques. If anything, liminality drives one back into the body to experience a world of human bonds that Turner calls "communitas" which requires that we recognize an "essential and generic human bond, without which there could be *no* society" (*The Ritual Process* 97). In fact, liminal states in traditional rites of passage often require manipulations of the body (tattooing, hair cutting, a change of wardrobe, scarification, physical deprivation, or isolation) as proof or a reminder of the changes in the initiate's status.

Is this the breaking point between theory and practice, where the theory is that the new media is liminal while the practice is that nothing works? What is the new media offering by way of new narrative possibilities? We suggest that it may not be particularly accurate—or useful—to argue that the new media opens or creates liminal spaces. If we are going to talk about narrative in a hypertext environment, it is time for us to recognize that such a narrative obeys rules quite distinct from those of the liminal experience. For one thing, there is no beginning, middle, and end of the experience of the new technology as there is required in a transaction that

passes through the typical rite-of-passage liminality. More importantly, to argue that the experience in hypertext is that of liminality is, in some sense, saying that the reader-navigator of hypertextual narrative is in limbo. Murray aptly described the current situation with hypertexts by suggesting that we are struggling between defining the boundaries of these spaces and creating domains that are terrifying in their formlessness. It would be horrifying to be always in such a liminal state: human communities cannot exist in liminality and the whole point of the liminal experience is to be able to step out of it, however changed, however renewed.

We may experience a sense of being absorbed into a story, an absorption that is not different in kind than that which we experience when we read a good book. But absorption does not mean we are not in our bodies. Indeed, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson make it hard to hold that hypertext is really a disembodied environment because they argue that our perceptions and actions are fundamentally tied to our having a body and our dwelling in space and time. What is important, they reminds us, "is that the peculiar nature of our bodies shapes our very possibilities for conceptualization and categorization"(19). Stated simply, "Thought is embodied; thought is mostly unconscious; thought is largely metaphorical" (Lakoff and Johnson 3), and the categories we create to make sense of the world cannot be created without our bodies.

In large part the embodiment of our experience is due to the fact that we move through space with a body involved in numerous cause-effect relationships with the external world. Any *sense* of disembodiment might grow out of our own notion of ourselves in both internal and external space, what poet Charles Olson calls "proprioception." He explains this as "the data of depth sensibility/the 'body' of us as object which spontaneously or of its own order produces experience of 'depth' Viz. sensibility within the organism by movement of its own tissues" (17). The sense of disembodiment, then, is felt within the internal space of the body!

Therefore, one potential danger in applying a metaphor like liminality to new media is that it misunderstands in an unproductive way the imaginative and fleshy possibilities of this creative form. As our Web site makes plain, we choose to recognize the dream as a point of intersection between body and imagination as well as a crucial link between ourselves and the ways in which we create coherent narratives out of the raw materials of a life. In the new media, we have the possibilities for forging coherences that follow the map of our dreams in ways that we don't typically get permission to do. While the traditional (i.e. linear book) narrative

involves a set of conventions that discourage tracking away from the established order and arrangement of events, a hypertext medium entails an experience that encourages ranging around, linking up new things. Like poetry, hypertext can keep its reader-navigators held at the creative tensions between the visual and rhythmic, word and image, movement and stasis, internal and external bodiness. The hypertext models we are talking about are the realizations of efforts to forge coherences in ranges of poetic possibilities. In this sense, the new media represents a further realization of the full range of imaginative thought. At the same time, hypertext narrative is, in a way, a discontinuity from prior models of thinking and imagining. For one thing, it shifts to the foreground the possibilities for simultaneity and co-existent zones of information.

While one could take the view that, in navigating hypertext, there is some sort of magical dislocation of the mind from the navigator's body—indeed, such disembodiment may be seen as a goal—our position is to value the fleshiness of navigation in hypertext. To the extent that we understand experience at all, if we want people to experience hypertext narrative as something substantial, we have to count on certain fleshy requirements in the environment. For one thing, we must come to new understandings about the ways by which the new media offer navigational experiences; for us, one of the more interesting approaches to such a consideration is to examine the ways in which hypertext navigation is resonant with our experiences in dreams.

For the "Interactive Frictions Conference," we presented a talk on the role of dreams in constructing our Web site. Specifically, our plan was to take up Bert O. States' work on dreams in conjunction with our own sense that our Schwarzenegger dreams constituted something more and different than merely symbolic codings of an assortment of repressed desires our research had awakened. Let's face it, more than one hundred fifty dreams about any one person, place or thing ought to be a signal flare that something significant is happening!

The Web site offers alternative methods of moving through and connecting material we have collected for the narrative matrix we call "Arnold Schwarzenegger"—a matrix stitched through by these recurring, thematic dreams. With our Web site, we consider Lakoff and Johnson's assertions about embodiment in relation to States' ideas on the function of dreams. States contends that "the world of the dream, unfolding in the world of the body, is one of perpetual motion in which figures are constantly and rapidly transformed, taking the path of least resistance—or better, the path of greatest suggestibility" (66).

Our emphasis on dreams is mainly an experiment in what to foreground in the experience of being in hypertext. We are opting not to foreground the notion of disembodiment, the separation of mind from body. We *are* foregrounding the dreamscape and embodied dreams. Up until now notions like dreaming have been in the background; to foreground them is like making the area beyond the vanishing point in a painting suddenly appear and become relevant. In our culture, when you report a dream in everyday life, it is treated as fantasy or encoded desire and will be dismissed as irrelevant to everyday life; at worst it can be a dangerous distraction from real work of the day. But, in thinking about hypertext, and other new media narratives, we might argue that there is no background but only more and more layers that share and shape the foreground. Visually this gets reinforced by the authoring software used to create the images and texts of hypertext and Web sites: programs like Adobe's Photoshop, used by serious digital producers, promotes a dreamlike collage effect possible with layered images and texts.

One of the more common 'learning' activities for children is to have them look at groups of objects or materials and have them try to eliminate those things that don't 'belong' to the rest of the set. But with the new media we are encouraged to pay attention to what things are possible to put together. There is no question of belonging; the categories of belonging are created as the navigator navigates, as she decides where to 'go,' what to look at, listen to, resist, ignore. The navigator is, as has been said by numerous writers about hypertext, the artist, as well; as States reminds us, "the roots of art are in the dream" (79).

It makes sense to us, then, to emphasize attempts that are made to pursue the things that are, in the new media, most dreamlike. Such an emphasis changes or clarifies the nature of interactions in this media environment. It changes expectations. This is where the experience is. A lot of the expectations are cinematic or textual or technical and fairly traditional. Janet Murray described the different 'pleasures' and 'aesthetic' goals that were being sought in the new media: graphic designers want a screen poster; literary theorists want an authorless book; cinema studies wants a morphing film while instructional design wants distance learning; librarians want a networked card catalog while those in human-computer interactions want an information appliance.

One of the reasons there aren't other expectations is because we are still learning what the other expectations could be. If we suggest framing things in terms of dreams, you have a different inter-

action with the environment and a whole list of new possibilities that don't just replicate the print or cinematic world. If there are long texts, for example, they are fleeting linguistic events; there is a good chance you won't go back to them. The images and texts are not irrelevant because they are fleeting; they are relevant like dreams: they suggest new or reinforce old categories and sets of categories and classifications. And while it may be argued (by States, for example), that dream states are not necessarily unconscious ones, we want to at least suggest that dreams permit the revision of categories of knowledge and thought in ways that waking consciousness does not. Lakoff and Johnson write, "Though we learn new categories regularly, we cannot make massive changes in our category systems through conscious acts of recategorization" (18). But such "massive changes in our category systems," according to Bert O. States, do indeed occur in our dream consciousness. For States, the dream is an "expressiveness . . . devoted to the classification of experience" (57).

At this point, taking a cue from Yeats and a lesson from Borges, we might ask how one is to know the dreamer from the dream. Both the Interactive Frictions conference and our own research and experimentation with the new media have provoked questions about the idea of point of view. In traditional narrative, you 'will' yourself over into the point of view that is established for you. In a way, we don't have point of view as we read; we witness one (or more). New media require us to choose a view in the navigation. The reader/navigator has to keep track of her point of view as things accumulate. There really is something dialogical about going through hypertext narrative experiences. You are keeping track of fragmentary points of view, but you have to keep track of your own shifting point of view on two levels: to forge coherence and to keep track of your own position in order to make navigational choices. There is a constant returning to your own points of view on multiple levels. In this way it really is a very different medial experience than a traditional narrative. In some limited way in traditional narrative you can do these things but the least you can say of the difference of the old and new is that there has really been an augmentation for the requirements of multiple viewpoints.

Domenic Stansberry talks of precursors of stories told from multiple points of view (this is particularly evident in, for example, the films of Kurosawa). He suggests that such narratives are really multiple stories told with a common vanishing point. If we move to the next 'level' of complexity, we might, then, talk about multiple stories told from multiple points of view with a further erasure into this

common vanishing point. In hyptertexts, because there are entrances and exits but no beginnings, middles and ends, you can't even know that these stories are pointed toward a common vanishing point. You expect that there will be a stop but the stop may be entirely within your own point of view. "Interactive multimedia lends itself to such Rashomonesque use of point of view by its very nature. As users, we are constantly drawn down alternative paths and away from the center. Often the difficulty is not in finding new paths to explore but in remembering where that center is" (Stansberry 77).

That is, those who interact with the new media may find themselves de-centered, disoriented, convinced that they have experienced overload, maybe even disembodied, lacking a solid grounding. But, along with Paul Levinson, we would argue that this is not so. "We frequently walk into books stores and libraries, and encounter many more choices than we could possibly process, but feel overwhelmed if at all only for a moment or two, after which we gain our bearings and make selections. Why? Because we have, since childhood, been exposed to navigational strategies for bookstores and libraries, and have long internalized them by the time we are adults. Overload, in other words, is really a condition of underload—of not enough navigational structures at hand" (134-35)

We have said, then, that the problem with arguing that experiencing narrative in the new media is one of disembodiment is that the argument employs an excessive—and mostly inaccurate—liminality and disembodiment metaphor. We would suggest that the challenge for artists in the new media is to create ever-more imaginative navigational structures that allow—encourage—those who engage these media-works to discover—and make—new and wondrous revisions to their own categories of thought and to the ways in which they experience their fleshy presence in the new media's dreamscape.

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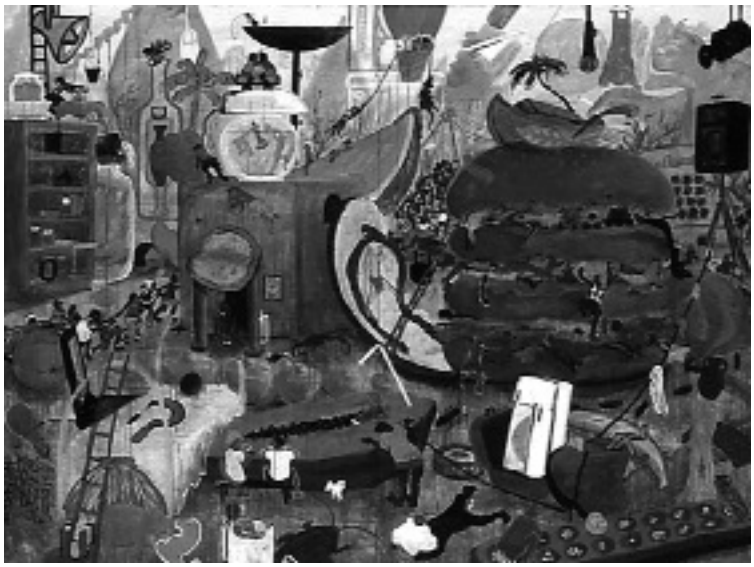

Photographic reproductin of acrylic painting on canvas,
"Veryvaryville," by Aris Kuntjara