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Technologies and Cultural Specificity

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*Honoring the Past and Creating the
Future in Cyberspace: New Technologies
and Cultural Specificity*

Marsha Kinder

I come to Pacific Islands studies as an outsider—as someone who began as a scholar of eighteenth-century English fiction, then became a theorist of film, television, and new media. I am now a multimedia producer making scholarly hypertexts, electronic fictions, and interactive installations, which are all interdisciplinary projects. I want to suggest how interdisciplinary interactive projects might potentially work in Pacific Islands studies. But first I want to flesh out and personalize my own movement across academic disciplines, because I believe that an individual's interdisciplinary approach is based not just on a commitment to a particular method or theory but on a narrative—a story structured by a specific sequence of encounters and moves through a series of cultural and historical fields.

My original decision to study eighteenth-century English literature was based on a single lecture I heard as an undergraduate at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). It was not the subject that drew me (the colonialist implications of Alexander Pope's mock epic, "The Rape of the Lock") but the rabbinical fire of the lecturer Ralph Cohen, a secular Russian Jew with a working-class background, which matched my own ethnic and class identity. He became my intellectual father by teaching me how to ask difficult critical questions. Once I got my doctoral degree and first academic job, I was free to follow my own passion and interest in choosing my object of study, and what turned me on most was cinema—the radical narrative experimentation of maverick filmmakers like Luis Buñuel, Michelangelo Antonioni, and Jean Luc Godard. So like many other leftist scholars in the 1960s and 70s, I emigrated to a new academic discipline called film studies, which (as in the case of Pacific Islands studies), because of its relatively "late" entry into the world of academia,

attracted scholars from many different fields and therefore was interdisciplinary from the start. It kept alive that dimension—that continuing openness to new combinations of ideas, theoretical frameworks, and objects of study—partly because it was full of nomadic intellectuals like me who were deeply suspicious of the territorial boundaries that usually divide academic disciplines. That’s why the field soon morphed into critical studies, media studies, and cultural studies, where it was always fairly easy to move from one medium to another—from film to television to electronic games to the Internet. But that still does not explain my move from theory to practice, which took place twenty years later—the move from “talking the talk” to “walking” it. Like Alice, I entered this new world by pursuing a white rabbit.

REFRAMING ROGER RABBIT

In fall 1990, I was scheduled to teach a graduate film seminar in the University of Southern California (USC) School of Cinema-Television on the theoretical implications of close textual analysis. I realized one couldn’t really teach this topic in the 1990s without addressing how computers and laser discs were changing the way we read films. So I joined a “Technology Analysis Group” headed by Steve Mamber at UCLA, who was then designing his own computer programs to work interactively with films on laser disc. I decided to do a similar hypertext project in my seminar, but there were a few obstacles to overcome. I had no equipment whatsoever and no budget for purchasing any; neither did our department. And though I had good ideas about what to do, I didn’t actually know how to implement them myself. But I didn’t let those little things stop me. I decided our class should pool our knowledge and skills, which forced me to change my approach to teaching. I could no longer be the master of a subject I was teaching to my students; rather, I became the leader of a creative research team that had to learn a number of complex skills to accomplish a specific task. So we threw grades out the window; everyone who participated fully would get an A. Then I contacted Apple and Pioneer and convinced them to loan us equipment—a computer and a high-end laser-disc player. After compiling a list of laser discs that we happened to have in our cinema library, I told the students they could pick the film for our project. They chose *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* because of its hybridization of animation and live action as well as various genres, its innovative use of sound-image relations, and its representation of the cultural history

of Los Angeles (our own locale), especially on registers of race and gender. Each student chose a topic and started building a database of materials on the computer: both images from the laser disc of the film (which could instantaneously be accessed via the computer) and extra textual data (like archival materials, interviews, and their own commentaries, which were entered into the HyperCard program we were designing). Like the other members of the seminar, I chose a topic and became one of the contributors. Luckily, two students in the class had specialized skills—a graphic designer who did the layout and a specialist in animation who provided technical information about the production—but we still didn't have a programmer. Then during our third meeting of class, a production student happened to drop by at the break and said, "Heard you were doing a really interesting project and wondered if I could participate—even though I'm not enrolled in the class." I said sure, and he became our programmer.

Two Chinese students who were doing reception studies took a copy of *Roger Rabbit* home over break, to Beijing and Taiwan respectively, to get the reactions of Chinese students and find out why they did or didn't like the film. Another student went to London to interview the British animators who worked on the film, while others interviewed the local animation team based in the San Fernando Valley. And we were fortunate that Robert Zemeckis (a USC alum) was scheduled to teach a USC course the following semester, so we videotaped an interview with him and included excerpts from his commentary throughout our program.

Even after the semester was over, our seminar continued meeting (without tuition, credit, or grades) because by then we had become a tightly knit, collaborative community. When USC hosted the annual Society for Cinema Studies meeting in May 1991, we delivered our "Reframing Roger Rabbit" project as a multimedia presentation. We repeated it the following fall in our large Introduction to Cinema course, where 700 undergraduate students were asked to contribute more data to our databases; those who were especially interested were invited to design a database of their own. Although the undergraduates were game, several teaching assistants felt threatened because they were computer illiterate and feared this assignment might upset the existing balance of power.

Since we had put so much work into the project, we decided to turn it into an anthology, to be bundled with our software and possibly with the laser disc. Then we lined up a publisher. But before we could sign a contract, we needed to secure the rights to use images from the film, and that meant dealing with Disney, the most notorious naysayer in the industry.

Despite the fact that we had managed to speak about the project directly with Robert Zemeckis (the director of the film) and Jeffrey Katzenberg (then one of the heads of Disney), who both gave us the green light, they still referred us back to the Disney lawyers, who gave us a resounding No. Not one single image! And to make matters worse, Disney suddenly released a new edition of the laser disc with totally different numbers, making all of our numbering obsolete. Someone had claimed there was a frame of Betty Boop flashing, a moral deviation that demanded a recall and sent our anthology into the trash.

I learned two crucial lessons from that experience: never start a new media project without first dealing with intellectual property rights, and never underestimate the transformative power of the collaborative process. Some of the students published their contributions as individual essays, but otherwise we had nothing tangible to show for all of that work—except for the fact that it totally transformed my approach to teaching and changed the direction of my research (and that of most of the students in the seminar). This was the rabbit hole that led me into the Labyrinth.

The Labyrinth Project is a research initiative on interactive narrative, which I have been directing at the Annenberg Center for Communication at the University of Southern California since 1997. All of our works are created at the pressure points between theory and practice, storytelling and database structures, the language of cinema and video and the interactive potential of new digital media (websites, CD-ROMS, DVDs, electronic games, interactive installations, and interactive television). Although none of our projects has specifically addressed Pacific Islands cultures, many of the issues we have been dealing with are precisely the topics under discussion at this conference. That is why I have incorporated the conference title, “Honoring the Past, Creating the Future,” into the title of this paper, which interweaves three different strands:

- 1) concrete descriptions and demonstrations of different kinds of projects we are producing at the Annenberg Center;
- 2) five general principles we have learned from making those projects;
- 3) a few tentative suggestions about how some of these principles might be applied specifically to Pacific Islands studies. I say “tentative” because, to avoid another level of colonization in cyberspace, it is essential for such projects to be conceptualized by indigenous artists and researchers from within the culture rather than by an outsider like me.

PRINCIPLE I: HONORING THE PAST

The Labyrinth Project was built on the principle of honoring the past. We began with the premise that interactive narrative did not begin in cyberspace. It has deep, tangled roots in an array of earlier forms—ritual, theater, poetry, novel, dance, music, radio, cinema, television, performance art, and dreams. But new digital media provoke us to redefine these two concepts—narrative and interactivity—in productive ways.

In western academic theory, “narrative” is traditionally perceived as a mode of discourse (whether in art, myth, or history) containing actions and characters that interact and change according to laws of causality within a spatial and temporal setting. But new media, as modes of non-linear storytelling and communication, help us see that in a much broader cognitive and ideological sense, narrative is also a means of patterning and interpreting the meaning of all sensory input and “objects of knowledge”—a perspective that may already be familiar to most Pacific Islands cultures. For narratives map the world and its inhabitants and locate us within that textual landscape or seascape, requiring a constant refiguring of our mental cartography with its supporting databases, search engines, and representational conventions. Given that every culture creates its own stories, humans must be “wired” for storytelling. Narratives mediate between biological programming and cultural imprinting, processing the past and refiguring the future, as in dreams and prophecy. That is why it is very important to consider how our children first gain entry into the narrative field—whether it’s a matter of elders telling or reading them stories about their own people and landscape, or children merely tuning into whatever aspects of global culture happen to be accessible on television or the Internet, or habitually absorbing the specific blend of visual signs, musical cues, and ideological assumptions of the culture in which they are immersed. In any case, we all find ourselves positioned within a series of open-ended narrative fields in which cultural values are embedded, transmitted, and challenged: as a relative in a family saga, as a member of several communities with complex territorial relations, as a spectator who tunes in to a series of individual tales and chooses to identify with some of their characters, and as a performer who absorbs and repeats cultural myths and generates new variations.

In this model, narrative space includes not only the territory represented in these fields and fictions, but also the twisting strands and tendrils that are generated by their networks of associations, both within the text and

reaching outward toward other texts, referents, and personal memories. In the process, each narrative web redefines the intertextual architecture of a specific genre, period, culture, and subjectivity. That is why storytelling can be such a powerful vehicle for changing individual consciousness. The key question is how we can change and be changed by narratives—which makes interactivity crucial.

In cyberspace, interactivity wavers between two poles. While all narratives are in some sense interactive (in that their meanings always grow out of a collaboration between the individual subjectivities of authors and users and the reading conventions of the respective cultures they inhabit and languages they speak), all interactivity is also an illusion, because the rules established by the designers of the text necessarily limit the user's options. As a result, interactivity tends to be used as a normative term—either fetishized as the ultimate pleasure or demonized as a deceptive fiction. Even those who fetishize it as a mode of two-way communication—like new media theorist Andy Lippman, who defines it as a “mutual and simultaneous activity on the part of both participants, usually working toward some goal”—acknowledge the need to create the illusory “impression” of an infinite database from which users' choices are drawn (Lippman quoted in Stone 1995, 10–11).

One productive way of avoiding these two extremes (of fetishizing or demonizing interactivity) is to position the user or player as a “performer” of the narrative—like an actor interpreting a role, or a musician playing a score, or a dancer performing traditional moves, contributing her own idiosyncratic inflections and absorbing the experience into her personal archive of memories. I think of that moment in last night's performance of “The Boiling Ocean,” when dancer Katerina Teaiwa performed her live stylization of a dance whose traditional moves were simultaneously visible in the video being projected directly behind her. As this brilliant staging clearly showed, although any performance is partly structured by the text, it is also affected by the repertoire of past performances (by this player and others) within this particular genre, medium, and culture. By privileging interactivity in this way, new digital media and their critical discourse encourage us to rethink the distinctive interactive potential of earlier narrative forms.

In June 1999 when our Labyrinth Project hosted an international new media conference called “Interactive Frictions,” Vilsoni Hereniko gave a wonderful paper called “Recreation and Re-creation: The Subversive Female Clown of Rotuma,” which followed a performance by new media theorist Sandy Stone (the transsexual author of *The War between Desire*

↳ *Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age*) and which enabled us to read it in a different way. While many of us had already seen Stone perform this kind of transgressive erotic clowning at other multimedia conferences (where she demonstrated the virtual nature of the body by displacing her erogenous zones to the palm of her hand and encouraged the audience to help her reach an on-stage cyber orgasm—giving new meaning to the term “palm pilot”), no one had previously contextualized this transgression in cross-cultural terms, as Hereniko was so brilliantly able to do. This was not a matter of importing western concepts into Pacific Islands studies to see what new insights they could generate or colonizing indigenous material but rather seeing how the Pacific Islands context could broaden our understanding of what is at stake in interactive narrative more generally. Hereniko successfully demonstrated that while “interactive narrative” is a discursive topic ordinarily restricted to western culture and new digital media, it could easily be expanded and enriched by considering issues of historical and cultural specificity. He moved the topic not only to a Pacific Island culture but also to more traditional narrative forms like theater, dance, and social ritual where there is a long and complex history of interactive techniques and shape-shifting being used to negotiate local issues of power within social communities and their regulatory conventions.

Because we firmly believe in the value of these kinds of connections, the Labyrinth Project deliberately builds on narrative experimentation in more traditional forms to create works of interactive storytelling that are emotionally compelling and conceptually powerful. For our first series of electronic fictions, we chose to collaborate with a novelist and several independent filmmakers because we believe the creative boundaries of newly emerging media are frequently stretched more by being compared with earlier forms than by exaggerating their so-called “newness.”

I first observed this phenomenon when I was writing my dissertation on Henry Fielding’s experimentation in the theater and how it affected his work in the newly emerging genre of the eighteenth-century English novel, which he helped to shape. I realized that in trying to overcome certain formal constraints in the theater, Fielding developed a number of narrative strategies (including an on-stage narrator) that were ideally suited to the novel and that resulted in works emphasizing the differences rather than the similarities with his plays. In fact, his novels expanded the possibilities of this new genre by comparing and contrasting it with a whole compendium of earlier narrative forms.

When I later moved from literature to cinema, I noticed a parallel

dynamic in the work of the great modernist Soviet filmmaker, Sergei Eisenstein. In his 1934 essay, "Through Theater to Cinema," he described how experiments designed to overcome the technical limits of the stage ultimately led him to a theory of montage, which he developed more fully once he turned to cinema. As in the case of Fielding, his movement from theater to the new form did not make his works more theatrical; on the contrary, it made them more cinematic, for they emphasized the differences rather than the similarities between the two media. Eisenstein continued to compare cinema with many other forms besides theater (the novels of Dickens and Joyce, the poetry of Walt Whitman, Japanese scroll painting, Kabuki theater, haiku poetry, and Disney cartoons), and his theory of montage and filmic experimentation grew more complex as a consequence. So despite the distance between Fielding and Eisenstein in period, culture, and media, their careers both support Walter Benjamin's observation: "One of the foremost tasks of art has always been the creation of a demand which could be fully satisfied only later. The history of every art form shows critical epochs in which a certain art form aspires to effects which could be fully obtained only with a changed technical standard, that is to say, in a new art form" (Benjamin 1969, 237; for an expanded discussion, see Kinder 1998).

Thus, in the Labyrinth Project we purposely chose to work with artists whose experimentation with nonlinear narrative seemed to be challenging the boundaries of their own medium. We selected novelist John Rechy and independent filmmakers Nina Menkes, Pat O'Neill, Péter Forgács, and Carroll Parrott Blue—artists whose stylistic and thematic concerns, we felt, could push the boundaries of digital interactive forms. In turn, we provided these artists with easy access to new media tools and a creative team and budget for producing an electronic fiction on CD-ROM or DVD that could also be presented as a museum installation.

As an example of this work, I will describe our second production, *Mysteries and Desire: Searching the Worlds of John Rechy* (which won the New Media Invision 2000 Gold Award for Best Overall Design and was an official selection for the 2000 Sundance Film Festival); for it features literature, choreography, and graphics by artists from marginalized cultures, characteristics that might make it relevant to Pacific Islands studies. Drawing passages from John Rechy's writings, this interactive memoir assembles a network of personal memories and family documents, setting them against larger collective histories of Chicano culture and the gay world. Challenging the borders between autobiography, fiction, and history, it mines the outrageous fictions that circulate around this fascinating

literary figure, who, as a Chicano writer from Texas, a gay icon, a long-time bodybuilder, a gifted teacher of creative writing, and 1997 recipient of PEN West's Lifetime Achievement Award, has long been a subject of notoriety and fantasy. In 1963, when Rechy published his first novel, *City of Night*, which quickly became a best seller, critics claimed he didn't actually exist, for how could a male prostitute—particularly a Chicano—write such a powerful novel? Some insisted it must have been written by a famous gay writer like Tennessee Williams or James Baldwin who was merely using the name Rechy as a pseudonym. People actually went to parties pretending to be John Rechy while the real author went into hiding.

Mysteries and Desire positions users as performers who have access to a wide range of interfaces, divided into three interwoven realms—Memories, Bodies, and Cruising. Based on specific passages from Rechy's writings, these interfaces can be used to solve mysteries or generate new fictions.

In the realm of "Memories," a three-dimensional (QuickTime VR) representation of Rechy's subjectivity, one can explore a collage of memorabilia (photographs, drawings, documents), zoom in on any image, and activate any of the seventeen hot spots that either randomly trigger associations or jump to other realms or fictions (figure 1). Each time users return to one of



FIGURE 1. In the realm of "Memories" from *Mysteries and Desire: Searching the Worlds of John Rechy*, users explore a collage of family photographs, drawings, and documents. (Courtesy of John Rechy and the Labyrinth Project)

the hot spots, they find a different event, for all of our interfaces are built on a combination of three determinants: our design, the user's choice, and random unpredictability. This realm includes personal recollections by John and his friends and family, a game of anagrams, video footage of Rechy receiving the PEN Award, and excerpts from all of his published novels.

In "Bodies," one experiences the connections between religious ritual, bodybuilding, writing, promiscuous sex, and the repetition compulsions these activities share. Moving among three zones (Passion, Confession, and Salvation), users' interactions become increasingly gestural. In the Passion zone, users trace the connections between erotic graffiti and the stations of the cross (from Rechy's novel *Rushes*). In the Salvation zone, they listen to Rechy's commentaries on bodybuilding or "pump iron" to control a body of changing imagery. In the Confession zone, users type in the number of times they have sinned and get a related passage from the Bible or from Rechy's novel *Numbers*.

In the realm of "Cruising," one enters a 3-D representation of Griffith Park, which Rechy's novel *Numbers* helped make one of the most notorious gay cruising sites in the world. Here users can find Rechy and others engaged in the sexhunt, whose choreographed movements lead them on an obsessional journey across America's vast city of night—from Griffith Park in Los Angeles, to a leather bar in San Francisco, to Mardi Gras in New Orleans, to Times Square and the docks of New York (figure 2). One can either passively watch the dancers like a voyeur, or, like a sampling DJ artist, use the stylus on the turntable that appears in the lower right hand corner of the screen to create one's own mix of music, movements, voice-overs, and backgrounds. This choice enables the player to become an active performer in the dance.

Given that dance, music, and oral literature are such important art forms in the Pacific Islands, it is fairly easy to imagine how some of these techniques could be readily adapted to a Pacific Islands project, where perhaps traditional movements, indigenous languages, and chants could transform as the interactor navigated across "the boiling ocean" from one island culture to another.

PRINCIPLE 2: EMPHASIZING CONCEPTUALIZATION OVER TECHNICAL MASTERY

In producing *Mysteries and Desire* and our other interactive fictions, we learned our second principle. We deliberately emphasize conceptualiza-

tion over technical mastery, partly because the technology is changing so rapidly, and strong concepts of interface design can always be adapted to new formats. We purposely choose to collaborate with artists who have a work in progress in another form, because we find that simultaneous production in both media actually helps expand the possibilities of both works. *Mysteries and Desire* drew on Rechy's *Autobiography: A Novel*, a book in progress; and our DVD-ROM project *Tracing the Decay of Fiction* is based on a 35 mm film in progress by Pat O'Neill, which explores the Hotel Ambassador as an archeological site for the cultural history of Los Angeles (figure 3). The archival materials and interactive dimensions that we are designing for the DVD are affecting the structure of his film, just as changes he makes in the film are continually affecting the interface design of the DVD.

In January 2001, we also started our next series of electronic fictions, partially funded by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. The first is an interactive installation that premiered at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, 17 August–29 September 2002. Titled *The Danube Exodus: The Rippling Currents of the River*, this project is based on a documentary by Hungarian artist Péter Forgács. Given that it focuses on a reorchestration



FIGURE 2. In the “Cruising” zone of *Mysteries and Desire*, interactors follow John Rechy’s sexual outlaws across America’s city of night, stopping at the notorious New York piers. (Courtesy of the Labyrinth Project)

of historical encounters and uses navigation by water as one of its primary tropes, some of its design elements might also be adaptable to a Pacific Islands project. Forgács' film is based on amateur footage shot by Captain Nándor Andrásovits, who ferried Eastern European Jewish refugees along the Danube River to the Black Sea (and eventually to Palestine in 1939), and then one year later transported a group of Bessarabian Germans fleeing Stalin on the same ship and river back to the Third Reich. Forgács interweaves these two stories with a third narrative, featuring the captain and the Danube, an expanding narrative field that enables us to reconsider with historical hindsight the complex relations between the displaced Jews and Germans. The two stories of exodus are mediated not only by the captain who originally chose what to shoot, but also by Forgács, who accentuates his editing process through the stylized poetics of his film. Our interactive installation extends this mediation process to museum visitors, enabling them to make new combinations and connections among these three fascinating tales, which are projected on five large screens with immersive surround sound (figure 4). The interface demonstrates that history is like Heraclitus' river: one can never step into the same river, or same history, twice.



FIGURE 3. *Tracing the Decay of Fiction* explores the Hotel Ambassador as an archaeological site in the cultural history of Los Angeles. (Courtesy of Pat O'Neill and the Labyrinth Project)

The second project is an interactive DVD-ROM version of a memoir by African-American photographer/filmmaker Carroll Parrott Blue called *The Dawn at My Back: a Memoir of a Black Texas Upbringing*, which will be published as a book by the University of Texas Press in February 2003. Featuring voice-overs by Blue and Debbie Allen and by Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis as her parents, and testimonies from the black community in Houston, the interactive version of Blue's memoir unfolds through a quilting of vivid moving images and a gospel-like layering of voices (figure 5). This braided structure reveals the cultural resonance of one woman's struggle to understand her mother and their entangled historical legacy.

We are still looking for a third project. There are wonderful possibilities for comparable Pacific Islands electronic fictions, but Pacific Islanders should be the ones who conceptualize them without being overly influenced, restricted, or intimidated by technicians or technical issues.

This emphasis on conceptualization also leads to certain practical decisions. For example, we use off-the-shelf authoring software (such as Macromedia's Director, QuickTime, Photoshop, After Effects, ShockWave, and Flash) rather than writing our own code. Ironically, because the technology moves so fast, new media tools are usually abandoned before



FIGURE 4. Hungarian media artist P ter Forg acs and Marsha Kinder consult during the installation of their interactive exhibition *The Danube Exodus* at the Getty Center in Los Angeles. (Photo by Laurel Almerinda)

their creative potential is fully explored. So we keep getting faster, more realistic renditions of the same limited concepts, which, despite their brilliant graphics, are usually still terribly boring.

On a theoretical level, this emphasis on conceptualization leads us to reject technological determinism (the idea that technology itself dictates the content—or, in the more familiar terms of Marshall McLuhan, that the medium is the message), for we agree with Raymond Williams that old power struggles always get remapped onto new forms. This process is clearly happening now on the Internet, as the music and film industries are trying to use the courts to protect their financial interests against Napster and other new forms of interactive spectatorship, and as the West tries to colonize the rest of the world through this new form, despite all the utopian rhetoric about its potential for democracy and decentralization.

Yet whenever new technologies (computers, television, cinema, or the telegraph) are introduced into a culture, there is always a period of transition when new kinds of experimentation are encouraged. I believe we are still in that phase with new digital media. In the area of interactive narra-



FIGURE 5. Carroll Parrott Blue emerges out of her Texas homeland in the interactive DVD-ROM version of her autobiography, *The Dawn at My Back: a Memoir of a Black Texas Upbringing*. (Courtesy of Carroll Parrott Blue and the Labyrinth Project)

tive, despite the commercial success of violent, kick-ass video games and sports simulations, no single paradigm has become truly dominant and no single set of conventions is totally locked into place. At least, not yet. And the same is true for pedagogical models for teaching new media production and for distance learning. That's why it is essential for those of us who oppose hegemonic paradigms to intervene at this historical moment, when new narrative, technological, and pedagogical forms are still in flux. If we don't take advantage of this opportunity now, we risk becoming further marginalized. That's why I think new media are of particular relevance to Pacific Islands studies, where the politics of marginalization are so crucial. But what this would require is a constant renegotiation between the old and the new, a discovery of new ways of expressing and teaching indigenous forms, and an emphasis on conceptualization rather than technical mastery.

For example, in distance learning we can see several competitive models emerging. The first was introduced by virtual universities that did not have a traditional infrastructure to transform, and by enterprising schools that did not have an established reputation for academic excellence. Thus both were free to partner with high-tech companies to open up a new online educational paradigm through which they could stake out new territory and markets. While they took the initial financial risks, the more traditionally successful schools could sit by and assess their progress—a situation similar to the way sound was introduced to cinema. While claiming their efforts would help democratize higher education in our nation, making it affordable for all students, they raised the specter of another form of academic divide: those with the qualifications and resources could still afford to go to college, while others would have to settle for distance learning. This division was compounded by the fact that the uses most of these schools made of the medium were not particularly innovative or educationally sound. The design of classes was put primarily in the hands of technicians, with faculty acting merely as “content providers” or hired guns, who were eager to supplement their income. Yet this model had enough success to motivate more prestigious schools to come up with an alternative model.

For the past few years, several prestigious private institutions—such as Harvard, Stanford, and Columbia—have conducted studies of distance learning and have decided to invest in a “winner take all” scenario, in which their names are used as “marketable” brands (like designer labels) to create new revenue streams for these institutions. Outside digital companies are being hired to handle the production of courses, and, again,

what are being produced are not particularly innovative courses that take advantage of the unique educational potential of the interactivity and nonlinearity of new media, but programs designed to generate the most income. Of course, they draw on the names and syllabi of their prestigious faculty, who, by means of new policy statements on intellectual property, are no longer able to sell their courseware to competing distant-learning ventures, but these faculty are still restricted to the limited role of content providers whose courses and syllabi are being colonized.

While these scenarios may not seem promising to so-called “marginal” fields like Pacific Islands studies, other models might be more relevant and appealing. One is a consortium approach wherein a group of universities, who are united by geography, regional interests, language, or cultural values, could pool their resources and offer courses in their specialties that build on existing strengths, and through a process of exchange, fill in their respective gaps. They could not only form the basis for productive collaborations within that region but also be exported more widely to other schools (like my own) that presently have no Pacific Islands studies programs.

It would also be possible to build a consortium among widely dispersed scholars who are interested in a particular field or specific topic, a model that would probably not produce a lucrative revenue stream for one institution but would help sustain and expand a body of knowledge that might otherwise languish. For example, at the Labyrinth Project we are now developing an experimental e-learning course in Slavic studies, a relatively small field that is threatened with extinction but in which our university has unique strengths. By pooling our strengths with those of other Slavic studies departments at two other institutions (the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Chicago), we could help develop an innovative course that is not currently offered at any institution and which could be made available anywhere in the world. Tentatively titled “Russian Modernism and Its International Dimensions,” this course draws on unique databases of historical materials to engage students in active research projects that explore the cultural specificity of Russian modernism. Students can participate in a role-playing game for multiple users (being developed in collaboration with a professional game company). The game enables them to adopt avatars based on historical figures, but only after having done extensive research on their biographies and backgrounds. The University of Southern California has contributed unique assets in the form of Professor John Bowlt’s extensive archive of authentic books, prints, posters, gramophone records, and artifacts on the Rus-

sian avant-garde that are housed in the Institute of Modern Russian Culture. Another USC contribution is a scholarly CD-ROM by Latvian film scholar Yuri Tsivian (now teaching at the University of Chicago). Titled *Immaterial Bodies: A Cultural Anatomy of Early Russian Film*, this was produced at the Annenberg Center as part of the series of bilingual CD-ROMs on national media cultures, which I am editing. Containing clips from over a hundred films, with voice-over commentaries and printed texts by Tsivian setting them against a rich cultural context of modernism, the CD-ROM allows a user to save a particular pathway, which could be presented by a teacher in the classroom or pursued by an individual student. On all of our projects, the personal pathway is central to learning, for it enables users to navigate through an open-ended narrative field, driven by a culturally inflected search engine that is motored by their own curiosity, passion, and desire. We believe this approach is crucial if distance learning is to be effective.

This kind of “topical consortium” is gradually gaining support in film studies. For example, the Rossellini Institute and the Centro Sperimentale in Rome have digitized the complete works of Roberto Rossellini and are making them available on a series of DVDs, which will work interactively with a website that has archival materials on Rossellini from all over the world. There are plans for similar projects on Fellini and Pasolini. At Georgia Tech a collaborative project is being developed on the films of D W Griffith and their cultural context, a hypertext that includes commentaries by a wide range of scholars from all over the world. Working in consultation with the Asian nations in NETPAC, Jeanette Paulson Hereniko has produced an outstanding multilingual website on Pacific Asian cinema at the Annenberg Center called *Asian Film Connections*, an online resource that provides updated information to critics, scholars, students, and distributors on recent films from those regions. This website could obviously be a tremendous resource for distant-learning courses related to these regions. All of these projects were built with a collaborative approach to interface design, which is the third principle we learned on the Labyrinth Project.

PRINCIPLE 3: COLLABORATING ON INTERFACE DESIGN

We strongly reject the prevailing commercial model of having a designated “content provider” who turns over ideas or material to a crew of technical experts or professionals for development, which inevitably results in a form of colonization. In all forms of interactive projects—whether a dis-

tant-learning Pacific Islands studies, a website on Pacific Asian cinema, a scholarly hypertext like *Immaterial Bodies*, or an electronic fiction like *Mysteries and Desire*—interface design is central. It shapes the content just as form does in every other medium. Thus, even though none of these scholars or artists we worked with had previous experience with new digital media, they all collaborated with us on the interface design. A Pacific Islands conference like this would be an ideal site for recruiting artists, scholars, and students who might collaborate on an interface design for interactive projects in this field—a design that would avoid being colonized.

This collaborative model helps our projects perform a pedagogical function at the Annenberg Center. The visiting artist learns how to work with new tools and how to experiment with new forms of interactivity, and everyone on our team is challenged by the visiting artist's aesthetic rigor. We launch each new project with an interdisciplinary workshop to which we invite local scholars and artists engaged with the topics. We also recruit and hire talented graduate students from a wide range of programs—critical studies, animation, film production, multimedia, writing, architecture, engineering—and who also bring different kinds of knowledge to the project from their varied ethnic backgrounds. Many of our assistants choose to continue working with us after graduation, even if they could make more money outside, because they want to work on projects they believe in and on which they can continue growing as artists and theorists. While our primary goal is to create new modes of interactive narrative, in the process we also train a new generation of multimedia artists who are knowledgeable about earlier narrative forms and who learn how to leverage their own hybridity. We actively recruit hybrids and cultivate this kind of cross-disciplinary work.

We also use this collaborative principle in our classes. For example, the Annenberg Center houses and funds an experimental Multimedia Literacy Program (originally developed by one of the students in the *Roger Rabbit* seminar), which began as a collaboration with the USC undergraduate honors program and is now available to other courses throughout the university. This program offers a summer workshop that gives professors and teaching assistants from any academic field hands-on experience as they learn how to tailor new media specifically to the material in their own classes. They collaborate with a teaching assistant in critical studies who has new media authoring skills and who works with their undergraduate students in a media lab, helping them design their own websites and CD-ROMS as individual term projects. Here the interdisciplinary history of

critical studies becomes very valuable. If such courses focused merely on technicians teaching students how to use specific software, that knowledge would soon become obsolete. While this kind of information and experience is available in workshops and tutorials, the main class sessions focus on how to conceptualize interface designs for substantive ideas—whether from art history, Russian literature, anthropology, or Chicano studies. One of the most important things they learn is how to come up with compelling metaphors, which is the fourth principle.

PRINCIPLE 4: SEARCHING FOR COMPELLING METAPHORS

In order to avoid colonizing material and forcing it into an alien structure, on all of our projects we try to create interface designs that work off tropes from the specific culture or style being represented. We search for compelling metaphors that help us rethink familiar issues. Such tropes are usually not new, but we adapt them to new media and customize them for our own specific needs and agendas.

I cannot think of a richer source of tropes for this purpose than Pacific Islands studies. Clearly, it would be possible to build original interface designs based on traditional Pacific Islands metaphors—such as weaving, chants, dance, the tattooed body, woven gods, a sea of islands, the boiling ocean, healing arts, ocean navigation, and oral histories. Such designs might greatly enrich the decentering possibilities of the Internet, for these analogies could help Pacific Islands studies appropriate new technologies and use them to reimagine both the future and the past.

The choice of metaphors is always politically charged. Take, for example, the “information superhighway,” a trope that privileges those fast-paced, money-driven cultures built around the automobile and the oil economy; or the “network,” which strengthens the Internet’s connections both with traditional broadcast media and with prevailing models of cognitive structure. Even these tropes can be reinscribed for different ideological ends, as in Fabian Wagmister’s use of Argentine roadside shrines and radio transmissions in his multiscreen interactive documentary, *Invocations and Interference*, an installation that shows some of the political liabilities of the so-called “information superhighway”; or in Sawad Brooks and Beth Stryker’s *DissemiNET*, a website/installation that interweaves diasporic tales of users and disseminates them through a localized network at a specific historical crossroads.

Another powerful trope in cyberspace is morphing, which has roots in many different cultures and could therefore easily be refigured with Pacific

Islands specificity. A brilliant example can be found in Sia Figiel's award-winning novel, *Where We Once Belonged*, in which she demonstrates that the contemporary appropriation of traditional mythological transformers and the reinscription of their gender and sexuality need not be restricted to western (or Japanese) consumerist examples (like those superhero cults of empowerment built around Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Power Rangers, X-Men, and Pokémons). Instead, they can be imbued with spiritual, curative powers and linked to ancestral gods who give them very different cultural meanings.

A reinscription of morphing was also central to my own first venture into cyberfiction, a computer game for teens called *Runaways*, written and produced in collaboration with three-time Oscar-winning documentary filmmaker Mark Jonathan Harris (*Into the Arms of Strangers: Stories of the Kinder Transport*). In studying children's media culture, I wondered if one could mobilize the popular trope of morphing to address issues of identity politics—gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity—and the social problem of runaway teens. Our game invites players to join the Searchers, a team of detectives who specialize in finding teenage runaways. But before they are assigned a case, players must fill out a questionnaire identifying their biological sex, gender, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity. Each of these questions has a help screen with a two-minute QuickTime movie that challenges that category and encourages players to rethink it. Even if they skip over these movies, the answers they give to these questions help determine how people treat them on the search. Thus, the game leads players to experience and explore cultural stereotypes. While writing our script, Mark and I visited local teen shelters in Hollywood, went out on outreach vans, and met with groups of real runaways who told us their own stories and gave us valuable feedback on ours. We also recruited a group of talented USC film students who collaborated with us on the interface design. We produced a prototype for a CD-ROM game, which we tested with a diverse group of inner-city teens and have presented at conferences. Now we are working on an online version of the game where players can choose to be either Searchers or Runaways, and the latter can write their own stories, telling why they left home. We are planning to hire inner-city teens to help us design the online game and to learn multimedia skills in the process. And we hope to recruit them into our new interactive division.

Another resonant trope for cyberspace is dreams, which is central to one of our new Labyrinth projects. *Dreamwaves* is a website providing an

exhibition site for dream-based art and a discursive space for an interdisciplinary, cross-cultural exploration of dreams as a model of interactive database narrative (see <www.dreamwaves.net>). Functioning as a cultural dreampool of images and sounds that are perpetually recombined to generate new visions of the future, it draws material from an award-winning interdisciplinary journal called *Dreamworks*, which I cofounded and coedited in the 1980s. (The title was subsequently changed to *Dreamwaves* to avoid conflict with DreamWorks SKG, the motion picture production company launched in 1994 by Steven Spielberg and others.) This website has an experimental dream-like structure, which means that periodically the user's visit is interrupted by the onset of a rapid-eye movement (REM) period featuring a montage of oneiric images and sounds randomly accessed from a diverse array of databases within the cultural dreampool. The website also includes a circle of dreamers featuring new work by innovative web artists, such as Jessica Irish and Eric Loyer. The dream pool welcomes dream adaptations, digital animations, dream reports, essays, and other contributions from artists, students, and dreamers from all over the world. We would love to have Pacific Islands artists, writers, and theorists as collaborators. By using dreams as the ultimate model of interactive database narrative, this website calls our attention to our fifth principle.

PRINCIPLE 5: LEVERAGING THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF DATABASE NARRATIVES

By *database narratives*, I am referring to narratives whose structure exposes or thematizes the dual processes of selection and combination that lie at the heart of all stories and that are crucial to language: the selection of particular data (characters, objects, settings, sounds, events) from a series of databases or paradigms, which are then combined to generate specific tales. Such narratives reveal the possibility of making other combinations, which would create alternative stories, and they encourage us to question the choice of categories and of what is included and omitted. We find this structure in many novels—such as Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, Kingston's *Women Warriors*, Lessing's *Golden Notebook*, Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, and Figiel's *Where We Once Belonged*. We also find it in several recent popular films like *Time Code*, *Memento*, *Run Lola Run*, *Ground Hog Day*, *The Matrix*, *Slackers*, *Pulp Fiction*, and older classics like *Last Year at Marienbad*, *Vagabond*, *Memories of Underdevelopment*, or any

film by Peter Greenaway, Chantal Akerman, Agnes Varda, Jim Jarmusch, Raul Ruiz, and my old favorites Antonioni, Godard, and Buñuel.

In contrast to the predictability of most Hollywood movies, such films are full of surprising ruptures that reveal the radical potential of the underlying database structure (which ordinarily lies hidden behind the story). These works also frequently demonstrate that dreams are the ultimate model of interactive database narrative, for they rely on a dialectic play between the disruptive power of seemingly random images (which deliver a surrealist jolt) and a repressive narrative drive that imposes chains of causality. One of the most radical lessons that Buñuel and other surrealists learned from Freud was the censoring function of the narrative impulse in dreamwork—that process of secondary revision that is operative both within the dream experience itself and within the interpretive act the morning after. This narrativizing process distracts the dreamer away from the most subversive meanings of the dream—those discrete visual images and sounds that threaten to explode all master narratives and their authorizing regimes of religion, nationality, and class. By privileging the disruptive power of sensory percepts over the normalizing drive of secondary revision, such films reveal that so-called master narratives are neither inevitable nor natural, but mutable like all stories. That means the vast reservoir of databases from which their narrative elements are drawn can serve as a powerful repository for social change. For it is always possible to make space in a database (if you really want to) for additional voices and images. This kind of perception is sorely lacking in cyberspace, despite all the utopian rhetoric about its so-called democratic decentering of master narratives and networked power. And that's why all of our Labyrinth projects keep returning to the trope of dreams—whether it is the dreamlike quality of cruising in John Rechy's interactive memoir, or Yuri Tsivian's discussion of dream sequences in Russian silent films, or a teenage runaway's nightmare about being lost in the pyramids, or an entire website built around dreams.

Although the Labyrinth projects I have described pursue diverse goals in various genres for different users, they all adhere to the five principles discussed in this paper: honoring past art forms, emphasizing conceptualization over technical mastery, taking a collaborative approach to interface design, searching for compelling metaphors that are culturally specific, and leveraging the transformative potential of database narratives. I hope you find some of these principles and projects useful (or at least provocative) for creating the future of Pacific Islands studies.

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Abstract

After tracing my academic journey from eighteenth-century English literary scholarship to new media production, I interweave three discursive strands: descriptions and demonstrations of several experimental interdisciplinary projects being produced at the Labyrinth Project, a research initiative on interactive narrative that I direct at the University of Southern California Annenberg Center for Communication; five general principles learned while making these projects; and tentative suggestions about how they might be applied to Pacific Islands studies. Despite the diversity of works presented (*Mysteries and Desire: Searching the Worlds of John Rechy*, an interactive memoir about gay Chicano novelist John Rechy; *The Danube Exodus*, a museum installation developed in collaboration with Hungarian filmmaker Péter Forgács; *The Dawn at My Back: a Memoir of a Black Texas Upbringing*, a DVD-ROM based on an autobiography by African-American photographer Carroll Parrott Blue; an e-learning course on Russian Modernism with an online role-playing game at its center; a computer game for teens called *Runaways*; and a website called *Dreamwaves*), all adhere to five basic principles: honoring the past, emphasizing conceptualization over technical mastery, taking a collaborative approach to interface design, searching for culturally specific metaphors, and leveraging the transformative potential of database narratives.

KEYWORDS: database narrative, e-learning, interactive narrative, interactivity, interface design, Labyrinth Project, narrative



When you get there I shall go myself

1999

Oil on canvas

Photographed by Gary Sturges