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Having Your Story and Eating It Too: Affect and Narrative in Recombinant Fiction

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It is night. A car drives up to a house and parks. The headlights go out. The next morning, the car starts again and drives away.

The above sentences barely make up a narrative, yet they describe a direction of events in time and space (a before and after) that conjure a network of possible (and possibly meaningful) narratives. Is the driver an investigator or a jealous stalker? A tired or homeless traveler? Is the car robotic? What is the narration concealing? It is within this explosion of possibilities that the simplest sequence can, not only hold attention and create expectation but also activate an array of the reader's own mental operations beyond just decoding the text's denotative meaning. Decoding a work of fiction might involve, simultaneously, visualization, imagination, associative thinking, perceptual and emotional identification, memory searches, inductive and deductive reasoning, comparative analysis, calculation, and prediction. The distinct pleasure of "getting lost" in a story might occur because these conscious and unconscious processes are tuned to the text and simultaneously involved in complex processes that are outside the text; that is, in the reader's mind. Narrative artists work hard to embed signals (useful information) so that texts can be decoded, but they also work at ambiguity and semantic noise to engage a reader's cognitive participation. Life is a daily encounter with contingencies and random events that don't fit plans

and strategies. Narrative fiction, being itself a model of life experience, must wrestle with the unexpected and the random to incorporate as affect the things, events, and processes outside human meaning-structures.

One of the challenges of computational fiction, of which there are many genres and flavors of practice, is how to manage narrative coherency while exploring the more interesting and affective possibilities of noise, indeterminacy, and randomness. These qualities, foundational practices in computational arts, are also a part of lived experience. We manage to make some sense of experience, despite the noise, indeterminacy, and randomness. But we also use these very chaotic processes to our advantage in making sense. At a preconscious level, we incorporate random processes into decision-making, abstract-modeling, problem-solving, and narrative construction. We create a kind of disorder to discover higher levels of order. Paradoxically, this complexity with which we negotiate experience remains inaccessible to us. Joseph Tabbi, in *Cognitive Fictions*, writes that digital artists may enact “cognitive calisthenics that usefully defamiliarize experience at the higher level,” but the deeper brain basis of cognition “escapes all signification, the level at or below which no narrative, language or social construction can go (xiii).”

... nowhere –not in print nor electronic media—is it possible to *represent* the actual transitions from perceptuo-motor behavior to human thought that arise, presumably, from the subpopulation of neurons at multiple locations throughout the brain.

(Tabbi 2002: xiii)

Whether we use narrative fiction to “make sense,” prop up beliefs, or just for amusement and play, it is a technique for modeling the chaos and flux of lived experience. To enter a story is to enter a dance (or battle) between order and chaos. Narrative artists have always worked with computational thinking to achieve the right balance between these forces. The very act of creative narrative composition involves combinatorics, conditionals, random and parallel processing, variables, and abstractions to build meaningful, affective, and believable representations of contingent experience within a narrative framework. In modern and postmodern literatures, authors use parataxis, meta-narrative, and stream-of-consciousness techniques to disrupt narrative logic in order to produce affect in the reader/viewer—a meaningful confusion that stimulates a search for other patterns outside or beyond linear cause–effect chains.

Recombinant poetics, a term coined by artist/scholar Bill Seaman, refers to a techno-poetic practice in which the display and juxtaposition of media elements are partially or fully generated by computer algorithms, rather than through an author’s predetermined composition. Much like the labyrinthine and rhizomatic structures of hypertext fiction and poetry, there

is a semantic instability to recombinant works. As texts, they change with each reading. Espen Aarseth labels such indeterministic texts *metamorphic*, a subset of ergodic cybertext that transform “endlessly with no final (and repeatable) state to be reached” (1997: 181). If recombinant texts inscribe change and indeterminacy as affective qualities or as metaphorical frames for negotiating fragmented content, how is meaning generated? Seaman draws on Roy Ascott’s notion of “field theory” in art to describe how semantic elements “work together to form an emergent outcome through recombination and *interaction*↔*intra-action* by an engaged participant” (Vesna 2007: 135). Recombinant authors program discrete media elements to display and behave through deterministic and variable processes, often in conjunction with user interaction. Although inspired by traditions of combinatorial literature and the use of constraints to generate narrative or poetic forms, recombinant works of art produce “fields of meaning” where “a finite set of media-elements is entertained through a vast set of potential combinatorial abstractions” (Rieser 2002: 242).

If narrative art is about representing causal relationships between agents and events, how can a work be received as narrative without these relationships being made explicit? Examples of recombinant poetics in works of digital poetry and art are abundant. Digital narratives that foreground recombinant processes are less common, because they tend to dismantle or dissolve themselves as narrative in favor of more nonlinear, affective, and emergent meanings. Narrative may be present in recombinant works, often within discrete semantic fragments, but narrative structure collapses when the intentions of anything like a narrator are noticeably absent.

In recent years, works of digital fiction have opened up new possibilities for incorporating recombinant poetics *inside* narratives. *Pry* and *Strange Rain* employ touch gestures that are metaphorically tied to narration; the user uncovers narrative meaning by exploring and learning about how the work operates. While both are only partially recombinant, in different ways, they are also both committed to telling psychological stories. Like much digital fiction, the works model subjective points-of-view and cognitive, nonlinear processes, but within a framework that is organized as a sequence of events. *Toxi•City*, a more overtly recombinant work, incorporates audio and video, fictional and nonfictional elements into a collage documentary about an ecological catastrophe that takes place both in the future and in the recent past. The work conflates the real with the imagined in a dense, semi-random (toxic) montage of audio and video fragments. What is interesting about these works is how their authors seek narrative coherence. Whether it is through user gestures, visual and auditory motifs, or narrative voice, the narrative elements resonate with the indeterminacy of the works’ combinatorics. Neither narrative nor recombinant processes are dominant. They are rather in a productive and meaningful relationship that the reader negotiates.

Recombinant fiction seems to work when both narrative structure and stochastic processes are explicitly in play at the level of signification. That is, narrative sequence and indeterminacy or randomness are evident and recognizable in the text. *The Korsakow System*, created by Florian Thalhofer, is a downloadable program for creating database films. The software makes it quite easy for authors to create and display interactive, recombinant systems out of a collection of video fragments. These fragments, called smallest-narrative-units or “snus,” are authored to display through a semi-random selection process. Inside the player of a *Korsakow* work, each video comes with a menu of other videos to play next in sequence. The random selection for these displayed choices are constrained by the author’s in and out tags for each video in the work. The more a video is tagged to other videos, the more likely it will appear. It is also possible to assign probabilities with a rating scale to control the frequency or precedence of videos appearing in any given traversal. Many of the best *Korsakow* films are nonfiction—meandering, generative, and gently interactive database documentaries that explore topics, ideas, or places. *Korsakow* narrative fiction has proven to be more of a challenge. The problem is not the degree to which an author can either restrict or open the possibilities of selection, nor is it a problem of the user recognizing narrative structure and randomness. It is that, in a *Korsakow* film, there is no explicit relationship between the two processes, no visible dance between chaos and order. The user has access to narrative content in each video, but the random processes have no resonance or tension with the content.

How does resonance and tension between order and chaos emerge in a work of fiction? From my own experience of authoring both linear and recombinant fictions, I believe it starts in the act of composition. Working at the micro and macro levels of constructing a narrative fiction, drafting arrangements and patterns, testing and iterating, a fictional work grows in complexity in the mind of the author. The author’s challenge is to translate this complex network into a compact system of signs that can be unpacked by a user back into a complex cognitive network. In two recent recombinant fiction projects, *Fingerbend* and *Phantom Agents*, my aim was to create narrative sequence within an interface that was indeterminately arranged with image selections, text fragments, and design elements. I wanted a “book” that always changed, but reflected that change within a static narrative sequence. *Fingerbend* is the multimedia diary of a character in a futile effort to make a story out of something radically distributed and networked. *Phantom Agents* is the episodic adventures of two characters inside a corrupted augmented reality game. In the composition of both works, the narrative and generative system emerged symbiotically. It is not only that there are narrative rationales for stochastic systems, but that these systems produce affect that complicate, disrupt, and infect the narration. Built with HTML5 and JavaScript, I used a few simple programming

principles to compose, simultaneously and iteratively, the narrative structure and the recombinant system. Random text fragments, images, and design elements are held in arrays, as are the narrative fragments. With each swipe or movement forward in the work, the interface displays from the narrative arrays in increments (*i++*) and from the random arrays based on a random JavaScript-generated number (*Math.random()*). Once that basic system is built, my role as a narrative artist takes over and I fill the arrays with the media fragments that play with each other, that resonate and mirror what the system is doing, as well as impart the necessary information about plot, character, and setting. Interface design is another layer of refining edges between the process and structure. As recombinant fictions, the works are playfully about themselves and not the simulations of a believable inner or outer reality. They are *metamorphic* texts that simulate the murky and liminal realms of lived experience; the paradox of being both in the world and dreaming the world.

Peter Schwenger in his book *At the Borders of Sleep: On Liminal Literature*, adopts the music term “obligato,” the sometimes improvised musical line around a main theme, to refer to the barely conscious mental wanderings of a reader trying to follow a text.

... when we read, we are aware not only of the shapes of phrases and sentences, not only of the particular “meaning” that words like nets enmesh, but also of the associative reticulations of our own minds.

(2012: 32)

Conventional narrative suppresses the possibilities of the reader’s *obligato*, keeping attention on the causal chain of events, mostly by raising questions and then answering them. Much of experimental literary fiction and electronic fiction, decidedly unconventional in its approach to narrative, uses opacity (Lamarque 2014), absence, and noise (Paulson 1988) to encourage and stimulate private, dream-like associations as an affective counterpoint to narrative cause and effect. The roots of narrative art, how a reader’s affect and cognition are stimulated in a text, is less about making meaning clear than about multiplying networks of semantic connections within and outside the text. While noise in a text, the disruption and decomposition of semantic coherence, seems to work against narrative’s temporal logic, it is in fact essential to embedding appropriate complexity of character, situation, and/or theme.

There are many authors of electronic literature that resist narrative, because narrative as a structuring device is just one of many that we now use to navigate contemporary life. Our environments, social interactions, diversions, and expressive tools increasingly follow database rather than narrative logic (Manovich 2002: 216). For digital artists, computation and database aesthetics offers so many possibilities for exploring networked life,

that narrative is just one formal device among many. It is optional. Also, as Galen Strawson point out, there are harmful limitations to relying on causal-chains to explain nonlinear forces in lived experience (2004: 428–52). Narratives, as frameworks for “human self-understanding, close down important avenues of thought, impoverish our grasp of ethical possibilities, needlessly and wrongly distress those who do not fit their model, and are potentially destructive in psychotherapeutic contexts” (447). However, some of the most lasting works of literary fiction—*Don Quixote*, *Tristram Shandy*, *Ulysses*—probe not only the complexities of lived experience but also the viability of narrative for representing such complexity. Literary fiction is an ever-elusive quest to model, map, and harness contingency and indeterminacy on the level of signification. The possibilities for computational fiction are immense in furthering this effort. It is unlikely that recombinant poetics in electronic literature will produce fictions made of well-formed characters living explicitly in a believable external reality, but it might produce fictions that evoke the murky and liminal symbolic systems that make up our internal and external networks.

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