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Locative Narrative

Jeremy Hight

The moment of greatest cartographic awareness in human history is arguably happening right now. Maps are active on smartphones and in cars. New ways of tagging maps, annotating spaces, and even storing and searching information are on these maps. Cartography is no longer static maps and globes but a more malleable and layered entity. Our sense of space is also entering new areas of resonance and contextualization in this more active mapping and sense of location. An area to emerge and expand in this cartographic period is locative narrative (geospatial narrative) but it began before this ubiquitous mapping moment by several years.

A street is in fact a punctuated space. A sidewalk is as well. A city is a more complexly punctuated collective amalgamation of spaces small to large (like sentence to paragraph to full text). A sentence is mediated by length, vocabulary, punctuation, and detail in the same way a street is mediated by stop signs, stop lights, and length and detail. City planning is, in a sense, placement of spatial comma and semicolon to mediate space, flow, and information. A city is a scripted space by said design. The larger definition in animation of “narrative” is something moved over a duration and thus something changed and this was inferred to the viewer. Therefore, our physical spaces are already narrative in a sense. There also is in any space a connotative and denotative read.

Locative narrative has emerged as a range of works that place narrative along physical space (geolocate) be it on maps, on malleable maps like Google maps, or, more commonly, in the physical world itself. Martin Rieser in his 2009 essay “Locative Media and Spatial Narratives” describes how “The emergent field of ‘locative’ media art explores the convergence of computer

data and location using portable media.”¹ He continues with how “the predominant uses of mapping and spatial information necessarily lead us to a radical reassessment of the nature of representation.” Rieser elucidates how locative narrative is a location aware progression of both narrative form and technological functionality and usage for creative exploration. It is both a radical move into a malleable and content aware cartography and a logical progression.

Ann Galloway and Matthew Ward in their 2005 essay “Locative Media as Socialising and Spatialising Practices: Learning from Archaeology” early on discusses the general range of locative works as “everything from mobile games, place based storytelling, spatial annotation and networked performances to device-specific applications.”² The emergent field at that time was a range of location aware works with a subset being locative narratives. The field has since expanded out into augmented and mixed reality and films with location-specific components. The works under the umbrella of locative narrative explore the inherent social and functional tensions in a space as well as the narrative potential of space, data, and one’s physical engagement in a location.

Spaces are never of only present itself. There are ghosts. Past is a ghost. Erasure is a ghost. Forgetting over time is a ghost. Suppression of controversial information is another ghost and perhaps the most complex of all. A writer can take a room and based on details chosen describe paint as dark or bright as possible, as full of portent and subtext as possible or as light and of the passing moment. Prose has long held these elements in its basic tools and architecture. What happens when this is applied to the world itself and physical location(s)? What is possible when a writer writes with the physical world as details, metaphors, subtext, or meta-text? The possibilities are nearly endless and have become a huge thread within the emergence and resonance of locative narratives. It is important, however, to first look back at key precedents that have helped this field form and emerge.

Locative narrative has roots that go back in many directions. One is in forms of writing playing with the space within a text. A text is its own sort of cartography as it is laid out for navigation in the larger space of presentation and thus has a kind of architectural internal logic as well as physicality and spatiality. Typography also is a sense of almost girders as individual letters are bent thick shapes clustered then into words, sentences, and paragraphs. A traditional book thus is a building or even a city in a sense; there are rooms within the hole, spaces, internal elements, parts to

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¹Martin Rieser, “Locative Media and Spatial Narratives,” *NeMe*, last modified May 28, 2009, <http://www.neme.org/texts/locative-media-and-spatial-narratives>.

²Ann Galloway and Matthew Ward, “Locative Media as Socialising and Spatialising Practices: Learning from Archaeology (Draft),” forthcoming *Leonardo Electronic Almanac*, MIT Press, last modified 2005, http://www.purselipsquarejaw.org/papers/galloway_ward_draft.pdf.

whole and how it all “moves” upon reading. Some experimental texts have moved these elements even further into new areas and directions that are key lineages to locative narrative.

George Perec’s *Life: A User’s Manual* was published in 1978. It has been called a postmodern masterpiece as well one of Oulipo. It may well be these things but it moves beyond the border lines drawn by such naming. It can be argued that placing a deeply resonant work of varied elements in one specific field is reductive and constricts the ways the work can be viewed and experienced to the semantics and semiotics of a cluster of related works and definitions. This book is many things. It is the rooms of a single building instead of chapters. It is the map of these rooms. It is a chess board and the reader moves along like a pawn on a board not page by page in a narrative in a book. It also is a puzzle. There are to this day new theories and images trying to “solve” the puzzle. It is also beautiful writing telling stories by listing elements in each room. It shows that narrative and space can be malleable and can be read on several levels and contexts at once.

Mildorad Pavic’s *Dictionary of the Khazars* came out in 1984 and is completely fictional as far as the Khazars and is not a dictionary but a “novel” constructed as a fictional encyclopedia. The reader can read it in its entirety or can read one paragraph entry and have read the work. This is Pavic’s intention and design. The text is now a space that has let go of authorial control and is instead a space open to navigate. Pavic has made a space that is experientially navigated and is many spaces within the larger space of book. It is essentially a landscape. This work elucidates how text can be experienced in many paths within the larger ideas and meta resonances of an author and small to large experienced can be considered reading/experiencing the work.

These two works together are a direct vein into locative narrative as text is shown to be a space, an experience parts to a whole and not just nonlinear or linear but to move through as though in a city, mountainside, building hallway, or seaside. An interesting third bit of text is actually something made to be read primarily by young teens. *Choose Your Own Adventure* books were created by Edward Packard in 1978 for an audience generally 10–14 years of age after telling his daughters variations of bedtime stories of the same character in different adventures. It initially was rejected many times but became a phenomenon as it opened up narrative to a kind of game with many paths inside a printed book. The instructed along the path gave options of pages to turn to and thus forking paths often leading to either death or a new section and possible forking paths to come. It was a lot like the play of video games that had a certain end point and several ways to “lose” before reaching that end point in a narrative and space. Text was game play and a space of many paths and experiential lengths. This form has come to influence many experimental writers and inform locative narrative as geospatial placement of narrative creates not only an experiential interface

of text and narrative, but also has ties to game narrative and space as having options and being multidirectional.

Locative narrative also has clear and strong ties to previous art movements and works dealing with physical space and its resonance and even annotation in nondigital forms. Land art took the age-old question of the white space (exhibition space and white walls such as museum and gallery) and the problematization of work taken to the white space and pushed it out altogether. There are positive and negative semiotic reads just as there are negative positive epiphanies (flash of realization of idea vs. flash of realization of failure of impossibility of idea or its negative effects). A negative semiotic read is a kind of extended rhizomatic (shared root system) symbolism and association as opposed to more familiar positive or general semiotics. The age-old negative semiotic of the gallery or museum space is the antiseptic nature of the white walls, the erasure of all things outside this hierarchically charged space. It can be tied back to the negative semiotic read of a hillside village in feudalistic times. The low-lying area of crops and serfs looking up the hillside see the king's castle and its high walls as exclusionary. It is a rarified space with rare passage. The positive of art being accepted in galleries in museums, of course, is the work being seen as having merit and appeal. The negative, however, is that this space is excluding all other works, other places, and things outside the tastes of the gatekeepers. It also is seen as a rarified space of commerce above aesthetics.

Land art argued in many works that the physical world was an exhibition space, was material for art, and was not the natural sublime (the quality of that sunset beyond words and that crushing beauty of something greater than the human realm) but simply of itself. Nature was to be seen at times sublime, but also humble, open, malleable to a degree, open to many paths and contexts. Robert Smithson had long been exhibiting in galleries when he moved toward spaces outside and works like his 1970 classic work *Spiral Jetty*. Smithson made a work of physical location and materials, location, and aesthetics. The jetty is an elemental form both seen in nature and in created works. The spiral is an artwork and it is location specific. Gone is the white space and its positive and negative semiotics. It is a location-specific and aware work and is an annotation of a physical space like we take for granted now on smartphones.

GPS has roots going back to 1956 but became a working system in 1995. A triangulated "line of sight" is fixed between navigational satellites utilizing latitude and longitude. The public signal has slightly less accuracy than the military and first was used in airplanes, by fishermen, hikers, and geocaching (easter egg-like hunts for signals placed in physical locations) enthusiasts. The system gridded and guided smart bombs in the First Iraq War. Early GPS art includes the important early work *The Telepresent* by Stephen J. Wilson in 1997. The work was a decorated box to be passed on like a present to others in physical space. It used GPS to track its location on a shared map.

What it saw with its camera was shared to others and determined by who it had been given to. Wilson brought together tenets of land art (out of the gallery into the physical world), video art, telepresence, human behavior psychology (he was very interested in who it would be given to and why), and autonomy (it had no wires or specific protected ownership when passed around). It opened up many doors and directions to come.

In 1999 Teri Rueb first created *Trace*. The work utilized GPS to trigger sounds and poems along hiking trails in Yoho national park in British Columbia. The songs, sounds, and poems were memorials along the trail and ruminations on death, life, mortality, and the space in between. The work was geospatial augmentation and an experiential interface. The audio forms an overlay on specific locations along the trails and a transformative space of elegy and memorial. This moves from *The Telepresent's* groundbreaking sense of space and signal into something also of text space overlay in physical space while holding onto the sense of aesthetics and power of location found in *Spiral Jetty*.

Trace opened up a new area of geolocative writing and art as a kind of space to place memorials along physical space. Physical space became a kind of curated as well as augmented space in the same way that flowers are placed at the sites of fatalities along streets and roads. This was also a crucial early move into the possibilities of mixed space and mixed reality with technology and screen space tied to physical space.

34 North 118 West began in 1999 and was completed in 2001 and first shown in 2002. The project utilized the public GPS signal at first with an external GPS unit (like hikers used at the time), then a GPS card on an old 100 dollar laptop. The project began as an exploration of the connections between global positioning satellite data and the way raw materials moved across physical space in the early twentieth century along railroads. This opened up research initially into cartography as well. The map is an overlay of data and system of functionality above landscape just as railroads have long veined the landscape with a system of timing, architecture, data/material, and a specific dialect of its own iconography. GPS also has a grid space laid out across physical space with its own iconography, system functions, and methods of working with parcels of data (smart bombs in the First Iraq War, for example).

34 North 118 West became the first locative narrative. The project laid narrative as a kind of skin across the landscape taking elements of detail, metaphor, and subtext from the keys of type to a kind of imagined hybrid keyboard of writing with text and the physical world itself. The place could reveal a deeper metaphor in say a dry river bed, could take the facade of an older building as that meta reference in a story along with the text itself. Utilizing the Global Positioning Satellite system's ability to place data by latitude and longitude, the project also allowed place to have a "voice."

34 *North 118 West* created a kind of “narrative archeology” by taking historical research of a hundred plus years of a four-block area of Los Angeles and culling historical data. The research found that waves of people had moved through while the buildings essentially were the same from the early twentieth century. The city was shown to be iterations, layers almost like sedimentary layers of earth over time. The cliched perception/negative semiotic of Los Angeles is of a perpetual present continually botoxing and erasing its past. The city has let go of many historical landmarks like Schwab’s pharmacy (legendary for stars being discovered in the mid-twentieth century) and the beheaded legendary restaurant (literally top section cut off and placed on a mini mall across town while rest was leveled) the Brown Derby.

A common generalist conception of archeology is the researcher digging in the soil and finding at different depths different layers of artifacts and thus time and history (striations of a sort like sediment layers themselves or tree rings in measure). The verticality of the dig becomes time and the artifacts become placed spatially giving a basic sense of space tied to information. 34 *North* laid out short prose/prose poetry made of historical data *horizontally*. To move through a city space and have information trigger from the past while moving along streets, sidewalks, and alleys was clearly another type of archeological “dig.”

34 *North* placed colored squares on a map (an early augmented reality aspect) along a map of a four-block area of Los Angeles. The map moved a cursor as the person or persons (up to six people at a time with connected headphones) moved along streets, parking lots, or alleys. The pink squares indicated areas of augmentation with narrativized historical data from research. The map indicated the date of the audio as well. The effect was of place being given voice. The narratives were indeed a kind of skin laid across physical space, but were also a way for place to voice layers of past and even things lost or suppressed over time. There was not the need to read books far away or lose voices as all could now be signal, could be tied to place itself, channels even of voices of past where they occurred.

Locative narrative has traveled the path of many things once deemed “avant garde.” The history of creativity and technology echoes the same kind of sine wave of emergence and experimentation. This is by far not a negative. Avant garde has an early meaning of basically being that first line emerging in battle. A new tool comes along and is played with and explored. Later tendrils and threads form of emergent paths and areas of exploration. Later fields and sub-fields begin to gel of aspects of play and contextualization. The field becomes documented and studied and a feedback loop begins of looking both backward and forward over time. The work of early pioneers becomes either lexicon, reference point to move from or both.

Another interesting aspect of locative narrative is its context in the literary discussion of form and experimental vs. traditional. Robert Frost

is a great point of reference. His work is seen by many as having the clarity and familiarity seen as precepts of “traditional” writing. At the same time he late in his life spoke of how he imagined a place and its spaces and iconography along with a character not himself that navigated this space. This Robert Frost is in fact a proto avatar and his writings of a kind of second life or internet space, a simulation. These aspects are the bedrock of much “experimental” writing. Locative narrative has become a range of forms and works and many have the clarity and familiar structures of literary fiction, poetry, short shorts, and even Oulipo in its listing of things like list poetry. Locative narrative at the same time is a form taking older forms into newer areas of structure, form, presentation, malleability, and play. These aspects are of experimentation.

Locative narrative has and will continue to move in new tributaries and hybrids. Locative narrative film making, locative psychology, locative journalism, locative comedy, QR code narratives, augmented reality narratives, map augmentation narratives, and mixed-reality game storytelling are just some of the areas to emerge thus far under the geo-locative umbrella. The initial magma of play with a tool has cooled into fields within fields and an ever-expanding lexicon.