Staging life stories on the web: the *Small Histories* project and performances of reconstruction

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the Small Histories website, a work-in-progress that aims to create an online network of interlinked personal narratives by facilitating the creation and sharing of life stories. It investigates ways the Internet can support the urge to tell and share one's personal history, and explores some attendant issues. The question is raised: can personal and communal identity be reconstructed through web-based performances in the form of shared online narratives? In response, this paper poses the proposition that the Internet can be deployed as a performance space, with tools made available for people to gather and unite fragments from the traumatic past, and present them to an online audience.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

Primary Classification: D. Software; D.0 General Additional Classification: A. General Literature; A.0 General; Subjects: Biographies/autobiographies

General Terms

Design, Experimentation, Human Factors

Keywords

Web 2.0, social software, social networking, sociable media, Internet narrative, online narrative, narrative research, hypertext, cybertext

1. INTRODUCTION

The Internet is, as well as many other things, a "technology of memory" [25]. People use it to reclaim territories and identities lost in political and social upheavals. They gather fragments of the past, digitise them, create meaning and context around them, and share the results online. This has become easier as the tools to self-publish - to upload digital media and add layers of meaning through comments, captions, tags and the like - have become more accessible in recent years, thereby helping to support the emergence of what has been called an "auto/biographical society" [16].

Whilst there are specific genealogical and familial motivations for these online explorations of personal history, I would argue that this kind of activity also points to a general urge to rebuild context and continuity in a fragmented world – of re-establishing one's place in the world in an era of mass physical and social upheaval, dispersal and trauma [4].

However this does not mean that one is simply trying to recreate something that used to exist, or providing an aid or adjunct to memory [19]. It is instead like the rebuilding of a city after a bombing raid, a form of reinvention, a reuse of the fragments of the past to build something new. It takes from the past but it is not the past; the past is only a starting point. Publishing one's life story online is, I propose, a creative act, a performance on the stage of the computer screen.

My PhD project, the *Small Histories* website (www.smallhistories.com), aims to facilitate the online self-publishing of life stories, stories that might otherwise be lost or unseen. Through the site's development and testing process I plan to support users' performative efforts by making the story creation process as purposeful as possible, and by developing options for users to visually present ordered sequences of text, images, video and other items of digital media.

2. THE STAGING OF THE SELF

2.1 Performing postmemory

The kind of web-based reinvention described above takes on particular resonance when undertaken by those who have not experienced events firsthand, but who have a yearning to establish contexts for themselves that reach back beyond their time to previous generations. Marianne Hirsch defines this as "postmemory", a kind of memory that "characterises the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated." Such a memory, says Hirsch, is one whose "connection to its object or source is mediated, not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation." [9].

2.2 Identity and the web

The urge to create and share one's story on the web could be characterised as being composed of the following:

- *The Past*: reclaiming lost history, postmemory (family history, mitigating loss, memorial)
- *The Present*: reclaiming spaces and places (personal identity, community)
- *The Future*: staking a claim to future memory (future generations, legacy)

The quest for personal identity is a central factor: *what is my place in the world*?

My own life story, which spawned the Small Histories project, bears this out. In 1997 I traced my biological father to Israel and lived there for almost a year. In the ensuing decade I have sought to integrate this newly discovered part of myself into my sense of who I am and where I belong. The developing Internet has become my partner in my search for identity; I have scoured it and discovered fragments of information directly and indirectly connected to my history. In its evolving role as a facilitator of connections, the Internet has changed the process of collecting, reinventing and presenting fragments of personal identity. The huge growth of genealogy as an online pursuit is an example, with its plethora of web-based user tools.

2.3 Performances of reconstruction

As a result of the Internet's transformation during recent years into a database-powered hub of exchange, personal identities are, as Danah Boyd states, becoming 'networked' [3], dispersed electronically on servers around the world – Facebook profiles, Flicker photo collections, blogged ruminations on one's life, comments on YouTube videos. All these artifacts are performances of the self, versions of oneself created for particular audiences.

I propose that life stories published on the web can be seen as performances of reconstruction. They are performances in the sense that they are actively created through a technology-mediated process of making (digitising, creating context, uploading), and in the sense that the process of creation is infused with an awareness and expectation of *audience*. Creators know that their work will be on show and accessible by an audience around the world, albeit one that is ambiguous and undefined. As stated by Marie McLean in *Narrative as Performance*, which was written before the rise of the Internet in 1988, "Performance always implies submitting to the gaze and measurement of others." [14] This is especially true of narratives that are created to be published online.

McLean also makes the point that "Performance at its most general and most basic level is a carrying out, a putting into action or into shape." and that "narrative (can) not be satisfactorily explored except as the site of an interaction, just as a body or a mind can only be fully appreciated when seen in interplay with those of another." [14] The Internet makes this interplay more explicit, even as it warps traditional notions of audience and creator with user-created additions such as comments, tagging and other forms of user input.

As suggested above, the web acts as both the stage - the story that appears on the web - and the performance development process - the publishing workflow created by the particular software, albeit the Small Histories site, Flickr, Facebook, Blogger or any other online self-publishing media. Indeed, the user interface and associated workflow rules shape the final performance to a large degree as well as its audiences. The technology chosen and the related processes deployed, and therefore their creator/s, are silent co-directors of the performance along with the author [10]. Lastly, there is a sense of immediacy about self-publishing on the web, a knowledge that the results of one's efforts will shortly be available to the world. There are relatively few steps between the urge to create and the output, unlike traditional forms of media publishing. This immediacy adds, I believe, to the sense of a performance.

The ease with which one can publish on the web also leads to what one might call a more 'flexible' attitude to the truth. You can always change your story or add to it; your words won't stay in print for perpetuity. In fact when seen as performances, it doesn't matter how 'true' life stories are. As Marie McLean states, "Performance is not subjected to the criterion of truth or falsehood, but judged on failure or success. Its standards are those of desire or lack rather than of fact. Thus, for a performance to be successful it is not enough for it to have purpose; it must have energy and effect."[15]

This is a particularly interesting issue when looking at web-based autobiographical stories. Conceptions collide here: 'energy and effect' become all the more important when seen in context of the Internet, a place of millions of competing narratives, notoriously short audience attention spans and the ability to change your story at short notice: Vivian Gornick observes that autobiographers create a persona that is 'them and not them', a unifying entity that brings order and clarity to the narrative [7] When writing we "become-other, becoming of that of which we write and think" (Probyn 1996, quoted in [24]). And on the web, we are given the ability to perform a continual work-in-progress version of ourselves. What happens, then, to the expectation that memoirs should be reliable and trustworthy, as expounded by Lejeune in his idea of an 'autobiographical pact' between writers of autobiographical material and their readers. [11]? How much artistic licence can be taken when telling one's story on the web? What is the expectation when operating in a medium full of half-truths and contradictory performances of the self? This is an area I plan to look at in this project.

2.4 Order and open-endedness

The widespread growth of database-powered web systems has transformed the Internet in recent years. In his landmark 1997 work *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Espen Aarseth outlined a model for conceptualising computer-based narratives that incorporates database-driven technologies. He called it *text machines* - "a mechanical device for the production and consumption of verbal signs" [1], a term that resonates with Ted Nelson's *literary machines* of the 1960s. Aarseth broke down narratives into elements called "textons", which are then ordered or arranged into viewable/readable sequences or "scriptons" through what he calls the "traversal function", "the mechanism by which scriptons are revealed or generated from textons and presented to the user of the text". The scriptons form the narrative users see or read.

Database-driven websites (which are one kind of text machine) can allow for constant addition and re-editing of content items (ie textons). When applied to Facebook profiles, blogs or a site like Small Histories, this can results in a creative work that never has to end. Lev Manovich, in *Database As A Symbolic Form*, makes the assertion that the open-endedness of editable online systems is an "anti-narrative logic" and that database and narrative are "natural enemies" because adding new elements over time results in "a collection, not a story". Manovich asks: "how can one keep a coherent narrative or any other development trajectory through the material if it keeps changing?" [13]. In doing so he makes a sharp distinction between what he sees as the structured framework of narrative and the unstructured, random access model of the database. This view incorporates a problematic view of what a database is and does. As Rune Daalgard points out [5], Manovich's notion of the database is broad and encompasses everything from

collections of web links to relational databases; these are in fact very different in their nature and function. On the Internet, databases are the unseen, highly structured engines powering emerging performative narratives, including those that evolve over time; and when framed as a evolving performance rather than a static story with beginning, middle and end, the open-endedness of such narratives become less of an issue.

3. ABOUT SMALL HISTORIES

3.1 How the Small Histories site works

As a proposed repository of life stories, the Small Histories site invites a kind of performance different to those on other database-powered sites such as blogs and media upload sites. With Small Histories the process of self-publishing necessarily involves a degree of premeditation, of prior intention. When using Small Histories there is less of the immediacy than, say, on a blog, where there is only one step to publishing one's thoughts – type into the box and hit 'submit'. Instead the Small Histories publishing process requires a number of steps.

After logging on as a Small Histories story creator, one uploads media items (photos, video, text, audio etc) to a repository. One then creates a story by:

- Giving the story a title and description
- Adding to the story at least one item uploaded by somebody else by dragging it from the left-hand to right-hand column
- Choosing a presentation style and, on the same screen;
- Adding any number of one's own items by dragging them into an order into the right hand column.

This story will then be available on the web in the presentation format chosen. These currently include:
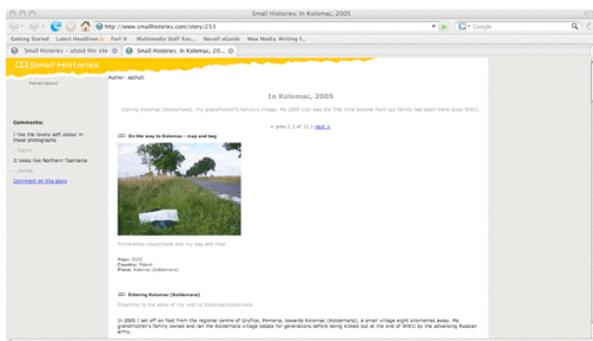


Fig 1: Narrative format – scrolls down the screen
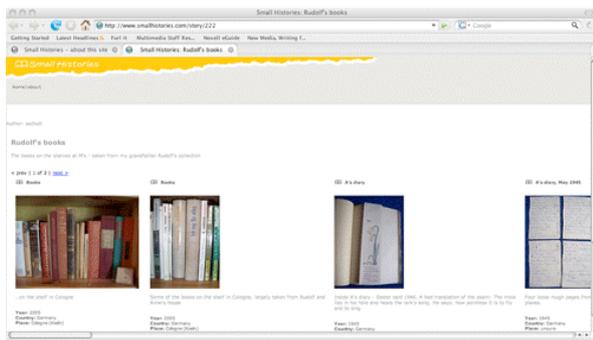
Fig 2: Gallery format – scrolls across the screen
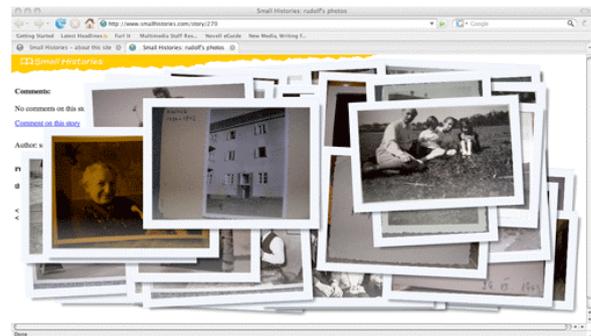
Fig 3: Shoebox format – draggable layers

Two other presentation styles, *slideshow* and *scrapbook*, are still in development. The slideshow format presents items as a series of slides, while the scrapbook format is like the shoebox except that the positioning of items is defined by the story creator (items within a shoebox presentation can be moved by users).

As stated previously the Small Histories site is currently a work-in-progress. Its mechanisms are about to be tested by releasing and promoting it to a select group of users, then to the wider web, with research data to be collected through personal and online interviews and log file data as well as the stories and comments on the site itself. It has been built in PHP, with the intention that the final software will be released as open source for others to develop it further. The site has been built by programmer James Cartledge using the Model View Controller (MVC) design pattern. This model separates the data appearing on the site, the user interface and the site's control logic into three independent entities. MVC has been chosen for its flexibility and will allow for the site to change by letting design, usability and workflow changes to be made without affecting the rest of the site's functionality or structure.

3.2 Small Histories and 'weak links'

One of the project's aims is to respond to what network physicist Albert-László Barabási calls a tendency of the Internet to 'encourage segregation and social fragmentation' [2]. Barabási shows that, in any network composed of concentrated clusters of nodes and links, only a few links bridging these clusters are enough to connect the network. If clusters are not linked, this leads to silos of information where opposing viewpoints are not presented, leading to closed self-reinforcing loops of like-minded opinion. Small Histories will attempt to counter this by implementing an "outside link" rule. In workflow terms, this means that the first step of the story creation process will be for authors to include an item in their story that has been uploaded by someone else.

However in usability terms I have already struck some problems with this addition. Having uploaded some 3000 digital media items to Small Histories myself, any other author will now encounter a choice of thousands of items to choose from when taking the first step of story creation. This may be overwhelming and prove to be a disincentive to those who want to create a story on Small Histories. And perhaps these users may simply not want to include someone else's item in their story. I will find this out soon.

4. CONCLUSION

The recasting of online life stories as performed narratives opens up alternative ways of thinking about the Internet's role as a facilitator of life stories. It allows for websites to be seen as active partners in the recording and sharing of history through the technical processes they dictate to users. Indeed, the web is already taking on the role of 'performance director' for millions on social networking sites, the rules of user engagement and information display dictating the final outcome on the screen.

This approach allows for a fresh approach to autobiography by diminishing the emphasis on truth with an awareness that the business of personal story creation is unreliable and people's stories are subject to change over time, just like in real life. Database-driven web environments are of particular interest here because they allow creators to change elements, add new parts and otherwise change their stories as they change.

As far as the Small Histories site itself is concerned, I intend to test my assumption that an open-ended story can work as a performed narrative. I would like to see if Aarseth's Cybertext model provides a response to Manovich's concerns about narrative open-endedness by testing my assertion that database is an engine, not an enemy, of narrative.

It will also be interesting to test the idea of Dirk De Bruyn [4] that open-endedness may never let you achieve 'closure': "Because of its open-ended nature at some point in the making of an interactive the question arises: How do you finish? How do you move away from something without end, how do you get out of a never ending story and finish with that mourning?"

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