
Exploding, Centralizing, and Reimagining: Critical Scholarship Refracted Through the NewRadial Prototype

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Abstract

This article discusses the ways that INKE's Modelling and Prototyping team is extending the NewRadial prototype environment to re-present print-based monographs and journals, while enabling new layers and patterning opportunities for those existing forms of scholarship. NewRadial will also be modified to explore, support, and encourage digital-born forms of scholarship that retain print-based affordances, but that organize argumentation differently (e.g., linked and layered mind maps, concept maps, or flow charts). Through this, we are modelling different types of social aggregation within centralized workspaces to counter the isolation and scattered dialogues that often result from print-based distribution.

Keywords

Digital scholarship; Monographs; Journals; INKE; NewRadial; Prototype

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Environments are not passive wrappings, but are, rather, active processes which are invisible. The ground rules, pervasive structure, and over-all patterns of environments elude easy perception. Anti-environments, or counter-situations made by artists, provide means of direct attention and enable us to see and understand more clearly.
— McLuhan & Fiore, 1996, p. 68

Literary works are by nature social products and social structures.
— McGann, 1985, p. 404

Every scholar's work, whether narrativized or not, operates in a field which it cannot comprehend within itself. Narrativity is used by the critic precisely to struggle against the apparently arbitrary limits of that referential field.
— McGann, 1985, p. 410

This year, the research teams that make up INKE (Implementing New Knowledge Environments), a SSHRC Major Collaborative Research Initiative headed by Dr. Ray Siemens, are focusing on the ways that digital environments impact the production, circulation, and use of traditional venues for scholarly research (specifically journals and monographs).

INKE's Modelling and Prototyping team is extending the NewRadial prototype environment to explore the following metacritical questions in relation to these types of critical discourse:

1. Can monographs and journals continue to exist as separate entities in networked, digital space? How must they evolve beyond their relatively independent, static, closed-access, and narrative traditions?
2. How can we visualize scholarship through time and space, and how can such spatiotemporal visualizations and manipulations be used to provide unique scholarly perspectives on the life and growth of a critical idea?
3. How can the collaborative activity and collective intelligence modelled by Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) and Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) be harnessed for secondary scholarship and peer-review methods and models?

A renewed attention to the forms and functions of print-based vehicles for critical discourse (what we have here called "secondary scholarship") demands that we return to earlier discussions about the nature of such communication to establish a foundation for our explorations.

In the 1990s, the assignments written throughout my undergraduate and graduate humanities education continually required an objective, depersonalized, and grammatical style that represented the universal applicability of my arguments. In essence, I was told not to write pronoun-filled sentences like this one and to exclude narrative aspects from my critical writing style, engaging with ideas and principles instead of the people who produced them, while still generating a coherent and progressive (but depersonalized) path of argumentation through a field of knowledge. Herded by mentors and practitioners who simply taught to me what they had learned, I obediently overlooked some of the metacritical discussions that were taking place at

the margins of the critical theory feeding frenzy. For example, Don Bialostosky's 1986 article "Dialogics as an Art of Discourse in Literary Criticism" offers Bakhtin's idea of dialogic discourse (which acknowledges an essential synthesis between people and their ideas) as an alternative to the Aristotelian binary of dialectic (shift or support theses) and rhetorical (defend or attack persons) modes of argumentation. He suggests that, "as practitioners of dialogics we would... [strive] both to recognize the mutual bearings of diverse voices and to answer them from our own perspectives" (p. 789). In a way, then, Bialostosky at once advocates for narrative and anti-narrative modes of critical discourse that acknowledge specific cultural, temporal, and individual contexts: on the one hand, he embraces a critical subjectivity, while on the other, he avoids the reductive beginning, middle, and end arc of storied representation.

Approaching this from another route and drawing from Roland Barthes' ideas, Hayden White (1980) suggests that narrative is a metacode, a translatable solution to the problem of how to convert knowing into telling (pp. 5-6). He goes on to assert that the absence or refusal of narrative is "an absence or refusal of meaning itself" (p. 6). However, White complicates and clarifies this further by listing the epitome, meditation, and anatomy as non-narrative modes of historiographical representation that do not refuse meaning, and he suggests that these are examples of ways in which critical discourses can be narrated without narrativizing, or imposing the form of a story on their content. Narrativizing processes, like those that shaped my student essays, tend toward an objective mode, universalizing the story, whereas narrated examples grammatically acknowledge subjectivity and perspective at the heart of the story. He concludes by recognizing, however, that "value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary" (p. 27).

This imagined coherence of images of life is a likely explanation for why narrativity has been instituted at the heart of literary critical discourses. Indeed, the seemingly anti-narrative style that I was required to adopt during my university education is actually exposed through White's lens as an ironic process of subtle narrativization that strengthens its imaginary coherence by grammatically denying a subjective perspective. However, Jerome McGann (1985), in his paper "Some Forms of Critical Discourse," responds to White by recognizing – yet also criticizing – the ubiquitous narrativity at the heart of literary criticism, pointing out that:

[T]he study of a literary work begins under the auspices of previous investigators, whose views are the hypotheses which bring order and direction to the study of the phenomena. The critic's own reading of the work measures both itself and the work against the received, enabling hypotheses. Finally, the working critic judges how adequate the hypotheses are to the work, and in the process he will either propose a wholly new hypothesis (for example, Cleanth Brooks' chapter on Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn"), or he will revise, supplement, or otherwise alter – without overthrowing – the received views. At that point – and this is crucial – the entire critical process will be translated into a verbal form as a lecture or, more normatively, as an essay or a monograph. The very acts of analysis and reading are represented in narrative form. (p. 401)

While agreeing with White's implications that "the narrative form... produces fictions of moral completion and order" (p. 406), McGann (1985) also mourns the disconnection between this hermeneutical type of critical analysis and non-narrative forms of critical inquiry (such as those related to textual and bibliocritical discourse). These latter forms

do not merely provide us with 'facts' that may elucidate certain words or passages; they characteristically define those vast and regulating structures which alone give meaning to the poetic semiosis. Through such critical works we begin to unravel the inception and reception histories of literary products and thereby the textual structures which re-present those histories in iconic forms. (p. 401-402)

Taxonomically differentiating between narrative and non-narrative forms of discourse, subdividing the latter into hypothetical, practical, array, and dialectic types (p. 399), McGann explores a bibliographic entry as an arrayed form, noting that "[a]rrayed forms organize their materials in certain preestablished patterns and grammars ... [and that this] standardized format ... declares that ... one cannot decide in advance how and in what way these matters will be significant." Further, "an arrayed form ... demands that people master its grammar and usage if they are to read it[,] ... presupposes the reader's familiarity with the larger context ... [and] sets ... the gestalt in terms of which all the details can find their possible lines of interconnection" (pp. 404-405).

Unlike White, then, McGann attempts to escape from the ubiquity of narrativity (and the attendant reductivism that accompanies storytelling paradigms) in critical discourse via an exploration of non-narrative forms and a faith that limited and limiting narratives will inherently deconstruct themselves within larger contexts.

Particular works have their limits defined for them in the endless discourse whose text can never be established (since it is always being modified and extended). The narratives of literary criticism, then, will have their limits exposed, necessarily, by other critical views and scholarly narratives. Nevertheless, this exposure offers no criticism of the form of narrativity itself or of the apparitions of order and completeness which that form insists upon. (McGann, 1985, p. 410)

McGann's critique of narrative's reductive aspects, along with White's recognition of its meaningful necessity, creates a vital and persistent tension at the heart of critical inquiry. However, what has changed since their print-based exchange in the 1980s is that the digital frame offers significant and additional alternatives to print-based forms of critical engagement and communication, which simultaneously support narrative and non-narrative modes of meaningful discourse.

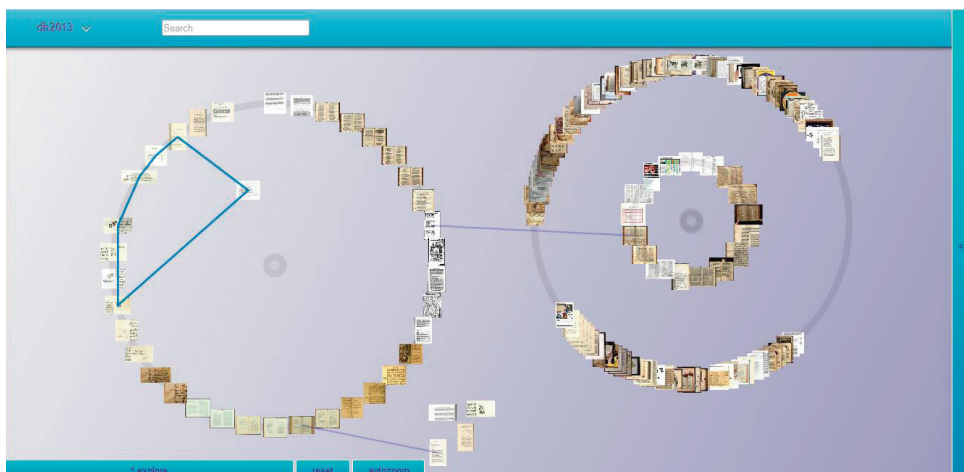
We are thus using the NewRadial prototype to shatter the seemingly isolated aspects of print-based monograph arguments that employ "narrative form to generate an illusion of completion and moral finishedness" (McGann, 1985, p. 409) and to engage with the less coherent opportunities available through journal serialization (despite the inherent structures of linearity, progress, and inheritance that journals embody within their

individual articles and overall), while enabling new layers and patterning opportunities within and between those existing forms of scholarship.

NewRadial is a data visualization environment that was originally designed as an alternative way to encounter and annotate image-based databases. It allows users to engage with humanities data outside of traditional scholarly paradigms and the linear nature of the printed book, encouraging user contributions via connective commentary rather than isolating annotation. In this environment, users can contribute and comment on links between texts in a shared, Web-based virtual space, and make this work accessible to a community of users. This focus on community means that scholars can access, read, and respond to the work of others in a common, networked arena and engage in scholarly conversation while dynamically altering and augmenting the arrangement and relationship of their source texts. NewRadial displays data as radials of nodes. The radial, circular arrangement of related nodes allows for a nonlinear, holistic visualization of sources, and nodes visually and variously present the individual units of the source text (e.g., pages, artwork, etc.). The radial pattern initially establishes a circular field of nodes, but the user can rearrange and manipulate the nodes, creating new radials that customize and sort data relative to their particular interests.

Annotations and connections can be made between nodes and radials through the creation of edges. Edges simply draw a line between nodes and are visual representations of user-generated connections that open a space for annotation, commentary, and conversation with a larger community of users. The weight or thickness of the edge offers a visual indication of how much activity and commentary are associated with particular connections. If users need to make more complex connections and associations between more than two nodes, they can create a group. Groups can contain as many nodes as the user wishes and, similar to edges, can establish and define a commentary and conversation space. Created groups can be visualized within the parent radial, but can also be quickly isolated into a new radial for more focused study (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: A NewRadial workspace that bears traces of user-added connections and commentary.



NewRadial is being used to explore, support, and encourage digital-born forms of scholarship that retain these traditional variations of print-based scholarship, but that organize argumentation differently (e.g., linked and layered mind maps, concept maps or flow charts). Through this, we are modelling different types of social aggregation and dynamic organization within centralized workspaces in an effort to counter reductive, isolated forms of monographic narrativization and the scattered dialogues that often result from print-based distribution models. In essence, this digital prototype visually and operationally realizes Bialostosky's dialogical call to "situate an utterance historically or imaginatively in a field of other persons' utterances rather than topically in a field of dialectical terms or rhetorical commonplace" (Bialostosky, 1986, p. 790).

NewRadial also acknowledges that "the continued productivity of dialogue depends on our discovering mutual bearings among person-ideas that have not yet engaged one another as well as on our reconstructing the mutual bearings of those that have" (p. 790). It might be useful to understand this environment as substituting the traditions of "mere anthologies of essays, dialectical forced marches, or rhetorical prosecutions of cases" with a digital symposium of provocative interactions that gives users the "right to represent [or reorganize] others in terms they might not have anticipated or acknowledged" (p. 790). Dialogically self-aware users are encouraged to "approach the diversity of critical and theoretical voices not as an issue to be settled or a problem to be resolved but as a conversation to be constructed and entered" (p. 791). In short, NewRadial allows users to confront and to contribute to the complexity of humanist critical concerns in diverse ways.

In addition, NewRadial functions in ways that emulate and extend the features of G.E. Bentley Jr.'s *Blake Records*, a book that McGann (1985) celebrates as an effective example of non-narrative critical inquiry. McGann highlights the ability of the Bentley volume to illustrate how an arrayed form of discourse can maintain its own integrity within a narrativized field. This book collects all the known contemporary records that relate to the life of Blake, and it arranges them in a loose chronological string. The arrangement is necessarily loose because the original "records" are exceedingly diverse. Bentley's "narrative" connects the records in such a way that a coherent story of Blake's life emerges through the collection. But each of the records has its own integrity, which Bentley's narrative normally does not invade. As a result, the book offers the reader a peculiar freedom, an unusual array of diverse points of view. Bentley's narrative holds the various parts together, but not under the determinate authority of its narrativization; the story Bentley tells is continually subjected to a critique from other materials, including other narratives that he himself has collected in his book (McGann, 1985).

In a manner similar to Bentley Jr.'s, NewRadial can be used to collect and "loosely" arrange diverse database records in a decentralized fashion, encouraging emergent narrative patterning without threatening the integrity of the original database (see Figure 2).

More importantly, it essentially avoids the narrativizing impositions of the form of the book through its digital affordances, such as giving the user the ability to rearrange, regroup, and customize the collection, and aggregating and centralizing these various efforts in the workspace in ways that can be browsed and filtered. In this way, users can

Figure 2: NewRadial's non-narrativized default display of database records can be meaningfully and variously rearranged into narrative arguments by users.



see a record of the efforts and choices made by others within the space that they share, superimposed on that space – augmenting, but not actually altering the landscape permanently. To this end, layers of critical inquiry can build up within a dynamic, constantly expanding field of digital discourse. Narrativity is not excluded from the NewRadial environment – in fact, it is an essential tool by which non-narrative databases can be curated and used to establish meaningful argumentation within NewRadial's centralized knowledge community. However, the narrativized and patently artificial paradigms of monographs (which often assert their generative dependency on other sources, but argumentatively assert themselves as the latest and best statement in ongoing critical discussions) are exchanged for combinative, dynamic, conversational complexities.

NewRadial is thus itself a non-narrativizing space in which narrative and non-narrative types of engagement with existing and emerging critical discourses can take place. On one hand, NewRadial's re-presentation of the network of critical discourses (customizable through the selection of and focus on specific metadata search results) that influence and emanate from a primary text offers a bibliographical, de-narrativized map to the user, a picture of the discourse space generated by a critical event that is not interpretatively shaped by narrative beginnings, middles, and ends. NewRadial's current iteration functionally emulates both the two-dimensional array form and a schematic form, which according to McGann, is “a function of the large amount of particular information which is being processed – not merely large numbers of special, so-called facts but facts whose referential existence assumes the simultaneous presence of certain frames of reference, as well as the fact that those frames of reference operate in complex, intersecting networks” (McGann, 1985, p. 405). Users can then impose narrative routes on this complex network map, simultaneously extending and refining a narrative form of critical discourse out of the non-narrative collection presented by its default display by highlighting/isolating particular pathways or curating constellations from the landscape that suggest specific spatiotemporal relationships. However, linearity is only one of many kinds of route-mapping processes available for narrativization purposes, and NewRadial's patterns are dynamic and

reconfigurable based on search strings and user-created groupings, not superimposed by a pre-defined, singular ontology or taxonomy. As well, the way that NewRadial initially presents its information and results in a circle (or “radial”) is a conscious design choice, meant to avoid hierarchy and centralization and to resist the urge to narrativize its data. This prototype remains flexible enough, however, to experiment with other ways of spatially organizing and connecting data.

Vilém Flusser has observed that “the more texts one writes (and reads), the more textually one thinks, and the more textually one thinks, the more one writes and reads” (Flusser, 2007, p. 20). NewRadial is an environment that encourages critical involvement with the history of written scholarship in a way that eschews the inherent linearity of the established textual and scholarly systems of communication and dialogue. As a mapping environment, this prototype is able to offer datasets compiled from traditional monograph and journal writings (or simpler bibliographical records of scholarly contribution) as non-narrativized possibility fields that encourage a variety of uses: surveying, connecting, grouping, annotating, discussing, arguing, and routing, to name a few. NewRadial’s environment is calibrated to circumvent the exclusive dominance of writing (and its attendant perceptual constraints) by imagining the scholarly networks of discourse as a non-linear, but still relational, environment that supports multimodal interaction. It models an answer to F.R. Leavis’ (1972) call for “a different, sustained effort of collaborative human creativity which is concerned with perpetuating, strengthening and asserting, in response to change, a full human creativity—the continuous, collaborative creativity that ensures significance, ends and values, and manifests itself as consciousness and profoundly human purpose” (p. 156).

Recently, I have been worried about the ways that notions of “big data” and “datafication” are emerging in Digital Humanities discourses, and the reflexive and reductive statistical responses to the complexity of such a vast landscape of cultural production and reception. However, this past summer, while looking out the window of an airplane that was tens of thousands of feet above the ground and marvelling at the view and perspective that such an experience afforded, I realized that my experience was very much akin to the use of the computer to further humanities-based inquiry and reflection. Like the airplane, the computer is a mechanism or tool that multiplies my perspective in ways that I could not achieve with my own senses and cognitive abilities. This digital opportunity allows me to confront complexity rather than categorically reduce it, and NewRadial is a prototype environment that models ways in which we can immerse ourselves (narratively or non-narratively) in the complexity of critical discourse, diversify our perceptual range, pluralize perspectives, and multiply the forms of our participation within the rich field of humanities dialogue and inquiry.

During the rest of this research year, the INKE Modelling and Prototyping team is planning to further extend the NewRadial prototype to explore additional opportunities related to the application of cartographic paradigms to fields of critical discourse. Imagine a Google Earth-like opportunity to move between the “street view” of a close reading environment to aerial views of the inferences, influences, and dynamic constructions that emerge from the routes that grow up around a text, to satellite views of larger, constellated fields of contextual data. What kinds of scholarship

and scholarly communication would be enabled by such an environment? How would the inclusion of mapping and terraforming tools encourage further occupation and influence?

Inspired by scalable, dimensional virtual spaces as well as MMORPGs that model the political and social densities of vast, emergent narrative universes (such as EVE Online), we are working to encourage a shift from final statements to calls for provocation, response, dialogue, and extension within the field of a text and its contexts. These larger environments – created by the alignment and integration of digital affordances – feature a process-over-product dynamic that supports collaborative curation and multiple, branching narrative opportunities and accumulations.

Our NewRadial environment prototypes this in a single tool, but it can and should be interoperably combined with other tools (such as close-reading environments like SocialBook to allow for zooming in, out, and through different “views” or scales (that enable different kinds of perceptions and work). Like cycling through camera angles in a video game, such integration will certainly generate preferences, but also inherently preserve possibilities for interoperable layers of information perception. Narrative engagement within and across these flexible perspectival factors etch new routes of meaning on the existing map of texts and contexts, and this map becomes a host for a dynamic record of use and dialogic discourse, without asserting the static, monologic declarations of independence associated with print-based, narrativized critical inquiry.

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