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RHETORIC, COMMUNITY, AND CULTURE OF BLOGGERS

BLOGOSPHERE

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## Battlecat Then, Battlecat Now: Temporal Shifts, Hyperlinking and Database Subjectivities

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A recurrent theme in discussion of blogs is the manner in which blogging functions as an externalisation of the individual psyche of the blogger. Rebecca Blood (2002) writes in *The Weblog Handbook*: "No matter how random or structured or impersonal a weblog may seem, each one, whatever its nature, provides for its readers an intimate portrait of its maintainer, a portrait drawn over time. Random observations, selected links, extended diatribes – accumulated, these elements resolve into a mosaic revealing a personality, a self" (p. 30). To read a blog, in the words of Rebecca Mead, is to "... enter a world in which the personal lives of participants have become part of the public domain" (Mead, 2000). Cameron Barrett describes his personal blog *CamWorld* as being 'about him'. "It's about who I am, what I know, and what I think ... CamWorld is a peek into the subconsciousness that makes me tick" (1999). He later defines blogs generally as "... an interactive extension of who you are" (1999). Joe Clark carries this metaphor of technological extension further, describing a blog as "... a form of exteriorized psychology. It's a part of you, or of your psyche; while your titanium hip joint or a pacemaker might bring technology inside the corporeal you, a Weblog uses technology to bring the psychological you outside of it" (n.d.).

Within these examples, the blog is being cast in the role of mediator, a technology of self expression traversing the gap between the public space of information and the personal, interior space of the Self. As Mortensen and Walker write: "Blogs exist right on this border between what's private and what's public ..." (2002, p. 256). But, like all media forms, the blog is not transparent. The technological code of the software contains affordances that filter and, in part, determine the constitution of the private/public Self represented in any weblog. And so, what kind of Self (or Selves) are made possible or enabled by typical blogging practice? It is the contention of this paper that the basic features of the generic software – hyperlinking and temporal dynamism – privilege a form of subjectivity aligned with the cultural form of the database. Using a particular instance of blogging practice, [battlecat.net](http://battlecat.net), as a case study, this paper intends to explore how the formal and textual structures of the medium, and their implementation by this blogger, allow for a selective interpretation and re-interpretation of her identity akin to the interpretation and re-interpretation of data enabled by the database.

### The database form

Firstly though, it is necessary to clarify what I mean by the database form and, subsequently, the 'database subjectivity' it privileges. Central to the practices of computing is the computer's function as simultaneously an information storage mechanism and a window into that information – the computer as a database. Theorists such as Poster (1995), Chesher (1997) and Manovich (2002) contend that the symbolic form of the database is becoming Western culture's dominant conceptual paradigm, manifestly suited to the saturated informational space of the early 21st century and the subjects who navigate through it.

For Manovich, the database consists of two parts – the data collection and the interface. As simply a data set, the database is different from, and experienced differently from, traditional linear narrative based cultural forms. In fact, Manovich posits this as one of the key reasons for its emergence as a symbolic form at this time. He says: "Indeed, if after the death of God (Nietzsche), the end of grand Narratives of Enlightenment (Lyotard), and the arrival of the Web (Tim Berners-Lee), the world appears to us as an endless and unstructured collection of images, texts, and other data records, it is only appropriate that we will be moved to model it as a database" (2002, p. 219). However, as Manovich contends, most databases are not experienced as random collections of data. Instead what is experienced is the interface, the appearance of which is constituted by an algorithm which organises the data into a meaningful representation (the data view). The algorithm 'translates the underlying database' into a linear, causal framework rather than its actual existence as an arbitrary set of zeros and ones arrayed in a data structure. The algorithm is what offers narrative coherence to a data set. A key example offered by Manovich is a computer game which, technically, is a set of objects in a database but which are presented in narrative form at the level of the interface (2002, pp. 221-2).

As a form for mediating subjectivity this structure has significant consequences. Poster (1995) argues that the database, which he describes as an engine "... for producing retrievable identities" (1995, p. 89), interpellates and creates subject positions for users reflective of the multiple, contradictory and dispersed subjectivities of the 'postmodern condition'. To the database, an individual is not an essential creature, but a simulacrum. "To the database, Joe Jones is the sum of information in the fields of the record that applies to that name. So the

person Joe Jones now has a new form of presence, a new subject position that defines him for all those agencies and individuals who have access to the database" (1995, p. 91). In this way, the database does not work by constituting a modern subject, aware of his/her transcendent and unique interior consciousness (1995, pp. 90-91). Instead it produces identities which can be dispersed across numerous sites, but pulled together temporarily through the particular filter or search function in operation at the time. The algorithm used to determine each interface or view constructs a narrative sequence from the random and arbitrary sets of information about a person collected in a database (or databases if they are relational). It unites selected aspects and in doing so, defines, at least for a moment, the effective subjectivity of that individual. Within the database form, the Self becomes a data set of collected experience and the partial, dynamic representation of it. This is the form of subjectivity that I term a database subjectivity – one defined by its temporary, and selective representation of the life of the user. This is also the form of subjectivity I believe is found in blogging practice.

## The bricoleur and the blogger

The fact that blogging is a computerised practice almost renders it a *fait accompli* that it would manifest the database form and thereby privilege database subjectivities. Blood (2002; 2000) argues that there are two kinds of blogs. Those that are 'link-driven' are a "... mixture in unique proportions of links, commentary, and personal thoughts and essays." These blogs filter content for the ease of other users. However, since the popular expansion of the practice and the development of software such as Blogger, Blood contends that more blogs are of the 'journal-style', recording a blogger's daily thoughts with cross-referencing to other blogs or home pages in the obligatory sidebar of other weblogs. Despite this apparent distinction, the general form of the blog can be defined as a collection of links coupled with a personal interpretation centred around reverse chronologically dated entries which are archived.

As a typical contemporary blog, using [Movable Type](#) blogging freeware, battlecat.net follows this model. It consists of a home page offering a menu and graphic imagery personally selected by the blogger, as well as the epithet "a lean, green, procrastination machine". The site's menu lists: '[about](#)' (links to 'vital statistics' and a sidebar menu of recent activities), '[travel](#)' (links to Battlecat's travel diary), '[dailyish](#)' (daily diary accompanied by a side bar menu of archives and list of interesting links and blogs), '[consume](#)' (recipes and other consumed items), '[photos](#)' (photo archives) and '[contact](#)'. As such, it contains the features typical of contemporary blogs – the dated diary entries, an archive of these posts, facilities to offer feedback, 'blogged' friends and links to other pages on the Web. Although these features have been personalised and formatted in line with Battlecat's aesthetic preferences, a means of expressing individual taste, style affinities and therefore identity, they are standard facilities offered by the software.

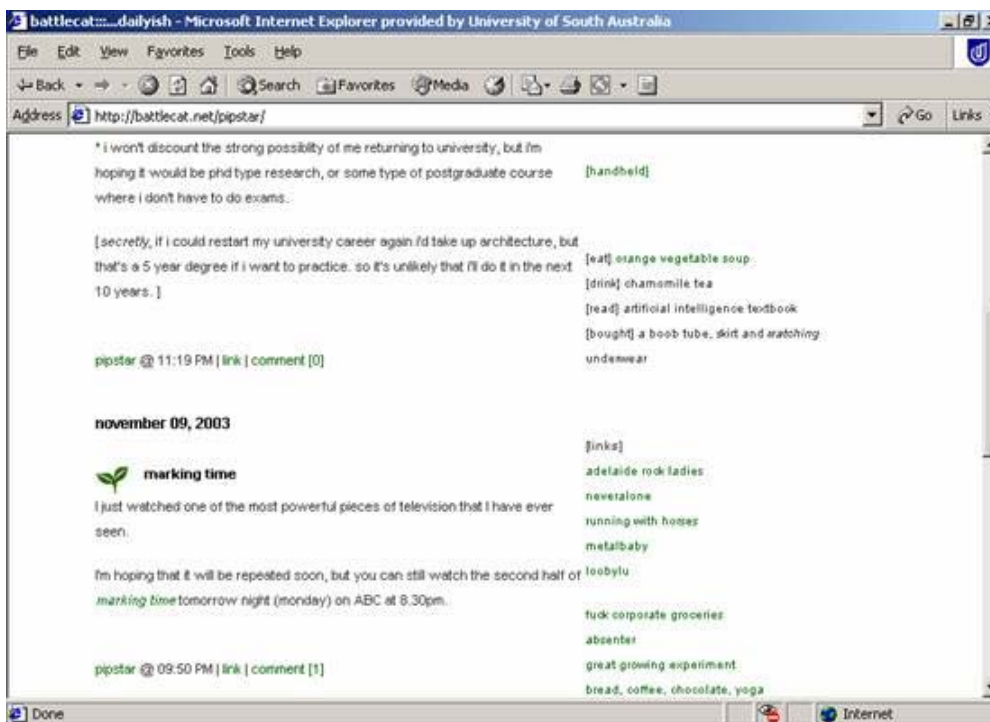
Essential to all blogs, including Battlecat's, is the link. For Mortensen and Walker (2002), a focus on connecting information is one of the defining features of the weblog. They say: "Links are vital to the genre; take the links out of a weblog and you are left with a web diary, a much more introverted and private form of writing" (2002, p. 265). This emphasis on linking means that a blog exists primarily as a collection of existent information, rather than a reasoned and linear argument. This hypertextual depth of the blog, clearly, almost literally represents the database subjectivity at work. A blog is, firstly, a data set, a list of things – experiences, events, people, objects, information – that the blogger has collected. Yet at the same time, it is a revealing interface of that blogger's subjectivity<sup>[1]</sup>.

Discussing personal home pages (PHP), Chandler (1998) likens the page author to a bricoleur as depicted by Levi-Strauss. He summarises: "The values of the *bricoleur* are reflected in the assumptions which underlie specific inclusions, allusions, omissions, adaptations and arrangements" (1998). It is through this bricolage that the PHP author **assembles** their identity. Like the individual dots of a pointillist artwork, the link choices (including the exclusions) collectively constitute a portrait of the individual. The same is true of blogs. Effectively, the links selected by the blogger – as sites of enough interest to be initially accessed and then judged worthy of display on the blog – reveal his/her values and become an accessible representation of the identity of that blogger for the site's readership<sup>[2]</sup>. As Blood describes, the patterns and 'predictability' (2002, p. 16) of the chosen links become the tools for audience understanding of the blog and the blogger, and consequently are important for establishing and maintaining readership. The links, which constitute a data set, therefore, become the *de facto* identity of that blogger for the site's audience.

Battlecat's audience can understand her partly through the short narratives she writes in her dailyish entries. However it is also through the collections of arbitrary links on her site that her (effective) identity emerges. For Battlecat, this image is typically associated with objects which she has consumed or is herself crafting; Battlecat regularly procrastinates by gardening, cooking, photography or craft activities. For instance her [April 15, 2003](#) entry offers links to the [Not Martha](#) blog, showing the source of Battlecat's [latest knitting project](#), as well as links to [Internet Movie Database reviews of the film Talk to Her](#) which she had recently seen. She also displays and regularly offers [links to her photographs](#), often of her friends, herself and her craft/gardening projects. For the reader, a (partial) image of Battlecat<sup>[3]</sup> emerges from this collection of objects, practices and people to which she offers links, informed by the narrative she uses to link them.

Similarly, a picture of Battlecat's cultural, aesthetic and social affinities, and thus her identity, can be extrapolated from the list of links and statements emphasised by their display in the sidebar menu of links

offered on her 'about' page. This listing of consumables or recent activities can also be seen as a conscious process of identity representation. Although Battlecat's 'vital statistics section' on the 'about' page offers only nominal information about her, the sidebar menu, which contains a dynamic and temporary list of recent activities, is more revealing. It is, notably, merely a random collection of activities and objects, yet manages at the same time to craft an image of the blogger.



In this example captured in November 2003, Battlecat's choice firstly to eat orange vegetable soup and to drink chamomile tea as opposed to, for instance, rare steak and lager speaks of a personal identity performance. But secondly, the fact that she has chosen to display these particular examples as opposed to all the other things she has consumed in recent history, speaks of her preferred representation of herself. By emphasising these particular tastes and life events and marginalising others, Battlecat filters her life experiences and isolates those which she thinks best represent herself.

Most importantly, their location on her 'about' page indicates her recognition of these lists as fundamental to the definition of Battlecat, both of the blog and of herself. Thus, it is not only the narrative sections of the dailyish entries that tell the tale of Battlecat's life. It is in the selected and collected lists of links and activities. As with PHPs, Battlecat is **assembling** (a representation of) her subjectivity through the bricolage of links and narratives that constitute the site. They become, in effect, a data set. And understanding of Battlecat emerges through the particular selective collection of data, the set of signifying hyperlinks and narratives, which are united at the level of the blog interface.

This form of narration is further structured by the archiving function of the database form. This is made transparent in the sidebar menu of links offered along with Battlecat's 'dailyish' entries. Listed under the headings of '[photos i took](#)'; '[pictures i drew](#)'; '[things i grew](#)'; '[things i like](#)'; '[things i made](#)', these archives collect the various entries offering these facets of Battlecat's life practice and personality into a single accessible resource for readers. In doing so they also reveal the database structure at work for each hyperlink functions as a search algorithm, filtering the content of Battlecat's life and grouping it under each topic in reverse chronological order. Consequently, the data organised in these archives is not coherently ordered into a structured argument. There is no narrative development within each interface following each object through from conception to execution. Rather they are truly random collections of archived data from Battlecat's blog, following "... the flight of thought rather than the chain of thought" (Mortensen and Walker 2002, p. 268).

Yet the entire blog, including the linear narratives of the 'dailyish' diary entries, can be viewed as an archive, and as such as an arbitrary collection of data. But like the computer games described by Manovich which rely on the user determining the algorithm in order to make sense of and to complete the game (2002, pp. 221-3), Battlecat's blog is nevertheless made sensible at the level of the interface (the blog) by the reader's determination of the algorithm (the sense of Self) which has resulted in the selection, framing and interpretation of the data. The blog here is a database of the Self, an interface into the data set which is the blogger's life, reflecting the self-determined algorithm which the author has used to bring order and to define the limits of that data set.

## Temporal dynamism

Thus far though, the description of the blog and the subjectivity it privileges sounds little different from that produced by the PHP. Yet there is a capacity structured into the generic form of the blog which renders it different from this cultural form. If linking is one elemental feature, the other defining quality of a blog is its dynamic updating within a dated entry format. Hourihan (2002) argues that this is one of the features which defines the commonality of bloggers and blogging. This typical format creates, as Hourihan notes, the expectation of continual updating by both readers and authors alike. The dynamism of the temporal framework of the blog produces an assembled subjectivity that is necessarily dynamic as well. Thus, blogs are not merely a way of writing the Self, they are "... a continuous way of writing oneself" (Mortensen & Walker, 2002, p. 258). With each new entry, the assembled links and narrative scraps that constitute the identity of the blogger are reformed, replaced and renewed.

Chandler & Roberts-Young (1998) do insist that the technical qualities of the traditional PHP encourage constant revision, and thereby revision of the Self represented there. Certainly this is a more dynamic form of publishing as compared to the book for instance. However the impetus to constantly update a PHP is not integral to its form. In contrast, temporal dynamism is **elemental** to the structure of a blog. A blog, by virtue of its structural form centred around the reverse chronologically dated entries, is **necessarily** a dynamic and multiple experience of identity assemblage. The identity constructed through Movable Type is intended to be a moveable feast.

It is here that the logic of the database again reveals itself. As Mortensen and Walker claim, blogs are "... published bit by bit; they are always in progress, always becoming" (2002, p. 267). And so too, the assembled subjectivity of the blogger is never fixed, but always becoming. The dynamic nature of the content of a blog and thus of the selective representation of Self effected by the blogger renders it an unfixed subjectivity. De-centred and re-centred by each new entry, the subject who is represented by a blog is the epitome of the postmodern identity Poster sees reflected in the database. Battlecat's existing representation of her subjectivity is altered, adapted and/or extended by each additional entry. Each entry then can be interpreted as a new algorithm, trawling through a collection of RL and online life experiences, choosing select moments, bringing them to the fore, marginalising others and creating a new view of the data set. In doing so, it also re-writes the narrative of Battlecat's life.

### **Battlecat then, Battlecat now**

However, it can be argued that the analogue diary which progresses from date to date also offers this 'continuous way of writing oneself'. So what is it then that makes the blog such a unique medium and such a clear example of the database form? The answer to this lies in the combination of an omnipresent temporal framework coupled with a hypertextual depth which means that the temporality of a blog does not only progress in one direction. Links can be used not only to add additional information but to restore previously published information. The blogger, in the 'now', can readily call upon the blogger in the 'then', using this juxtaposition to contrast, explain, enhance or otherwise complicate the portrait they are attempting to construct<sup>[4]</sup>.

For instance the reader can only understand Battlecat's lament in [October](#) that she would have achieved more in her studies by using 'the 10 minute rule' by linking back into the archive to [April 16, 2003](#) in which she first tries out this approach to study<sup>[5]</sup>. But it is not only that these links are sometimes necessary for meaning to be made, it is often that these links **augment** the understanding the reader gains of Battlecat's experiences. For instance, in [June 2003](#) Battlecat refers back to her [travel diary](#) adding context and content for the more recent post. Consequently, her affective response to receiving a Battlecat action figure from a former travelling companion is complicated and overlaid with meaning through the ability to draw upon the narratives of their time together. These temporal shifts within the document, an effect of the dated entry format and the archived data it presupposes, invokes (Chesher 1997) 'Battlecat then' to explain 'Battlecat now'. The objects, people and events in Battlecat's life are given new and more complex meaning by these links into their past. Each reflexive link creates an otherwise obscured cause and effect trajectory that establishes meaningful juxtapositions within unordered lists of events (Manovich 2002, p. 225). Temporally dispersed identities, like the identity simulacra Poster (1995) finds dispersed across multiple marketing databases, are brought together into the one data view by the hyperlink and made into an effective representation of the blogger.

These kinds of links into the past, also exemplified in the aforementioned mini-archives, work like flashbacks in classic cinema narratives. In this media form, flashbacks offer a subjective insight into the history or psychology of a protagonist, increasing the depth of knowledge available to the audience (Bordwell & Thompson 1990, pp. 66-7). They are a form of temporal montage, editing together and making historically disparate elements of the story collectively meaningful. The same practice occurs in the blogging medium in which recursive hyperlinks connect events and make them mutually significant. But unlike the film medium (and the literary form), the 'flashbacks' in a blog do not relate to novel content. A flashback, in for instance, a film noir, may refer to an existent event in the story, but typically not one already contained within the narrative. The scene is unknown to the viewer until it is invoked by the text. In a blog however, 'flashbacks' relate to existent events already noted and stored in the archive. Effectively, these kinds of links, which are encouraged by the ubiquity of the archive, pulls together a representation of the blogger from an **existing** set of data. This aspect of the temporal dynamism of a blog is driven, in the terms of Manovich (2002), by a logic of selection, rather than a logic of

creation (pp. 123-4). It is, therefore, a tool of self representation appropriate for a medium, and a subjectivity, constructed on the database form.

## Conclusion

And so, each blog entry functions as an interface into the experiences of the blogger, allowing insight into a lifetime, or a day's, worth of data collection (experiences). The blog record itself – what we read – can be understood as the product of an algorithm, a program of filtering and sorting the life data of the blogger into a specific, self-selected form. The data view constructed by this algorithm in turn becomes the means by which the blogging community can make (some) sense of the nature of that individual. It becomes their effective identity. So, within the blog we see the fundamentals of the database form – the data set which is the inner life of the user, exemplified by the ubiquitous archive, and the adaptable interface of the blog entry itself which allows temporary passage into and creates infinitely alterable meaning for that collection of data. Battlecat.net may be a banal example of a database subjectivity at work. However, in a time of 'project identities' (Rose 1998; Castells 1997), in which we are encouraged to constitute ourselves (our Selves) as a work in progress, the form this subjectivity adopts may have resonance far beyond the practice of blogging.

## Notes

[1] This remains true of blogs which utilise a less personal, journal style than battlecat.net and adopt a more socio-political view. Although blogs such as these may not appear to be oriented toward representing the personality of the blogger, the choices of links nevertheless reveal something about the author. As Blood summarises: "Link choice is voice ♦" (p. 73).

[2] It can also become a means for the blogger to get to know themselves (their Self). Blood writes that after producing her own blog she noticed a 'side effect'. "... I discovered my own interests. I thought I knew what I was interested in, but after linking stories for a few months I could see that I was much more interested in science, archaeology, and issues of injustice that I had realized" (2000). Later she writes on the same topic: "Reading the record of things I deemed worth sharing reminded me of a self that I had overlooked" (2002, p. 30). Chandler and Roberts-Young (1998) describe similar self-awareness emerging from the construction of personal home pages.

[3] This image may be understood differently by different readers, according to their own individual valuation of these links. This ambiguity is why I do not offer 'the' interpretation of Battlecat's identity implied by these link choices. Furthermore it is not necessary that this identity be 'an actual' or 'real' representation of the inner life of the blogger. This paper is concerned with the processes of representing identities rather than defining an essential identity.

[4] This practice was/is available to readers and authors of print media. Footnotes and the ability to flip backwards through a book or different volumes is not denied. However, in digital media this facility is foregrounded, augmented and made more efficient through the possibilities of hyperlinking. The temporal shifting within the document is an element of that technical code of the World Wide Web medium in a manner which is denied traditional print media.

[5] It is also notable that the logic of this process for academic achievement also only reveals itself through another link in 'time' and 'space' to [Alex Beauchamp's blog](#).

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