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The Electronic Book and the Logic of the Index

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Narrating the Archive and Archiving Narrative: The Electronic Book and the Logic of the Index

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Abstract: The creation of my hypermedia work Index of Love, which narrates a love story as an archive of moments, images and objects recollected, also articulated for me the potential of the book as electronic text. The book has always existed as both narrative and archive. Tables of contents and indexes allow the book to function simultaneously as linear narrative and non-linear, searchable database. The book therefore has more in common with the so-called 'new media' of the 21st century than it does with the dominant 20th century media of film, video and audiotape, whose logic and mode of distribution are resolutely linear. My thesis is that the non-linear logic of new media brings to the fore an aspect of the book – the index – whose potential for the production of narrative is only just beginning to be explored. When a reader/user accesses an electronic work, such as a website, via its menu, they simultaneously experience it as narrative and archive. The narrative journey taken is created through the menu choices made. Within the electronic book, therefore, the index (or menu) has the potential to function as more than just an analytical or navigational tool. It has the potential to become a creative, structuring device. This opens up new possibilities for the book, particularly as, in its paper based form, the book indexes factual work, but not fiction. In the electronic book, however, the index offers as rich a potential for fictional narratives as it does for factual volumes.

Keywords: Narrative, Archive, Index, Database, Electronic Texts

THE INDEX OF a book presents an ambivalent vision, one that is simultaneously of order and disorder. If the table of contents at the front of the book lays out an ordered system of logical narrative progression from chapter to chapter - a representation of unity and completeness of subject and knowledge - then this logic is swiftly undone by the index. The index at the back of the book presents to the eye instead an accumulation of particularities: lined up one after the other in a lengthy alphabetical list. Far from indicating completeness and logic, this alphabetical listing of people, places, objects, ideas that have little or nothing in common emphasises disparateness and randomness. Furthermore the enclosed unity of the book is instantly punctured, as every entry within the index refers the reader outside its own pages as much as to the indicated page within the book. Take the second page of the index from Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984), selected at random from my bookshelves, where we find:

'Booth, Wayne C.: *The Rhetoric of Fiction*
Boulevard Novel. *See* Novel, boulevard
Bucolic poetry
Burke, Kenneth
Byron, George Gordon, Lord
Byzantine literature'

Any one of these subjects exists more fully outside the book in which it is indexed than it does within

it. On reading this list my eye halts at the term 'Byzantine literature'. Further thought about what this might comprise then takes priority over the pursuit of its particular relevance to Dostoevsky's poetics. This is of course because I am reading the index in the wrong way. I am browsing it idly, rather than hunting for a preselected search term. But it is my experience that such a browsing of the index can yield rich imaginative possibilities. I will take another example, this time the index of *On Longing* (Stewart 1993). This time we find:

'Aberrations. *See also* Freaks
Abstraction
Accumulation
Adventures of a Pincushion, The (Kilner)
Advertising
Alan of Lille
Albigensian heresies
"Aleph, The" (Borges)
Alice in Wonderland (Carroll)
Alienation
Allegory
Almanacs
Ambience
Amulet. *See* Talisman
Amusement parks
Analogy
Anal retentiveness
Anatomy of Melancholy (Burton)
Andre, Carl'



To read this list is to free associate ideas and images conjured up by the unlikely juxtapositions it produces. As an activity this might yield less definitive results than would an identification of the role these terms play in the unfolding narrative of the book; or indeed further research into their existence outside its pages. But as an imaginative exercise its possibilities are infinite.

Thus the index works a mischievous magic: reconfiguring the contents of a book into a higgledy piggledy pile of 'stuff' on a junk store table; or, to credit it with a certain organisational intent, into a fascinating cabinet of curiosities – an attempt to understand the world not through a unified narrative teleology but through the endless amassing of particularities.

The index as a structuring form is, I believe, full of creative potential. As in Foucault's description of his reaction to Borges' "quotation" from "a Chinese encyclopaedia", which divides animals into entirely incommensurate categories:

'(a) belonging to the emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs... (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way of look like flies' (2002: xvii)

it is 'the wonderment of this taxonomy' (ibid), the random and impossible juxtapositions constructed through the alphabetical series, which fire the imagination. Like the "chinese encyclopaedia" the alphabetical index of a book can set the reader imagining previously unimagined heterotopias where such juxtapositions might take place, and what the implications of those juxtapositions might be.

Such poetic and thought provoking qualities of the index were the inspiration for artist Helen Mirra's book *Cloud, the, 3* (2007), in which she recreates an index for the book *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, by

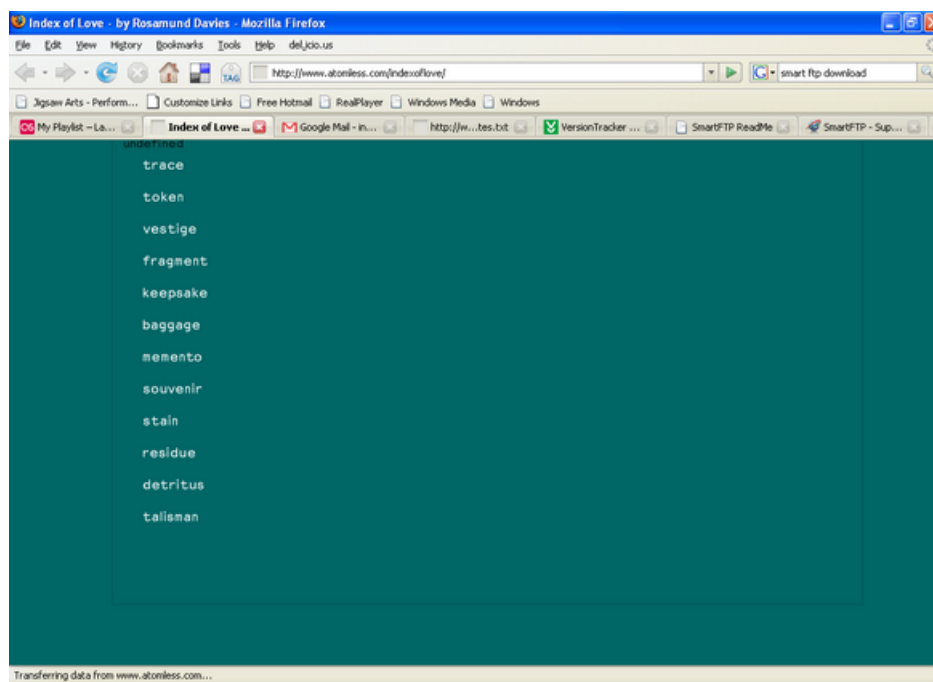
John Dewey (1920): turning it into a kind of poem, or meditation on the words and ideas contained within the volume. The figure of the index was also the starting point for my own hypermedia work *Index of Love*. My aim in this work was to use an index as a facilitating tool for narrative: for fiction and fantasy, rather than for reference.

I wanted to use it to create a structuring form, somewhere between archive and narrative, which did not so much tell a story as weave narrative threads: setting up unexpected connections and juxtapositions.

My jumping off point for the work was the fact that, whereas the index comes at the end of a traditional book, in an electronic text, such as a website, it comes at the front: in the form of the 'menu', and is the primary mode of access to the text. Of course the average website menu is not an alphabetical list. It purports to map the contents into logical, thematic sections, and is thus more like the table of contents than the index. But a user is just as likely to explore the website by typing keywords into the always present search function as they are to consult the official menu.

The key difference is that the aim is never to read the website in linear progression, as one might expect to read a book from cover to cover. We consult the sections we need, or we browse through it, searching for what might interest us and cross referencing via hyperlinks from one page to another. When a user/reader accesses an electronic text via its menu they simultaneously experience it as narrative and archive. The narrative journey taken is created through the menu choices made and the resulting pathway followed.

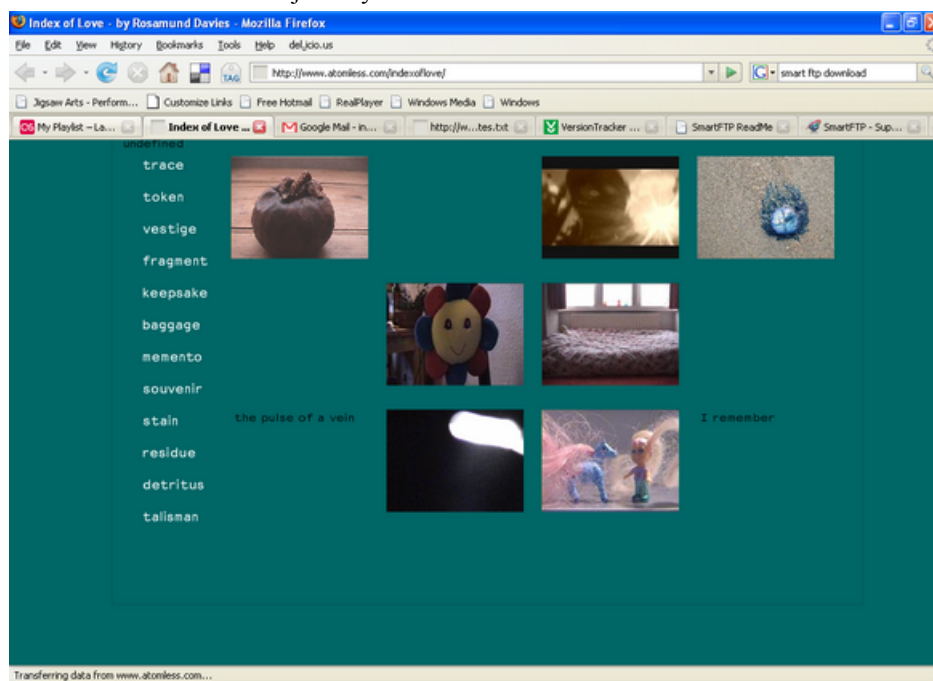
My idea for my own work then was to begin with a list of indexical traces and to make this the starting menu for a hypermedia narrative which picks over the remains of a love affair, an 'index of love'. This menu is depicted below:



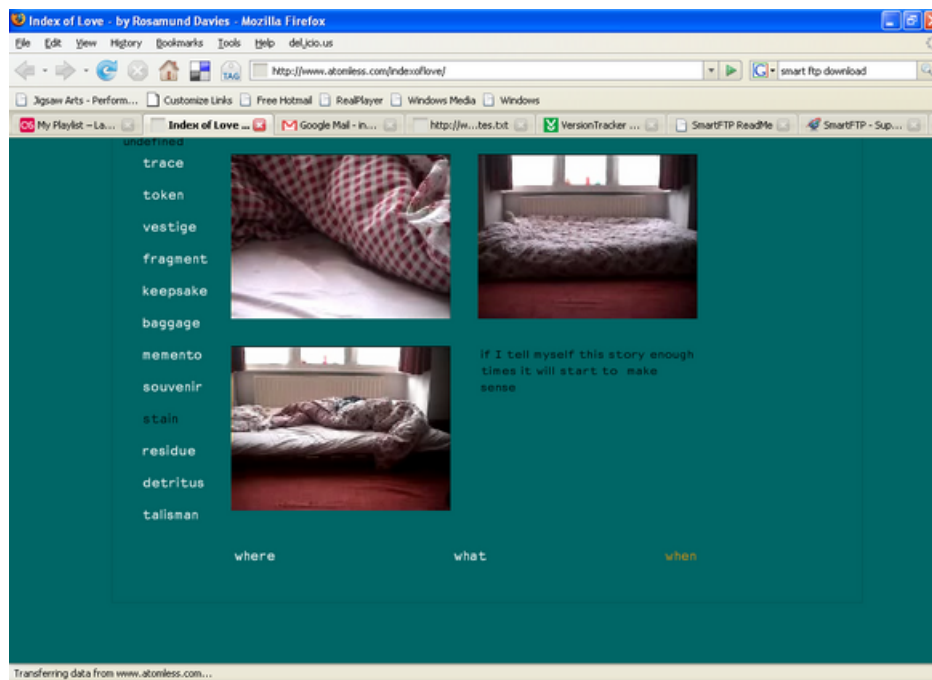
(Davies 2007)

Index of Love presents the user/reader with an index of the past, an index that catalogues an archive of experience. The user/reader selects an element from the index and clicks on it to see what happens next. The story then becomes the narrative journey taken

through the archive: exploring the connections between the elements, trying to piece together what these elements have in common and how they all came to be together in one place.

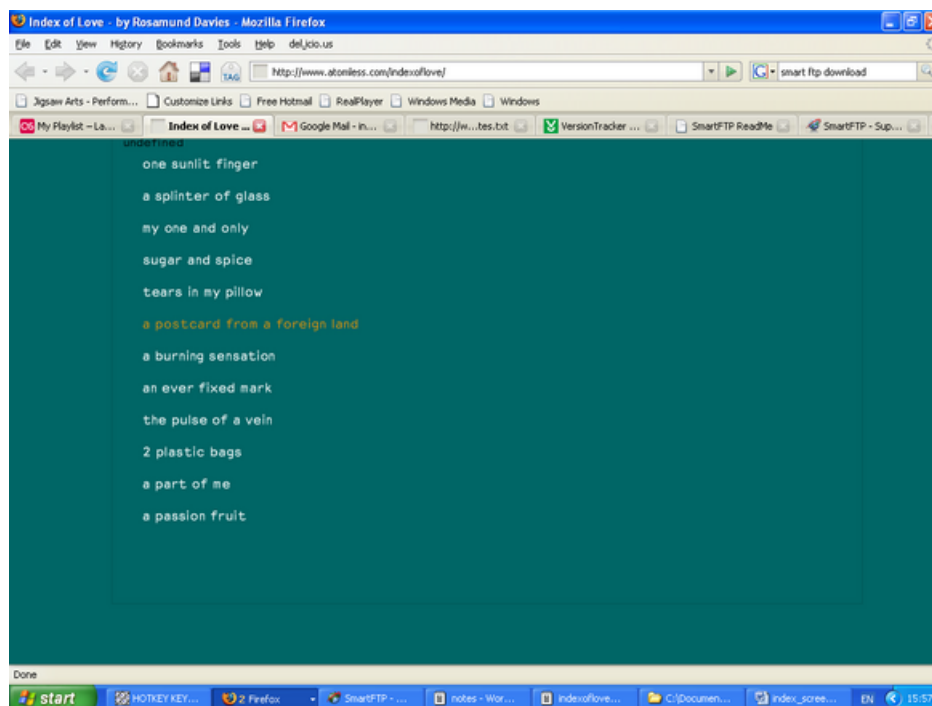


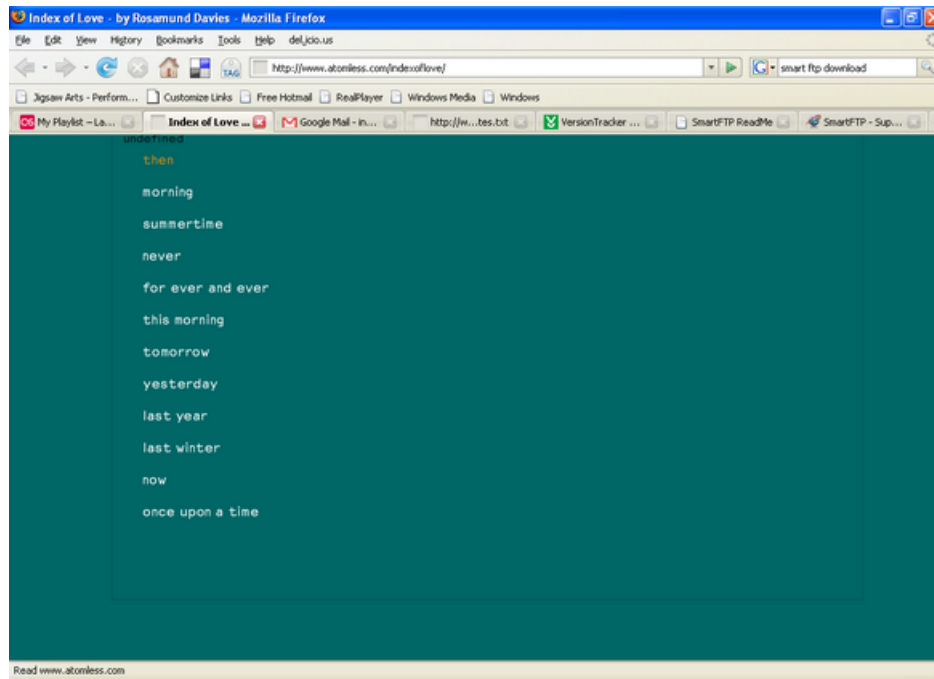
(Davies 2007)



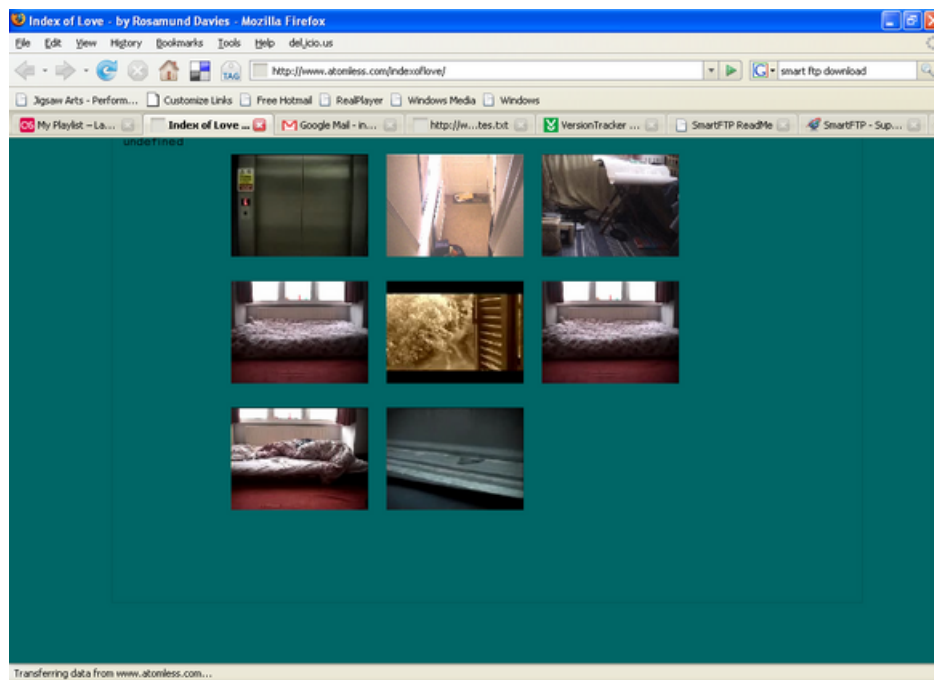
(Davies 2007)

As the reader/user navigates the hypertext, they are presented with different indexes, each of which lead back into the archive.





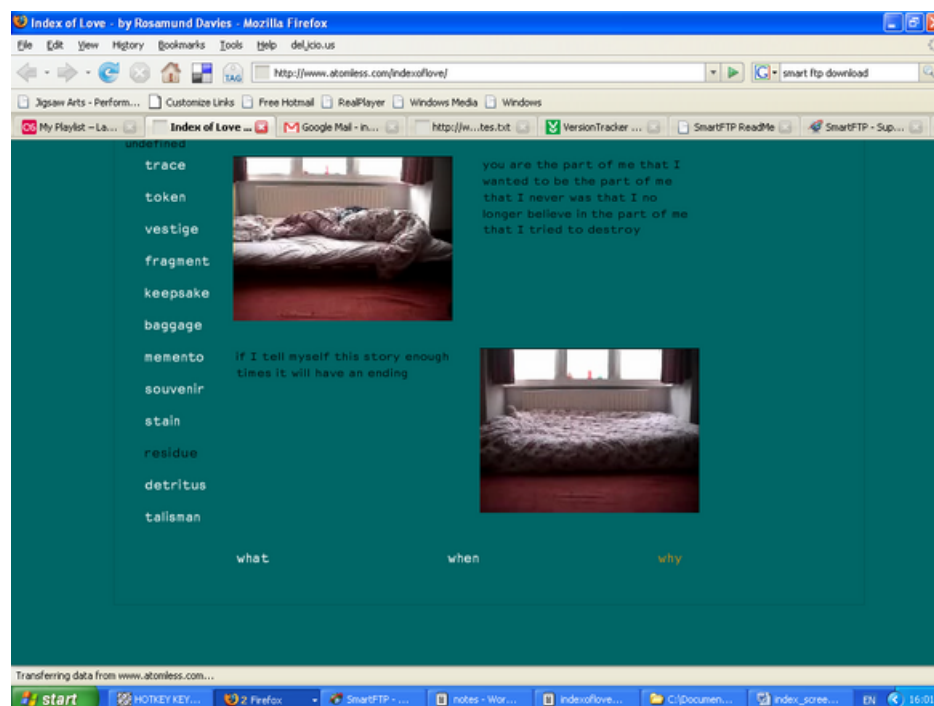
(Davies 2007)



(Davies 2007)

It becomes apparent after a while, if not instantly, that the different indexes do not always lead to different material each time within the archive. What

they do in fact is reconfigure the same material differently.



(Davies 2007)

Thus the subject of *Index of Love* is the experience of repetition and circularity, but of repetition that is repeated each time slightly *differently*. Shifting relations between image and text create connections and moments of illumination. However the narrative fragments within the archive refuse to finally resolve themselves into a unified whole, into a coherent love story with a definite ending, be it happy or sad.

Index of Love puts in tension the drive to organize, to make sense of experience - the desire that is manifest in the construction of both narrative and archive - against the simultaneous destabilising of that painstakingly constructed edifice by the material contents of the archive/narrative itself, which remain resistant to the attempt to systematize them in any definitive form.

Feverish, repetitious and circular, the love story enacted in *Index of Love* resembles Foucault's scenario of an aphasiac organising skeins of wool:

'... and so the sick mind continues to infinity, creating groups then dispersing them again, heaping up diverse similarities, destroying those that seem clearest, splitting up things that are identical, superimposing different criteria, frenziedly beginning all over again...' (Foucault 2002: xx)

But although the work enacts the anxiety of a failure to establish a unified system of meaning, there is ultimately satisfaction to be found for the user/reader within it. If the work enacts the frenzied search for

meaning of a sick mind, it also represents the cure. A sense of meaning and narrative satisfaction comes, not from a linear closure of narrative, but from a spatial closure: a sense of having explored and exhausted the possible connections, having travelled all pathways. This is not the narrative rationalization of the psychoanalytical 'talking cure': where recovery from trauma is effected through the process of identifying and narrating its original cause, through finally understanding 'what happened'. The satisfaction that is achieved is through something more akin to the Freudian 'psychical working out', or, more specifically the 'work of mourning', where, through the process of repetition, memories lose their investment of affect and the trauma dissipates. The original question of 'what happened?' remains however unanswered, and indeed unanswerable.

As Murray has pointed out, this kind of narrative satisfaction is characteristic of hypertext narrative. Such narratives are often 'trauma narratives', in which:

'the navigation of the labyrinth is like pacing the floor... it represents the mind's repeated efforts to keep returning to a shocking event in an effort to absorb it and, finally, to get past it' (1997: 136)

Trauma has in fact become a narrative model, not only for hypertext fiction, but also for contemporary cinema employing alternative narrative structures¹. In these forms of narrative the pleasure for the read-

¹ Examples include *Memento* (Nolan 2000), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Gondry 2005?), *21 Grams* (Iñárritu 2003).

er/viewer comes from the opportunity to both experience the confusion and non meaning of trauma, and yet ultimately to be able to piece together the puzzle.

However, in the case of hypertext, next time you enter this narrative space - tomorrow, next week, in an hour's time - you will go back and do it differently, tell a different story, start the whole process again. Repetition of the non-linear text will always be a different repetition. The narrative will thus never come to an absolute end. Murray has pointed out the appeal of such non-closure: 'in the rhizome, one is constantly threatened but also continuously enclosed. The fact that the plot will not resolve means that no irreparable loss will be suffered' (1997: 133)

Trauma narratives are part of a wider cultural context in which the Freudian project has been reinterpreted to posit trauma as 'the structure of individual lives rather than neurosis' (Caruth 1996). In this particular theorisation of subjectivity, trauma - the 'enigma of survival' (ibid) - has come to be seen as a structure of human experience that is the rule rather than the exception.

These narratives could however equally be characterised as structures of experience that pertain to the context of digital technology. The repetition and deferred action that characterise trauma as a structure of experience resonate with the recursive structure of digital operations. This is one example of the multiple feedback loops between the concerns of computer science and the construction of contemporary subjectivity: through which technology and experience construct each other (Hayles 1997). In Murray's words: 'to be alive in the twentieth century is to be aware of the alternative possible selves... the limitless intersecting stories of the actual world. To capture such a constantly bifurcating plotline... one would need a computer' (1997: 38).

It follows then that to access a text via an electronic index, rather than through a linear reading, is not only to access a technology, an automated search and retrieval function, it is a mode of reading that is also a way of thinking and being in the world.

I believe therefore that this movement of the index to the front of the text, and the fundamental reorganising of the user interface - and therefore the user experience - that it effects, has far reaching consequences for the future cultural role of the book and for its development as an electronic form. Having taken my own particular experience of reworking and repurposing a traditional feature of the book in an electronic text as a starting point for discussion, I want now to elaborate the broader thesis that the

development of 21st century digital media is good news for the future of the book.

Much contemporary effort to imagine and realise the future of the book has focussed on trying to determine the most apposite and marketable platform to replace the bound and printed paper volume. These efforts include the development of books on CD and more recently both the quest to invent the book equivalent of the ipod, on which electronic books could be downloaded, and the development of print-on-demand printers.

Since the book has been such an important material element in the construction of the post-Enlightenment world, this focus is not surprising. The physical presence of the book as object has been hugely significant in western culture: whether this be the book as status symbol, packing the shelves of the eighteenth century private library, or the book as intimate component of personal history, as described by Alan Marshall (2007) in referring to Benjamin's essay "Unpacking my Library". Books build our world and, if they are to be replaced, they will need to be replaced by something with similar aesthetic qualities.²

However this focus on the book as final delivery platform, as hardware, is in danger of undervaluing one of the key impacts of digital technology on all media forms. The rise of information technology has separated out into distinct components three aspects that were previously considered inseparable: platform, interface and content. Television and radio are no longer single unities: a permanent coupling of scheduled broadcast content received through a dedicated reception device - the radio or television set. Radio and television programmes are now routinely downloaded via the internet and viewed on computer screens and a range of mobile devices. Digital radio can be listened to on the television set and so on.

This uncoupling of content from platform requires new interfaces through which the former can be effectively accessed through the latter. This interface typically facilitates a user to make selections from a database of content and then output it to their chosen delivery platform. Thus the key to successful exploitation of new digital technologies is to be able to innovate new articulations of these three elements: content, interface and delivery platform. Recent innovation in digital media has correspondingly seen the development of the interface beyond its functional role as a tool for data search and retrieval. The success of digital databases such as Flickr and YouTube is down to the fact that they facilitate the processes of search, retrieval and organisation of data

² This would be something that achieved what first the CD and now the i-pod have been able to achieve, in replacing the vinyl record as a tactile, sensual, defining element in our constructed physical world - a feat that the audio cassette and the mini disc never managed to the same extent.

in such a way as to make them creative and meaningful activities for users.

In this context of technological convergence, the future of the book, like the future of other media, is cross or multi-platform. To exploit and innovate such platforms successfully, the book needs to be conceptualised as simultaneously content, interface and platform: elements that can be articulated separately as well as together. The book as content can be conceived and repurposed for a range of delivery platforms. The book as interface can also be adapted for a range of new digital applications. It is my intention in this paper to concentrate particularly on the book as interface. My argument is that the book as user interface is highly distinctive, and too much emphasis on the need to find the new hardware incarnation of the book could cause the potential of this distinctiveness to be overlooked by both writers and publishers. Along with its status as cultural artefact, the cultural role of the book as a particular mode of presenting, organising and otherwise interacting with data and representing experience has been equally significant. The perplexing question of which platform it will take in its digital future should not be allowed to obscure completely the need to think creatively about how the book functions as a conceptual and experiential interface.

Conceived as an interface to content rather than as either content or final delivery platform, I would argue that the book as a structuring form is far better suited to the new media environment than are the dominant 20th century media of film, television and radio. I want to go on to look a bit more closely at why this might be.

In a discussion on the idea of the 'networked book' on the blog of the Institute for Future of the Book, a vision of the future of the online book as 'an open book designed to be written, edited and read in a networked environment' was put forward (Vershbow, B 2006). Many participants emphasised their feeling that the idea of the networked book corresponded to their mode of being in the world, their sense that life is a continuum, a network of instances or fragments, multiple possibilities and parallel realities, rather than a linear and single trajectory. The gist of this discussion was that in the electronic or networked book 'the connections between works and between readers and readers and author come from the background to the foreground' (Stein, B 2006).

Thus examples of networked books already in existence might include the online encyclopedia *Wikipedia*, but also content sharing sites such as *Flickr* and *Youtube*. These online databases, like most websites, utilise searchable indexes to facilitate a non-linear on-demand access to content. However this categorisation system is furthermore open to modification by its readers. Indeed the content of the

site is produced entirely through the constant process of users using the system to upload, edit and organise data. The complexity and creative achievement of the site lies in the successful design and construction of an interface to a database that is at once extremely robust (accessed by thousands of users simultaneously), easy to use and adaptable to different configurations and purposes. This interface transforms activities such as cataloguing and indexing into participatory and collective activities for its users. On *Flickr*, for example, users categorise and make their photographs accessible to others through the use of tag words and by placing them in sets. Users can not only access and arrange their own photo album but can also search the whole digital archive to see what photographs other people have stored. They can do this using a number of methods. They can search using a particular tag word they have used themselves to see what other people have categorised under that term, or they can use a number of other filters facilitated by the site. They can choose from a list of most popular tag words, or search using criteria such as location (via a map view) or date, through to 'favourite', 'friends' and 'interestingness', an algorithm developed by the site's creators. Users can annotate both their own and other people's photographs and include photographs by other people in their own collection (if the rights holder allows it). They can also join groups with likeminded fields of interest. They become part of a network of users.

The metaphors employed in the above discussion of the networked book: the 'network', the 'hub', the 'rhizome', are spatial metaphors, and it is highly significant for the future of the book that its future takes shape in a cultural context in which space is privileged as a conceptual and experiential framework. The writing of contemporary experience tends towards topography, rather than teleology. The mapping of time onto space is thus predominant in new narrative forms, within which different paradigms of time-space emerge. The network is perhaps the one that comes first to mind. However there are other spatial formations that recur frequently. One such form, particularly within contemporary digital art practice, is the map. The immersive environment of the game is another. It is however the particular spatial paradigm of the **archive** that I think offers the greatest potential to the book as a digital form.

The archive has become as important as narrative in the construction of personal and social identity. This is partly to do with the increased durability of things, of reified fragments of the past. Not only objects such as heirlooms and souvenirs, but photographs, home movies and other collectable scraps of media, turn a personal, family or social history into an archive.

The 20th century media with which public and private lives have been recorded – photography, film, video, audiotape – are archival media, in the sense that they are the material media used to record experience. But archival media are not archival interfaces. It is, in fact, within the pages of the book that still photography (in both the personal album and the published collection) has been creatively organised so as to constitute an archive that is also simultaneously a narrative.

Until the twenty first century, however, the moving image or audio archive had found no comparative narrative form. They could not be contained within the pages of a book like still photography and have simply been stored on the shelves of physical archives. With digital convergence this is changing.

The social digital media archives cited earlier provide an interface that facilitates their users in the establishing and mining of a public archive for individual and personal meaning. Users of these sites pursue individual trajectories; construct individual menus, playlists; compile personal collections of material, which they organise and comment on. In this way users weave personal narratives from material deposited in the archive by both themselves and their fellows. The resulting digital scrapbooks of individual experience are expanded and given particular validity and meaning by the process of sharing them with others, who can further comment and add to them. Through this process is engendered a feeling of being part of a community: that one's personal, unique narrative is simultaneously part of a larger, collective one.

Like *Index of Love*, these sites enact a dispersed contemporary subjectivity. Users interface with data in a partial and temporary fashion (on demand, networked, in small chunks that can be customised and repurposed). The structuring of content is similar to *Index of Love*, in that the raw material of an archive is constantly rearranged in overlapping, sometimes contradictory narratives. The narrative subject that emerges through a site such as *Youtube* is however very different to that of *Index of Love*. It is not so much fragmented as multifaceted. The experience that is emphasised is one of control, participation and fullness, rather than relativity and meaninglessness.

But such a structure does not have to be employed exclusively either to facilitate 'empowered' user generated content or for trauma narrative. It offers many other possibilities for new forms of the electronic book. What these new forms would have in common would be that they would all respond to a fundamental change in the way that audiences/readers conceptualise narrative/experience: a change that is perceptible in both social networking sites and hypertext fiction.

These forms of narrative are cumulative and multistranded. They will be open to different interpretations and offer the possibility of representing collective and distributed identities and themes. They build up a composite picture, rather than tracing a linear trajectory, and they always exist explicitly in space as well as time. In this formulation the text becomes a '*space you visit* rather than a thing you read' (White, K 2006).

The photographic book, and encyclopaedic projects such as Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* and Benjamin's *Arcades Project* are examples of traditional format books that function at the intersection of narrative and archive. But there are ways in which the electronic book as digital archive can achieve unique possibilities that print narratives cannot. Digital automated space provides the opportunity for a more complex weaving of multiple narrative threads using text and still and moving image.

In the same way that linear perspective and more recently computer algorithms have made it possible to conceive and therefore to build buildings that were literally inconceivable and therefore unbuildable before, electronic narrative forms can make visible previously invisible, or, at the very least, implicit structures of experience. In particular they can make the connections between things resonate very powerfully.

An example of such a narrative is *wefeelfine*: an online global collective narrative generated in real time from sentences plucked from blog entries, all of which begin with the words 'I feel...' or 'I am feeling'. These sentences comprise 'a database of several million human feelings, increasing by 15,000 to 20,000 new feelings per day' (<http://wefeelfine.org>. 2007). Different interfaces allow the reader to shape the narrative in different ways: they can specify for example the demographic or geographic context and generate a collective narrative of the experience of under 16s or over 60s. They can generate a narrative that combines images with words or explores a particular feeling. Here the narrative interest comes from the similarities and differences between the experiences expressed, creating a composite picture.

As Guertin points out, in contemporary culture 'the system no longer means, but in the digital realm the wealth of connections between the gaps speaks volumes' (2004)

There are some key implications for both writers and publishers here:

1. The role of the writer of an electronic text becomes more like that of an architect or a game designer. Their role is to create a structure with creative and versatile potential for those who visit and inhabit it: to facilitate potential path-

ways and connections within an open structure, rather than to fashion a finished text.

2. Following on from this assignation of agency to the reader/user, the individual curation of data becomes an important activity for the latter's reading of the electronic text. If the role of the museum curator is to make the museum archive tell a story, then with the digital archive narrative this storytelling role is handed over at least in part to the visitor to the archive. Curation and customization of data become part of the reading experience: as readers not only create their own pathways but can then preserve, further rework and even present to other readers the narrative journeys they have created within the archive.
3. If experience is an archive, then the pathways through it become indexes and in digital archive media lists are ubiquitous. On social networking sites one's identity is represented not only by a photograph, but by a series of lists: lists of friends; music playlists; reading lists; lists of favourite films; lists of activities participated in. Each one of these lists indexes an archive of content, which tells other people what kind of a person you are, and, just as with the index of a book, one of the attractions of these lists is the heterogeneous content they juxtapose. Individual identity might be produced at the intersections of a network of multiple associations, affiliations and connections, but the way you offer other people access to it is via a series of linear menus. Scrolling down a list has become a default activity in online space. The list has thus both evolved into an increasingly normalised interface and become imbued with new significance and currency.

So here we return to the key significance of the index for the future of the book as hybrid archive/narrative form. If contemporary experience is characterised by a sense of provisionality, partiality and relativity of any knowledge or experience; if the model of knowledge is the cumulative encyclopaedia, rather than the comprehensive system, then narrative as archive and the index as its interface become culturally significant structures.

So what finally should we conclude about digital modes of being and opportunities for the book as

archive and interface? It should be clear from the above discussion that, beyond its possibilities as a reference volume, the electronic book has the potential to enhance its role as archive in ways that are also narrative. Writers and publishers have the opportunity to further the possibilities of the narrative/archive interface to open up the creative potential of both these structuring forms as they interrogate and configure each other.

Instead of the book being seen as under threat, or protesting that electronic texts only automate features that books have possessed for centuries, we can think more openly and strategically about how the book, as archive/narrative, can become central to a media landscape in which the dominant and defining media of the 20th century - television and film - are moving away from their linear time based broadcasting model, towards a publishing model, and to an existence as media archive services, accessed on demand.

This area has, up until now, been dominated by specialised new media companies. Having recently entered the terrain, television companies have not to date found anything particularly creative to do with the convergence between archive and narrative, beyond offering content on demand and encouraging user generated content. The film industry has so far explored the digital realm largely as a marketing space (sometimes very creatively) and also of course in the development of film inspired computer games. However ultimately the audiovisual industry is, unquestionably, going to claim this area as its central platform.

I would propose that this should in fact become the terrain on which the productive future of the book as interface unfolds. There is a huge potential for writers and publishers in working with digital media archives as narrative forms. If the move is towards creating absorbing, versatile, non-linear user interfaces for archives of content, then starting from how books work and how creatively to exploit their key features is a better place to start when thinking about digital texts than starting from how film and television work. Once we have fully recognised and taken stock of the book's simultaneous status as both narrative and archive and its resulting creative potential as a non-linear searchable database, adaptable to a range of content and delivery platforms/outputs, we can really start to realise its potential in the electronic/digital age.

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Rosamund Davies has a background in script editing and writing. She lectures in media and creative industries at the University of Greenwich, specialising in writing for the screen and screen narratives. Her research and practice interests focus on the convergence between print and screen media and on the intersection between narrative and archive as cultural forms.

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