

# **The Small Histories project:**

The internet, life stories and ‘performances of reconstruction’

An exegesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## **Declaration**

I certify that where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Stefan Schutt

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## Acknowledgements

This project, to risk using a cliché, has been quite a journey. It has involved one curtailed attempt to undertake a Master of Arts at, a second attempt at an MA, then a shift of metaphorical gear to a PhD.

And now here I am, ten years later, submitting this document. Whew.

What was called the Isreal Project, and is now called Small Histories, has been a constant companion throughout this time, beginning as it did with some family discoveries that continue to play out in my life.

As a consequence, many people have been involved in this project, in one way or another, throughout the last ten years. I will mention the most important of these, but there are many others too.

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## Abstract

This project revolves around Small Histories, an online web-based software system for the uploading and sharing of life stories: <http://www.smallhistories.com>. I created Small Histories to explore the ways in which the internet can facilitate the urge to tell, share and compare one's personal history and, by doing so, generate an online network of interlinked personal narratives connected to historical times, events and places.

The project originated with a personal event: the tracing of my biological Israeli father in 1997 and my subsequent explorations of my Israeli and German family histories. The stories I encountered in these explorations differed, depending on who was telling them. The Small Histories system was a response to the potential of the burgeoning internet to represent such differing viewpoints, and to generate new forms of encounters with the past. Since then the system has developed in tandem with the internet, especially the explosive growth over recent years of what has been called *social software*.

Conceptually, this project explores the fast-evolving social internet as a setting for auto/biographical narrative practice and how this overlaps with and changes accepted notions of performance, community formation, identity construction and acts of memory. As a framework for these investigations, I propose that the internet is a catalyst without precedent for the production of *performances of reconstruction*, where fragments of the past are dug up, collected, assembled and presented as an imaginative reconstruction of 'what used to be', in an attempt to re-establish a lost sense of roots, identity and belonging; a coherent narrative of identity in an era of fragmentation.

# 1. Introduction

This is the story of a story. Or rather, of three interwoven stories: the development and adoption of the internet, the uncovering of my family history (including the tracing of my biological father) and the evolution of a book project that turned into a website that turned into an online system for sharing life stories.

## Three linked stories

In 1993 I returned to Germany for the first time since leaving as a seven year old in 1972. For some weeks I stayed with my grandfather Rudolf and his second wife Anne in Venningen, a small village on the Rhineland-Palatinate tourist road.



Figure 1: 1980s postcard of Venningen

One morning Anne looked out over the vineyards outside the lounge room window and told me that my biological father had North African origins (which I had known) and that he was definitely Jewish (which I hadn't known).

A month later I sat crying under a palm in a hillside park in Fez, Morocco. I'd just been to a food van run by Moroccan Jews. For the first time, here were people who looked like me.

In 1994 I took my only photograph of my father to Melbourne's Jewish Holocaust Museum. In the photo he stands on a beach, tanned and bare-chested. On the back was some scribbled Hebrew. Maybe someone

in the museum might be able to translate it? A museum's volunteer, who had lived in Israel, spelt out the writing (*David, Bat Yam, 1964*) and looked at the photo: *hmm... that face looks familiar*. That was all she could recall.



Figures 2 and 3: Photograph of my father, front and back

In 1995 my workmate Archie took out his Macintosh laptop, put it on his cubicle desk and plugged in a phone cable. I watched, amazed, as text from another world magically appeared on the screen.

In 1996 and 1997 I continued to fall under the spell of the internet. I learned website coding and started to work as a web developer. I also posted a message to online Jewish genealogy newsgroups. It reads as follows:

### ***Looking for father***

*Greetings. I am looking for my natural father.*

*His name is/was David Nathaniel (according to the Hebrew written on the back of a photo). He would be around 65 -70 years old now.*

*He had served in the Israeli Army, and has half a foot missing.*

*The photo (from 1964) shows him as well built, dark and balding. He was living in France, then Germany, around 1964-1966, then - who knows? Apparently at the time he was well known by members of Paris and Munich's Jewish community.*

*Recently, an acquaintance in Melbourne, Australia (my home town) recognised his face. She had lived in Israel some time ago, but could not remember any more.*

*Any help would be much appreciated.*

*Thank you,*

*Stefan*

You can still find this message today if you search in Google Groups (<http://groups.google.com/>).

A David Lewin from London replied to my message. He runs a small search agency called Search & Unite (<http://remember.org/unite/>) that traces lost Jewish family members. We corresponded, I dithered, then after a few months took a deep breath and employed him to search for my father.

In 1997 I deferred my Professional Writing and Editing course, completed an English as a Second Language teaching certificate, took a month-long internship at the internet search engine LookSmart, then went overseas for a year: Hong Kong, China, Trans-Siberian express, Europe. I planned to end up in Turkey, teaching English.

When I got to Germany, I went with my aunt to her office at the Cologne University law school. I was chatting to her when the phone rang. David Lewin's voice announced: “Are you sitting down? We’ve found your father.”



Figure 4: Photograph taken by the author at Mount Zion, Jerusalem, 1997

So I changed my plans and went to Israel. I got to know my father, his family and the country. A year later I came back to Australia, worked for LookSmart and starting writing a book about my experience as part of the professional writing course.

Since then the world, the web and I have changed. I’ve discovered more family stories on both sides, the internet has developed into a place of information sharing – and I’m writing this exegesis on what was originally a Masters project called the *Isreal Project*, and has now become a PhD project called *Small Histories*.

## The project: a summary

At the heart of the Small Histories project is my web-based software for the uploading and sharing of personal life stories: <http://www.smallhistories.com>. I created it to explore how the internet might facilitate the urge to tell, share and compare one's personal history and, by doing so, generate an online network of interlinked personal narratives connected to historical events.

The *Small Histories* project began with my tracing of my father and everything that went with it. It began as a book project in 1998 and morphed into an online hypertext narrative in 2000 after I had concluded that the events I had experienced could only be truly presented as multiple different contexts or viewpoints. This became apparent when I began to delve into the history of my mother's (non-Jewish) German family and the juxtapositions between my two family histories.

As time went on, my views on the project and its themes changed as I changed and world events came and went. I found my views and reactions evolving with every new turn in the Middle East conflict. I realised that I needed to reflect this evolution in my project - but that 'closed' (uneditable) memoirs are locked in time and cannot change as their authors' perspectives change.

Memoirs in book form are also, I concluded, locked in another bubble – that of point of view. They may discuss events of wider significance, but often appear self-referential and unwilling to embrace divergent viewpoints. My observation coincided with the rapid growth of online social software in the early 2000s. All this led to the development of the Small Histories website, whose aim was to facilitate the emergence of multiple viewpoints related to common events, places and experiences.

The Small Histories proof-of-concept was completed in 2009 following three years of intensive technical development. This was preceded by three years spent developing a number of earlier site iterations (for more details of the site's development history, see Appendix VII: The evolution of the Small Histories website). In 2009 I undertook informal user testing with ten acquaintances. The feedback from these users reinforced my conclusion, based on my commercial experience as an interaction designer, that although Small Histories worked as a proof-of-concept, its story creation processes needed to be simplified before it could be widely released for public use. At this point I decided to forgo further technical development on the site and focus on the theoretical and conceptual aspects of the study. This included deepening my understanding of how the principles developed in the project could be applied to other contexts involving shared, cross-linked online storytelling.

Since then, boosted by recent interest in Small Histories by commercial and educational organisations wanting to embed shared storytelling in their work practices, a simplified, generic version of the software has been developed. This new project, called StoryMaker (<http://www.thestorymaker.org/vu>) is funded by a scholarship from the National Centre for Vocational Educational Research. The first iteration of the site focuses on the creation of an easy-to-use online storytelling environment for vocational teachers. It is currently being trialled within Griffith and Victoria Universities. More details on StoryMaker can be found in Appendix VII.

Both the Small Histories and Storymaker systems have been designed and built using Open Source PHP code. This code has been released to the Open Source developer community to use, improve and customise: current versions of Small Histories and StoryMaker are now available on the Open Source developer portal Github for others to download: <https://github.com/jcartledge/smallhistories>.

### **Why do it?**

The tumultuous events of the twentieth century has resulted in massive dislocation and change, shaping millions of life histories. Personal life narratives or 'small histories' can offer embodied perspectives on the big events of our times, and on the histories of others connected to the same events, places or times. In doing so they promise to provide 'a bridge between the tacit and the explicit, allowing tacit social knowledge to be demonstrated and learned, without the need to propositionalize it' (Linde 2001, p. 1). The Small Histories system aims to facilitate the creation and sharing of life stories through an online, user-driven, database-powered system; a setting within which these stories are not only compiled, but also collected, told, compared and disseminated.

In doing so, the project hopefully achieves an additional purpose: that of a self-generating archive of personal stories that are easy to find and share, unlike many other collected narratives (Linde 2001, pp. 8, 13-

...My interest is directly related to Kolomac because my ancestors actually lived and worked on the estate in (then Koldemanz) and I was stunned to find your photos and video of that space. Really quite amazing to be given the gift of place and history in such a way.

*Excerpt of email to Small Histories site owner from a multimedia lecturer, Alverno College, USA, May 2010*

14).

## Some emerging questions

The Small Histories system has evolved in tandem with the internet since the mid-1990s, particularly given the emergence over the last decade of what has been called *social software* (Allen 2004). Previously a delivery mechanism for one-way information, the internet has been transformed, as the term suggests, into a facilitator of connections and interactions. Judith Donath's term *sociable media* further expands this concept, explicitly referring to 'media that enhance communication and the formation of social ties among people' (Donath 2004, p. 1).

I am interested in the ways the social internet intersects with auto/biographical narrative, particularly in terms of crossovers into performance, community formation, identity construction and archival/memory activity; hybrid practices driven by the increasing variety, sophistication and ease-of-use of online technologies.

The Small Histories system doesn't fit neatly under one category of online activity. Although inspired by social software, both technically and conceptually, its primary aim is to collect, disseminate and share life stories created by people who have ultimate control over the content they create, even if elements of their stories can be used and recontextualised by others. Whilst Small Histories incorporates some elements of community building and network generation, the author of every Small Histories story is a solo operator, much like a traditional book author, or indeed the author of a personal blog.

This leads to questions about where Small Histories fits. Should it be seen as 'social software'? Does the ability to find, read and/or comment on another's story imply the creation of 'community'? Is sociality implied by the ability to collectively edit or amend core content (ala Wikipedia)? What about the ability to create your own content for others to view? What is truly social software - and what is an online version of vanity publishing? And what part does user interaction design play in critically framing a system like Small Histories, given that software is inherently tied to the technical processes developed for its users? And what of issues around the currency and obsolescence of that software?

In fact there are so many questions tied up specifically with the internet and technology that, as a defined and doable PhD project, I had to make some decisions about what to explore and what not to within the PhD research, although the Small Histories system and its spinoffs continue to evolve as stand-alone development projects.

The project was first conceived (firstly as part of a Master of Arts, then a PhD) as a working prototype that would be tested on a base of public users and refined by an ongoing development cycle, with public use of

the site forming a central aspect of the research. To start with, I undertook coding and refinement of the site over three years with the help of web programmer James Cartledge. I then tested the limits of the system by uploading over 6,000 items of my own content and creating online stories (33 to date) from this material. This led to a number of ideas for redevelopment and refinement, some of have since been incorporated into the system.

In 2009 I invited ten people to upload their own stories to Small Histories. The purpose of this invitation was to test the mechanics of the system as it stood. These people had previously expressed interest in the project, came from a variety of backgrounds and had differing levels of familiarity with online systems. Most were friends and a few had found the site via the internet or conference presentations. Whilst all ten people logged in and experimented with the system, only two ended up uploading fully completed stories. In discussion about why this happened, almost all cited a lack of time. Some users also pointed to usability issues. This generated a further 'to do list' of features and amendments; it soon became apparent that ongoing development of the system was too big a task for two people with full-time work (as opposed to comparable web systems developed by a dedicated team of employees or open source contributors.)

The working, albeit imperfect, proof-of-concept served to demonstrate the system's principles and potential, as well as solving a number of problems connected with interface design and web system development. This can be defined as the 'Master of Arts phase' of the research. However, the PhD phase of the research needed a tighter focus. To better understand how a system like Small Histories might develop, what it might be used for in the future, and the implications of its public existence and use, I needed to undertake a more conceptual investigation connected with narrative and auto/biography, trust, postmemory and performances of the self.

Throughout this conceptual phase of investigation, the Small Histories site has remained 'live' on the internet and publicly displaying the stories I and others have created, with more content added periodically. The site is also generating a range of initial data from Google Analytics on user types, numbers, origins and keywords used to find it via web searches. A new site development phase is currently underway in the form of the StoryMaker system, which is designed to encompass a broader range of uses in online story construction and sharing.

In terms of this project's conceptual work, I have explored a number of questions that revolve around the realisation that publishing to the web implies an audience, which in turn implies a kind of performance by the story creator. But who exactly is the performer, and who is the audience – especially when they've come to you through a casual Google keyword search? This has involved looking at the internet's intersection with history and memory; its capacity to fuel people's contradictory archival urges - to remember some things,



but to forget others (Derrida 1996). The internet fuels this urge by providing people with unprecedented ways to discover and present fragments of dispersed histories and identities. The huge growth in online genealogy and family history points to the power of that urge.

To frame these questions and the explorations around them, I propose that the internet can be seen as a catalyst without precedent for the production of *performances of reconstruction*. Fragments of the past are dug up, collected, assembled and presented as an imaginative reconstruction of 'what used to be', in an attempt to re-establish a lost sense of roots, identity and belonging; in other words, to create a coherent narrative of identity in an era of fragmentation.

### **Narrative's moment**

The opening sentence of this document is a lie. This document is really the story *of the story* of the three stories I've outlined. It's the story of the theoretical explorations (and, it should be said, confusions) that have danced alongside the evolving project, impacting it and being impacted by it. At the heart of this story is narrative itself.

'We live in narrative's moment', states Maines (cited in Denzin 2000, p. xi). Increasingly 'culture is seen as a performance. Everything we study is contained within a storied, or narrative, representation' (Denzin 2000, p. xi). Narrative is a fundamental way that humans make sense of the world and our lives: 'Experience, if it is to be remembered and represented, must be contained in a story which is narrated. We have no direct access to experience as such. We can only study experience through its representations, through the way stories are told' (Lincoln & Denzin 2003, p. 240). Narrative researcher Catherine Kohler Riessman concurs, pointing out that storytellers create order from the disorder of experience, giving reality 'a unity that neither nature nor the past possesses so clearly' (Cronon, cited in Riessman 2007, p. 7).

So what is narrative? Definitions vary, but Denzin provides an operational one that I will adopt throughout this document: 'Narrative is a telling, a performance event, the process of making or telling a story. A story is an account involving the narration of a series of events in a plotted sequence which unfolds in time. A story and a narrative are nearly equivalent terms.' (Lincoln & Denzin 2003, p. 240). This is reinforced by Riessman, who, whilst cautioning us not to expect a simple definition of narrative, does provide one view of its 'essential ingredients', the foremost being the principle of sequential ordering. This harks back to oral storytelling, where 'a speaker connects events into a sequence that is consequential for later action and for the meanings that the speaker wants listeners to take away from the story' (2007, p. 3). In other words,

contingency is crucial: 'Whatever the content, stories demand the consequential linking of events or ideas. Narrative shaping entails imposing a meaningful pattern on what would otherwise be random and disconnected' (Salmon & Riessman 2008, p. 78).

The creation of meaning from chaos through narrative ordering is a central theme of this document, and forms the basis of the Small Histories website and its processes. By creating an ordered account of events, stories give shape to life. Narrative is, in fact, *of* life: 'an event, sometimes a very minimal event, related in the form of a tale, belongs not to literature but to everyday life' (MacLean 1988, p. 13); it 'helps us to learn, to create shape out of our experience and make sense of the world and ourselves' (MacLean 1988, pp. 13-14).

Some historians concur. After some initial scepticism, Holocaust researcher Raul Hilberg deferred to storytelling's ability to render 'difficult' stories meaningful, and recommended its use by historians (Hirsch 2008, p. 104).

Here a qualification is needed: the term *narrative* incorporates more than oral stories. Riessman says that beyond the commonality of narrative shaping, 'the narrative concept is operationalized differently' (p. 5). This is reinforced by Barthes' statement:

There are countless forms of narrative in the world... a prodigious variety of genres, each of which branches out into a variety of media.... Among the vehicles of narrative are articulated language, whether oral or written, pictures, still or moving... narrative is present in myth, legend, fables, tales, short stories, epics, history, tragedy... drama, comedy, pantomime, paintings... stained-glass windows, movies, local news, conversation... it is present at all times, in all places, in all societies... Like life itself, it is there, international, transhistorical, transcultural. (Barthes & Duisit 1975, p. 1).

Sociolinguists, Riessman (2007) tells us, define *stories* as one specific prototypic form of an overall class called *narrative*, though Riessman decides to use the terms more or less interchangeably. De Fina (2003) expands on this, stating that 'stories can be described not only as narratives that have a sequential and temporal ordering, but also as texts that include some kind of rupture or disturbance in the normal course of events' (p. 6). I will go on to examine how trauma, a form of this 'rupture or disturbance', intersects with narrative performance.

## Coming to terms with the research, or: the project as a mangrove tree

The task of developing a theoretical framework for this project has proved daunting at times because it is inherently multi-disciplinary, and because it has changed over time as the internet and my perspectives on my own life story have changed. The advice I received whilst in the thick of this was to look at the project as a mangrove tree. Unlike some other trees, a mangrove's roots are broad and widely spread - but it still stands up. At the heart of the research is the intersection of the internet, narrative and performances of the self; this area incorporates knowledge from a range of fields: memory studies, cultural studies, narratology, performance, interface design, literature and narrative inquiry.

So what kinds of research methodologies have been appropriate for the various stages of this investigation? For the development of the website system, it might be called both participatory action research and a version of Agile software development (Highsmith et al 2001; Abrahamsson et al, 2002): ongoing quick cycles of *design, build, test, refine*, undertaken in conjunction with a sympathetic software developer.

In terms of the larger conceptual sweep of the project, my research position has been built over time by collecting things that have come my way and that I have sought out - articles, scholarly papers, works of art, novels, interviews, historical data, theories, photos, web posts, news items. This way of working could be called a variation of Grounded Theory in that the theory is built from the data collected, but this seems like retrofitting a construct onto what has essentially been an artist's manner of working, from instinct upwards, a bowerbird assembling a nest from all manner of objects. And like the bowerbird's collection, which is composed of blue things, a thread has run through all the flotsam and jetsam I have gathered together - a deep current of a sense of loss and an associated yearning for putting the scattered pieces back together. It wasn't planned that way. It is most certainly subjective, and draws on my own experience. Sometimes it is hard to put your finger on these things until afterwards. This process has gone on for years. And it should be noted too that above everything, I identify as an artist (my background is as a musician and writer), so perhaps I feel most at home with this kind of approach.

Recently I discovered some texts that provided a degree of clarity and validity to the rambling process I had undertaken. Griselda Pollock, in *Conceptual Odysseys: Passages to Cultural Analysis*, argues that the 'theoretical turn' of the 1970s and 1980s has had its day, and that academic analysis is in need of a revamp through what is described as 'transdisciplinary encounters with and through concepts' (Pollock 2008, p. xv). The book's preface describes the framework of 'research as encounter' (p. i) via concepts that circulate 'between different intellectual or aesthetic cultures, inflecting them, finding common questions in distinctively articulated practices': the *travelling concepts* defined by Mieke Bal (2002). In the section *Working With Concepts*, Bal describes the investigative process:

The **field** of cultural analysis is not delimited because the traditional delimitations must be suspended; by selecting an object, you **question** a field. Nor are its **methods** sitting in a tool box waiting to be applied; they, too, are part of the exploration. You do not conduct a method: you conduct a meeting between several, a meeting in which, a meeting in which the object participates so that, together, object and methods can become a new, not firmly delineated, field. (Bal 2008, p. 1)

This approach dovetails with mine. Reinforced by the book's insightful, multi-layered and wide ranging conceptual analyses (covering everything from medieval circumcision rituals to the intersection of the AIDS epidemic and a 1980s fashion shoot), Bal's *travelling concepts* notion has provided me with a useful and explicit framework for the processes I had, until recently, undertaken intuitively.

By then I had also encountered Ken Wilber's *Four Quadrants*, which seeks to integrate different domains of understanding and their 'validity claims'. All forms of knowledge can therefore be conceptualised as useful, different and complementary as long as they follow 'the three strands of valid knowledge acquisition: injunction, apprehension, confirmation/rejection (or exemplar, evidence, falsifiability)' (Wilber 1997, p. 81). In Wilber's model, which I have condensed into one table, the left column is the domain of subjectivity (or the *interior*), and the right the domain of objectivity (the *exterior*). The top row focuses on the individual, and the bottom on the collective:

	Interior	Exterior
<b>Individual</b>	<p><b><i>I</i></b>  <i>(Intentional)</i>            SUBJECTIVE  <i>truthfulness</i></p> <p>sincerity            integrity            trustworthiness</p>	<p><b><i>It</i></b>  <i>(Behavioural)</i>            OBJECTIVE  <i>truth</i></p> <p>correspondence            representation            propositional</p>
<b>Collective</b>	<p><b><i>We</i></b>  <i>(Cultural)</i>            INTERSUBJECTIVE  <i>justness</i></p> <p>cultural fit            mutual understanding            rightness</p>	<p><b><i>It</i></b>  <i>(Social)</i>            INTEROBJECTIVE  <i>functional fit</i></p> <p>systems theory web            structural-            functionalism            social systems mesh</p>

Figure 5: Wilbur's *Four Quadrants*

I found this model useful because my project touches on all these domains, although its methodological 'home' is in the two cells within the 'Interior' column sum: a combination of the subjective (individual qualitative investigation; the use of artistic practice; the use of my own life experience...all with their attendant issues of truth and authenticity) and the intersubjective (the study of cultural phenomena connected with narrative, auto/biography, genealogy and internet culture). This toggling between the individual and the collective on a subjective level is at the core of this project, and mirrors the curious interplay of solitary and social activity that characterises the use of social software. For instance, the 'individual' characterises my own relationship to the project as the author of the system and its current content, and those of others who will submit stories in the future. However, the networks and interactions resulting from the sharing of these stories to an online audience, as well as the exploration of issues connected with mass trauma, dispersal, community and reader-audience relationship, veer into the realm of the collective.

Where the Small Histories project extends into the 'Exterior' column is:

- *Objective cell*: the examination of behavioural data such as usage patterns and Google keywords used to find the site, through my linking of the Small Histories site to Google Analytics, plus my use of usability and human-computer interaction guidelines and research
- *Interobjective cell*: my use of other research into social software and my reviews of other online software systems (such as the genealogy websites reviewed in Appendix II). Post PhD, the project will also examine how people create and share stories on the Small Histories and StoryMaker sites, and how their interface and user processes influence this

One pivotal text I refer to throughout this document is Marie McLean's 1988 work *Narrative as performance: the Baudelairean experiment*. Published before the internet became popular, this work provides a point of reference on the performative aspects of pre-web narratives. I also quote from novels, artworks and my project blog posts to illuminate points in the document. These references appear in 'breakout boxes' (to use publishing terminology) and are meant to be read as complementary asides to the main text. I will also quote liberally from the works of two novelists, Anne Michaels and W.G. Sebald, who weave evocative stories from threads of fiction, biography, European history and memory, and whose themes closely match those of my project.

In this document I will refer to a number of historical family photographs. These originate from a cardboard box containing hundreds of photos belonging to my German grandfather. The box was uncovered in 2005 in the basement of my aunt's house near Cologne, following my grandfather's move to an aged care home as

a result of Alzheimers Syndrome. This story is an almost archetypal German one: finding the box of revealing family photos from the difficult past (Kempe, 2002; Ludin, 2007; Himmler, 2007). Furthermore, the photographs, strangely, were found by relatives at the same time that I was in Germany on a two week research trip for this project; the images you will see are re-photographed versions that I took with a digital camera during my trip.

Leading on from this, and as a final comment on research methodology, it is worth noting the centrality of field research to this project. The relationship of place to identity has shaped both the development of the Small Histories project and my own personal development. My visits to places of family and personal significance in Europe and the Middle East have been pivotal in determining the shape and direction of this project, and Walter Benjamin's concept of *life mapping* has provided a fitting framework for my geographical explorations. I shall return to this theme later.

## The Small Histories Website

### How the website works

The Small Histories website has three levels:

1. a public website where stories are published and the public can find, view and comment on these stories
2. a password-controlled area where registered story creators can upload items and create stories
3. an administration area where administrator/s (currently myself) can review, edit or delete content

Anyone with internet access can view and read the stories uploaded to the main (public) Small Histories website ([www.smallhistories.com](http://www.smallhistories.com)) and comment on these stories (comments are displayed around the margins of the screen).

The website's design approach was developed in consultation with graphic designer Tony Aszodi from the School of Creative Industries at Victoria University, with additional input from programmer James Cartledge.

How stories are listed on the homepage:



Figure 6: Small Histories homepage: <http://www.smallhistories.com>

Links to selected Small Histories stories are currently presented on the site's public homepage under three headings: *Recent Stories*, *Popular Stories* and *Random Stories*. An *All Stories* hyperlink at the bottom of the screen links to a table containing all current stories:



Figure 7: Small Histories: list of stories

This presentation style was developed in consultation with the programmer as a response to user interface issues identified with presenting a long list of stories on the homepage. Such a long list, we thought, could be confusing, particularly in anticipation of many more stories being uploaded by users worldwide.



At the same time we made the assumption that relevant content would tend to be sought by web users via keyword searches (as opposed to browsing the Small Histories homepage), so we ensured that the stories' titles and descriptions (which would tend to contain certain search terms) would automatically populate search engine-friendly areas of the particular story web page, such as as web page's html 'title' tag - thereby maximising chances of web searchers finding the Small Histories story relevant to that keyword search.

This seems to have worked reasonably well for specific search terms, as revealed by a Google search in March 2010 for the term Koldemanz (the pre-World War II name for my grandmother's village), which resulted in the first and second search result position within Google:



Figure 8: Google search for *Koldemanz*

## Creating and publishing stories

For a person to create their own stories, the site administrator (currently myself) needs to create a new user profile for that person (users can change their username and password under the 'My Details' tab once they have logged in)

To create and publish a story, a person needs to be logged in. The publishing process then takes the following steps:

*Click the 'My Items' tab* and upload media items (photos, video, text, audio etc) to the repository. These items and their associated metadata can be edited or deleted at any time by their creator:

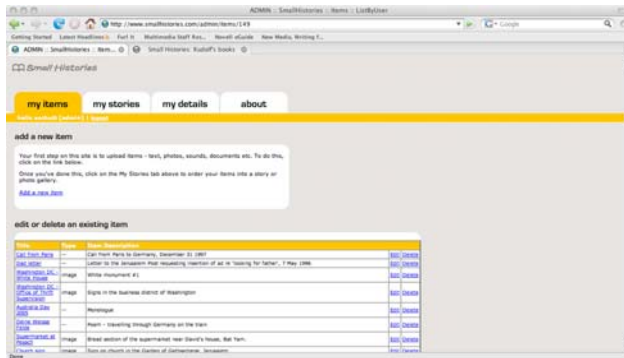


Figure 9: My items tab

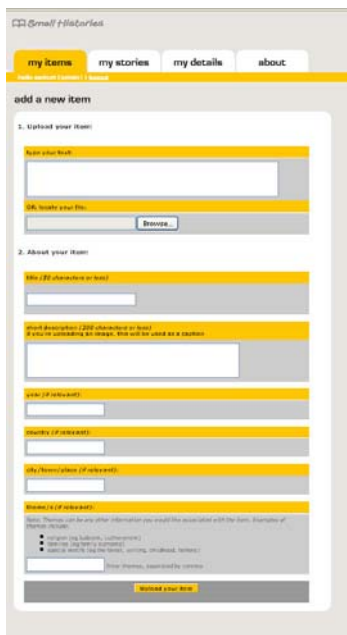


Figure 10: Add a new item - popup

Click the 'My Stories' tab:

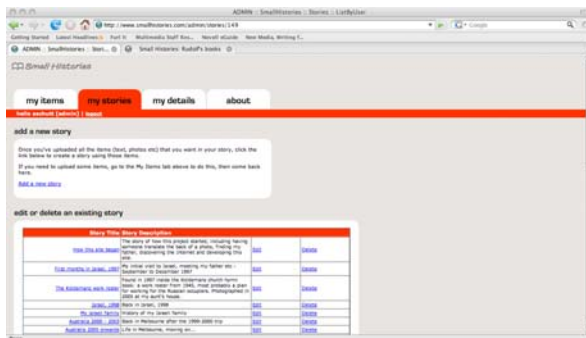


Figure 11: My Stories tab

...and create a story by:

*Step 1:* give the story a title and description

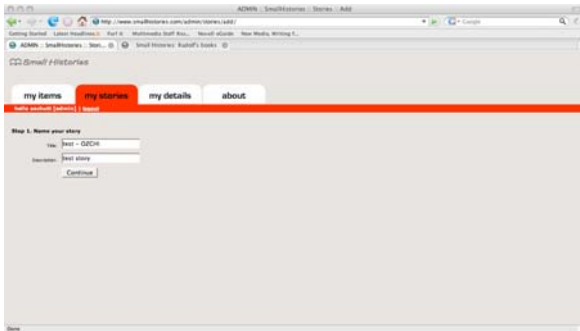


Figure 12: *My Stories* title and description

*Step 2:* include at least one item uploaded by somebody else in the story. This is done by selecting and dragging that item from the left-hand to right-hand column (the reason for this follows shortly)

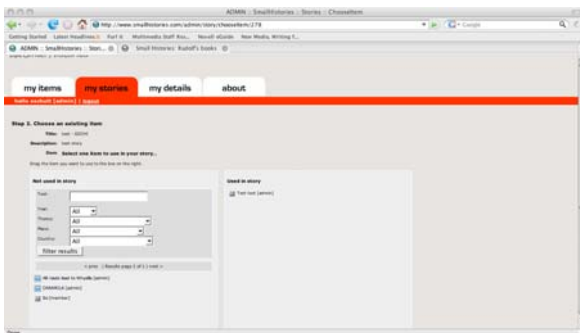


Figure 13: *My Stories* – add another's item

*Step 3:* choose a layout style

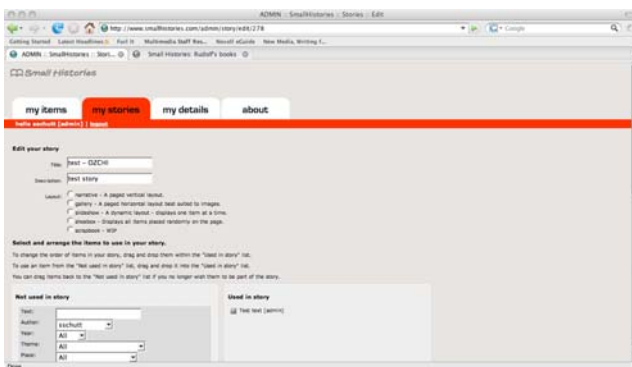


Figure 14: Choose layout style

note: if *narrative* or *gallery* are chosen, a box will appear with number of items per page:

**Edit your story**

Title:

Description:

Layout:

- narrative - A paged vertical layout.
- gallery - A paged horizontal layout best suited to images.
- slideshow - A dynamic layout - displays one item at a time.
- shoebox - Displays all items placed randomly on the page.
- scrapbook - WIP

Items per page:

Figure 15: Choose layout style - detail

*Step 4 (on the same screen):* add one's own items by dragging them into an order into the right hand column.

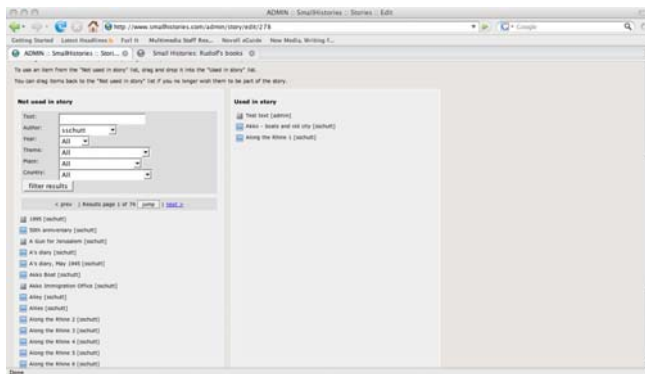


Figure 16: Add own items

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

*Narrative format – scrolls down the screen:*



Figure 17: narrative format

*Gallery format – scrolls across the screen:*

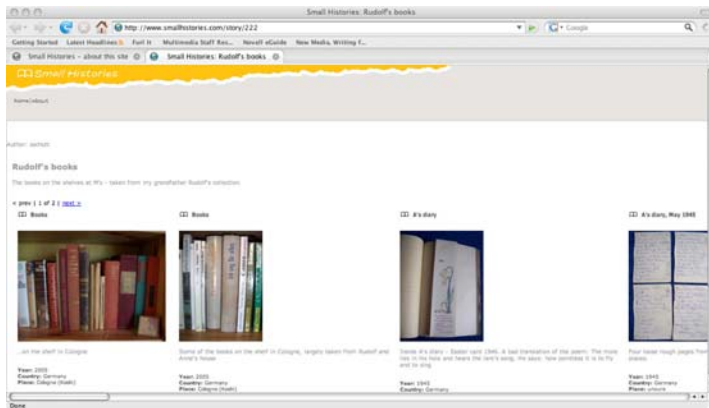


Figure 18: gallery format

*Shoebbox format – draggable layers:*



Figure 19: shoebbox format

Two other presentation styles, *slideshow* and *scrapbook*, are still in development. They are described in the following section.

These presentation styles provide a number of story models, ranging from largely time-based to largely space-based, and ones in between. The *narrative* format was designed to mirror current stories on genealogical and family history websites (see screenshot example in *Appendix II: Genealogy on the web - a software review*). That is, text, images and other material scroll down the page, then continue with a link to the next page. This way of presenting material is primarily time-based and sequential.

The *gallery* format, with its horizontal scrolling, was inspired by an online gallery created by Bosnian artist Nebojsa Seri (otherwise known as Soba or Shoba: <http://www.shobaart.com/>) in the late 1990s. This gallery used horizontal scrolling, usually considered a travesty by web usability specialists (Nielsen 2005) to mimic walking through a gallery space and observing the artworks on the wall. It combines sequential presentation with the sense of meandering visual discovery, and has since been taken up by online storytellers such as by Jonathan Harris in the Whale Hunt (Harris, 2007c), where it is used as a visual timeline device and described as a 'filmstrip'. The gallery format is also inspired by the illustrated scroll as an ancient form of storytelling; although all information exists at once on the scroll, it is through the gradual revelation of events and the temporary withholding of information that creates a sense of narrative tension and drama. Through the spatial relationships it enables, Small Histories' *gallery* format is designed to arrange visual information chronologically in order to generate context between items, to facilitate a gradual revealing of information (ala scrolls), or to deliberately construe new forms of meaning (ala montage).

The *shoebox* format presents material in randomly layered fashion, similar to finding a collection of photos in a shoebox like the ones my family found in Germany. It is inspired by Andy Warhol's *Time Capsules*, sealed cardboard boxes where Warhol kept objects such as letters, newspapers, childhood toys, souvenirs, tickets and the like. (Warhol, 1973-1987) This format abandons ordering altogether, either visual or sequential, in favour of visual discovery as random as the layering of items on the screen. In this model, users can click on items to bring them to the top, as well as move them around the screen. This format is designed for exploration by the viewer, thereby generating possibilities for serendipitous association and meaning creation through unplanned juxtapositions, as outlined in Eisenstein's concept of *collisions*, which I will discuss in more detail later.

## Currently under development

Two options for displaying stories are currently under development: *slideshow* and *scrapbook*. The *slideshow* feature is similar to others like it on the web, which allow images to be displayed one at a time with forward and back buttons, as well as an automatic option for displaying a series of images at time intervals.

The *scrapbook* feature will be based on the current *shoebbox* feature, where items are layered on top of one another and dispersed throughout the screen area in no particular order. However, while the shoebox feature lets any web page viewer drag these items around the screen, the scrapbook feature will let story creators move items and then lock these into place. The displayed items will then be seen this way by viewers and cannot be moved. This will allow story creators to tell their stories in a visual, collage-style narrative presentation, as per Dan Eldon's autobiographical journals which inspired this feature. More on the influence of Eldon's work later.



Figure 20: Dan Eldon, *The Journey is the Destination*, Book Seven. Source: <http://www.daneldon.org/journals/>

Another feature currently mooted for development will let story creators develop compound stories by linking stories together, and include discrete items as connectors to join the stories together. I saw the need for such a feature after uploading a number of smaller stories about my visits to various villages in Pomerania, then realising that these stories were all part of a larger story concerned with investigating the history of my grandmother's family.

A number of user interface design issues have been identified for revamping, including bigger text boxes for descriptions and a reworking of the ordering 'drag and drop' feature.

A longer term aim is to present the stories in a visual map-style interface, where the items are presented as 'towns' and the stories as the 'roads' connecting the items. This will require significant technical work and is slated for the next stage of development. More details on this can be found in the *Where to from here* section.

### **Small Histories and 'weak links'**

The Small Histories narrative creation process currently has a specific rule embedded in its functionality: those wanting to create a narrative must also include at least one media item uploaded *by another user*. This is to ensure that links across narratives are maintained; that the site grows as a web of interconnected elements rather than a collection of isolated silos of data.

This rule is an experimental response to what network physicist Albert-László Barabási describes as the internet's tendency to 'encourage segregation and social fragmentation. Indeed', Barabási states, 'the mechanisms behind social and political isolation on the Web are self-reinforcing' (2002, p. 170). Unlinked clusters of data lead to silos of information where opposing viewpoints are not presented, leading to closed self-reinforcing loops of like-minded opinion:

In June 2000 Cass Sustein, a law professor at the University of Chicago, conducted a random survey of sixty political sites, finding that only 15 percent of them have links to sites with opposite views. In contrast, as many as 60 percent have links to like-minded Webpages. A study focusing on democratic discourse on the Web arrived at a similar conclusion: Only about 15 percent of Webpages offer links to opposing viewpoints. Sustein fears that by limiting access to conflicting viewpoints, the merging online universe encourages segregation and social fragmentation (Barabási 2002, p. 170)

Barabási concludes that, in any network composed of concentrated clusters of nodes, only a few links bridging these clusters are needed to counter the effect of self-reinforcing loops. This hypothesis was first proposed by Mark Granovetter in *The Strength of Weak Ties* (1973, revised 1983). As Barabási explains:



You start with a large number of isolated nodes. Then you randomly add links between the nodes...If you add only a few connections, the only consequence of your activity will be that some of the nodes will pair up. If you continue adding links, you will inevitably connect some of these pairs to each other, forming clusters of several nodes. But when you add enough links such that each node has an average of one link, a miracle happens: A unique giant cluster occurs. That is, most nodes will be part of a single cluster such that, starting from any node, we can get to any other by navigating along the links between the nodes...Sociologists would tell you that your subjects had just formed a community... (Barabási 2002, p. 17-18)

It requires **only one link** per node to stay connected...If nodes have less than one connection on average, then our network breaks into tiny noncommunicating clusters. If there is more than one connection per node, that danger becomes remote. (Barabási 2002, p. 18)

I have acted out on Facebook what Sustain and Barabási have observed. In 2010 I was 'friended' by an old university acquaintance. His Facebook posts regularly express his view that global warming is a conspiracy concocted by vested interests to gain control over the world. My views differ from that, and so I have been left with the choice of ignoring his pronouncements, silently 'defriending' him, reading his posts and not commenting, or commenting and responding, thereby exposing myself to an online debate and the possibility of argument, not only with him but also his other Facebook contacts. Although tempted to take one of the first three, easier options (he is not a close friend in real life), I decided to act on the principle expounded by Barabási, took a deep breath, and engaged in a debate. The result thus far has been encouraging: a respectful exchange of differing views, including the knowledge that his and his friends' views are in fact more nuanced than initial impressions convey. This highlights the danger of people being turned into caricatures by others (and sometimes themselves); being 'put in a box', as it were, as a result of a few expressions of online opinion. Of course, not every online exchange ends up like that, but this was one situation where siloing was avoided.

Within the Small Histories system, the experimental process designed to counter siloing has hit some usability snags. To test future usage of the system I have uploaded over 6000 of my digital media items – which means that any other author will now encounter a list of thousands of items when taking the first step of story creation (i.e. choosing at least one item uploaded by someone else). This amount of material could be overwhelming to story creators; also they may not want to include others' items in their stories. Therefore, in subsequent versions of the site I may make this rule optional, and see how this affects the siloing tendency. This change has already been implemented in the Storymaker software, whose focus is on development of a simplified story creation process that can be used in a wide range of contexts.

## 2. Performances of Reconstruction

«Everything has broken down and new things had to be made out of the fragments. Collage was like an image of the revolution within me – not as it was, but as it might have been.» (Schwitters, cited in De Bruyn 2001, p. 3)

In this study I propose that *assembling and publishing life stories on the internet is a creative act, a performance on the stage of the computer screen.*

Online life stories are performances not only because all written narratives are performative to some degree, but also because online narratives are infused with an awareness and expectation of *audience*. Creators of online narratives know their work will be instantly available to a worldwide audience, albeit one that is as nebulous as it is large.

The 'reconstruction' in the term *performances of reconstruction* refers to the creation of something new from the fragments of the old. The twentieth century was characterised by unprecedented fragmentation: eviction and dispersal of entire populations due to large-scale traumatic events, breakdown of family and tribal structures due to social and technological change. Our times have seen large-scale ruptures in the continuity of identity and belonging. Hence, *reconstruction* refers to the urge to gather up the scattered pieces of the past.

Unprecedented in history, masses of humanity do not live, nor will they be buried, in the land where they were born. The great migration of the dead. War did this first, thought Jean, and then water.

The land does not belong to us, we belong to the land. That is the real homesickness, and that is the proprietorship of the dead. No place proclaims this with more certainty than a grave. In this century of refugees, it is our displacement that binds us.

*The Winter Vault by Anne Michaels, p. 312*

But the urge to create and share one's online 'small history' is not just about trying to generate belonging by recreating something that used to exist, or just about providing an archival aid or adjunct to memory (Sellen et al 2007). It is more: like the rebuilding of a city after a bombing raid, it is a form of reinvention, a reuse of the fragments of the past to build something new. It takes from the past but is not the past. And how can it be, since the internet has only existed since relatively recent times, and was not part of that past?

This term *performance of reconstruction* suggests a process of trying to mitigate or transform the effects of trauma through creative reassembly. This is invoked in the introduction to Anne Michaels' novel *Fugitive Pieces*. Here, John Berger states 'In this novel everything has been broken and, for love's sake, there are those who ferociously place the pieces back together again. Or try.' (Berger in Michaels 2006, p. 1).

## Reclaiming memory in the internet age

*The past does not change, nor our need for it. What must change is the way of telling.* (Anne Michaels, *The Winter Vault*, p. 321)

The internet is a 'technology of memory' (Van House & Churchill 2008). People use it to reclaim territories and identities lost in political and social upheavals. They gather fragments of the past, digitise them, create meanings around and through 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, thereby helping to support the emergence of what has been called an 'auto/biographical society' (Plummer 2001).

Since finding my Israeli father and family, the internet has become my partner in exploring my new identity. I have scoured the web and discovered fragments of information directly and indirectly connected to my family and cultural/genetic/tribal background. The internet's ability to facilitate connections between such isolated items of data has transformed the process of collecting, combining and presenting fragments of personal and tribal identity, in what might be called the human equivalent of paleontology's *life assemblage*, a group of fossils gathered together to represent a former living community (Boucot 1953). Such a process can be seen in the explosive growth in online genealogical activity (see Appendix II for a review of online genealogical services).

Typing the name of my grandmother, Leni Sowade, into Google, I came up with a memoir of a man called Scheunemann, the grandfather of a German tree surgeon who put his grandfather's memoir on the web. Scheunemann recounts visiting my grandmother's estate on his bicycle in advance of the Russian front in early 1945:

*With the pre-Spring wind in my back, and a wide open coat as a sail with a good west wind, I rode back through Mecklenburg Vorpommern and first drove to Koldemanz. Rudolf Gloxin was occupied in some way, and the estate was led by his sister, Mrs Leni Sowade. On this trip I came across a huge Russian prisoner column. Suddenly out jumped a Russian named "Gorni" and wanted to bug me. The security guards were speechless until I told them that he had worked with me as one of three oxen servants. This ox I had bought because of the scarcity of tractor fuel and Hans Peter had been his best friend. He was a dark-colored Asian. It seemed almost that Damerau was perhaps the best time of his life. In Koldemanz I recovered for two*

*days. Wonderful place to sleep with a bed and bath after nights in barns and under moss in the woods!*

Amongst the photos of my grandfather's found in 2005, there were some from the 1950s. One had a group of people relaxing in a meadow, and was labelled on the back with the name Scheunemann. This friend of the family was the memoir writer's son. I sent the tree surgeon these photos of his father, which caused family members to speak again after a long estrangement.

*Small Histories: 'Scheunemann'*

Marianne Hirsch's work on *postmemory* (outlined in more detail below) reinforces this sense of reconstruction, not just by those involved but by the next generation as well:

Postmemorial work, I want to suggest...strives to reactivate and reembody more distant social/national and archival/cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression. Thus less-directly affected participants can become engaged in the generation of postmemory, which can thus persist even after all participants and even their familial descendants are gone. (Hirsch 2008, p. 111)

I would summarise the urge to research, compile and publish family stories on the internet as follows:

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

However it should also be noted that digital technologies have paradoxically undermined our sense of a unified personal narrative as they have facilitated our attempts to reclaim it. The increasing adoption of social networking sites, media sharing sites and the like have resulted in the uneasy feeling that personal identity is fragmented or 'networked' (Boyd 2006), dispersed electronically on servers around the world, collated and presented to online audiences via Facebook comments, Flickr photo collections, blogged ruminations on one's life and comments on YouTube videos. This dynamic is curiously contradictory; as people deploy technology to consolidate and unify memory, their daily use of this technology creates widely dispersed digital traces, the result being that family memories of the future may well become more fragmented and disjointed than ever. The Thorpes.org case study in Appendix II highlights this: as one family member creates an online portal to share and keep family stories and photos, other members embrace Facebook, voluntarily handing over stories, photos and records of family interactions to a remote US-based company.

## Postmemory: the next generation's search for continuity

The urge to re-establish a sense of continuity and connection takes on particular resonance with those who have not experienced events firsthand, but who have a yearning to connect with the experiences of 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.' (1997, p. 22). 'Postmemory', says Hirsch, 'is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection'. An example of this can be seen in a 2010 newspaper feature article entitled *A Bridge Too Far*. It tells the story of an Australian World War II soldier who had worked on the Burma Railway as a prisoner of war and his son, who now works at the Thailand-Burma Railway Centre:

Snow's father...survived the war but died when Snow was five. Snow came to Asia searching for any mention of his father. Thanks to Beattie, he says, "I've been able to stand on the ground where my father's camp was, to walk along the railway bed that he would've helped build ... to stand on the ground he would've been on in a number of places he would've been in Thailand."

"Yesterday, I was riding my motorbike just to the west of here, and into my head popped this idea that my father probably would've seen those mountains in the distance, and seen that over there, and felt the weather at this time of year, and it was very comforting for me to know that." (Dapin 2010, pp. 16, 20)

Postmemory could be described as a sympathetic form of nostalgia, in its literal sense of an amalgam of the Greek words for 'returning home' and 'pain' or 'ache': literally, 'homesickness'. Postmemory is the displaced yearning for a home only experienced through the 'narratives that preceded...birth' and in which trauma frequently seems to feature. It is the sense that *something* is missing in the here and now, something that may be found by reclaiming the past on behalf of previous generations, who often prefer to leave the past alone.

This can be observed in the book *The Himmler Brothers* by Katrin Himmler (2007), great-niece of Nazi SS leader Heinrich Himmler. Married to a Jewish Israeli, Himmler sets out to investigate her infamous family history on behalf of her young son. She explores her father's relationship with his father (the brother of Heinrich Himmler) which results in a cascade of emotions:

He knew....that Ernst could also be a loving father, so he must have found it particularly distressing that his own sparse memories were so negative...My questions seemed to have stirred it all up again - contrary to his repeated assurance that 'all that' was no longer important to him. During our conversation I kept coming up against barriers I could neither see nor understand (Himmler 2007, p. 17)

The experience of postmemory is further exemplified by artist and academic Marsha Berry, a first-generation Australian whose background is Russian and German and who writes: 'I would often pore over old photographs of family and friends I hadn't met -- yet these were my familiars. I knew their stories and felt far more connected to them than to the friends and neighbours in our street. Yet I was the seed for the new life in the new country' (Berry 2009, p. 1).

John Berger's aforementioned introduction to the novel *Fugitive Pieces*, a work intimately concerned with the experience of postmemory, says it is: '...about memory, about saving from oblivion and, above all, about bodies, their names and, what they know' (Berger, cited in Michaels 1996, p.2). This quote succinctly summarises the postmemorial urge.

In this study I propose that we are in a transitional moment in regard to postmemory, a time that incorporates an accelerating sense of uncertainty of how, and in which ways, to connect the past, with all its drama and trauma, to both the present and a future that seems increasingly uncertain in the context of global concerns such as climate change and overpopulation. Adding to this sense of uncertainty are the networked technologies which are changing how we live, relate and remember in unexpected ways. We are awash in an overwhelming ocean of electronic communications. Surrounded by an ever-intensifying 'data deluge' (JISC 2004), ethical and historical moorings are becoming increasingly tenuous, with information frequently hijacked for political, commercial and other partisan ends. There is so much information: where is our place within all this, what should we pay attention to, and what can we trust?

### **The Holocaust and the slide into postmemory**

The Holocaust haunts this study. Much of the theoretical and creative work I refer to, including the theory of postmemory itself, are products of the Holocaust: its stories, its political and social aftermaths, and the theoretical and moral investigations it has generated.

It seems that the Holocaust is currently transitioning into postmemorial experience. Those with first-hand experience of the Holocaust are dying out, though a number of projects have sought to record survivor experiences, such as Steven Spielberg's *Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation*, which conducted around 52,000 video interviews during the 1990s with survivors in 56 countries (SSVHF, viewed 2010). The 'era of memory' (Hoffman 2004) is fading and causing considerable consternation and debate, including a sense of urgency about who or what should be custodian of this traumatic past (Hirsch 2008).

In 1951 German philosopher T.W. Adorno stated that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' (Adorno 1951, p. 30). This statement has since morphed in the popular imagination into the iconic statement that it is impossible to write poetry after Auschwitz (Hoffman 2005, p. 182) and so has been used to support declarations of the futility (and even perversity) of making art in the face of such difficult truths. Although misquoted, the statement and its adoption reveals expectations of how the Holocaust is to be represented: namely as solemnly and soberly as possible, given the moral enormity of events that, in their inhumanity, still humble attempts at comprehension.

I tried to bury images, to cover them over with Greek and English words, with Athos's stories, with all the geologic eras. With the walks Athos and I took every Sunday into the ravines. Years later I would try a different avalanche of facts: train schedules, camp records, statistics, methods of execution. But at night, my mother, my father, Bella, Mones, simply rose, shook the earth from their clothes, and waited.

*Fugitive Pieces by Anne Michaels, p. 93*

I seek out the horror which, like history itself, can't be stanch'd. I read everything I can. My eagerness for details is offensive.

*Fugitive Pieces by Anne Michaels, p. 139*

However it seems that the commonly accepted rules around Holocaust representation are starting to change. Although some past works (Mel Brooks' *The Producers* or the television series *Hogan's Heroes*, for instance) have taken liberties with the solemn tone of Nazi-era subject matter (and taken flak for it), they still skirted around direct references to the Holocaust. But it looks like this is now in flux, and interpretations that do not try to be faithful to the historical record are beginning to appear.

One audacious example appeared in 2009 in the form of director Quentin Tarantino's film *Inglourious Basterds*, which features a gang of violent Jewish vigilantes and an alternative, 'what if' take on history that sees the entire Nazi leadership killed, pre-Final Solution, in a Paris movie theatre as part of a revenge plot by

a French Jew whose family had been murdered by the SS. It is interesting that Tarantino stated that his 1998 screenplay was 'some of the best writing I've ever done. But I couldn't come up with an ending.' (Bowles 2003). Perhaps the new ending could only fully emerge some years later: when released, *Inglourious Basterds* became Tarantino's most commercially successful film (Gray 2009). In essence a violent revenge fantasy with the moral framework of a Spaghetti Western, *Inglourious Basterds* makes no claims to subtlety or high art. But it may be seen as a sign that the historical sanctity of the Holocaust is under review. It signals a new kind of permission to play with the facts.

Some point out that this new permission has its dark side. In the case of *Inglourious Basterds*, Jewish groups have questioned the film's cavalier approach to one of modern history's darkest chapters (Rotten Tomatoes, 2010), claiming that it undermines the validity of real events and plays into the hands of Holocaust deniers. According to commentators such as the New York Times' Samuel Pizar (2010), the struggle for the 'authentic' Holocaust in the postmemorial age may, degenerate into a battle of footnotes, allowing the waters to be permanently muddied by those with a vested interest in doing so - a parallel example being the ongoing battle over recognition of the World War I Armenian genocide (Totten et al 2008, p. 19-21).

Today, the last living survivors of the Holocaust are disappearing one by one. Soon, history will speak about Auschwitz with the impersonal voice of researchers and novelists at best, and at worst in the malevolent register of revisionists and falsifiers who call the Nazi Final Solution a myth. This process has already begun. (Pizar 2010)

One example of what Pizar warns us about is the nationalist Lithuanian government's efforts to erase memories of the 1941 genocide of Lithuania's Jews, as outlined in the work-in-progress documentary *Rewriting History* (Ben-Moshe 2010). According to this documentary, the genocide was instigated largely by locals sympathetic to Nazi ideology and was a model for the implementation of the Final Solution. Acts of wilful, officially sponsored 'forgetting' of this deeply difficult past have ranged from the Lithuanian Parliament changing the definition of the word 'genocide' (thereby diluting its meaning to include other, less confronting historical events) to charging World War II Jewish partisans with war crimes.

Claims to historical authority and truth represent difficult territory when applied to works of postmemory. However when presented in the context of creative endeavour, that dilemma is side-stepped because the currency of artistic works is not of objective truth, but of emotional effect (McLean 1988). Things get tricky again, however, when elements of auto/biography are introduced to the mix, given that an assumed 'autobiographical pact' exists between authors of life stories and their readers (Lejeune 1989) - and they get trickier still when this material moves to the internet, where the rules are even less clear. I shall return to these themes later.



In the case of *Inglourious Basterds*, the very outlandishness of the film's premise is a defense: its plot is so fanciful that it disqualifies any claim on history. There are also many different takes on what is permissible (or not) to say about the Holocaust, including within the Jewish community. In an opinion piece called *The Holocaust is no exemption from satire*, Australian Jewish columnist and blogger Alex Fein (2009) points out that the tendency to be less than reverential about the Holocaust may be a psychologically healthy development, part of a generational shift within the community. Some also make the argument that, as opposed to negating memory, reinvention is necessary to keep the memory of the Shoah alive to new generations; a strategy to counter what publisher Louise Adler, in her critique of Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader*, describes as the phenomenon of 'moral boredom' (Adler 2009).

In June 2010 Australian artist Jane Korman posted a video (the first of a series of three) to YouTube of her survivor grandfather and his grandchildren dancing and singing to the song 'I Will Survive' at Auschwitz and other former Nazi concentration camp sites. The video generated worldwide controversy and debate. Korman defends the video by stating that 'it was very important for me to create some sort of work that had a fresh interpretation of the holocaust, especially for the younger generation because I could see that even the word holocaust and the images that one sees of the holocaust were numbing to people' (Caldwell 2010).

Discussing the video in a New York Times interview, survivor Raul Teitelbaum reinforces this view: 'Memory, and also the lessons of history, are not unchanging...Every generation takes its own lessons and memory from historical events, and that's good. The disaster will be if people stop looking for an answer' (Associated Press 2010).

I woke to find Petra in front of the bookcase, volumes scattered on the table, left open on the chair and couch as she rummaged through your possessions. Her perfect nakedness, while she desecrated what had been for years so lovingly preserved.

I sprang, held her wrists.

"Are you crazy?" she screamed. "I'm not doing anything. I'm just looking around - "

*Fugitive Pieces by Anne Michaels, p. 281*

In 2009, journalist Mark Dapin interviewed a group of middle-aged children of Melbourne-based Holocaust survivors who, despite having successful lives and new families, continue to investigate their own families' past trauma. Their activities have included forming a support group (originally called *Second Generation* and now *Descendants of the Shoah*) and undertaking activities such as writing a play called 'The Lighter Side of Growing Up as a Child of Holocaust Survivors'. Group members discussed their lives with some candour in the interview, making comments such as: 'The Holocaust was like an ether...if you look at the air...I think it was 5% Holocaust'. Members discussed their attempts to make sense of their parents' experience in classic

postmemorial fashion: 'some of us wanted to go back there (Poland) to feel the hurt'; 'I would have loved to be an extra on *Schindler's List*...To go through it, to feel the pain of what they must have gone through, because it's impossible to imagine'. When asked why, one survivor child reflects: 'I think it relates a bit to guilt. In some cultures, if their grandparents have been shot, it's the obligation of the grandson to go and seek revenge. And that tends to satisfy them. We don't have that. So how do you resolve that? I have to say, with me it's anger. I'm very angry.' (p. 28) .

Interviewees also stated that many second-generation survivors 'suffer "vicarious" fears of trains and showers' (p. 28), something second generation friends of mine have also experienced. I particularly recall the story of one friend waking up in panic when he overslept on a train and realised he was in southern Germany. The postmemorial experience of the second generation is not academic. It is visceral, embodied and very real, the result of having been surrounded with trauma, with their parents' experience being, as it were, 'in the air' through everything from dark moods to heightened expectations of their children. But at the same time the effects are displaced, removed and elusive, with parents divulging little details of the past and their children having no direct way to respond. Perhaps one way to deal with such postmemorial shadow-boxing is to 'make the experience real' for themselves, to engage in what Jean Arp (1987) called 'concretion'. Hence the postmemorial work undertaken by children of survivors - from video artworks and plays to the formation of support groups.

Adorno himself qualified his famous statements in 1966. He stated that 'Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as the tortured have to scream... hence it may have been wrong to say that no poem could be written after Auschwitz' (1966, p. 362). Adorno's statements were, in fact, less about the creation of cultural artifacts but a general existential questioning; the quote above is followed by: 'But it is not wrong to ask the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living'. (p. 362). In fact, as Hoffman (2005) has stated, to declare that poetry is 'impossible' after Auschwitz is to reassert a pre-war culture-barbarism dialectic that had in fact collapsed in the wake of the mass brutality that had taken place in the heart of 'enlightened' Europe (p. 188). Art, in fact, is indispensable, even if it is barbaric to make it after Auschwitz; it is therefore not possible nor impossible (p. 187). It may be ineffectual but it may be all that European civilisation has to claw back its humanity (p. 190).

Some thirty years later, John Berger's introduction to Anne Michaels' novel *Fugitive Pieces* goes one step further. In writing about the book's significance to him, Berger states that:

Anne Michaels' book is about the Holocaust, the unspeakable, and about pleasure, particularly pleasure. In the early 1950s Adorno, discussing the impossibility of any longer writing European poetry, said: 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.' At the time, this statement rang true and

was probably necessary. Finally, it has become untrue. In this sense, *Fugitive Pieces* is the most important book I have read for forty years. (Berger in Michaels 1996, pp. iii-iv)

A counterpoint to *Inglourious Basterds* is the work of W.G. Sebald. Introspective and thoughtful, Sebald's novels are a meditation on experiences of European postmemory after World War II. In them Sebald deliberately combines fact and fiction, not to muddy any waters but to give expression to the tacit postmemorial yearning for continuity and meaning after everything has been torn apart - the struggle to reassemble fragments of dispersed lives and histories. Sebald's work is playful in parts and postmodern in approach but is always serious in intent. A scholar, translator and writer of non-fiction works as well as novels, Sebald was acutely aware of the space he inhabited. No claim is made on history, just on its effects on the lives of people caught up in its maelstroms. Sebald's books are a fitting testament, like the work of Michaels, to the power of poetry after Auschwitz.

I already knew the power of language to destroy, to omit, to obliterate. But poetry, the power of language to restore: this was what both Athos and Kostas were trying to teach me.

*Fugitive Pieces* by Anne Michaels, p. 79

I think I relate to Sebald's work because his experience and background was similar to that of my family. Like my mother, Sebald, who died in 2001, was German and was born in Germany towards the end of the Nazi era: my mother in 1941 and Sebald in 1944. As such, his connection to the events of that time - what was 'in the air' for him as a child - would have been tangible. As for the effect of the Holocaust? For Sebald, it was a core theme of his writings. For me, I have witnessed its shadow in my life and the lives of my family, albeit, I hasten to say, in a much different way to those whose parents were its direct victims. An example: when I was born, my parents argued about whether or not to have me circumcised. My mother refused because she didn't want me targeted if 'another Hitler' emerged. Partly as a result of this disagreement and my mother's amorphous fear of persecution of Jews, she broke off contact with my father, which led to his refusal to pay child support, a paternity case, and his departure from Germany. (But then, that is a reconstructed narrative, based on the fragments I have gathered: who knows the whole story?).

Later in this document I will explore further the case for artistic practice as a fitting setting for postmemorial practice. I will also discuss the artists mentioned previously, as well as others, in more detail.

## Postmemory and the 'circle of solidarity'

At his 2009 Melbourne Writers Festival opening night address, *On Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, German novelist and lawyer Bernhard Schlink proposed that trauma and guilt are passed down from the perpetrators and victims to the following generation. The immediate offspring of those involved are caught up in the 'sins of the father' whether they like it or not. In order to cut their links to these sins, these children need to actively dissociate themselves, because they are, by default, part of what Schlink calls the 'circle of solidarity'. Guilt and trauma will haunt them until they actively renounce their solidarity with the past, especially if the society they were born into has not done so.

However this circle of solidarity, according to Schlink, only extends to the next generation - the generation of postmemory - because it has to be concretely experienced in day-to-day living through direct contact with the perpetrators as an 'experience of belonging'. It is a kind of *Community of Experience*, or, perhaps better, *Community of Circumstance* (these terms are described later) that one has to actively choose to leave. The dynamics that play out of the 'circle of solidarity' can be seen in the 2007 documentary *2 or 3 Things I Know about Him* by Malte Ludin, the son of a high-ranking Nazi official, in which Ludin and his sister argue about the guilt of their father: the expression of an anguish that, the film explains in some detail, is foreign to their young nephews and nieces.

For the twice-removed generation, the postmemorial spell is, it seems, well and truly broken. As Schlink states, whilst the children of trauma are irrevocably caught up in their parents' maelstroms, the next generation are free to live without this monkey on their back. As another Dapin interviewee stated: '...our kids don't feel any guilt about anything...We overcompensated. Our kids have to be happy. Our kids never have to feel guilty. Our kids have to have options.' (Dapin 2009, p. 29)

Whereas the generation of postmemory can choose to identify with the circle of solidarity or remove themselves from it, the generation of the perpetrators cannot. According to Schlink, guilt (or the need to deny guilt) will always stalk them, regardless of personal involvement. I have seen evidence of this with my relatives. Below is a portrait of my step-grandmother's first husband, taken from the unearthed box of my grandfather's photos. The man is wearing a Nazi Party badge, which someone has tried to obliterate:



Figure 21: Photo of man with Nazi Party badge obscured

Schlink states that most Germans did, in fact, not end their solidarity with the Nazi regime. Instead, as Sebald pointed out in his 1999 examination of the aftermath of the Dresden and Hamburg bombings, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, a culture of silence and denial took over in Germany after World War II, even in relation to the suffering of Germans themselves.

Even now this culture seems to persist in places. I felt this in Munich, the city of my birth (and that of the Nazis) when I returned there in 2005. In Berlin, recognition of the Nazi past is everywhere: commemorated, discussed and debated. However, Munich's recognition of the Nazi era seemed to me to be sullen or begrudging, when it was recognised at all. Perhaps this is because Munich is a parochial provincial centre, whereas Berlin is a liberal, international city. Whatever the reason, the two cities reminded me of two people, one who had broken the circle of solidarity, and one who hadn't. My evidence for this is anecdotal and subjective, but the impressions were strong. Some of these follow.

Whilst in Munich I went to the Siemens Forum, a permanent exhibition showcasing the technological achievements of the Siemens company. Siemens was active in Nazi-era Germany, using slave labour in locations including the Ravensbruck concentration camp (Jewish Virtual Library 2010). With this in mind, I was struck by two charts. The first charted sales growth to 1944:

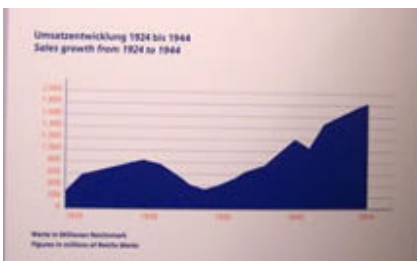


Figure 22: Siemens Forum chart: sales growth

The second chart showed employee growth over the years, with a large spike in the 1930s and 1940s, then a sudden drop.:

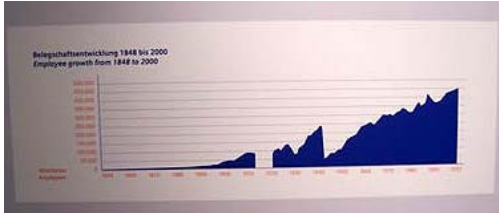


Figure 23: Siemens Forum chart: employee growth

No attempt was made to put these charts into historical context. Amongst all the claims of innovation, business prowess and technical inventiveness, no mention or acknowledgement of slave labour was made that I could see.

Around the block from the Siemens Forum is Brienner Strasse, where the Nazis' national headquarters (the Brown House, destroyed in Allied bombings) stood, and where Heinrich Himmler lived for some years. The Brown House was the setting for many tortures and executions, and the implementation of policies that later led to the Final Solution. I saw very little sign of anything at the site, just an empty lot; internet searches told me that the foundations of the Brown House were excavated some years ago, then covered up.

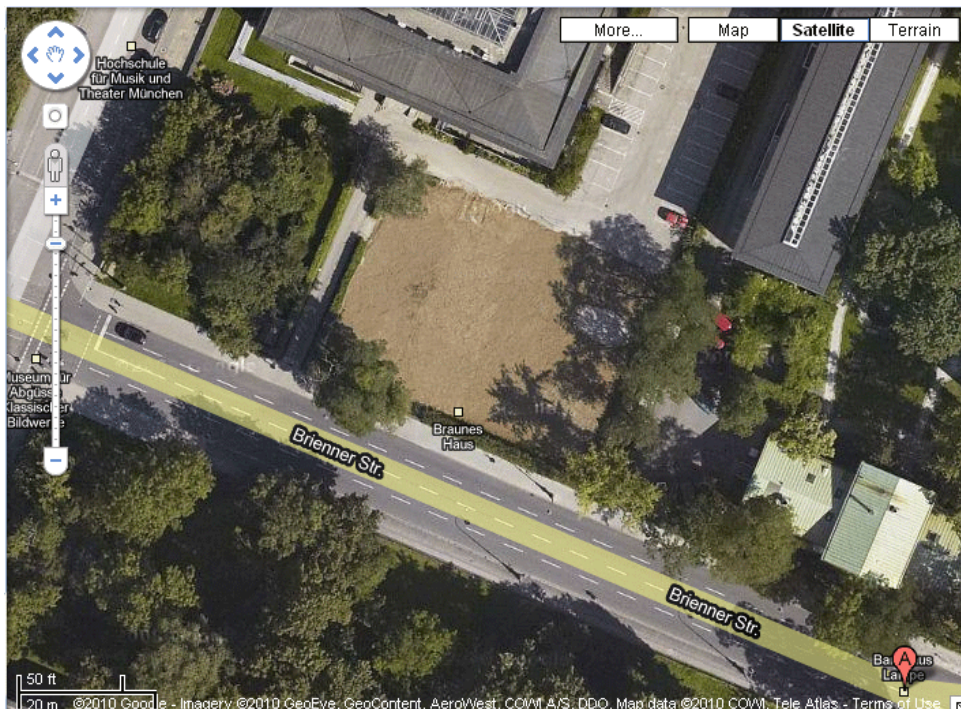


Figure 24: Brienner Strasse, Munich. Source: Google Maps

A small, inconspicuous memorial to the victims of Nazi violence sat in a nearby park opposite the Leopold Cafe where many Nazi officials used to gather (see C on map; Siemens Forum is at A and the Brown House at B), without context or explanation. Then, as Google Maps tells us, there is the Wittelsbacher Palais which used to stand between the monument and the Brown House. This was a former king's palace, destroyed by Allied bombers, that the Gestapo turned into a prison - though no mention is made of this either.

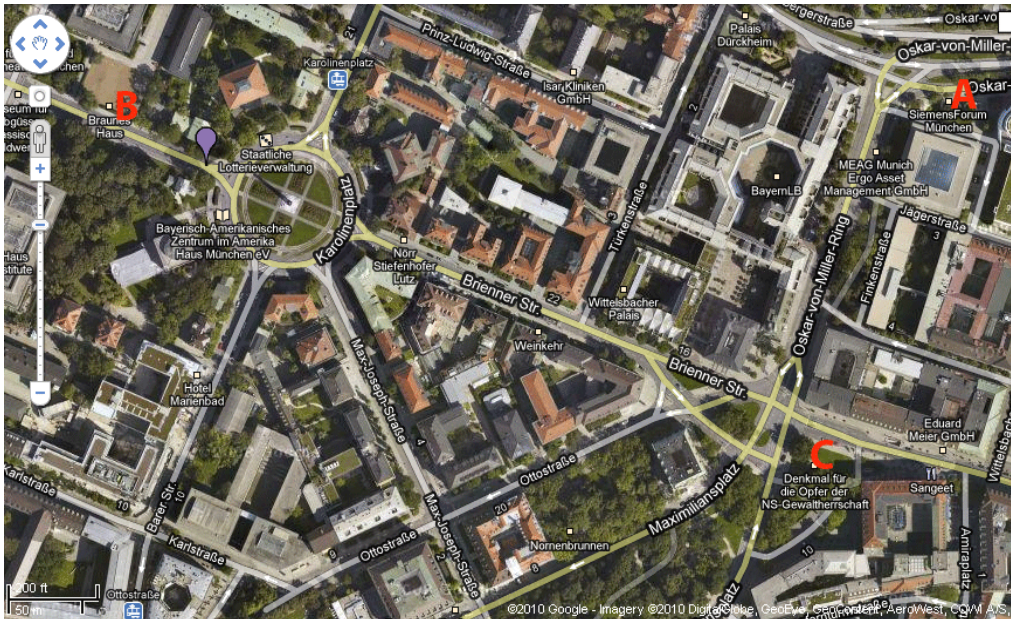


Figure 25: Around Briener Strasse, Munich. Source: Google Maps

Another Munich location I visited was the Schwabing Schuttberg. Munich has three Schuttbergs - literally 'mountains of rubble'. Gavriel Rosenfeld (2000) explains that after World War II, the rubble of the ruined city was bulldozed and landscaped, turning the flat Munich topography into a 'mountainous landscape'. The Schwabinger Schuttberg became part of a civic park, Luitpoldpark. At the top of the hill is a copper cross, replacing a plain wooden cross erected by a citizen in 1949, along with the legend 'Pray for and remember all of those who died under the rubble'. When the official copper cross was erected in 1958, this legend was repeated, along with 'God, grant them eternal peace' (Rosenfeld 2000, pp. 133-134).



Figures 26-28: Schuttberg and cross

Around this time, recounts Rosenfeld, a fight ensued about whether the hill should be called Schwabinger Schuttberg; other possible names included Kreuzberg (Cross Hill), a name supported by the local Christian Social Union political party as a Calvary-like monument to the "cross" borne by the local population.



Rosenfeld points out that, although implemented with firm conviction unlike Munich's "many half-hearted commemorative gestures", the debates and language reveals a "preoccupation with local suffering" (p. 135). It was less confronting for the citizens of Nazism's birthplace to identify with the victims than the perpetrators. Additionally, the appeal to mythical, divine sources - rather than what Rosenfeld calls the "mundane causality" of a corrupted political and civic society - facilitated a further distancing of responsibility. The circle of solidarity, it seems, was hard to break in Munich.

### **Myself as symbol of the past**

As I was writing this section, I realised that my German family's breaking of the circle of solidarity was, in classic postmemorial fashion, interwoven closely with my birth in Munich in 1966, only 21 years after the end of World War II. For the people around me, I was a symbol, or perhaps embodiment, of the desire to create that break, in keeping with the emancipatory spirit of that era. I was born into a mesh of recent (and often unacknowledged) memories, events and echoes, the offspring of an unmarried German mother and Israeli father. How could I not be such a symbol?

Some more examples of this enmeshment: my father ran three striptease nightclubs in the Platzl, the Munich's central entertainment precinct, next to the Staatliches Hofbräuhaus, the inn where the Nazis planned their rise to power and the site of some of the first violent attacks on Jews (Shuman 2006). There, according to my father, he bought passports to pass on to the Israeli secret service, and shot a Bavarian patron in the leg after being threatened with anti-Semitic violence.



Figure 29: The Papagei Bar, owned by my father, 1960s

As a toddler I visited St Nicholas (the German version of Santa Claus) in the Marienplatz, the central square where an inscription commemorates the arrival of U.S. forces in 1945. By then I was the stepson of a German man, the unplanned offspring of a Wehrmacht soldier injured in Russia and the nurse who attended to his wounds. Before meeting my mother, my wayward stepfather had been living in a commune outside Munich with people including those who would later form the Baader Meinhof gang, leaders of the influential musical movement known as *Krautrock*, and filmmakers like Jim Jarmusch and Werner Herzog (Pouncey 1996). A reaction to the extreme conservatism of previous eras, the Ammon Duul 1 commune represented young people's conspicuous and wilful attempt to break with the past. Around that time my mother worked in the J.L. Feuchtwanger Bank, owned by a well-known Munich Jewish family whose pre-war leader, a writer, fled to the US in the 1930s, eventually leading to the establishment of the Feuchtwanger Institute for the Study of Exile Literature. And at that time our family lived in a flat in Sankt-Jakobs-Platz, directly opposite where the Jewish Museum and the Ohel Jakob synagogue have since been built, and over a World War II bomb bunker. Everywhere, the connections and echoes, a 'life map' (Benjamin 1932) resonant with the ghosts of the past.



Figure 30: Munich - train to Dachau, 2005

Looking back to my childhood, both before and after our family's emigration to Australia, the awareness of the war years was ever-present. Besides the obvious - the schoolyard shouts of 'I know nussink!' from *Hogan's Heroes*, being called a 'Kraut' accompanied by the obligatory right-arm salute - an undercurrent of sensing *something* continued. I remember quite consciously and provocatively asking my stepfather's parents about their resistance to the Nazis, hiding behind my identity as a child, observing their uncomfortable glances and faltering responses that 'things were....more complicated then'.

And then on into adulthood: university and a couple of years of work in largely Anglo-Saxon Adelaide. In 1988 I visited Melbourne, which has the highest per capita number of Shoah survivors outside Israel (Dapin

2009). As I reconstruct it now, on a tram trip to the beachside suburb of St Kilda, I observed shopfronts with Hebrew script and the sense of a new but familiar world. Somewhere, something resonated. I moved to Melbourne the following year.

During my teenage and early adult years I became increasingly conscious of the emotional memes of the past, in particular the traditional German style of parenting with its emphasis on correct behaviour, emotional coldness and undercurrent of violence. I noted how my stepfather's father (then an 80 year old) cried when he dropped me off at the Göttingen train station and explained how *his* father, a military officer in the Prussian mould, had denied him any warmth or encouragement. I noticed the way my stepfather was warped by similar treatment from the man who cried at the train station and the way my stepfather, in turn, passed on some of that to me, in mutated form. I noted the way I instantly recognised and recoiled at how the German-Jewish father treated his prodigal pianist son in the movie *Shine*, and how in my teens I'd responded strongly to the 1906 Hermann Hesse novel *Beneath the Wheel*, a critique of the harsh German education system of the time.

I recognised it in the graphically illustrated children's stories of *Struwwelpeter* (Shock-haired Peter), where transgressions like thumb sucking and playing with matches resulted in thumbs being cut off and burning to death, and the stories of my mother being beaten by her father for stealing an apple and later being kicked out of the family home for being pregnant.

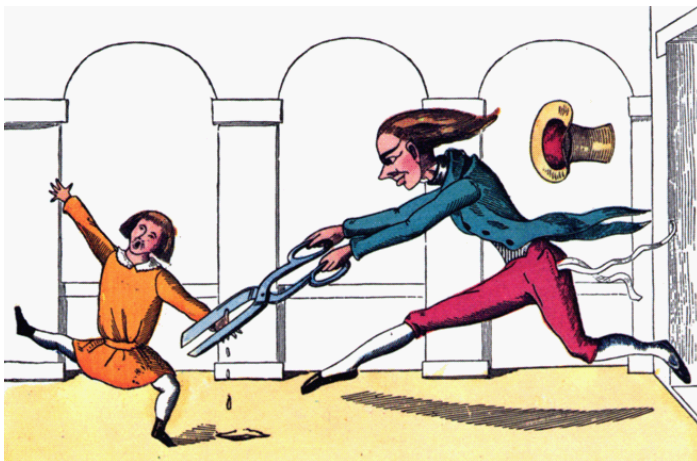


Figure 31: Image from *Struwwelpeter*. Source: <http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/81/Struwwelpeter.png>

And, more recently, I saw the same theme in the sudden, vehement answer given by Katrin Himmler's father in response to her questions about the past: 'What do you imagine I think of a father I can only remember punishing and beating me?!' (Himmler 2007, p. 16). And then again, as a child, in a letter from his father: 'You must be nice and obedient and always love Mummy and your brothers and do everything your teachers tell you, so that they will like you and you will bring good marks home' (Himmler 2007, p. 40).

Staying with my grandparents in Venningen in 1997 and 1998, I recall my close bond with my gentle grandfather, the same man who had kicked my mother out to fend for herself before taking her (and me) back into their small Munich flat. I remember their European interest in music and art (when would one ever see a Franz Marc print on the wall of a lower middle-class Australian retiree's house?), the elaborate cold-meat breakfasts and the long leather overcoat in the wardrobe of the spare room where I slept - an overcoat like the one Reinhart Heydrich wore in the 1941 victory parade through Prague, as recorded and published in the *Who's Who of the Third Reich* that sat on the bookshelf in the spare room. And I remember the photo of my grandfather as a young man in the early 1930s, proud in his SA uniform and sports medal, the photo that shocked my aunt when she found it in the box of photos in 2005. And how Katrin Himmler's book describes the popularity of children's war games before World War II, a family friend telling her that Nazism was started 'by German schoolboys at home' (Himmler 2007, p. 51)



Figure 32: Rudolf Sowade, early 1930s

All this, of course, is subjective. In my twenties a girlfriend told me the story of the university professor who began looking for missing scraps of meaning in rubbish bins around the campus. In retrospect, I think that she was making a comment about me. Yes, you can find meaning wherever you look for it. But as I've learned, where there's smoke, there can be fire. The aforementioned story preceded me finding my biological father, which would not have happened had I not looked in the bins of my history and questioned some assumptions and gaps. The line is often not clear, and all you have sometimes is your instinct. In the relatively young, clear Australian air, the very thickness of European history can be hard to fathom.

The Professor finds rest in theory. Finds validation. There are hidden secret meaning in things after all, and there always have been.

*Small Histories project note book entry, December 2008*

Returning to my 2005 Munich visit: one last story. I had wanted to find out what had happened to my father's apartment after he hurriedly left Munich and Germany in 1968. Before leaving Australia I got in touch with a Munich-based colleague of the man who found my father, and who had worked with him to find Jewish family members. She kindly undertook some initial research and invited me to stay with her family. I did so and met her teenage children and husband, himself the son of a liaison between a German mother and American GI who had never met his father. She and her family were pleasant and helpful, and I was lucky to have this support (they had introduced me to the Schuttberg as well as other locations). However after one night I felt a little claustrophobic; in her efforts to show me Munich, she was at pains to point out locations where resistance to the Nazis had taken place, such as the Viscardigasse, a lane known as 'dodger's alley' because people used it to avoid saluting the Nazi guards at the nearby Feldenhalle. There was a self-consciousness in her attempts and a sense of apology that sat oddly with me. After returning to Australia I discussed this with her colleague on the phone, who echoed my impressions. He also told me something I didn't know: her uncle, a Luftwaffe doctor, had been convicted at the 1947 Nuremberg trials for undertaking medical experiments on inmates in Dachau concentration camp.

In mentioning this, I need to state that I am not questioning her good intentions and that I am grateful for her help. It just seems to me that the weight of the postmemorial guilt outlined by Bernhard Schlink weighed heavily on her shoulders, and her life activities, including hosting me, were a strategy to break the circle of solidarity. My point really is that I had felt that *something*, and indeed there was something there.

"The big high-rise housing development in the southern part of the Muranów district in Warsaw was built on top of what had been the ghetto. There was so much rubble - thirteen feet deep - and we had no machines to clear it. So instead the debris was crushed even further, and the housing built right on top. Then grass was laid down and flowerbeds planted on this terrace of the dead. That's their 'blood-and-soil garden.'

*The Winter Vault by Anne Michaels, p. 281*

## **Life stories, performance and the internet**

The connection between written narrative and performance has been extensively explored by narrative theorists. The rise of the internet, and its implications for (amongst other things) authorship and audience, have added additional layers to this line of investigation.

The history of the narrative-performance nexus has been outlined in detail by Marie McLean in 1988's *Narrative as performance: the Baudelairean experiment*. In the work, McLean states that 'to some extent all written narratives are, to use Musset's term, «a theatre in an armchair». Dramatic models, and indeed theatrical models, are constantly used within written narrative. We are seldom allowed to forget the intimate relationship which exists between narrative and drama' (p. 11).

This document argues that the notion of narrative as performance is alive and well when narrative is translated to the internet. McLean points out that 'performance always implies submitting to the gaze and measurement of others.' (p. xi) This certainly applies to narratives created to be published online, to an unspecified and possibly massive audience, using social software tools that allow laypeople to publish quickly to what may be called the 'stage' of the World Wide Web. However what might be called the 'rules of engagement' of such performances are still in flux and emerging. More on this later.

### **From oral experience to written manuscripts**

Narrative, McLean points out, originated as shared oral experience, but separated from the 'immediate life-world' (McLean 1988, p. 8) with the advent of writing and developed a life of its own. Originally designed to be read aloud to others, written narrative morphed into the printed book, a form designed for solitary consumption:

Writing enabled narrative to emancipate itself from the limitations of spatial presentation and from the time limits oral performance placed on absorption....In written narrative, signs become both more specialized and more controllable. Time, for instance, when reduced to textual space, can be infinitely manipulated both by author and reader. A book is totally in the reader's power (McLean 1988, p. 9).

As the field of negotiation has changed, as literature has become a more and more private experience, relived as such by each individual reader, so performance has become less a matter of

the pulpit, the minstrels' gallery, or the trestles and more a matter of the sitting-room or the bedroom (McLean 1988, p. 20).

But narrative is a performance even in the sitting-room. For McLean, any kind of narrative can 'not be satisfactorily explored except as the site of an interaction' (p. xi) that takes place within a space described as 'the arena of play':

The teller includes certain hearers within the space of the telling, admits them to a position of privilege or duty from which others, for a variety of reasons, are excluded. However, this admission to a space is not one-sided: the teller also enters a privileged space which we may call the arena of play (Caillois 1962) or at least the arena of reception. The teller is governed by the rules of his or her own territory, but audiences are equally governed by the rules of theirs, rules which may of course change drastically according to context (p. 1).

Comparable narrator-narratee relationships exist on the internet. Soon I will look at some issues of power and control that emerge in these relationships, and how narratives on the internet both mirror and depart from the kinds of power relationships McLean observes in written and oral narrative.

### **Written text as performance space**

McLean points out that every reading of a printed fiction work produces 'a type of individual performance in which text and reader co-operate' and where 'the text must, as it were, perform' (p. 10) to harness the attention of the narratee. The use of the terms *synchronous* and *asynchronous*, usually used to describe online communications, apply reasonably well to oral and written narratives: synchronous implies real time interaction, as in instant messaging and oral interactions. Asynchronous interactions involve time delays, as can be seen in email threads. One could also say that narratives on paper are asynchronous, although unlike web-based interactions there are no feedback loops; the narrator's output does not change in response to feedback from the narratee.

Like any performance, written narrative interactions take place on a stage. Here McLean cites Anne Ubersfeld from the field of Performance Studies when describing an 'acting-space' as:

A space not indefinite but marked by its limits. The stage is here and not there. A space which is defined by its relationship of exclusion with what is not itself. Even if naturally fluid, the limits of the space are virtually cut off as though by a razor (Ubersfeld, cited in McLean 1988, p.110)

There are also spatial limits to the acting-space created by written text - but those limits are different to those of theatre acting-spaces:

And yet written narrative, by the fixed nature of its signifiers and its pure textuality, is both more limited spatially than theatrical space and yet capable of architectures not available to the stage. (Ubersfeld, cited in McLean 1988, p.110)

In her analysis of the writings of Hannah Arendt, Julie Kristeva states that 'The art of narrative resides in the ability to condense the action into an exemplary moment, to extract it from the continuous flow of time, and reveal a *mnēma*' (2001, p. 17), in a process that, as it produces this brief, condensed, fragmentary moment, is 'integrated into action' (p. 18) - a micro-performance. A written narrative has 'a life as object' (McLean 1988, p. 110) beyond the lifespan of a performance that occurs at a particular place and time. It is a persistent artifact that may appear in unexpected contexts, creating a different performance every time.

Since the growth of digital technologies that allow for the infinite copying, recontextualising and recombination of data, as well as their distribution to a worldwide audience, the performative life of text has become increasingly complex. A performance can now emerge in all manner of places and contexts: the words 'life as object' have taken on a range of new meanings since McLean wrote them in 1988.

## **From paper to the web**

### **On new ground: the relationship between online authors and readers**

Narrative researcher Maria Tamboukou argues that narratives always emerge from a context, that in their production 'power and desire dance together' (2005, p. 6). Marie McLean proposes that the concept of performance provides 'the best clue to the play of forces involved' in this narrative dance (1988, p. xi). Although McLean initially states that 'performance at its most general and most basic level is a carrying out, a putting into action or into shape' (p. xi), the story is also more complex than this implies because every performance is unique, variable and more than the sum of its parts: the performers, the participants, the context and the setting can all vary from performance to performance (p. xii).

Essential to every narrative performance is the battle for control between narrator and narratee, whose relationship is, according to McLean, 'active and variable' (p. xi):

Through a narrative text **I** meet **you** in a struggle which may be co-operative or may be combative, a struggle for knowledge, for power, for pleasure, for possession. The meeting is manifest in the



course of the narrative performance in which the performer, whether human or textual, undertakes to control the audience by words or signs alone, while they, the partners in the act, use their power as hearers to dictate the terms of the control. (p. xii)

Narrative performance, for McLean, is "both 'act' and interaction": as in any formal interaction, this implies a contract: a recognition of and submission to the rules governing the interplay. (p. xiii). Narrative is, in fact, a kind of legal tender: a commodity (p. 73), that as Barthes stated in *S/Z*, is 'subject to contract, economic stakes, in short, merchandise' with meaning being 'golden' (1975, p. 89). McLean points out that 'we may pay the producer of fiction with money, with goods, with praise, with love, or with understanding, but, at whatever remove, the receiver of fictional narratives is involved in a transaction with the producer' (p. 76). Although McLean's focus is on fiction, I believe similar principles apply to non-fiction, but the currencies and rules of the game are somewhat different: in non-fiction, it could be said that truth (or, perhaps, trust) is gold.

When these contracted relationships move to the still-evolving medium of the internet, however, the rules are in flux. McLean's statement thus becomes prescient: 'it is clear that money and language function only within an agreed code. When we change the context we change the currency, thereby invalidating our initial means of exchange' (p. 79). Not only are game rules changed when narratives move online, but the game changes: the processes of narrative production, consumption and feedback. In other words, the technology itself adds a further layer of complexity to the narrator-narratee relationship. Some of the tacit narrative relationships teased out by McLean are made explicit on the internet through the technical design of the web system hosting the narrative, such as the creation of privileged audiences through password-controlled membership protocols, and the varying ability of narratees to comment on, add to or amend content. These are tangible manifestations of the kinds of privileged spaces and interactions referred to by McLean in 1988: 'the situation of tellers may vary from territorial liberty, as when a mat laid on a street corner creates an instant telling place, to territorial restriction, as when a tale may be told only in a temple sanctuary.' (p. 1)

For example, casual readers of Small Histories stories can make comments that appear at the peripheries of narratives created and controlled by registered users. This is a deliberate privileging of the story creator, based on an assumption that creators will want to feel 'safe' that their auto/biographical stories cannot be altered by others. It also assumes that readers desire stability and continuity in the auto/biographical stories they read, in keeping with Lejeune's identification of an unspoken 'autobiographical pact' between memoir authors and readers, with its attendant relationship of trust, reliability and continuity (1974, revised 1989) - although it also needs to be noted that Lejeune later softened his terms somewhat, calling it a 'promise of

sincerity' and stating that 'An autobiographer is not someone who speaks the truth about himself, but someone who says that he speaks it' (1998, p. 125).

More discussion on the 'arenas of play' on the internet follows in the *Open and Closed Narratives* section.

### **Issues of authority and trust**

Issues of power and control loom large in the narrator-narratee relationship, particularly in relation to the building of authority and trust. These issues take on new dimensions when narratives move to the internet. McLean states:

How does a text maintain its authority, how does it keep a firm grasp on interpretation? The rules of the game involve control, at first seen as the control of the telling by the teller. Narrative may be seen as a delicate interplay of power in which the narratee submits to the control of a narrator, while the narrator must scheme to overcome the power of the narratee. Each experiences an invasion of his or her territory by the other. (1988, p. 17-18)

In McLean's view, the narrator has the upper hand because they have 'a map of the territory'. The narrator 'can control the advance of the other, turn it into desired paths, and ultimately even persuade him or her to cede territory' (p.17-18). But the maintenance of control and authority is easier 'in a face-to-face situation where direct feedback enables the teller to gauge the audience reaction and the degree of 'noise' and thus to assess gains or losses of control' (p. 18). Control is not an easy thing to achieve in written narratives, says McLean. Even the idea of narrators and narratees 'are and remain textual constructs, there is never any guarantee that the virtual reader/audience will obey the promptings of the text....There is no one «true» proprietarial interpretation' (p. 19).

McLean then examines the role of the author in all this. An author can communicate directly with the audience or through a narrator. For the former, 'the most obvious example is if and when authors present themselves by name' (p. 28), which can be further broken into 'the virtual author of an unknown text' and 'the naming of an author created by previous texts', which is seen by McLean as a 'presentation of credentials' for those authors with a pre-existing reputation (p. 28). McLean also sees the work's title as the most important authorial speech act, the 'formalized rendition of the Labovian 'abstract' (p. 28) that 'indicates a performative relationship between virtual author and virtual audience and so announces the narrative contract' (p. 79-80).

When translated to the internet, territorial strategies for gaining or maintaining authorial power can take on new kinds of life. The design and use of technical functionality has the ability to turn tacit aspects of the narrator-narratee relationship into explicit actions - which in turn can change them into something else. For instance: the aforementioned announcement of the author's name may be complicated by the use of consciously constructed online identities; an author may choose to enable or limit the ability of others to comment on their work; a narrative's title may be explicitly chosen to maximise search engine hits for particular keywords or phrases as a strategy to increase audience share.

### **Auto/biography and the web**

In examining notions of trust within the narrator-narratee relationship, we also enter uncharted territory when traditional notions of fiction and non-fiction collide with the internet. In auto/biographical non-fiction an assumption exists that the narrator is telling the 'truth'; that a memoir is reliable, trustworthy. This is the aforementioned pact between writers of auto/biographical material and their readers.

We see the power of this unspoken pact when it is seen to be broken, notably in the public outcry accompanying the Norma Khoury and Helen Demidenko controversies, which saw these writers make up identities that were then presented as 'real' authors of auto/biographical narratives. Had these stories or their creators been presented as fictions, their authorial strategies would not have generated such considerable controversy, because the rules are different for fictional works. Here, says McLean, referring to Ubersfeld, the *true* is not the same as the *real*:

...when we acknowledge the fictiveness of the poetic functions we at the same time enable ourselves to acknowledge their truth in the world of literature. This is what makes us, as spectators and receivers, ready to accept counterfeit coin as legal tender. (p. 87)

Fictive discourse...is distinguished from natural discourse by socially acceptable criteria of validity, just as the distinction between forged money and genuine money is made by the ruling social institutions. (p. 88)

The pact is broken when a work attempts 'to pass off the fictional world as the natural world', as in the examples above. This 'must be either naive or deceptive, constituting a betrayal of trust and a devalorising of the true worth of the fictional narrative' (McLean 1988, p. 88).

However when fiction is presented as fiction, the writer-reader pact holds. McLean points to Gilles Deleuze's use of the forger, which is 'seen by Deleuze to reflect the breakdown in implied notions of 'truth'

and 'reality' which opens the way to an 'irreducible multiplicity' (p. 84-85). McLean makes the connection between forgery and art, or fiction, in its presentation of new possibilities not tied to 'the truth'. The reader 'accepts the offer of a narrative (**any** narrative)' and may get pearls or dirt in return. In both cases the experience is valid and 'we get what we bargained for' (p. 85), a gift of one kind or another:

Forgery is here seen as the Baudelairian narrator sees it, as part of a transformational chain with multiple future possibilities. As such it is easily assimilated to art. The gift of a forgery, its exchange value, and its implications for the receiver are analogous to the 'gift' of fiction, its value, and its implications for the reader (p. 84 - 85)

### **Online performance of the self: what are the rules?**

For McLean, similar criteria exist for performance as for fiction. 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' (p. xi). Feedback on the success or failure of an oral narrative is instant and ongoing - think of a stand-up comedian's show. In written narratives, however, there is no such feedback; instead publishers make a judgement call on a story's likely success based on a writer's reputation and readings of the manuscript; a kind of predictive gamble. The story then undergoes editorial processes and ends up as the final, printed version (until perhaps the next edition).

Online stories, however, are subject in part to a return to the fluid, feedback-driven development process seen in oral narratives, through a growing number of mechanisms which now include embedded reader comments, page view statistics, Facebook's 'like' and 'share' buttons, Twitter's 'retweeting' functionality, data on how many other people link to your story (courtesy of the Google 'link:' operator) and recommendations through community bookmarking and referral services such as *digg* or *delicious*.

Since online authors can undertake ongoing monitoring of their narratives' popularity, and can easily edit and update their work, it is not hard to see that some may tweak or embellish their performances of the self in an asynchronous version of the feedback loop seen in oral but not in written narrative. Online authors know that their words won't stay in print for perpetuity. They therefore don't require the *chutzpah* of the likes of Khoury and Demidenko/Darville, who were able to consciously guide their deceptions past the editorial processes and checks of book publishing, and fool many in the process. The internet provides the tools to manufacture increased 'energy and effect' when pitching to a worldwide audience with a notoriously short attention span, but this may sit uneasily to readers of stories presented as auto/biographical, with its underlying assumptions of truth, stability and reliability.

Still, such assumptions are themselves illusory, because the auto/biographical subject is inherently unreliable. Vivian Gornick (2001) observes that auto/biographers create a persona that is 'them and not them', a unifying entity that brings order and clarity to the narrative. When writing, we 'become-other, becoming of that of which we write and think' (Probyn 1996, p. 153). As Yuval-Davis states, 'identities are narratives, stories people tell about themselves and others about who they are (and who they are not)' (2007, p. 202). This, as Yuval-Davis notes (as does Gornick in her article) is a fluid process as it is 'always producing itself through the combined processes of being and becoming, belonging and longing to belong' (p. 202).

Cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1990) identifies two kinds of cultural identity: *identity as being* and *identity as becoming*. The former is static and provides a sense of unity and belonging, and the latter is constantly evolving, a dynamic form of identity more in keeping with today's fragmented, multifaceted world. To Hall – a Briton of African descent born in Jamaica - the latter is a strategic positioning involving active interplay with forces of culture, power and history: 'We should not, for a moment, underestimate or neglect the importance of the act of imaginative rediscovery which this conception of a rediscovered, essential identity entails.' (p. 393). For Hall, 'cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a *positioning*.' (p. 395).

Again, the self is seen as a work-in-progress, held together (or 'sutured', an evocative term that suggests strategies to heal the wounds inflicted by fragmentation) by the stories we tell about ourselves to ourselves and others, the stories that are constantly retold and updated, and that make us who we are. This open-ended version of ourselves is something that the internet lets us perform in an ongoing manner, aided by the ease with which we can publish, edit - and gauge response to – our content. This means that, when auto/biographical stories are told on the web, a pact between creators and consumers will only hold if everyone accepts these stories' changeability. As McLean observes, 'natural discourse, like currency, is....a fabrication, only 'true' if we agree on its use' (p. 88).

Perhaps, then, the internet could be seen as a facilitator of a more sophisticated, updated form of the autobiographical pact, a way for keeping auto/biographical stories 'honest' in that, through the mechanisms of online publishing, the web strips away the kinds of presumptions of truth and reliability that have led to the Demidenko/Darville and Khoury controversies. In other words, it may serve to create a more critical readership that is less likely to be taken in by the persuasive strategies embodied in the authorised, codified, highly stage-managed paper story, both because it understands that performances of the self are liable to be updated and altered, and so will not take them as gospel, and because the internet makes it easy to check and compare versions of the truth, instead of relying on publishing professionals to do this for us. In proposing

this, however, a caveat needs to be added: serious issues remain with the internet as self-referencing truth generator and fact checker - some of these are raised in the Wikipedia case study in Appendix III.

There is a role, I believe, for online narrative systems like Small Histories to act as conduits for the performance of the evolving auto/biographical persona, and for the presentation of points of comparison between stories created by different personas. What is hoped of Small Histories is that different versions of events, places and times will sit alongside each other, with personas/authors actively reconstructing their particular pasts and truths since 'the autobiographical I is at home in both history and narrative because it is produced by the action that draws those fields together' (Gilmore, cited in Tamboukou 1995, p. 22).

### **Written narrative on the internet: where to from here?**

#### **The shifting stage**

As we have seen, new layers of interest emerge at the intersection of narrative and the internet. Some affordances extend the conception of written narrative as a performance that encompasses the author, the text and an individual reader. Other affordances suggest a return to the roots of narrative as an active exchange between creators and audience; an exchange facilitated by the ability to collaborate and share online, and involving the return of some aspects of oral culture such as its conversationality and directness (Snowden 1999).

Online narrative practices, however, cannot be seen purely in terms of previous practices; they are new, unstable and constantly emerging through the adaption, mutation and hybridisation of existing narrative practices with new communications technologies. They are manifestations of what Gregory Ulmer (2003) calls 'electracy', a new kind of literacy that deploys networked technologies to build on previous literacies, particularly in the area of harnessing collective intelligence, a theme also developed by other educational theorists such as Henry Jenkins (2006). Ulmer sees this as part of a widespread transition in society with new technology acting as a catalyst, much as the development of the alphabet was previously:

What literacy is to the analytical mind, electracy is to the affective body: a prosthesis that enhances and augments a natural or organic human potential. Alphabetic writing is an artificial memory that supports long complex chains of reasoning impossible to sustain within the organic mind. Digital imaging similarly supports extensive complexes of mood atmospheres beyond organic capacity. Electracy logic proposes to design these atmospheres into affective group intelligence (Ulmer 2007, p. 49)

Turning the clock back to 1988, Marie McLean identifies five kinds of spatial relationships within written texts that determine their performance 'arena'. The first, deixis, refers to the 'deitics of shifters, a class of words whose meaning varies with their situation, and which can never be defined except in relation to the message which contains them.' (p. 111). These words 'organise temporal and spatial relations around the 'subject' taken as a point of reference (Benveniste 1974) and thus the illusion of life, of time, of space, flows in the first place from the text itself and not from anything exterior to it.' (p. 111). Described as an actor or voice on an empty stage, a word such as 'I':

...merely by being a presence, here and now, creates around itself a sense of space defined in relationship with that of the audience. This space may be modified and sharply delimited by the presence of a second actor or actors to whom the first relates (intimacy, hostility, indifference, etc.). Such a relationship has a past and a present even if only in terms of stage time, and it will eventually be modified by other spatial relationships with imaginary or contextual spaces (McLean 1988, p. 111).

It is not a big stretch to see how the modification of space referred to might occur explicitly on the internet, with comments, media mashups and other forms of web-enabled interactions working together with the originally posted text to create a specialised performance arena. Here, every website environment will generate a different kind of arena generated by the specifics of its technological implementation, with variables including interface design, level of authorial control, accessibility and level/types of reader interaction. Furthermore, the question of audience becomes increasingly layered, given that the internet opens up the potential of access by audiences that are simultaneously nebulous and worldwide (assuming the narrative is publicly available on the World Wide Web) and specific (ie searchable by keyword/interest type, or referred/linked to by others with the same interest).

The remaining four spatial relationships within written narrative listed by McLean refer to either what might be called the content of the text, or to contexts created by or alluded to by the written text. These (i.e. *spatial relationships iconically specified in the text; contextual space; spatial relationships suggested by the figures of the text; spatial relationship of the textual signifiers to one another*) apply as much to narrative on the web as narrative on paper. Indeed, the internet can be seen as an enabler of explicit forms of such relationships through its ability to provide increasingly sophisticated options for authors such as facilitating linking across narrative contexts and presenting narratives visually on the screen.

This in turn leads to one of this document's central arguments: that a close interaction exists between content created and presented on the internet, and the software deployed to create and present that content.

Unlike book publishing, the creation of web-based content and its publication are not separate stages, but intimately interwoven. For online narratives, the technology is both stage and director: the narrative performance is largely shaped by the technology's power structures, workflows and assumptions - and therefore by the software creator/s, the silent co-directors of the performance along with the author (Laurel 2001).

### **Online narratives: social or not?**

Charlotte Linde discusses the role of narrative in the development of individual and group identity. 'Individual social knowledge', says Linde, is 'is most frequently and best conveyed through narrative'. In the case of oral stories, this, says Linde, is typically in a group-based or participatory manner that, as discussed previously, allows the hearer to have a stake in the creation of the story (2001, p.5); the phenomenon of "recipient design" (Sacks 1992, cited in Linde 2001, p.8), where the story is tailored in every telling to a specific recipient or situation.

So where does this leave narratives on the internet? Online story creators know they are telling their story to an unspecified audience of dozens up to possibly even millions. Does this qualify as conforming to Linde's evaluation of narrative as "fundamentally social" (2001, p. 12)? It is that kind of performance? Or are users of web-based systems like Small Histories akin to memoir writers? Novelists? Are they creators of monologues or dialogues? Or do these definitions no longer apply? To come to grips with these questions, I looked at how existing notions of community and audience apply to an online environment.

### **Communities, audiences, networks**

Groups of people who view and contribute to websites on particular topics (such as forums and blogs) are sometimes referred to as communities. In contrast, those who attend cultural events or read books are referred to as audiences. In the uncertain space where performance, narrative and the web meet, and especially in relation to the Small Histories site, I will look at how we conceive of those on the other side of the screen. In order to do so, I will firstly look at some concepts of community.



### What is a 'community'?

The concept of *communities of experience* has been defined as groups of people who have undergone a common experience (Freidman 1993). When extended to encompass the phenomena of postmemory, this definition could be extended to also include those with a deep connection to a common experience, even if they have not experienced it themselves. In this sense, groups of people united by particular stories, events and experiences could be seen as communities, regardless of their actual level of interaction. Similarly amorphous is the concept of *interpretive communities* developed by Stanley Fish (1976) in his work on reader-response criticism, a concept that emphasises the role of the reader in the process of creating meaning in a written work. To Fish, the way we read a text makes us a member of a particular interpretive community, an community that we cannot escape but also cannot define.

Other concepts of community, however, are more defined. A community of experience shares some elements of a *discourse community* (Nystrand 1982; Swales 1990), but not necessarily all. Defined by Swales as 'sociorethorical networks that form in order to work towards sets of common goals' (Swales 1990, p. 9) gatherings round social software sites may lack the sense of purpose to create sets of common goals, but would generally fulfill the other five criteria set by Swales (1990, p. 24), here paraphrased as: *methods for members to communicate with one another; the use of participatory mechanisms to provide information and feedback; the ownership and use of genres or categories; the ownership and use of specific lexis, or specialist lexicons of words; and a threshold number of members with relevant knowledge and expertise.*

Dictionary definitions of *community* also stress agreement on common goals (Wordnet 2010). So perhaps community is too strong a term for those drawn to particular subject areas on the web, unless they then act to formalise their connection by forming joint goals. One example of a formalised online community is the *Random Acts of Genealogical Kindness* group referred to in Appendix II. Another is the *community of remembrance* (Worthy 2004) formed by war veterans and those connected with them, who 'enshrine their memories in stone' in the form of war memorials.

Perhaps, then, loose groups of people gathering around websites are simply networks. The social distinctions between communities and networks are exemplified in the work of social theorists Etienne Wenger (1998) and John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid (2000) in their terms *communities of practice* and *networks of practice*. Communities of practice, in which practitioners actively share information on a particular practice, must involve social presence, which Tu (2002) defines as 'the degree of salience of another person in an

interaction and the consequent salience of an interpersonal relationship' (p. 38) as well as motivation and collaboration. The concept of networks of practice was based on Wenger's work and developed by Brown and Duguid to encompass a wider range of interaction types, including (and especially) the more informal and loosely linked groups of the kind frequently seen on social software sites. The more involved and personal the communication, the closer networks move towards the more formalised community end of the scale - although confusingly the term *virtual community* (Rheingold 1993) is similar to the *networks of practice* concept.

Other variations of definition also exist, with the term *communities of interest* commonly used to describe communities of people interested in a particular topic, but who are not active practitioners, and *communities of circumstance* (Marsh 1999) describing those united by commonalities of life experience or circumstance, a concept similar to communities of experience.

All in all, it appears that traditional notions of communities as tightly-knit groups of people living physically or geographically interlocked lives are no longer the norm. In an era of social fragmentation, people are meeting their need to belong in a number of new ways, including membership of groups whose other members they may never meet in the flesh. In response, conceptions of community are expanding to embrace looser definitions of belonging: namely an advanced or mature form of network distinguished from looser networks by a combination of active involvement and persistence over time.

### **What is an 'audience'?**

We don't usually talk of performing in front of a 'community'. Instead, we use the term *audience*. Princeton University's online lexicon Wordnet (2010) defines audience as:

- a gathering of spectators or listeners at a (usually public) performance; "the audience applauded"; "someone in the audience began to cough"
- the part of the general public interested in a source of information or entertainment; "every artist needs an audience"; "the broadcast reached an audience of millions"

In both definitions, audience members ('spectators'/'listeners'/'general public') are not explicitly active participants in the performance, except perhaps to express approval through applause. Furthermore, the focus of audience members' attention is usually on the performance and not on each other: the idea of 'audience' does not usually include interaction between audience members. And, lastly, audiences are

temporal: performances create audiences. When a performance is over, its audience dissolves back into a disparate group of people.

So how does the concept of audience translate to the internet? Putting something online exposes it to a potential audience of millions. However, unlike other forms of performance, the performative act often happens in the intimate context of solo creator, computing device and network connection. There is a disconnect between the solitary action of creating content and showing it to the world, yet these acts are frequently parts of one process. What does this mean for an online narrator's awareness of audience?

Undertaking a performance usually involves an assumption of audience, whether it is a live performance or one (such as a film or television serial) with a gap between production and viewing (and whose production usually involve some kind of audience anyway, even if it is only the crew). But processes of production for online performances of the self blur the public and private. An example is weblogs or online diaries. Diaries have traditionally been private outlets for private thoughts, but, as weblogs, they are usually anything but private. This new hybrid space bridges the intensely personal and the intensely public.

A further complication is the immediacy of online self-publishing. Content creators upload material knowing that it will immediately be available for others to see. 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 performance.

In her discussion of narrative authors and audiences, Marie McLean evokes Baudelaire's concept of the *flâneur*, someone who 'walks without haste, at random, abandoning himself to the impressions and the sights of the moment' (Robert, cited in McLean 1988, p. 56). For McLean, a poet 'remains a *flâneur* so long as he is developing the text for himself and by himself. Let him publish, however, and thus put himself in the position of being read and of wishing to attract readers, and he becomes a performer. No longer an ambulating amateur, he becomes a strolling player.' (1988, p. 57).

Translating this to online self-publishing, one can ask: is it the creative process, or the assumed awareness of audience in doing so, that turns a blog post, a Facebook status update or an uploaded story into a performance? I would argue for the latter, since, to continue the analogy, if a walker is aware of being watched as they walk, that self-consciousness turns the walk into a performance, even if the audience is undefined.

And what of the other side of the screen: the people viewing the performance? Here, McLean's view on

written narratives seems to hold - that readers experience a voyeuristic form of pleasure. She states: 'Plays and books, narrative performances, allow us the pleasures of secret observation. We are the unseen, unsuspected, audience peeping through the lighted window at the private lives of others...' (1988, p. 36-37). A decade later, electronic literature academic Espen Aarseth concurs, proposing that in printed media 'the reader's pleasure is the pleasure of the voyeur. Safe, but impotent.' (1997, p. 4). McLean point out that even within novels that are considered innovatively interactive (in this case Laurence Sterne's 1759 opus *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* where the reader is invited into the fictional world by the narrator), 'the reader directly addressed by the narratorial voice is rather in the situation of the Elizabethan nobleman who had a seat on the stage. He was simultaneously included in the performance space but excluded from the performance, excluded from the audience space but included in the audience' (1988, p. 34).

In online environments, however, levels of reader 'impotence' depend on the design of the host website system. Potential reader interactivity built into a system ranges from none (i.e. where a static narrative is simply presented as created), to some peripheral reader involvement (as seen by the comments posted to online media articles, blogs and status updates, or in the ability to choose some narrative paths) to the ability to shape core narrative content (as in some wikis). In some cases, the system allows site administrators to choose the level of interactivity, such as the ability by YouTube content uploaders to disable comments or the ability of owners of sites based on the Wordpress, Joomla or Drupal systems to choose password-controlled access levels for different users.

### **In conclusion: from communities and audiences to network sociality**

Neither the term *audience* nor *community* adequately describe the kinds of participants involved in online performative events, though elements of both prevail: the temporal nature of audiences, and the interactive, interlinked qualities of communities. I was puzzling over this when I encountered the concept of 'network sociality' (Wittel 2001), which:

...explores some current transformations of the social. It argues for a shift from a model of sociality based on community towards a network sociality... It is a form of sociality that is ephemeral but intense, it is informational and technological, it combines work and play, it is disembedded and generic, and it emerges in the context of individualization (Wittel 2001, p. 1).

This sums up the kind of interactions I have observed online. I will also add that perhaps *network sociality* can evolve into *community* if interest and active involvement continues over time. Networked technologies

facilitate this through the feedback and communication channels they provide, both synchronously and asynchronously. Therefore, as hosts for performances of reconstruction, sites like Small Histories can be seen as potential seeders of community through their role as gathering points for events of network sociality.

### 3. That which can't be explained: postmemory, trauma and artistic practice

#### The crisis

The concept of *performances of reconstruction* arose through a crisis in the development of Small Histories. As I was building the website, I began to seriously question whether or not it was a good thing to bring the past to light, especially when that past involves trauma. This questioning was influenced by reading works based on Buddhist beliefs, which emphasised the importance of existing 'in the moment', and which were critical of the assumption that clarity and understanding necessarily arises from delving into the past (Tolle 2005).

I was also profoundly tired of digging up my own difficult family history. Other members of my family have not had the same urge to dig, and some (like my mother) have chosen to, wherever possible, block out the past. I wondered: what right did I have to exhume these skeletons? And what good would come of it? I also reflected on Bosnian refugee friends who have since made a new and comfortable life for themselves in suburban Melbourne. They like to talk about their traumatic history, and yet they don't. There is a tension. Again, what purpose is there in dragging up that kind of history?

'Importing 5,427 items...'

My daughter wanted to see a picture of my grandfather Rudolf. So I tried importing all my Small Histories photos into iPhoto on the laptop. Saw them all flashing past. So much data. So data weary. So much weight of information and association.

*Small Histories project notebook entry, December 2008*

In her family history, Katrin Himmler describes the torment that can accompany the trawling of the past:

After my first discoveries I felt disorientated. In my imagination I played out all sorts of scenarios about what my grandfather might have done and thought between 1933 and 1945. I tormented myself with reproaches for my lack of interest over all the years. I was furious with my father, who avoided direct confrontation with the documents, leaving that to me instead - though he could have

had no more idea than I did of how devastated I would be by what my researches threw up. I had obviously completely misjudged my detachment, my ability to remain unscathed by my grandparents' past. I battled with persistent health problems. I was struck by fits of panic about the future. I was stuck (p. 16).

In his research, Athos descends so far that he reaches a place where redemption is possible, but it is only the redemption of tragedy.

*Fugitive Pieces* by Anne Michaels, p. 120

Furthermore, as Marsha Berry (2009) points out, seeking out postmemorial experience can result in a rush of conflicting reactions; many layers of associations mixed, paradoxically, with a sense of absence:

My experience of Germany in March 2007 was overlaid with my projected feelings of displacement and connection with place. It was what Hirsch (1996: 664) describes as “the deep sense of displacement suffered by the children of exile, the elegiac aura of the memory of a place to which one cannot return, creates in my experience, a strange sense of plenitude rather than a feeling of absence: I’ve sometimes felt that there were too many stories, too much affect, even as at other times I’ve been unable to fill in the gaps and the absences”. This resonated deeply with me. I too had always felt that there were too many stories on one hand and too many gaps on the other (p. 214).

Then there is the sense of unfulfilled expectation in trying to reconstruct something lost. Anne Michaels' *The Winter Vault* explores the melancholic sense of displacement and psychic shock when something is recreated, but not as it was. Woven throughout the novel is the dismantling and rebuilding of the Temple of Rameses II (as well as ancient riverside Nubian communities) above the soon-to-rise waterline of the Aswan Dam, the relocation of Canadian villages facing hydro-electric inundation, and the detailed rebuilding of Warsaw's Old City after its devastation during World War II. The book explores such attempts to recreate communities and places as they were before the forces of modernity destroyed them, but that in effect can never be put back together:

In Warsaw in the 1950s, people were desperate with hope. They would make the most extravagant claims: 'For decades, physicists have been trying to figure out - if time can flow both into the future and into the past - why can't a broken eggshell become whole again, why can't shattered glass mend itself? And yet in Warsaw we are achieving exactly this! We haven't yet figured out how to raise the dead or regain lost love, but we're hard at work and if it happens anywhere it will be in reconstituted

Warsaw!' And while people ran about proclaiming such things, I could only think that everything exists because of loss. From the bricks of our buildings, from cement to human cells, everything exists because of chemical transformation, and every chemical transformation is accompanied by loss (Michaels 2009, p. 223).

Walking for the first time into the replica of the Old Town, said Lucjan, the rebuilt market square - it was humiliating. Your delirium made you ashamed - you knew it was a trick, a brainwashing, and yet you wanted it so badly. Memory was salivating through your brain. The hunger it tried to satisfy. It was dusk and the streetlamps miraculously came on and everything was just the same - the same signs for the shops, the same stonework and archways...

I had to stop several times, the fit of strangeness was so intense. I squatted with my back against a wall. It was a brutality, a mockery - at first completely sickening, as if time could be turned back, as if even the truth of our misery could be taken away from us. And yet, the more you walked, the more your feelings changed, the nausea gradually diminished and you began to remember more and more. Child memories, memories of youth and love - I watched the faces of people around me, half mad with the confusion of feelings (Michaels 2009, p. 309).

Another issue connected with excavating the past is the political dimension of family stories. Some people's stories have tangible consequences on the lives of others. For instance, the thirty-year-old political affiliations of Marsha Berry's Russian family are still not discussed by family members who remain in Russia because they fear the repercussions.

Lastly, there are the privacy implications of creating an online mechanism for people to publish family information that millions can view, sometimes without understanding the consequences. Perhaps I had, like other internet aficionados, uncritically embraced the idealistic notion of the 1980s Free Content movement (Clarke 2000) that 'information wants to be free'; a notion incorporated into the Google mission: 'to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful' (Google, accessed 2010).

Perhaps, too, I had been influenced by a 1970s childhood in an isolated South Australian steel town, surrounded by red earth, spinifex, seaweed-strewn beaches and not much else. Every now and then, when a strong wind was blowing from the south-east, sound bites from an Adelaide-based community radio station emerged from my FM radio: strange new music and chat by people who were proud of being different to the norm. I embraced 'DXing' when I was a teenager, a form of escape involving nights huddled around a short wave radio, trying to find broadcasts from far-flung radio stations. I had a twenty-dollar second hand radio, a copper-wire arial stretched between the roof and a tree, and a large map of the world with coloured



dots pointing out Radio Ulan Bator, the Voice of India and Radio Tirana, Albania.

When the internet arrived 15 years later, I embraced it and everything it meant for instant, unfettered access to other worlds. And indeed it was through the internet that I later found the means to trace my biological father. So perhaps I was predisposed to think kindly of the internet and its promise, without looking fully at all its implications.

- When I'm planting, said Jean, I'm leaving a kind of signal. And I'm hoping that the person it's meant for will receive it. If someone walking down the street experiences the scent of a flower they haven't smelled for thirty years - even if they don't recognise the scent but are suddenly reminded of something that gives them pleasure - then maybe I've done something worthwhile.

Jean looked at him miserably.

- But what you evoke could be something painful, said the Caveman. When you plant something in people's memories, you never know what you'll pull up.

He saw the look of dismay on her face. he thought for a moment.

- Maybe you should work in a hospital.

*The Winter Vault by Anne Michaels, p. 202*

## The resolution

My crisis was eventually resolved through a series of encounters with artistic practice. The resolution was this: it's OK to delve into the traumatic past *as long as you do something with it*. That is, through the use of creative or artistic reassembly to transmute the past into something that communicates on an emotional, subjective level, thereby neutralising the need for factual 'truth'. It is Marie McLean's 'energy and effect' referred to earlier.

I refer to narrative researcher Elaine Martin's invocation of the artist Jean Arp's concept of 'concretion' in her exploration of narrative as performance:

When a text is performed as a play and presented as a script the emphasis is as much on awakening emotion and lived experience as on presenting factual evidence. Performance is intended as a communicative act that invites an audience to participate and feel along with the performers. It typically relies on conversations between players who are cast with specific roles. It has been called a concretion rather than an abstraction of experience (Jean Arp, 1987). Arp suggests that concretions hug the natural world but are not exact equivalents. They are expressive, sensitive and experience-

near. They feel strangely familiar, and yet they are not. Performances aim to resonate and evoke emotion and nuanced insights as well as offering information (Martin 2008, unpublished).

German-Jewish artist Charlotte Salomon, to whom I shall refer later, inscribed her remarkable *Life? Or Theatre?* series of art works, completed under difficult circumstances in France during Nazi occupation, with the following statement:

Since I myself needed a year to discover the significance of this strange work, many of the texts and tunes, particularly in the first paintings, elude my memory and must - like the creation of the whole, so it seems to me - remain shrouded in darkness. CS (Salomon cited in Pollock 2008, p. 70)

Sometimes the artist is not consciously aware of the full power and meaning embedded in what they are creating, nor its potential to awaken and evoke emotion in themselves and others.

Perhaps it is precisely the ambiguity and fluidity of creative practice that can be a useful tool in bringing the traumatic past to light, something claimed by practitioners in the field of Art Therapy (Hill 1945). In his Melbourne Writers Festival speech, Bernhard Schlink suggested that it is important for the children of World War II perpetrators and victims to demonstrate 'tact, understanding, sensitivity and respect'. This puts them on the road to reconciliation because it emphasises the ties and commonalities that bind human beings, and leads to understanding. For Schlink, the next generation is torn between understanding and condemning, as if understanding might contaminate the purity of condemnation. Condemning and forgiveness 'settle the matter once and for all', but reconciliation and understanding are ongoing, fluid, delicately negotiated and need to be renewed. In this context, Schlink suggested that interactions based on art and music can help this reconciliation process.

However one caveat needs to be made. This document has claimed that, by neutralising the need for the presentation (and possible distortion) of facts, artistic practice can reduce the potential for the generation of propaganda. Then I came across this quote by Joseph Goebbels, published in an online review of the film *Harlan: In the Shadow of Jew Suss*: 'a work of art can very well accommodate a political alignment, and that even the most obnoxious attitude can be communicated if it is expressed through the medium of an outstanding work of art.' (Goebbels, cited in Dargis 2010). Whilst being open to new forms of interactions, one also needs to remain careful about others' agendas. Perhaps, too, there is a distinction to be made between artistic practice as a tool for mass consumption and opinion-shaping, and as a more intimate conduit for interaction and understanding between individuals, based on reflection on personal experience.

## Gathering up the pieces: postmemory and artistic practice

Dirk De Bruyn was a Melbourne PhD student whose interactive media project started out as a video work that documented his family life. Then his family life fell apart (he separated from his partner), and the project took on an entirely new focus. De Bruyn referred to childhood trauma literature's descriptions of memories being stored as 'fragments, cut-up and separated from each other' (2003, p. 5) as the psyche tries to deal with unbearable experience by dividing it and compartmentalising it, thereby creating discontinuous experience. Here, De Bruyn refers to *The Inner World of Trauma*, which states: 'The memory of one's life has holes in it - a full narrative history cannot be told by the person whose life has been interrupted by trauma' (Kalsched, cited in DeBruyn 2003, p.5). The person with the hole-ridden memory could well be my mother. But the compartmentalising isn't able to successfully vanquish memory. Instead the fragments continuously replay, 'these replays becoming disassociated intrusive thoughts, undiminished flash-backs, with each replay being as potent as the first' (DeBruyn 2003, p. 5).

Destruction doesn't create a vacuum, it simply transforms presence into absence. The splitting atom creates absence, palpable "missing" energy.

*Fugitive Pieces* by Anne Michaels, p. 161

One artistic reconstruction that deals powerfully with this kind of traumatic experience is the animated Israeli documentary *Waltz With Bashir*.



Figure 33: Scene from *Waltz With Bashir*. Source: <http://www.waltzwithbashir.com>

*Waltz With Bashir* is based on the personal experience of director Ari Folman, a young infantry soldier during Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon. It masterfully deploys 2D animated techniques, hand-rendered

over filmed sequences in a palette of orange, brown, grey and black, to explore a twilight world of hidden memories. Using this method, *Waltz With Bashir* integrates realistic depictions of past events with dreamlike fantasy sequences to represent the uncovering and reliving of lived trauma.

The film begins with a bar scene. An old army friend of Folman recounts a recurring nightmare in which he is chased by a pack of snarling dogs. After hearing about a connection between the dream and his friend's army experiences, Folman turns to his own past and is confounded by the fact that he cannot remember anything about his own army experiences.

Folman becomes a 'memory detective', seeking out and interviewing other old army friends as he tries to uncover his buried memories and discover the truth about his past: which, as he soon discovers, includes a close encounter with the massacre of Palestinians at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps by Phalangist forces allied to Israel. As Folman digs, his memory responds, sprouting a number of disturbing, surreal sequences. These are presented in the film alongside Folman's conversations with ex-colleagues, a psychologist and a journalist. A picture emerges of a group of young soldiers - pawns of larger political agendas - each struggling to deal with their wartime experiences in different ways.

The past is desperate energy, live, an electric field. It chooses a single moment, a chance so domestic we don't know we've missed it, a moment that crashes into us from behind and changes all that follows.

*Fugitive Pieces by Anne Michaels, p. 253*

In watching *Waltz With Bashir* I was reminded of my 1998 conversation (below) with an Israeli family member's boyfriend, a former soldier in the elite Golani brigade. Experiences like these may well be impossible to process rationally, or to draw moral resolutions from. Perhaps, then, the only recourse is to try to forget the experience (as Folman had) or to process the experience in ways where things don't have to necessarily 'make sense', where the effect of the experience can be validated and where others can gain an understanding of the experience. And maybe, too, to create an alternative reality from the fragments.

## Shimon

Tel Aviv, 13 April 1998

Shimon flops his tall lanky frame into a bean bag. The distant rumbling and honking of Tel Aviv drifts in through the open window. The night is hot and windless. He rolls a joint and adjusts his bandana. M, his girlfriend, is off in the kitchen washing dishes.

Sucking on the joint, Shimon looks out into the darkness, and leisurely blows smoke into the heavy air. "We had tanks, but we didn't have those things that shoot from the top. We had the smaller ones; we used them to transport the soldiers to their position". It's the first time I've met Shimon, and the first time I've been to M's apartment.

Shimon stretches out his legs and yawns. I look at his face - he's my age or a little younger, an ex-sniper in the Golani Brigade, the elite unit in the Lebanon war front lines. A veteran dressed in hippy pants and a surfing t-shirt.

"For a while you hate all the Arabs, not just the killers. Now I know we were crazy." He has another toké and hands me the joint. Shimon's a handiman who drives a paint-spattered panel van, like many Australians I've known. And like so many Australians I know, he's a traveller; two years in Japan and Thailand with M, doing what Israelis there do - selling paintings, importing jewellery, anything to make money. Like me, but different. Different.

"We had 200 in one operation. Half of us came back injured. This made us hate all the Arabs." M walks by without speaking; Shimon and I look up at the same time, like we'd been sharing a shameful secret. Why, I wonder? Maybe, I think, the girls might be taking a dim view of the dope - especially my young, seemingly straight sister whom I barely know. Am I making a bad impression? I don't know that M is silent because she's breaking up with Shimon up after six years together.

"In one attack, I saw two soldiers get killed" he drawls, looking up and blowing smoke towards the ceiling of the flat. I don't know how to react; this is totally outside my experience.. Outside a dog barks and a siren wails. M passes again, a bunch of newly-washed towels in her hand. "They shoot at you when you're on patrol. You see from where they shoot, you go there, but there's nothing there, it's like the wind."

We'd met in a restaurant around the corner from the flat, just off the Dizengoff Street shopping strip. I'd arranged to meet up in the restaurant with M and my sister, who'd arrived straight from her Army base in her Doc Martins, lipstick and ironed olive-green uniform. After we'd settled in over hot chocolates, we compared notes about travelling, music and David; it was comforting to hear the girls taking the mickey out of the same foibles I'd noticed in our father. As M and my sister spoke, they switched from accented English (when talking to me) to animated Hebrew (each-other) and back again. My sister was still a little shy around me, turning to her older, confident half-sister when the English and the presence of the new half-brother flustered her.

Half an hour later, Shimon drove past in his van, noticed us, and dropped in for a coffee. Ordering a flat white, he interrogated me in the abrupt, cocky manner typical of Israelis, asking me about my opinions while he looked on with narrow eyes and a half-grin on his mouth. "Down that street, about a block down." he said to me while M and my sister chatted in animated Hebrew, nodding his head in the direction of the road outside. "That's the house where Ben Gurion used to live. It's a museum now." After finishing our meals we walked back to the flat, where the two girls adjourned to the bedroom for sisterly chats. Shimon, who'd warned to me by then, recalled his travels and told me of his plans to visit Australia. By the time my sister took a taxi home an hour or so later, we'd moved onto the topic of Israel and the army.

"One night we took this house in a village" says Shimon matter-of-factly, emptying the butt into a coffee cup. "We found 200 guns and 40 rockets. Our commander thought this was where they were shooting, so we took all the people in the house. My friends were kicking them, hitting them, like in their face, it was terrible." He stretches out his arms and scratches his head. "You become like an animal, not like the human."

M passes silently by again. I'm stoned and unfocused. Shimon looks up at her intently as he rolls another joint. He sticks the joint in his mouth and flicks the top of his Bic lighter. "Sometimes, you don't know what to do. You see a seven-year-old kid throwing a hand grenade." He studies the flame. "So what do you do? Let them blow up your friends?" He puts the flame to the end of the paper and puffs. "Or shoot them?" He looks out into the night.

As well as Art Therapy, there are other connections between the deployment of artistic practice and medical treatments for trauma-related conditions. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is described by mental health professionals as an anxiety disorder suffered by people who have witnessed or lived through a dangerous event. It involves a changed or damaged 'fight or flight' response that continues to generate stress or fear even though the danger has passed. Psychotherapy treatments for PTSD include Exposure Therapy, which exposes people to trauma they have experienced in a safe way through the use of mental imagery, writing or visits to the place where the event took place, and Cognitive Restructuring, which helps people make sense of bad memories by looking at past events in new ways, including reexamining feelings of guilt or shame about what is not their fault. (National Institute of Mental Health, 2009).

Dirk De Bruyn responded to his trauma by using experimental video to re-present the fragments of his life. Here, his project resonated with me and my own experience as someone who has also been compelled to pick up the pieces and glue them together like an archaeologist of the self - or maybe creator of collages - because, as Schwitters says, it's not as it was, but *as it might have been*.

Interestingly, cultural theorist Griselda Pollock makes a distinction between the 'troped coherence' of narrative creation - the urge to create order from the chaos of life - and forms of creative expression that express the fragmentation and discontinuities of traumatic experience (Pollock 2008, p. 72). In identifying spatialization as a suitable form for expressing fragmentation, Pollock refers to the works of two German-Jewish victims of the Nazi regime: the artwork of Charlotte Salomon, and Walter Benjamin's explorations of 'life-mapping', which saw physical spaces recast as representations of lives, a turning 'from the continuous flow of time that underlies most misconceptions of autobiography toward a space of fragments' (Kochhar-Lindgren 2008). Hence one might hypothesize that narrative, which works with time, may through its very workings reconstruct experience into a semblance of cohesion, whereas visual expression, which works with space, may better suit the presentation of the unreconstructed fragments and discontinuities typical of trauma.

### **Trauma and the past**

At this point, the concept of *postmemory* enters centre stage once more. It is also a form of creative reassembly, but this time once removed, since it is undertaken by those who are revisiting the experiences of their parents' generation.

As mentioned previously, one of my most powerful encounters during this project has been with the writer W.G. Sebald. Sebald's partially historical novels deploy random, often visual fragments - found photos, diagrams, his own receipts - to tell the story of dispersal and loss of community and belonging in World War II-era Europe. These fragments embody the displaced postmemorial experience; Sebald's works revolve around the 'shadows cast by retrospectively encountered images that were contemporaneous with the beginnings of his own life' (Presner 2004). They are the 'memory with holes' referred to by Kalsched, writ large.



my head for several weeks, and they gave me an uneasy, anxious feeling which crystallized into the idea that I had been to blame, or at least one of those to blame, for the Lucerne fire. In my dreams, even years later, I sometimes saw the flames leaping from the dome and lighting up the entire panorama of the snow-covered Alps.



— 11 —

Figure 34: W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, pg 11

In his novels, Sebald reconfigures notions of truth and historical veracity as he reconstructs and provides a new home for the orphaned fragments he has collected. His 'evidence' rings true, but on an emotional, not factual, level. In fact, the randomness of the fragments adds to the books' emotional power.

The use of orphaned personal artifacts to embody the fragmentation of lives and communities as the result of World War II is also a theme of Anne Michaels' novel *Fugitive Pieces*. The book's central character Jakob Beer is rescued by an archaeologist who has spent much of his life as 'translator of posthumous writing from the war' (Michaels 1996, p. v). The first words of *Fugitive Pieces* are as follows:

During the Second World War, countless manuscripts - diaries, memoirs, eyewitness accounts - were lost or destroyed. Some of these narratives were deliberately hidden - buried in back gardens, tucked into walls and under floors - by those who did not live to retrieve them.

Other stories are concealed in memory, neither written nor spoken. Still others are recovered, by circumstance. (Michaels 1996, p. v)

It is fitting, then, that in the study guide at the end of *Fugitive Pieces*, Michaels namechecks Sebald's *Austerlitz* as one of her favourite books (Michaels 1996, p. 318).

Michaels' subsequent novel *The Winter Vault* explores related themes of personal artifacts and personal loss. The book's central character Jean is overcome with melancholy when she observes the bric-a-brac in an Egyptian flea market:

...for by what other means than tragedy or unconscionable neglect would an object such as an engagement ring or a child's doll arrive at its fate in the distant market of Wadi Halfa? The market seemed one consciousness, one body of memory, haunted by murderous betrayal and ill fate, inconsolable loneliness, entire lives scorched by a single mistake; and the softer regrets - wistful, elegiac. (Michaels 2009, p. 118)

Similarly, other artists use orphaned material to represent the postmemorial fallout from World War II. One is Christian Boltanski, born in 1944 to a Jewish Ukrainian father and Corsican mother. Boltanski's work explores themes of death, memory and loss, referencing the Holocaust and his own background in what might be called memorials for the nameless disappeared.

[Boltanski] finds and rephotographs everyday documents—passport photographs, school portraits, newspaper pictures, and family albums—to memorialize everyday people. Boltanski seeks to create an art that is indistinguishable from life and has said, “The fascinating moment for me is when the spectator hasn’t registered the art connection, and the longer I can delay this association the better”...By appropriating mementos of other people’s lives and placing them in an art context, Boltanski explores the power of photography to transcend individual identity and to function instead as a witness to collective rituals and shared cultural memories (Guggenheim Museum website, 2010)

I stumbled on Boltanski's work by chance during my 2005 German visit and was immediately drawn to it - only to be reacquainted with it in 2007 by my supervisor who suggested I might be interested in his work.



Figure 35: Christian Boltanski, 'Réliquaire', 1990 - photographed by the author at ZKM, Karlsruhe 2005



Like Sebald and Michaels, Boltanski's work 'sets out on a kind of search for clues' (Borowski, date unknown) with fragments of personal effects evocative of the disappeared.

(Boltanski) uses utensils associated with the subject of memory—old articles of clothing, tin boxes, archive cartons, toys—to produce the image of a fragmentarily put together past or reconstructed identity, which, however, do not contain a clear indication as to the person's destiny. Rather the viewer is confronted with the symbolic and implied biography of a person, which allows a certain «presence of death» [Serge Lemoine] to nearly become tangible. (Borowski, date unknown)

Postmemorial works like those of Boltanski, Sebald and Michaels zoom out from the autobiographical to construct a space for the memory of the 'orphaned forgotten'. This is also the case in the artworks of Charlotte Salomon, which could be described as works of parallel memory rather than postmemory.

In a 2008 article entitled *Life-Mapping: Or, Walter Benjamin and Charlotte Salomon never met*, Griselda Pollock overlays Benjamin's life-mapping concept onto the life and work of Charlotte Salomon. The article's focus is Salomon's remarkable series of 784 gouache paintings - and 570 supplementary works - entitled *Leben? Oder Theater? (Life? Or Theatre?)*. This series was completed in 1942, the year before Salomon was deported from southern France to Auschwitz, where she perished, five months pregnant, at the age of 26. The work was given to a doctor in Nice for safekeeping and survived the war. Many of the paintings were overlaid with text, and the work was in fact presented (framed) by the author as an operetta (*Singspiel*), with the intention that the painted text be sung by the work's characters in a Brechtian style combining classical and popular songs.

In creating the work, Salomon 'was not imposing order on her immediate experience. She was creating a series of visual scenarios for a distant childhood, a lost world; mapping another life/ other lives' (Pollock 2008, p. 71). In fact, Pollock concludes, Salomon was creating memories for and of other women, both inventing and remembering their life-stories. Living both with family trauma (her grandmother, mother and aunt had committed suicide) and, as a Jewish woman living in circumstances that went relentlessly from bad to worse, Salomon was 'suspended between life and this theatre (as memory)' (p. 72). Not having fully lived her own life, Salomon created a parallel one. It is a performance, not of reconstruction, but of *concurrent construction*, raising unrealised alternative realities: '...this work does not so much recall the known past so much as stage a reimagined visualization as a necessary summoning of lost feminine others, who are thereby invoked as the bearers of memories of and for the enunciating subject' (Pollock 2008, p. 72).

As with Boltanski and Sebald's works, Salomon's vast and fragmented artwork creates a 'living space' for the missing. However, in Salomon's case, the missing were her contemporaries (living and deceased) and, it could be said, her missing or potential self.



Figure 36: Charlotte Salomon: Life? Or Theatre? Source: <http://www.ago.net/charlotte-salomon>

Interestingly, Pollock's article undertakes a life-mapping process closely reminiscent of Sebald's searching protagonists. She follows Salomon to her pre-Auschwitz exile in the south of France and inhabits her lost world as best she can and includes, like Sebald's characters, maps and photographs of her journey. Pollock, however, does not follow Salomon to Auschwitz, stating emphatically near the article's end that 'I never intend to go there' (p. 88), after having posed the question two pages beforehand: 'Is the memorial a fetishism by which we seek to mark the impossible absence of the dead in our world; does the invisibility of death require a territorial reminder? Do we need to map death too?' (p. 86).

## Trauma and these times

*"We're in a very shabby moment, and neither the literary nor the musical experience really has its finger on the pulse of our crisis. From my point of view, we're in the midst of a Flood, a Flood of biblical proportions. It's both exterior and interior - at this point it's more devastating on the interior level, but it's leaking into the real world. And this Flood is of such enormous and biblical proportions that I see everybody holding on in their individual way to an orange crate, to a piece of wood, and we're passing each other in this swollen river that has pretty well taken down all the landmarks, and pretty well overturned everything we've got."* (Leonard Cohen, interviewed by Pico Iyer, 1998)

Dirk De Bruyn's investigation of trauma incorporates what he sees as the everyday trauma generated by modern life. His project, called *Traum a Dream*, has 'been tempered out of the notion that we inhabit a culture that traumatises us, bludgeons and nags corrosively at our bodies.' (2003, p. 3) Here De Bruyn invokes the notion of *Panic Bodies*, a reference to experimental Canadian filmmaker Mike Hoolboom whose 1998 film of the same name was both a meditation on human vulnerability and a personal response to being diagnosed with the HIV virus. De Bruyn suggests that we all live in a constant state of alienation and anxiety, a form of collective trauma.

In her speech at the 2009 Writers Festival, Anne Michaels referred to the 'trauma inherent in the act of living'. Anything deeply felt, stated Michaels, is perilous, complicated and deeply charged - not just grieving but also pleasure and love. Her books aim to take readers to those 'perilous places'.

- There were thousands of us, Robinson Crusoes, living in the debris...  
The silence of ruins is the breathing of the dead..  
It was the first time I'd ever been woken by the feeling of snow on my skin...  
We are born with places of suffering in us, history is the proof of them...

The Winter Vault by Anne Michaels, p. 211

Tied in with this sense of generalised trauma are the traumas associated with modernity. This is a topic explored by De Bruyn's project and Michaels' novel *The Winter Vault*, which is about 'what we make from what is left behind' (Michaels 2009) by the tumults that define our era: an era that is relentless and merciless in the way it uproots the old to make way for the new. Technology is 'both saving and damaging' (Michaels 2009). We can never get back what we have lost. Even the miracles of technology cannot help us.

A similar statement on the 'vertigo of modernity' (Trousse 2009) introduces the self-titled documentary from 2009 about the Manchester post-punk band Joy Division:

'To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world--and at the same time that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are.' -- Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*

The introductory section of W.G. Sebald's novel *The Emigrants* is set in Manchester, and is subtitled *And the last remnants memory destroys*. Sebald, who had studied in Manchester, portrays a crumbling former industrial powerhouse; a city that has fallen into disrepair but has since become a haven for immigrants. A similar sense of Mancunian decay is deployed within the Joy Division documentary; its bleakness presented as a backdrop and inspiration for the band's alienated sounds. It is in this Manchester that the narrator of *The Emigrants*, a fictionalised version of Sebald himself, meets a European Jewish emigre, Dr Henry Selwyn, who speculates about his past and its place in the breakdown of his relationship with his wife. The sense of past glory followed by fragmentation and decay - a sense of survival amongst the ruins - permeates the novel's four stories of German emigree lives. Sebald links the fragmentation of World War II with that of the modern age, and correspondingly Berman's book (whose title comes from Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto*) examines the conflict between social/economic modernisation and modernism, highlighting modern societies' tendency towards self-destruction.

Other works have also taken up similar themes. One is Terence Davies' documentary *Of Time and the City*, a poetic and personal history of Liverpool, another former industrial centre from the north of Britain, and the director's home city.

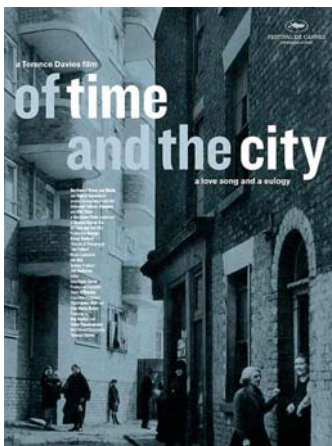


Figure 37: Of Time and the City: poster. Source: <http://www.oftimeandthecity.com/>

The documentary, described as 'both a love song and eulogy to Liverpool' (Davies 2008) traces the decline and collapse of Liverpool throughout the 1970s and 1980s, 'a response to memory, reflection and the experience of losing a sense of place as the skyline changes and time takes its toll' (Davies 2008). As in *The Emigrants*, this film explores the possibility of renewal as well as decay.



Figures 38 & 39: Of Time and the City: stills. Source: <http://www.oftimeandthecity.com/>

Another British work that looks at the intersection of technology, change and loss, this time through a more definitively auto/biographical lens, is Gillian Wearing's 2006 *Family History*. Wearing describes her working method as 'editing life' (Wearing 2007). Her project is based on a 1970s 'reality' BBC documentary entitled *The Family* that Wearing had watched as a ten-year old. The youngest daughter of the family depicted in *The Family* was recruited by Wearing and interviewed in a replica television studio set by daytime TV host Trisha Goddard. Conversations ranged 'from behind-the-scenes details to wider speculation about the influence of the series and the changes in British society over that time' (Bode et al, in Wearing 2007).

An adjacent studio set replicated Wearing's 1970s living room. An actor representing the young Wearing watched television and uttered asides to the camera:



Figures 40 & 41: Gillian Wearing: Family History. Source: <http://www.fvu.co.uk/projects/details/family-history/>

A 'film book' of the work was also produced in replica 1970s magazine style. It featured essays and photographs depicting the installation work as well as comparative photos of the cities of Birmingham (Wearing's childhood home) and Reading (the family's home) from the 1970s and 2006.



Figure 42: Gillian Wearing: Family History book. Source: <http://www.fvu.co.uk/projects/details/family-history/>

Key to all these works is the sense of what Terence Davies calls 'losing a sense of place'. All speak about the loss of a feeling of belonging - the loss of a sense of identity, communal and personal or both, through the relentless march of modernisation, with all its attendant effects of consumerism and cultural forgetting:

Perhaps the push towards narrative comes from contemporary preoccupations with identity. No longer viewed as given and 'natural', individuals must now construct who they are and how they want to be known, just as groups, organizations, and governments do. In postmodern times, identities can be assembled and disassembled, accepted and contested, and indeed performed for audiences (Riessman 2008, p. 7).

For Marianne Hirsch, taking part in 'memory culture' is a strategy for rekindling a sense of belonging in an age replete with trauma. Here, postmemorial work can play its part: 'the growth of memory culture may, indeed, be a symptom of a need for inclusion in a collective membrane forged by a shared inheritance of multiple traumatic histories and the individual and social responsibility we feel towards a persistent and traumatic past' (Hirsch 2008, p. 111).

Still, although the works by Sebald and Davies hint at the possibility of renewal and reinvention, what once was can never be again. Michaels' books suggest that although we can start anew, we cannot escape the traumas of modernity. Like Manchester (and my home town Melbourne), the Toronto of *The Winter Vault* is a place of second chances, where immigrants have come to regrow roots. But trying to return to the past, to recover what is lost, is complicated and fraught.

For Michaels, this issue is closely associated with the relationship between historical and personal trauma and how to deal with it; the issue of private memory versus public memory, or how we choose to commemorate. Michaels described this at the Melbourne Writers Festival as a complex and interesting topic. Jean's difficulty in both separating and reconciling personal and historical loss is a major theme of *The Winter Vault* and can be seen in her engineer husband's ambiguous efforts to move the temple of Rameses II, the relocation of Canadian villages and Lucjan's accounts of the rebuilding of Warsaw's old city. In her 2009 Writers Festival conversation, Michaels spoke of the poignancy of the desire to bring back the past through replication, and the disturbing nature of the results: the enshrinement of loss and a confusion of emotions.

Once 'your place' has gone, Michaels says to us, it cannot be brought back, even (and maybe especially) through technology. In a sense, imaginative recreation that recognises the loss as it builds something new from the fragments of the old is the only possible response. But it will not fill the void. As Michaels asked in her speech, once you have lost it all - community, place, time - what is left? Only, she said, memory and language: the building blocks of imaginative reconstruction. But although you can reinvent and recreate, this

cannot fully answer the fundamental question of *where do I belong?* In *The Winter Vault*, said Michaels, this question is represented by Lucjan. This question is a driver of Lucjan's life, and while he finds traces of belonging in his Toronto-based community of émigré Polish artists, he is fundamentally adrift.

In Gillian Wearing's work, 'a complex process of retelling, recreation and reconstruction' is undertaken (Bode, cited in Wearing 2007, p. 17) - a process that is, we are clearly told in the way the reconstruction has been created, something staged, an illusion. As for the broadcast technology of television, so too for the networked technology of the internet: the tension we feel between its immediate, all-encompassing, embracing nature and its dispersed anonymity and remoteness. Connection and isolation, bundled together.

This may well be the existential lot of people living in early twenty-first century Western societies. We have seen the breaking of the 'circles of solidarity' with much of the past. But, having broken these circles, to what do we now belong?

### **Participatory art: one response**

A number of artists have offered responses to the rootlessness and alienation of modern life. These include participatory artists whose practices engage audiences in the creative process so that they become co-creators of the work, thereby challenging the notion that art is made by a small group of professionals and consumed by everyone else. Different models and degrees of participatory practice exist (Goldenberg & Reid 2008), but for some 'participation IS the project', with the work focusing on 'generating encounters and meetings of all kinds' (Roux 2007). It has been pointed out by some artists that immigrants to new countries do this as a matter of course in order to re-establish a sense of belonging, as per Lucjan's Polish group in *The Winter Vault*, and that we can learn from this (Moriarty 2004).

A well-known example is Spencer Tunick, who photographs large groups of naked volunteers in public locations. Another is New York artist Xavier Roux and his Redseeds Art Studio. Roux's works include a handmade wheelbarrow where participants are invited to sit and tell Roux their story. Another is *SunTower*, which has seen Roux, in a 'guerilla gardening' strategy reminiscent of Jean in *The Winter Vault*, planting thousands of giant sunflowers throughout Manhattan. These sunflowers are positioned to create two rectangles on the topography of New York representing the fallen Twin Towers. During the timespan of the work, neighbors and passers-by were invited to water the flowers in a symbolic contribution to the renewal of life. Roux's work is about reclaiming community in an age of alienation, about trying to pick up the pieces and rebuild a sense of interdependency and shared experience. As the following newspaper article shows



these attempts are not always entirely successful, but they represent the seeds of renewal, just as for Sebald the arrival of immigrants represented the promise of renewal for Manchester - a renewal itself born of loss.

Reprinted from  
**The New York Times**  
 New York Region  
 September 26, 2002  
**A Trade Center Tribute, in Sunflowers**



The artist Xavier Roux tends to the sunflowers he planted at Greenwich Avenue and Seventh Avenue.

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**The New York Times**  
 New York Region  
 September 26, 2002  
**A Trade Center Tribute, in Sunflowers**

By LYDIA POLGREEN  
 Sunflowers are the only seedlings of the plant world, with fuzzy seedlike stems and leaves that grow so close to the golden bloom to come. But they grow fast, and to towering heights, which is why the artist Xavier Roux chose them as his medium for a tribute to the World Trade Center, "a giant, walking sculpture" in his work.

In early summer, Mr. Roux planted 4,000 of them, from ground zero to Chelsea, in the shape of the twin towers. The flowers outline two huge rectangles roughly four times the size of the original towers. Only a few sunflowers survived — about 150, he estimates. But there are enough of them to maintain the integrity of the outline, which is all he had hoped for.

"After 9/11 I felt the need to recreate the towers in some way," Mr. Roux said, walking along Seventh Avenue.

Mr. Roux makes big art and tries to get a lot of people involved in it. A 36-year-old Frenchman and former management consultant, he lives in Chelsea and has been a New Yorker for eight years. Every day for the last four months he has made his rounds on the four-mile circuit, carrying a green watering can, with a hand nuke tucked into his pants pocket for loosening tough soil.

"You never know when one will grow and when one won't," he said, chasing a five-foot tall sunflower in the West Village. "It's the same seed and the same place, and one will grow so big and another will be tiny."

As a public artist who has put on large works in Taiwan, Japan and New York,

Mr. Roux is accustomed to coming up with big ideas, then letting others do the grunt work. Not so this project.



The tower outlines were planted with 4,000 sunflowers; 150 remain.

"I thought all I would have to do is plant the flowers and tell people about the project and they would water them," Mr. Roux said. "I quickly learned this would not happen. And so I am out here every day watering the plants, and it has become a ritual for me."

As it has for many of the people along his route. He relies on their kindness. At Buchel Gourmet Foods on Greenwich Avenue near Seventh Avenue, Feliciano Fitz greeted Mr. Roux with a warm smile.

"Go ahead," Mr. Fitz said, gesturing toward a plastic pan of water collecting under melting ice used to chill fruit. "Help yourself!"

The response to his project has not always been positive. "People have yelled at me, told me I am on private property, or accused me of stealing plants," Mr. Roux said. "Sometimes city workers dig up the plants. Some people think they are weeds and tear them up. Some people just destroy them for no reason."

He put up signs explaining that the flowers were part of a project, but the results have been mixed. On Franklin Street, he came upon a tall sunflower that was snipped in three places, its flower stem.

"This one was the first one to flower," he said. "I planted it the first day of the project, June 4. All it takes is one drink to tear it down."

In a planter a few feet away, a sunflower dropped, its golden petals turning the color of rust, its fuzzy green stem turning black. It was dying — a natural death.

"All the flowers will die, some naturally, some not," Mr. Roux said. "That is just a fact of urban life."

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Figure 43: Xavier Roux: New York Times article about Sunflowers project. Source: <http://www.redseeds.com>

Roux, in his workshop at the 2007 Creativity and Cognition conference, pointed out that the internet has generated new models for collaborative activity that offers promise for art practice. His work uses objects and activities as tools to facilitate exchange between individuals. It is localised and based on physical interaction. What happens, then, when such a practice is moved to the internet? In Appendix IV, I explore some of the issues connected with this, through the work of artist and programmer Jonathan Harris.

## A personal note on identity and belonging

My own experience tallies with Catherine Riessman's previously quoted statements about identity as constructed and fluid. I was born in Germany, brought up in Australia, the offspring of an unmarried German mother, a (then) unknown father and a German stepfather. After finding my father, an additional layer was added: variously Israeli/Jewish/Sephardic. My attempts to negotiate this hybrid identity have led to the development of the Small Histories project.

Perhaps previous generations didn't try to 'make sense' of such complexities. Perhaps in the struggle for survival they lacked time to ponder, as many in poorer countries still don't. Other, overarching narratives existed to define them: comforting yet restrictive narratives of religion, fate, class and gender, of one's 'proper' place in the world. These days, people like me undertake projects like *Small Histories* - individualised attempts to generate a sense of belonging, to glue the fragments together.

Some years ago I lived in a Jewish part of Melbourne. A neighbour had turned to Orthodox Judaism after a divorce. We used to see him making his way to the synagogue, his skullcap perched a little uncomfortably on his head. I think I understand that pull, even though I have not been brought up as part of any tribal tradition; to be enveloped into the fold, to be part of a narrative that creates meaning from the events of life, and to find connection with others.

Following my return from Israel in 1998, I struggled to work out how this addition to my identity fitted into my erstwhile Australian, secular, day-to-day life as a worker and father. I learned Hebrew for a time, kept up contact with family, visited Israel and Germany again, read everything I could about the Middle East and Judaism, continued my research into family history, and began this project. It felt a little like living parallel lives simultaneously. And although my particular life experience was unusual, the experience of living with multiple identities, for whatever reason and in whatever permutation, appears to be a common one for many people of our generation. To repurpose a Kabbalistic concept (*The Raising of the Sparks*, or *Netzotzim*), there are sparks of us distributed throughout times, places and cultures. In this postmodern age, many are trying to 'gather in' these sparks, a process mirroring the commandment of *Tikkun ha-Olam* (The Restoration of the World) to which the *Netzotzim* concept relates: that humanity must restore and redeem a broken and fallen world. (Drob, 2001).

I don't think I could have chosen a more loaded, complex and disputed layer of identity. Do I *feel* a bit Jewish? Somewhere, yes. I remember being moved by a feature article in the early 1990s by a journalist from

a Melbourne-Jewish family whose grandfather had abandoned religion. The journalist had experienced a crisis of identity and had asked a religious leader, the Lubaviche Rebbe, for advice. The Rebbe wrote that the journalist indeed had a 'Jewish soul'. I still have the article, and I'm still not sure about what it means for me.

Was I brought up in Jewish culture? No. Am I considered Jewish? No - it's matrilineal. But if I were to join a liberal (Reform) congregation, I could be. But the Reform stream is not accepted as authentically Jewish by some other streams of Judaism. Could I convert in a lengthy Orthodox-sanctioned process? Yes. But in doing so, could I accept that Moses literally received the commandments on Mount Sinai? No. Could I surrender to a series of prescriptions on how to live? I don't know. If I had been born Jewish, I may well have been a lapsed Jew. And I would have had the option of being lapsed. (My father, for instance, is a 'proud Jew' who eats pork sausages).

**20 May 1998**

Furtively, in my father's mirror, I take a shot of myself wearing my cheap black Heritage House skullcap. I feel like a cross-dresser, like I will be discovered any moment.

It sits high on my head, like it shouldn't be there, announcing its alienation to the world: It's a goys head! It's a goys head!

On the photo I can see a forehead, a light, a kipa melting into darkness. Even the camera knows.

*Small Histories: text item*

Jews argue about all this constantly. Leonard Cohen, in his recent (and aptly titled) book of poetry *The Book of Belonging*, wryly puts it thus:

*Anyone who says  
I'm not a Jew  
is not a Jew  
I'm very sorry  
but this decision  
is final*

In an Israeli newspaper article entitled *My emotional history*, David Wollach examines his Jewishness and Israeli-ness. He states that 'to be a Jew is an emotional fact of historical identity'. (2005, p. 1):

Being a Jew is not a matter of content. It's not good or bad. There is no way to become a Jew. It's an emotional fact, an affinity, a conscious experience of identity, like a surname. A Jew is not someone whose mother, or father, is a Jew. A Jew is a Jew because that is how he feels. For good and for bad, it is not possible "to decide" to feel something. (Wollach 2005, p. 1)

It is interesting that I have held onto these references and not others. One could say I am constructing a narrative that fits my world view, gives me options and mitigates the sense of rejection of not being considered Jewish by some - regardless of whether or not I would ever want to actively take on a Jewish identity. This is a line others have taken too, as evidenced by the sharply humorous, and now sadly defunct, *Half Jew* website.

Through this narrative I am actively creating a sense of, at least, *potential* belonging by picking the above sources and not others. An example of the latter is the French ultra-Orthodox man I met in the sages' cemetery in Safed, Israel, who said that I was most certainly not Jewish, and the Ascent Institute in the same town, who refused to let me take their courses because my mother isn't Jewish.

Complicating the matter is the Israeli factor. Israel is a fascinating and endlessly complex place. So many more questions here: have I been in the army? What do I think of the occupation? Do I, like a pro-settler protestor once asked me, 'love Israel'? What of the Sephardic background? What of the fact that my North African family, like many other Israelis after the 1948 war, changed their surname from an Arab one (*Attia*) to a Hebrew one (*Netanel*) to erase any traces of their exiled (*galuti*) life and to differentiate themselves from the Palestinians? And what of the endless other news from this place - the constant grinding conflict, itself a dispute about identity tied to a small but significant sliver of Levant real estate? And then the related head-scratchers, such as (as one example of many) the 2005 news of the opening of a Holocaust museum in Nazareth by an Arab Muslim (Radin 2005)? I could go on for another thesis - or three.

There are, then, so many ways of looking at myself and where I 'fit'. Sometimes I wish I'd chosen somewhere easier to find a father.

At least this makes me a good research subject, something I have consciously decided to take on in this project. It is, however, an odd space to inhabit: self-consciously inside and outside myself at the same time, a one-foot-in, one-foot-out state of mind. I think this is partly why I related strongly to Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, an auto/biographical novel whose theme is the death of both parents

through cancer within three months, and the subsequent rebuilding of his life with his young brother. In the book Eggers holds his own life and experiences up at a distance, examining them like an outsider with prose full of irony, witticisms and an intense and manic kind of self-observation. Eggers watches himself watching himself experiencing. He's inside and outside his experiences at once, quarantining the feelings associated with his trauma by building a wall of irony to protect himself.

As I approach the end of this process, as this document is woven together more tightly into a veneer of coherence and I am about to sign off, I can feel the desire to let go of the line-walking, the position-straddling. I have spent over a decade now stoking the fires of my tribal affiliations, keeping the sparks glowing across the world: three visits to Israel and three to Germany, the Hebrew lessons, the readings, the sometimes awkward cross-cultural, cross-language phone calls, this project's website, the blog, the uploading of data to the website, the papers read, the smaller things like my noting the street near me because it reminds me of the hillside roads in Haifa. I'm tired of blowing on the embers and I'm due for a pit stop.

In the aforementioned Haaretz article, David Wollach describes a friend who, like my Israeli family, is of Moroccan origin:

My friend did well when he described the components of his personal identity in the opposite order - Moroccan, Jew, Israeli. And not because one of the components precedes the two others in importance, but because when identity is to be consciously considered, personal and family priorities come before cultural ones, and the civic-national identity comes only at the end.

This makes sense to me and my situation too. It is, after all, a lot of work to construct a multifaceted identity, and the complexities of a country like Israel make it that much harder. For those whose national identities are not intricately caught up in active 'close to home' concerns such as current religious, tribal and family practices or the dynamics of expulsion, war or displacement, it may be less troubling to leave the issue of national identity alone and focus on more immediate matters. As Molly Andrews points out, the nation has been described as an 'imagined community' (Anderson, cited in Andrews 2007b, p. 6), and, further, one where the imagination is 'active and situated' (Yuval-Davis, cited in Andrews 2007b, p. 12). It is form of ongoing, concurrent construction of identity that we create as we go, a construction quite separate from the nation itself. (Andrews 2007b, p. 2)

This is where I am at now. For now I will live with the embers glowing out there, ungathered, except perhaps in this document and on the *Small Histories* site. I will keep on with daily life, a middle-aged bloke with two young daughters who works at a university, plays music, lives in a large Australian city and breathes its relatively free, agnostic, uncomplicated (if occasionally polluted) air. For now, I am an Australian, a much

simpler form of identity than the others. Of course, that conclusion is a construction too. Like the Australian bush, the raw material of identity is flammable and has a habit of igniting. Perhaps rather than a statement of fact, let's say this is a statement of current intention, as of July 2010.

**I am**

My Curriculum Vitae

1997 - present

I am a son with a father and a second family. I am an Israeli whose father eats pork, whose grandfather lived and prayed in the Holy City. I am a prodigal son, a mamzer, a yekke, a goy whose grandfathers carried swastikas on their arms.

1993 - present

I am in part a Jew. I look at the man in the cafe: he blurs but does not disappear. Now he reappears, topless and brown, smiling, on a beach. Above him, a name appears in a strange script. It's my name too.

1974 - present

I am more than my parents. There is a hole in the puzzle; down in the hole, at a cafe table sits a charming man with dark skin, with two given names, one Arab and one Jewish. I look at him and he disappears.

1973 - present

I am an Australian. A player under the big skies, rootless, hiding in my city, pecking out at the emptiness. I am an Australian, a mongrel, an effect unaffected by its cause, a spark playing under the light big skies.

1972 - present

I am an immigrant, a visitor here, an old brown suitcase in my arms, tagged. I look around in wonder at the difference of this place. I put down my case, sit in the chair offered, try to make myself at home.

1966 - present

I am a German. I don't want to go to school, to be given the zuckertute, to be taught the rules of living. I try hard to learn the right way to eat, to do it better, for them, so they will like me better.

I am German and something besides. Something, but nobody will say what. My face; who here has a face like this?

*Small Histories: text item*

## 4. The murky business of recorded memories

*«...persons are constructed by the stories they tell. The self is a psychosocial, narrative production. There is no dualism between self and society.» (Denzin 2000, p. xi)*

*«...that's what a human is: a gathering around a perplexity.» (Leonard Cohen, cited in Iyor 1998)*

At the core of the Small Histories project is the principle of meaning-making through what comes beforehand and what comes afterward. In the Small Histories system, story creators can build narrative sequences that include items of media such as photos, passages of text and videos, thereby generating new contexts, and new meanings, for those items. Multiple meanings can also be created through the inclusion of the same item in different narratives by one more more story creators. For instance, the following image (of a doorway in the East Jerusalem village of Silwan that I took in 1997) could be part of any number of narratives including:

- a Jerusalem travelogue
- the story of my visit to Israel
- an account of the Muslim ritual of the Hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca
- a political critique of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank
- an exploration of Palestinian folk art (and so on)



Figure 44: Palestinian doorway

## Nodes and roads

A Small Histories narrative can be seen as a path through a series of nodes within a network (like a road trip through a series of towns). To add more 'nodes and roads' in an online environment is to set up new possibilities for the making and remaking of meaning. How someone 'reads' a media item (photo, text, video, audio file etc) will depend on how they have approached it, on the context their journey has created for it.



Figure 45: Nodes and road - a map

The more meanings and connections created, the more opportunity to provide different points of view on the same material. This is important because, as argued by Charlotte Linde (2001), stories do not just recall past events: they also reveal the moral attitude of the speaker towards these events, sometimes overtly and sometimes in subtle ways such as the use of a particular word or phrase. As discussed previously, auto/biographers cannot be relied upon to tell the 'truth' (Gornick 2001; Tamboukou 2005); auto/biographical stories can be political and partisan, staking a claim on history that highlights some aspects of the story and leaves out others - sometimes deliberately, sometimes not. This is further explored in the section on archival practice.

Never trust biographies. Too many events in a man's life are invisible. Unknown to others as our dreams. And nothing releases the dreamer; not death in the dream, not waking.

*Fugitive Pieces by Anne Michaels, p. 141*

With the above in mind, I set out to dig a little deeper into the knowledge effects of a system like Small Histories, using as a starting point narratologist Mieke Bal's (2008) distinction between *framing*, summarised by Frojmovic as 'an acknowledged active intervention on the part of the scholar/critic' and *context*, 'an objectivist appeal to an allegedly pre-existing set of historical data' (Frojmovic 2008, p.11).



## Context and framing: an exploration

### What do we mean by context?

Photos from those years have a different intensity; it's not because they record a lost world, and not because they are a kind of witnessing - that is the work of any photograph. No. It's because from 1940 it was illegal for any Pole, let alone a Polish Jew, to use a camera. So any photo taken by a Pole from that time and place is a forbidden photo - whether of a public execution or of a woman reading a novel quietly in her bed. (The Winter Vault by Anne Michaels, p. 286)

If the quote above were to either precede or follow a Polish photograph from 1941 within a narrative, the new context it provides would generate a new 'reading' of that photograph.

However the quote refers to more than explicit context. While it draws our attention to a set of historical circumstances that might help us to better understand a photograph (such as: *taken in Poland in the early 1940s, when it was dangerous for Poles to do so*) it also draws our attention to something purportedly embedded in the photo itself, something that we feel but can't put our finger on - the 'different intensity'. This 'something' is embedded in the risky action of taking that photo; of that subject, at that time, under those circumstances, a snapshot that captures a lot more than the subject being snapped. The quote is not simply, to again quote Frojmovic's summary of context, 'an objectivist appeal to an allegedly pre-existing set of historical data'. It is also an appeal to subjectivity, a use of historical data to uncover aspects of the objects that are present but hidden, at least in part. A kind of ghostly presence, perhaps, or a coded message or messages, or a part of the item's DNA, its creation: in Walter Benjamin's conception, the photographer as a priestly fortune teller who reveals the future through the entrails of the image (Benjamin, 1932b).

Perhaps, then, contexts can be tacit as well as explicit, intuitively sensed as well as consciously understood - and the exposition of explicit contexts can, like an archaeological dig, bring to the surface layers of other tacit contexts. This is something W.G. Sebald achieved so successfully in his novels about Europe: they brought to the surface the unspoken, melancholic sense of displacement and loss that resulted from the violent tearing apart of the pre-war social fabric.

Marie McLean alerts us to Roland Barthes' concept of *énonciation* (or enunciation/utterance/speech act) which sees language as 'an immense halo of implications, of effects, of resonance, of turns, returns, salients;...words are no longer illusorily considered as simple instruments, they are projected as missiles, explosions, vibrations, machineries, tastes: writing turns knowledge into a festival' (Barthes, cited in McLean 1988, p. 21).

This can apply not only to written language but also to the visual language of images. Through their visceral power, images have the potential to generate 'explosions' of response. As Anne Michaels stated at the Melbourne Writers Festival, 'an image reaches you before you have any time to defend yourself against it'. Jill Bennett points out that 'images have the capacity to address the spectator's own bodily memory; to **touch** the viewer who **feels** rather than simply sees the event, drawn into the image through a process of affective contagion...Bodily response thus precedes the inscription of narrative, or moral emotion of empathy' (Bennett, cited in Hirsch 2005, p. 36).

Marianne Hirsch suggests why. She refers to photography's 'promise to offer access to the event itself, and its easy assumption of iconic and symbolic power' (Hirsch 2008, p. 107). Photographs 'enable us, in the present, not only to see and to touch that past but also to try to reanimate it by undoing the finality of the photographic 'take'. (Hirsch 2008, p. 115). We insert ourselves into the narrative generated both by the photograph and by those things we know about the photograph.

Then there are the additional contexts generated through visual juxtapositioning; placing two or more media items together, as Sebald did in his books. Visual juxtapositioning is becoming increasingly common as technologies for creating and publishing media have grown in sophistication. However, it has a long pedigree. It is the basis of filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein's theory of *montage*, itself borrowing from notions of collage or 'glue', developed by Picasso and George Braque, then used extensively by the Dadaists and Surrealists (Waldenberg, date unknown). Eisenstein's theory involved the linking together of images in what he called a 'collision', generating new ideas, comparisons and metaphors (Eisenstein 1949). These may vary from closely related items to apparently unconnected imagery, as undertaken by Eisenstein in his 1928 film *October: Ten Days that Shook the World*.

To complicate things further, narratees also bring their own contexts to narratives. Tacit contexts influence the way stories are seen/read/heard/interpreted by a narratee. Just as the creation of a work involves the interplay of multiple forces, so too does its consumption and interpretation. Multiplicities of meaning, of the type revealed by Barthes and others like Bakhtin, jostle for prominence in our consciousness as we encounter images, events and places:

Places in Germany, particularly the old pre-WW2 East are heteroglossic (Bakhtin, 1981) because it is difficult for an outsider cognisant of the Holocaust images and the Second World War to look at them without overlaying the black mirror of this other. This realisation is displaced, transferred and belated. Places are read against past narratives of modernisation and fascism. (Berry 2009, p. 214)

As well as triggering historical and political narratives, encounters with locations also trigger more personal responses. In the auto/biographical *A Berlin Chronicle*, Walter Benjamin explores the idea of turning his life into a map, a kind of city resonant with layers of hidden meaning, with the seeker as archaeologist uncovering fragmented, unordered evidence of the past (1932, p. 26).

Fruitless searching is as much a part of this as succeeding; and consequently remembrance must not proceed in the manner of a narrative or still less that of a report, but must, in the strictest epic and rhapsodic manner, assay its spade in ever-new places, and in the old ones delve to ever-deeper layers (Benjamin 1932, p. 26)

Digital technologies offer new promise for the creation, publication and sharing of media-rich family stories in ways consistent with the ideas of media pioneers like Eisenstein and Benjamin, and incorporating hidden contexts. Some of this involves the use of metadata, as exemplified by IBM's research into what it calls Knowledge Socialisation. This looked at the use of metadata as a kind of lens through which to look at stories and thereby bring to the surface implicit knowledge (IBM Research website, viewed 2010).

Furthermore, the growth of networked mobile media is generating new ways of bringing the ghosts to the fore through mapping and juxtapositioning. One example is the StreetMuseum application for the Apple iPhone. Produced by the Museum of London, this software overlays archival photos of London streets, taken from the Museum's archive, onto 200 real locations when viewed via the iPhone camera. Viewers can then delve further, via metadata, into the historical contexts behind the overlaid archival images:



Figure 46: StreetMuseum application- Salvation Army International headquarters, 23 Queen Victoria Street, London. Source: BBC Online

Here the London street is literally framed and haunted by an archival photograph that has been digitised and recontextualised. It sets up a reflexive relation with the beholder, creating a site of postmemory that invites an act of the imagination as well as remembrance. We read the contemporary street against the context of World War II and the bombings of London. This kind of approach could well form the next technical development stage of the Small Histories project.

Whereas the contexts and frames of some archival photographs, such as the London street scene above, are explicit and transparent, in the following section I will try to expose the relations between context and framing in less transparent memory sites: those represented by my own family photographs. Here, I am interested in how context and framing are operationalised in the intimate, fragmented space of family history; what these sites are, what we bring to the sites, and how the interactions between beholder and object manifest as encounters.

## Some family photographs



Figure 47: family photograph

Above is a family photograph. How to read it? We will imagine ourselves as someone who is seeing it for the first time (a response based on previously observed reactions to the photo):

*It has an airy, informal, summery feel. The woman in the foreground is captured in what seems to be an unplanned moment of blurred movement, smiling. The other people in the background seem to be enjoying a stroll around the estate grounds.*

Anything else?

*It looks like Europe. It's from the past; a historical photo maybe. Chances are it's from a very different time.*

Are there any tacit contexts emerging yet?

Now we will add some snippets of explicit context:

- *the estate house pictured faces a large lake (behind the photographer, down the slope of the hill)*

- *on the back of the photo, in the handwriting of my grandmother, are the lines: 'Koldemanz 1944.'* This act of context - created by the photographer we presume - places the photo in the Pomeranian village of Koldemanz (now Kolomac), with the estate house being that of my grandmother's family.

This explicit context places the photo in the calm before the storm: a few months before the arrival of the Russian front in early 1945. The arrival of Russians and Polish forces resulted in the demolition of the estate house, the little Lutheran church where my grandparents were married in 1937 (located just behind the trees to the right of the estate house) and the German cemetery adjoining the church. Soon to follow was the expulsion of the German population.

Interestingly, I was exploring and photographing the ruins of the estate house and church in the same week that the photo above came to light in 2005, as part of my grandfather's shoebox of photos uncovered in a garage near Cologne. Here are two photos I took of the ruins:



Figures 48 & 49: ruins at Kolomac

And now to add some more personal context:

The arrival of the Russians saw my grandmother, like many other Germans, poisoning herself and her children (my four-year-old mother and six-year-old uncle) in the forest near the village. According to an account written by a relative and subsequently published in paperback (Von Normann, 1962), only a concerted and sustained effort by a Russian doctor saved their lives. And, by extension, my life too.

So how might we now read the photo? Perhaps:

*There is a sense of foreshadowing. The woman in front is a ghost, impermanent and in flux. White crosses, like war graves, mark the windows. The estate house is doomed. To the right, darkness. The woman is escaping the front. The others walk blindly into it.*

And so, the carefree summertime photograph takes on a completely new meaning; not replacing or negating its previous meaning but adding to and complicating it. The additional context cloaks the image with its resonance as, in the words of Marianne Hirsch, an example of "images of "before" that signal the deep loss of safety in the world" (2008, p. 108).

But does the image possess a hint of this poignancy *without* the explicit context? Might somebody not familiar with the story see, in Barthes' words, the *punctum*, the hidden, personal, wounding, subterranean counter-meaning puncturing the studium, the ostensible surface meaning of the image? (Barthes 1980). I can see the punctum in this image - but then I'm operating within a framework of family knowledge that has given me different eyes. Perhaps you can see it more clearly?

Context, as hinted at by the addition of the two photographs of the ruins, can be generated by juxtaposing temporal sequences to magnify the punctum of a specific image. The following examples make use of selected items from my own Small Histories story content to show how context can be created by combining images into a narrative sequence.

#### **Some examples of context creation from my life story**

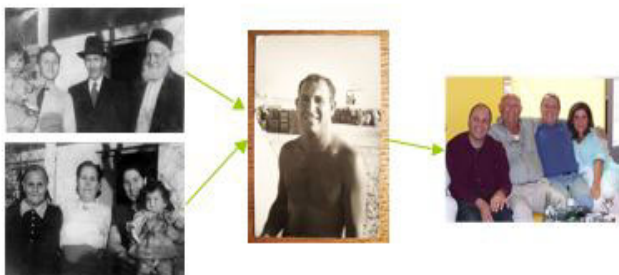


Figure 50: story of three generations on my father's side of the family

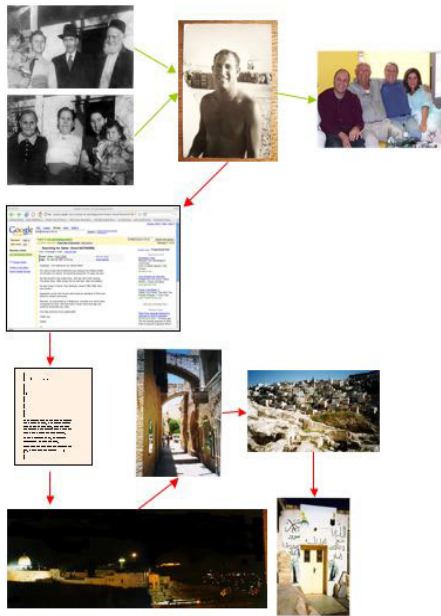


Figure 51: adding the story of finding my father (my 'looking for father' newsgroup message; email that father had been found; going to Israel)

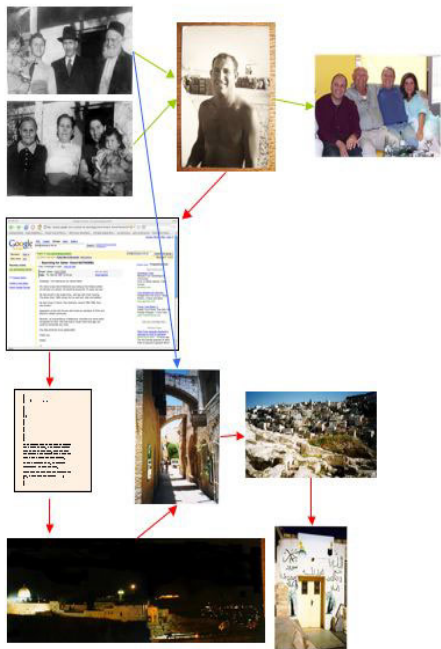


Figure 52: adding my great-grandfather's story (synagogue cantor and shop owner in the Old City of Jerusalem until 1948)



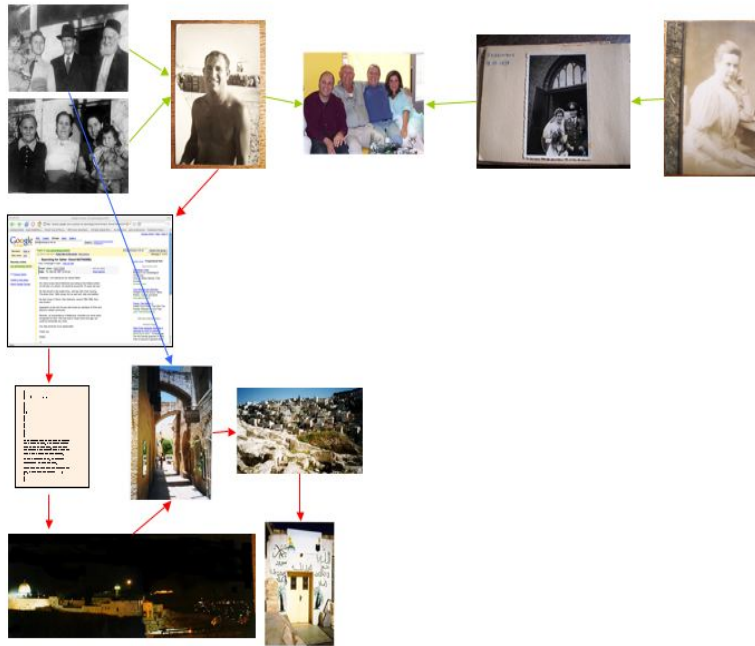


Figure 53: adding the story of three generations of my mother's family

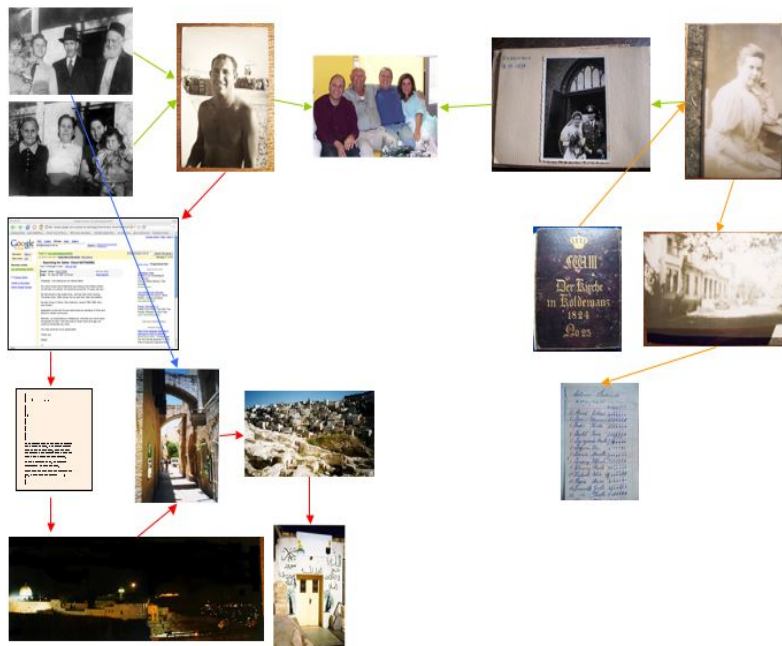


Figure 54: Adding the story of me finding the Koldemanz church hymn book on my grandparents' book shelf (inside of which was a photo of their estate house, a photo of my great-grandmother, and a forced work roster from 1945)

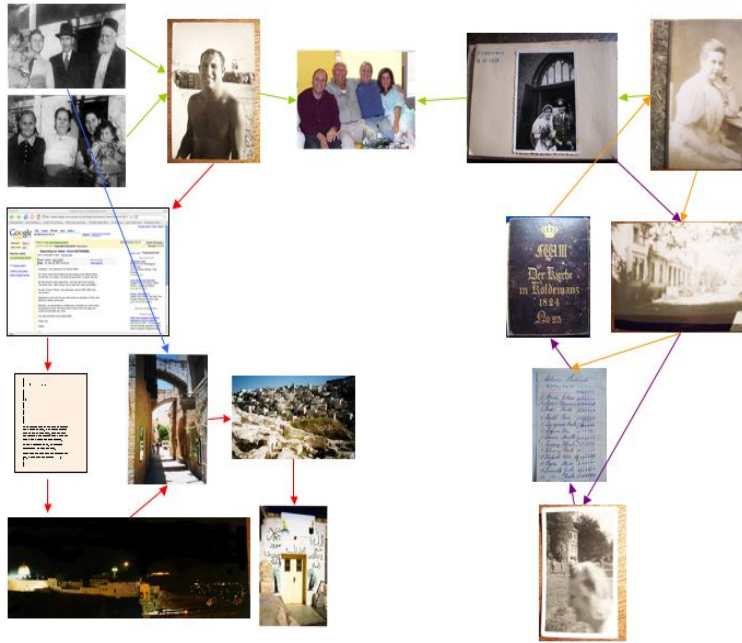


Figure 55: adding the story of my grandparents' village of Koldemanz (their wedding in the village church next door to the estate house, forced work gangs following the arrival of the Russian front, and the fleeing of my family, taking the church hymn book with them)

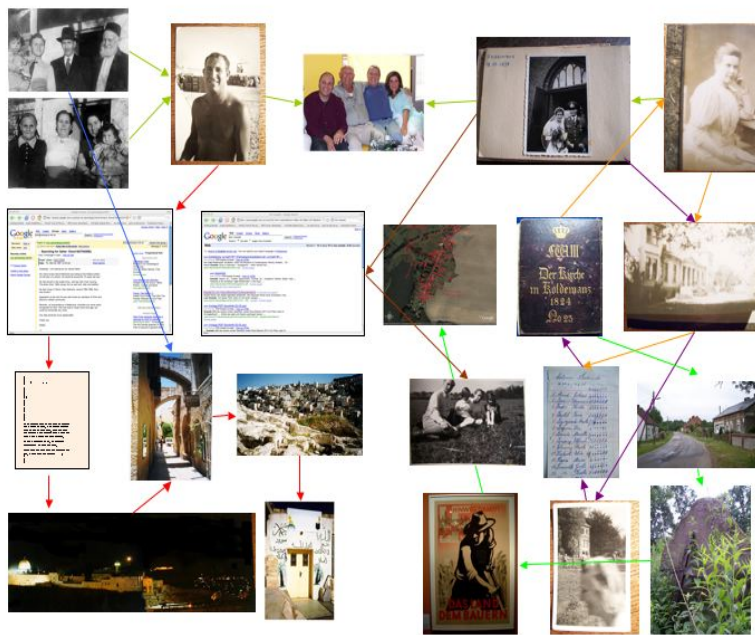


Figure 56: adding:

- the story of the destruction of the estate house and church (me visiting the village in 2005; finding the site of the church; poster from Berlin museum denouncing estates as bourgeois and Nazi; Google map of village superimposed with pre-World War II map of the village)
- the story of me looking up my grandmother's name on Google; finding her mentioned in the wartime memoirs of a family friend published online by his grandson; finding a 1950s photo of the family friend's son in my grandfather's collection of photos

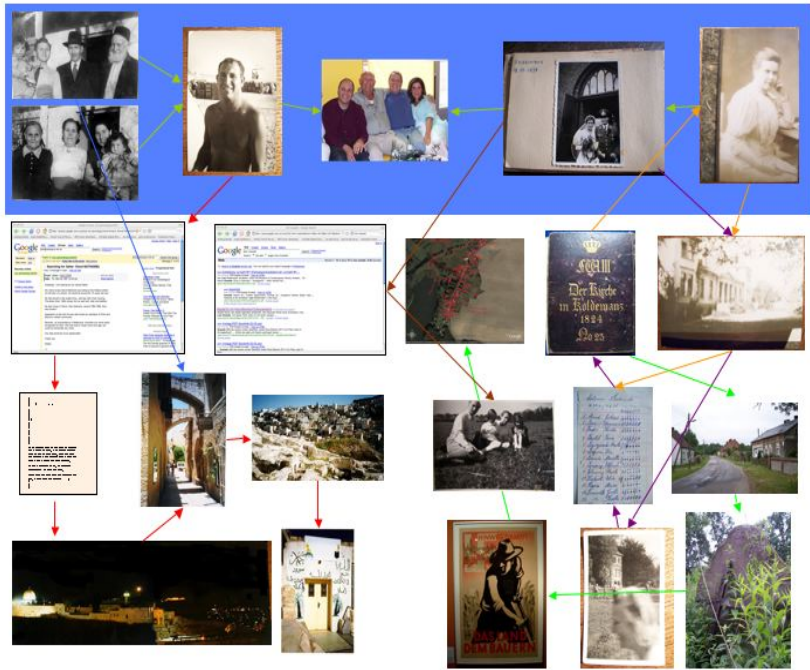


Figure 57: theme: my family history

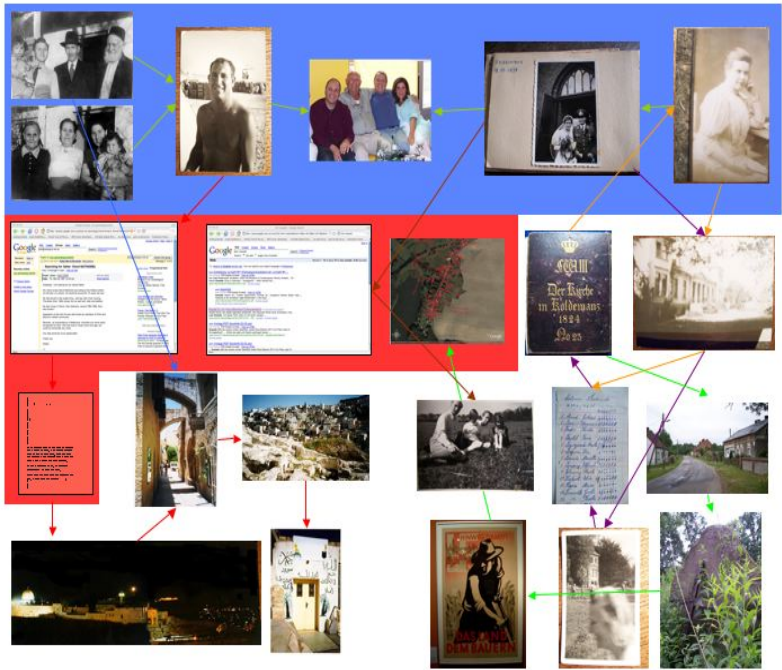


Figure 58: theme: the internet as a participant in my story

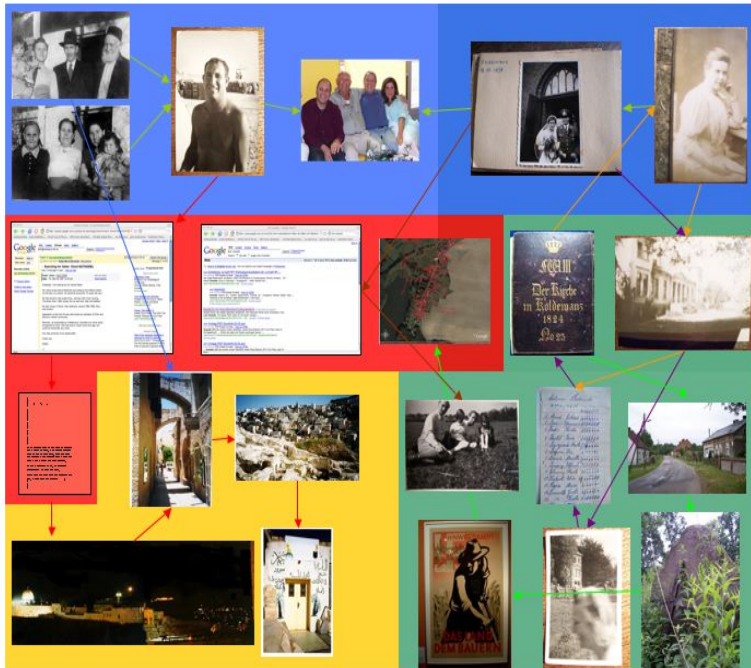


Figure 59: themes:

- history of my family in Koldemanz
- Jerusalem travelogue

### Framing 'framing'

Previously I presented a few carefully chosen photographs in a particular order and added specific commentaries. I told a story, weaving narratives from fragments that were invested with symbolic meaning. I created frames for the images presented, using context, the 'objectivist appeal to an allegedly pre-existing set of historical data' mentioned previously, to invest them with a sense of historical weight.

But what precisely do we mean when we talk about creating a 'frame'? Conceptions of the term vary. In its general usage it suggests a managed presentation of information, sometimes as a strategy to achieve particular ends, even at times to the degree of implying falsification or deception.

When conceptualised as a critical tool in Media Studies, framing becomes a lens through which research material is examined. Frojmovic (2008, p. 12) describes it as 'quite literally something that is (super)imposed on the image and can be inclusive or exclusive of its marginal spaces'. Framing can be seen as a kind of deliberate distortion or privileging that serves the purpose of fostering particular types of understanding.

Entman (1993) notes that 'to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation' (p. 52). This, as Fromjovic states, is 'an acknowledged active intervention' (p. 11). As such, it appears to tally with the general conception of framing as an active process, but differs in that it is explicitly acknowledged.

In the social theory understanding of framing, however, frames are filters or 'schemas of interpretation' that people use to make sense of the world. As described by Gitlin (1980), 'Frames are principles of selection, emphasis and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters' (p. 6). Here, the word 'tacit' suggests a passive, unconscious process of interpretation - as opposed to the 'active intervention' described previously. Frames in the social theory sense are seen as a mental shortcuts because by default, we prefer to do as little thinking as possible (Fiske and Taylor 1991), and we only shift frames or become fully aware of them when something forces us to replace one frame with another: an incongruity (Goffman 1974).

The word 'frame' has particular resonance when applied to images. The very act of taking a photo involves the creation of a frame, an intention. And through this frame, we look and attain glimpses into other worlds, whilst remaining safely removed from them:

Small, two-dimensional, delimited by their frames, photographs minimize the disaster they depict and screen their viewers from it. But in seeming to open a window to the past and materializing the viewer's relationship to it, they also give a glimpse of its enormity and its power. (Hirsch 2008, p. 117)

From this, we can learn about ourselves and, indeed, about our own frames:

They can tell us as much about our own needs and desires (as readers and spectators) as they can about the past world they presumably predict...The fragmentariness and the two-dimensional flatness of the photographic image, moreover, make it especially open to narrative elaboration and embroidery and to symbolization. (Hirsch 2008, p. 117)

As Chare states, the punctum forces us to look outside the frames we have created: "The punctum is not part of the meanings that we give to an image, rather it gives us meaning. Through the injury it causes, I feel something and I must ask why have I felt and what have I felt' (2008, p. 96).

Below is a photo of my grandfather and grandmother, taken in their Lübeck apartment some four years after their Koldemanz marriage:



Figure 60: Lübeck apartment 1

But I have added an additional layer of framing myself. Here is the photo as it emerged from my grandfather's shoebox in 2005:



Figure 61: Lübeck apartment 2

This photo seems to have been carefully composed so that the portrait on the wall was in the frame. Who took it? To what purpose? What kind of contextual information could help us here? And how do the contexts we bring to the photo influence how we read it?

And what if I add some of my own context, to modify the effects of the framing:

- *My grandparents became life-long pacifists and Social Democrats after their World War II experiences.*
- *My Israeli father believes to this day that my German grandfather was an anti-Semite. He thinks he saw a book or magazine with anti-Jewish sentiments when he visited once in the 1960s.*
- *When I was in Germany in 1998, my grandfather and his second wife Anne gave me a book of Jewish life stories from the Rhineland-Palatinate, where they lived.*

Similarly, Katrin Himmler observes in her family history how new context can change the way she frames her family photographs:

...after my first researches I started to see these photographs with a different eye. My grandparents' romantic wedding photos, which I used to admire so much, had lost their innocence. Only now did I notice the Party badge on Ernst's lapel. Heinrich, his best man, posed outside the registry office with the happy couple. He was wearing his SS uniform...(p. 19)

We create and modify frames by what we choose to include in our stories and what we leave out - see the Thorpes.org website case study in Appendix II for another example. A further frame then emerges in the way we arrange that material – the emphasis we give particular items, the narratives we choose to foreground or background. The process of framing and the process of context creation appear to be closely interwoven.

In *A Short History of Photography*, Walter Benjamin refers to the aura, an interaction of subjective attitudes which he describes as: 'a strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be' (1932b, pp. 119, 518). The aura also has a performative kinetic aspect whereby 'the aura is neither a stable attribute nor an object, but an index of the dynamic fraught relationship between the beholder and the artefact' (Briggs 2008, p. 115). Photographs have the power to create such kinetic self-reflexive encounters with the beholder, and acts of context creation and framing overlap as this relationship plays out, a relationship that can be fueled, as in my case, by the dynamics of postmemory.

## In conclusion

Acts of context creation and framing overlap. It can be said that the items selected for a family story/history - the number, type and nature of the stories, photographs and other items chosen, and those left out - is itself a frame. A further frame is then generated in the way these items are juxtaposed within the narrative. Furthermore, as can be seen in the previous quote from Katrin Himmler, any new contextual understandings can further affect the way we frame family data.

In summary, one can say that all of the following occur within a framework of intention, unconscious motivation and circumstance (personal, social, historical, political):

- the act of creating autobiographical material
- the act of presenting autobiographical material
- the act of consuming autobiographical material

Within such layers of activity, conscious and unconscious, contexts and frames operate. They can be tacit or explicit; it's murky out there and the definitions and boundaries are not often clear. The punctum, says Chare, 'eludes, evades, escapes our efforts to ensnare it and catch it in meaning. It gives sense without being sensible' (p. 96). One can say however that contexts are the building materials for frames, whilst contexts (and their juxtapositions) can also challenge - and shift - frames. And, in turn, frames may determine which contexts are included and which are left out.

The 'tripartate spaciality' proposed by Griselda Pollock (2008) for the analysis of painting as visual representation offers one succinct way to gather together such disparate and overlapping attributes. It suggests looking at: 'the spaces that are represented, the space of representation, and the space from which representation was produced and that inscribes one possibility of its space of reading' (p. 66). In these spaces, the encounter between the beholder and the object plays out.

In my own encounters with my family photographs, and observations of others' encounters, I have observed a phenomenon that could be called the 'resonant beholder', in that the beholder resonates, like a musical instrument, with a kind of recognition. The beholder recognises *something* about the object; they may not be necessarily sure what that something is, but a response is triggered related to memory, or perhaps a yearning for memory, or for a sense of continuity and meaning. This resonance is the visceral experience referred to by Hirsch and Bennett: the ability to, as previously quoted, **'touch** the viewer who **feels** rather than simply



sees the event, drawn into the image through a process of affective contagion...’ (Bennett, cited in Hirsch 2005, p. 36).

All beholders, it can be said, resonate to some degree with visual material such as photos, but the type and degree of that resonance seems to depend on the *something* that the object appears to be singing out to them, that the beholder takes from the object within the space of the encounter. Family connections could be seen as one of the strongest generators of such resonance, or cultural connections, or the memory of specific events, places and times. The beholder may well be ‘reading something into’ the object— creating their own frames – or picking up on what is there within the object, or both. These frames can also change radically as new information alters the space of the encounter, as can be seen in the Katrin Himmler quote above.

In presenting my family photographs, I have both called on context and created my own frames. From the encounters generated I have woven narratives of family that have simultaneously provided me (and potentially other family members, depending on who might be interested in this material in the future) with a deepened sense of place in the world, and exposed a deep postmemorial yearning for a mythic ancestral past.

## Some ethical considerations



Figure 62: Charlie

*This is a photo I took in July 2008 of my school friend Charlie driving his van. The sunlight streaming through the window gives it an ethereal feel. In fact, that is why I chose this photo instead of two others I took.*

*I'll add now that Charlie seemed uncomfortable at the time. I didn't ask him before I took the snaps. I still feel odd about that.*

*Now I'll add that Charlie was wearing a beanie because he had lost his hair, a result of chemotherapy.*

*And lastly I'll add that Charlie, a father of five, passed away nine months after this photo was taken.*

Here I have used a photo to make a point – a photo mining a personal event that is very real and important to people who are still living. What right do I have to do this? I don't know if I can answer. If I had framed the photo, so to speak, differently, would I have had more or less right, depending on the frame I had created? And would I have had more right if I had the permission of the living? Maybe I should upload this photo to his Facebook memorial page, as others have done? Would he have wanted that?

Stories about people who have passed away are archival in a sense - to keep alive a person through memory. Again I refer to Anne Michaels, whose poem was quoted in the introduction to *Fugitive Pieces*:

*The dead read backwards*

*As in a mirror. They gather*

*In the white field and look up.*

*Waiting for someone*

*To write their names.*

As stated by John Berger in the same introduction, this poem (and Michaels' book) is 'about memory, about saving from oblivion and, above all, about bodies, their names, and, what they know.' But as Derrida proposes in *Archive Fever*, the act of archiving is about selectively forgetting as well as remembering, about establishing authority as well as maintaining a sense of continuity and memory.

I would like to add to Denzin's statement that *persons are constructed by the stories they tell* with: *persons are also constructed by the stories other people tell about them*. This is particularly in the case of those who, like Charlie or my grandfather, have passed away, because they can't speak up for themselves. 'The photograph', says Charne, 'can in some respects function like an obituary, but only when the instant it carries within it is named' (Charne 2008, p. 100).

I am still not sure what Charlie was uncomfortable about, and I cannot ask him now. I do not know if he felt odd about being 'captured' like that, without the long locks of hair he had lost, if he was uncomfortable about my desire to preserve him, and if that reminded him of his mortality. I do not know if he was reacting to what might be seen as an act of voyeurism, me documenting his slowly failing body through a lens, safely at a distance from the void into which he was unflinchingly, atheistically staring, and which we had discussed on that same trip in the van. I really cannot say, or maybe I do not want to. But here is the photo. To be or not to be. To show or not to show. The question remains.

### **Where does the data go?**

A complex issue connected with online narratives is that of data: who owns it, who has the right to access it, and what responsibility data owners and collectors have to data providers. As seen with the Thorpes.org case study in Appendix II, people willingly give away their day-to-day histories, often to owners of social networking or media sharing websites with no obligation to keep this data, and no motivation unless their business stands to benefit. What will happen when posters' grandchildren want to find out about their forebears? Unlike me, they may not have the chance to access a dusty family album or a rediscovered box of photos. Might that be my responsibility as the owner of Small Histories? If not, who? The Internet Service Provider hosting the site?

When I started the Small Histories project, Facebook didn't exist. Now many of us volunteer our public and private histories to it and other sites like it: Albrechtslund (2008) deploys the term 'participatory surveillance' to denote a state of self-generated disclosure that is playful, emergent and socially based. Unlike the posed

photographs of previous generations, such data is not created as an intentional record for posterity. So should it be kept, and if so how, for whom, and for how long?

Also, in which ways might it be accessed now that data storage formats become obsolescent so quickly? Even when our relatives have the data, they may not be able to view it. Even now, who is still able to access a floppy disc? A Jaz drive? A DAT tape? In the future, who will be able to see the emails we write today? The Apple iPad currently does not support Flash files - so what will become of websites written in Flash? Archivist and technologists are attempting to deal with this issue. One is online artist and archivist Lisa Cianci, whose web-based *Blackaeonium Project* seeks to 'facilitate the storage, use and reuse of digital content using archival constructs and methodologies' (Cianci, 2010).

Then there is the opposite problem: the easy portability of digital data. As stated by David Lyon (2001, p. 42), the data we upload to an internet-based service is held in a 'leaky container' and can easily spill out into other areas of the web and beyond, given the accelerating tendency towards convergence. You never know where your information will end up - ask any Usenet user from the mid-1990s whose posts are now publicly searchable through Google Groups.

There are also related questions about control that relate to the technology itself. Who controls the technology? Who can change it? Who constructs the inbuilt hierarchies and why? Artist Victoria Vesna posed this question in 1999 when she stated, after examining the ongoing drive by corporations to 'digitise all knowledge': '...one truly begins to wonder what kind of role artists working with information and networks assume and indeed whether they will be able to effect coding or aesthetics in significant ways at all' (Vesna 1999, p. 10).

A decade later, the same questions remain, except that perhaps the online tools have become easier to use. I do not have answers for many of these questions, and I wonder if anyone does. All I can say is that, as Small Histories creator, I will endeavour to treat the data with respect and will let contributors know where the data is being stored. Eventually, perhaps, the site, if successful, could be transferred to an organisation like the National Library of Australia for continued use or archiving - but again, how would that tally with the intentions of the site's story creators? I plan to ask future contributors this when the issue arises.

## **Moderation**

On any website with active contributors, decisions have to be made when and how to intervene. In a site like Small Histories, there are risks of people writing damaging things to one another, or using the site to

further partisan aims. The questions is: how much and what kind of policing should go on on a website like *Small Histories*?

To help answer that question, in October 2005 I interviewed a former RMIT University postgraduate student, Carolena Helderma. Carolena's RMIT project *Positive Stories* is a website created for HIV positive people to share their experiences, predating the social networking era by some years. It is now ten years old and very popular around the world. The interview (a summary of which can be found in Appendix IX) surprised me in that, given such a sensitive topic, Helderma had found few problems with abusive posts or people attempting to push their own agendas. Helderma's approach to *Positive Stories* tallied with my planned approach to the (then still unrealised) *Small Histories* site, an approach influenced by my own experience working for a internet search portal, as well as subsequent work as a web producer and interaction designer. This approach was: a 'light touch' in regard to moderation (intervening only when necessary); an 'opt-in' approach to giving personal information such as email addresses or names; publishing of first names only; and judging potential issues on a case-by-case basis.

The only issues identified by Helderma were: occasional judgement calls had to be made with explicit or sensitive material; some informal policies had to be developed (such as no promotion of vitamin 'cures'); and the process of moderation was sometimes time-consuming and wearisome, as it was undertaken by Helderma alone. This is a bridge I still have to cross.

However since 2005 another issue has arisen in the form of automated scripts that scour the web and post multiple messages in unsecured comments fields. The Small Histories site has been struck a number of times, including recently (see below). The solution to this, however, will be a purely technical one – a filter of some sort.

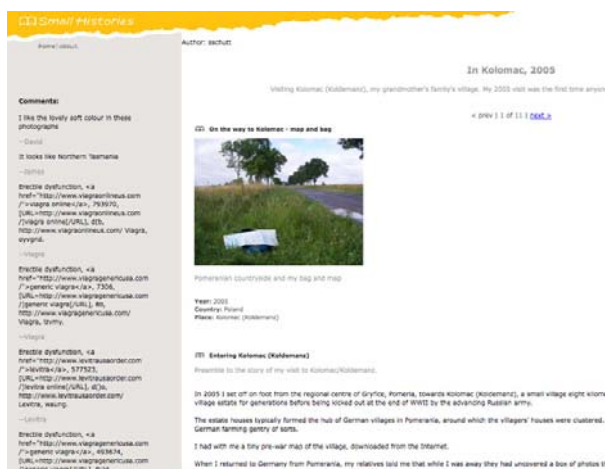


Figure 63: Comment spam on Small Histories site

## The archival dimension: preservation, destruction, partisanship

### The editable archive

One of Small Histories' aims is to become a self-generating archive of personal stories. This incorporates one of the internet's strengths: its ability to encompass a variety of media types including both text-based and forms of visual and audio media. Already the internet has been deployed for collecting and archiving visual material and the trend is growing, as can be seen in archival initiatives such as the *Arab Image Foundation*.

Jacques Derrida's book *Archive Fever (mal d'archive)* began as a 1994 speech at a conference held at the Freud Archives. It examines the urge to archive in terms of Freudian psychoanalysis, in particular the 'death drive' (the drive towards death, destruction and forgetfulness) which Derrida identifies as the engine of the archival urge (p.28). Pointing out that the Greek roots of the word *Archive* (or *Arche*) can mean both 'commencement' and 'commandment', Derrida argues that the archival impulse is contradictory: the attempt to preserve what might otherwise be forgotten, and the attempt to establish authority through remembering some things and wilfully forgetting others.

Concerned with both saving and destroying, exposing and concealing, the archival urge is a kind of affliction described by Derrida as "a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement" (p. 91). One could, in fact, say that my entire project is the result of such a yearning.

The places where people were killed often showed no mark; within moments the bit of pavement looked exactly as before.

From my window I kept looking for a trace of the old man's murder, but there was none.

*The Winter Vault by Anne Michaels, p. 287*

A simple-minded, childish revelation - that we can die without a trace.

*The Winter Vault by Anne Michaels, p. 288*

Talk is only a reprieve, Lucjan had said this more than once. No matter how loud we shout, no matter how personal our revelations, history does not hear us.

*The Winter Vault by Anne Michaels, p. 312*

Derrida argues that, by definition, an archive needs to exist apart from the thing it is attempting to preserve: "there is no archive without consignment in an external place which assures the possibility of memorization,

of repetition, of reproduction, or of reimpression."(p. 11). And unlike the Freud Archives, nowadays that 'place' need not be physical. It might instead be a network of linked binary data sitting on servers around the world and brought together - database, web front end, folders containing more ones and zeroes - via the internet. As Leonard Lawlor points out in his review of *Archive Fever*, 'the computer is transforming the archive because this futuristic technology virtualizes communication; in other words, it makes communication "spectral" ' (Lawlor 1998, p. 797). In this new environment, an archive's authority can be challenged as easily as it can be created. One version of history can be authored with a minimum of effort and sit side by side with another on a web search results page. Material from one context can be adopted and given new meanings - or doctored outright. Different versions of events can compete for the status of an 'authoritative' version of history, even within the same website. (Note: please refer to Appendix III for an exploration of Wikipedia's internal editorial wars).

There is nothing new about competing narratives; just the battleground has changed. Marie McLean stated in 1988 that 'narrative space can become an arena, and performance can become a contest. Narrative contests involve not only tellings, but rivalry and even aggression' (p. 125). By facilitating access to mass audiences, and providing participants with the ability to take part easily, anonymously and with often little consequence, the internet can be seen as a setting for archival warfare, driven by 'the death, aggression, and destruction drive' that Derrida sees as fuelling the archival drive (Derrida 1996, p. 95).

McLean refers to narrative as a game in which the goal is the ascendancy of *your* story. She references the improvised narrative contests undertaken by African-American rappers, and the origins of the word *ludus*: the Latin word for both 'game' and 'school' that originally meant a preparation for war (p. 126). Narrative can be seen as a competition of performances where your version of a story seeks to wipe out the opponent's version, perhaps for generations (p. 128). She states, in a statement in line with Derrida's observations some years later, that 'the fear of the generations as they confront each other is expressed as much by the anxiety of being superseded found in the story-telling contest as by the anxiety of influence' (p. 127).

Environments like Wikipedia bring to the fore the narrative power struggles outlined by McLean: 'modifications are imposed by a context which implies an interchange, and **a fortiori** by one which implies a competition.' (1988, p. 125). In oral narrative these are explicit, involving 'a permutation and alternation of roles between tellers and listeners' (p. 125), but in written narrative they become tacit and stabilised due to the shutting down of the arena for synchronous, unpredictable power struggles between narrative creators and consumers. The web and its practices, I argue, undermine the stability of power relations created by paper-based narratives. Some find this troubling, and would like to see a more stable (read: controlled)

situation where the ability to create and/or access information is funnelled through officially sanctioned channels.

### Remembering the dead: archives, technology and posterity

*When a man dies, his secrets bond like crystals, like frost on a window. His last breath obscures the glass.*  
(Fugitive Pieces by Anne Michaels, p. 114)

Writing of the relationship of the archive to posterity, Derrida states: 'It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow. The archive: if we want to know what that will have meant, we will only know in times to come' (1996, p. 36). Now we might add: if we know *what it will become*, we will only know in times to come. Because an archival story may never end, it may just continue to change.

Lawlor's review of Derrida's book concludes with 'An archive is what lies below or even beyond the living present; it makes living memory possible and yet, being artificial, it threatens it with death' (1998, p. 797). Lawlor's statement rings particularly true in this era: on the web, living memory is more editable than ever.

Below is a screenshot from the Facebook profile of Charlie, the school friend who died in March 2009:



Figure 64: Facebook profile of deceased school friend Charlie (with surnames removed)



**Small Histories blog post: 11 March 2009**

This morning, the txt came through. I've been slowly processing all day. Normal operations interspersed by fits and starts of occasional crying.

Tonight, I posted a reminiscence on Charlie's Facebook profile. It wasn't to Charlie, it was about Charlie to others. It's a strange space now. He is no longer with us, but his traces remain.

I was wondering: is this ghoulish? Inappropriate? Odd? Maybe...but then I remembered the Polish deli at Preston Market, with the laminated photo of the lady who died in 2007 pasted in two places. We forget you not.

A 2010 newspaper article from The Age explores the posthumous Facebook phenomenon. Entitled *Our virtual selves linger on, long after we've shuffled off*, Brigid Delaney writes;

...Until there is a way of finding out a user is dead, friends of the deceased must cope with ghosts in their machines.

They include the automatic messages from Facebook reminding you to "reconnect" with your dead friend. Or reminders of your dead friend's birthday. Having had friends who have died, getting these catch-up reminders from Facebook can be weird.

In the early days of grieving, to receive such a reminder is a shock. There is that small, almost imperceptible jolt when the message first arrives (maybe they are still alive, maybe I dreamt the death) before the realisation that, yes, they are dead, but Facebook just doesn't know it yet.

Months later, the reminders to get in touch with dead friends provoke melancholy. When someone dies young and unexpectedly, there is something stark about returning to their Facebook page. Scroll down and there is an unspooling of information around that death, time stamped in the narrative of the unfolding horror, charting the crawl towards comprehending the incomprehensible.

There is the banal last message she posted about ice-cream. Then other people posting: "I am hearing weird rumours, please contact me."

Then the penny drops and the information about the death flows across the Facebook page between friends. Then follow the RIPs and the tributes. The rows of kisses and emoticons. The links shared to prayers and favourite songs and sayings, and videos. It becomes a way of sharing information about the dead person and, especially if you are far away, sharing grief.

Next, a screenshot of Google Street View for Marysville, a Victorian village destroyed by bushfires in February 2009. The Street View images were taken before the fires.

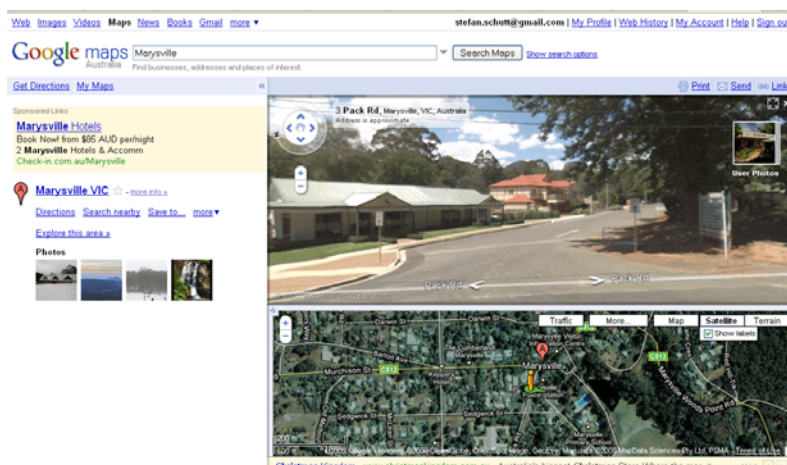


Figure 65: Google Maps: Marysville. Source: <http://maps.google.com/>

Illustrating the aforementioned archival tension is this excerpt from a 2009 article by Rob O'Brien in *Government News* (an Australian government trade magazine) entitled *Google preserving Victoria's bushfire towns, for now*:

...Google Australia has no immediate plans to update images of Victoria's ravaged bushfire towns on its Street View application.

The online search engine has been responding to queries from residents and pressure groups about preserving parts of Victoria that were damaged in the February 7 bushfires, which left more than 200 people dead and more than 10,000 homeless.

"We're not announcing a particular time frame for how often we're going to update it, but we're very aware that Street View works because it's a current view of what an area looks like," said PR manager for Google Australia, Annie Baxter.

A Facebook group started by a Melbourne resident in response to the bushfires lobbied for towns including Marysville, Kinglake, Flowerdale, Strathewen, and Kilmore to have their pre-bushfire images retained in Google Maps.

The group 'Keep Old Google Maps: Preserve Marysville & Victorian bushfire towns', which has more than 700 members, campaigns for "a time slider which could allow us to view imagery from the past as well as the present, or to keep the current views as a time capsule somewhere else online".

"We've received a number of requests to consider retaining the Street View imagery for fire-affected areas, and it's something we're looking into," Baxter said.

"There are no current plans to replace the existing imagery."

Increasingly, the web serves as a location or repository of memory for those who have died, either in conjunction with or in lieu of physical markers such as gravestones. Parallel offline practices also exist,

including the phenomena of 'ghost bikes', a growing international memorial practice that involves leaving a bicycle, painted white, at the place where a rider has been killed. A 2010 newspaper story entitled *At the site of tragedy, a ghost bike shines a white light on a fallen rider*, anonymously profiles the Melbourne rider who brought the ghost bike concept to Australia, and outlines the story of the his cycling friend's death. The friend's bereaved partner speaks of the ghost bike erected to remember him:

As part of her mourning, she began to visit the ghost bike on the 13th of every month. She has other ways of remembering him - and other places she goes - but sees the bike as "symbolic".

"He would not have wanted people to go to a cemetery," she says. "This has become his burial site."....She hopes it will be a "central place where all who knew Russ can go to pay their respects"

The article has a twist: the ghost bike was not put there by the dead cyclist's friend (who was trying to gain official permission to place the ghost bike himself) but by an anonymous rider. The article also tells the story of three other ghost bikes around Melbourne that disappeared shortly after being placed. No government authority or body has admitted to removing them.



Figure 66: Ghost bike, Mount Eliza, Melbourne. Source: [http://www.pistabikes.com.au/ghost\\_bikes\\_18.html](http://www.pistabikes.com.au/ghost_bikes_18.html)

This kind of 'guerilla remembering', as it might be called, is reminiscent of the participatory art practices referred to earlier. It is a spontaneous action of memory invocation, of marking a legacy, of locating or creating a conduit or focal point for emotion and memory. Ghost bikes 'serve as reminders of the tragedy that took place on an otherwise anonymous street corner, and as quiet statements in support of cyclists' right to safe travel' (Ghostbikes.org, viewed 2010).

I became interested in the ghost bikes phenomenon, which has now spread to 100 countries according to Ghostbikes.org, because it seemed to be driven by the same urge to remember, to 'save from oblivion', as that driving the memorial websites and social networking pages previously described. It also shares similar qualities of spontaneity, nimbleness of response and (ironically, and unlike the drive for permanent

remembering that has created cemeteries and their chiselled gravestones) a sense of ultimate impermanence that is somehow suited to the times we live in. The zealous removal of many Melbourne ghost bikes, apparently as a result of objections by some car drivers, underlines this impermanence, and has led to a Facebook lobby group, Ghost Bikes Australia, calling for Australian government bodies to not remove the bikes quite so soon (Ghost Bikes Australia, viewed 2010). The Ghost Bikes phenomenon highlights the pragmatic aspects of such memory acts. To paint and place a ghost bike is a relatively uncomplicated procedure (bureaucratic negotiations notwithstanding), as is setting up a memorial Facebook page. The downside is that such unofficial markers are easily obliterated.

But then, we live in an age where all intentions of permanency can be thwarted. Anne Michaels' invocations of venerable communities drowned by hydroelectric or irrigation projects highlight her conception of technology as 'both saving and damaging'. The forces that destroyed the church and cemetery of Koldemanz were history and politics (and war, their handmaiden), with help from the technology of earthmovers and bulldozers.

Modernity, in its restlessness, does not lend itself to letting the dead rest in peace. During my 2005 visit to Munich I wanted to visit the grave of my grandmother. Her remains had been moved from a plot in Germany's west sometime in the 1970s; my grandfather's second wife Anne wanted the family to be closer to her predecessor's memory. Flowers in hand, I visited the massive cemetery, asked questions in the office and eventually found the site. Leni Sowade, however, was not to be found. Another name was inscribed on the plot I had been directed to:



Figure 67: Where Leni's grave used to be, Munich

I went back to the office and discovered that if plot fees are not paid for some years, the tenant is evicted, the plot recycled and the original inhabitant's remains interred in an unmarked mass grave. In any case you can only rent a grave plot for twenty years. Buried before the new rules came in, the older inhabitants are, so to speak, in more solid ground than those who died after them. Maybe in her original resting place, Leni's memory might have remained chiselled in stone.

After leaving the cemetery I decided I would give Leni a more 'permanent' memorial and commission a 3D digital grave for her from my multimedia teacher colleagues, then create a fly-through video of it, then post online. I have not followed through on that yet.

As a kind of postscript to this story, after my grandfather and Anne died in succession recently, their daughter (my aunt) decided there was no point in burying them in a cemetery. My aunt has no children, and apart from our family contingent far away in Australia, no other connection exists to the names Rudolf and Anne Sowade carved on a block of stone in a German cemetery. Their ashes will be scattered in a forest instead.

Europe was torn up and re-sewn. In the morning a woman leaned out of her kitchen window and hung her wet washing in her Berlin garden; by afternoon when it was dry, she would have to pass through Checkpoint Charlie to retrieve her husband's shirts.

And what of the dead who'd once been lucky enough to own a grave? Surely, at least, if someone died in Stettin, his ghost had a right to remain there, in that past, and was not expected to haunt Szczecin as well...

The dead have their own maps and wander at will through both Fraustadt and Wschowa, both Mollwitz and Malujowice, both Steinau am Oder and Ścinawa; through Zlín and Gottwaldov and Zlín again. Down Prague's Vinohradská Street, Franz Josef Strasse, Marshal Foch Avenue, Hermann Goering Strasse, and Marshal Foch Avenue again, Stalin Street, Lenin Street, and at last, once again, without having taken a single step and shimmering only through time, Vinohradská Street.

As for one's birthplace, it depends who's asking.

*The Winter Vault by Anne Michaels, p. 279-280*

Athos said: "Jakob, try to be buried in ground that will remember you."

*Fugitive Pieces by Anne Michaels, p. 76*

## **The partisan archive**

No archive is neutral, and some are more partisan than others. As pointed out by Molly Andrews (2007), historical narratives and the ways they are collected are shaped by the political contexts and world views in

which the players operate. By comparing how narratives were collected for the archives of the former East Germany and the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Andrews found that a complex set of unstated political, historical and social forces shaped the kinds of stories that were collected, what they contained and who supplied them. So, too, for other archives, where both unstated and overt forces can play their part.

### A Levantine case study

Kibbutz Ma'ayan Zvi is perched on a ridge of the Carmel range in northern Israel. Overlooking the Mediterranean, the communal Zionist settlement was founded in 1938 by immigrants from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia. I lived for some months in Ma'ayan Zvi during 1997 and 1998.

The windows of the dining room look out over fish farms, avocado groves, banana plantations and Mediterranean beaches. To the north, you can see the small outcrop of Dor, an ancient Phoenician port.

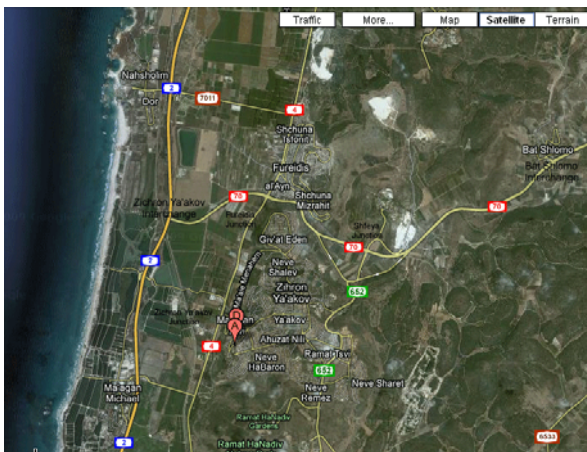


Figure 68: Google Maps: Kibbutz Ma'ayan Zvi and surrounds, Israel. Source: <http://maps.google.com/>

One day, I and a group of fellow kibbutz volunteers went by foot to explore Dor's ruins.



Figure 69: the author at Dor, 1997, as photographed by fellow Kibbutz volunteers

What we did not realise is that Dor is also the site of more recent ruins: that of the former Palestinian village of Tantara. Tantara no longer exists but, interestingly, appeared on Google Maps when I zoomed in a little closer recently:

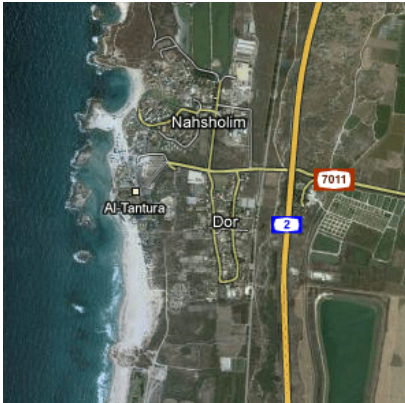


Figure 70: Google Maps: Dor and Tantara, Israel. Source: <http://maps.google.com/>

In 1998, the year after our Dor visit, an Israeli Masters student published his thesis. A research project about Tantara, this document has sparked a fierce debate that I (fittingly) stumbled upon some years later through the internet. The debate centred on whether or not 200 Arab inhabitants of the village were massacred by Jewish forces (including some from Ma'ayan Zvi) during the 1948 war that accompanied the establishment of the state of Israel. The student, Teddy Katz, claimed to have uncovered the killings through oral histories conducted with former Tantara residents. The publication of the findings by an Israeli journalist led to a chain of reactions and counter-reactions about the validity of the claims, leading to lawsuits, the destruction of academic careers, claims of bias from both sides (Pappé, 2002; Morris, 2004) and related discussions about academic freedoms and responsibilities. In the Middle East, politics is never far from history.

In this environment of competing claims to historical validity, a microcosm of the larger situation in Israel/Palestine, the website *Palestine Remembered* presents an online archive of data connected with Tantara from the Palestinian perspective, including current and historical images, oral histories, articles, statistics and a public forum:



Figure 71: Palestine Remembered: Al Tantara. Source: <http://www.palestineremembered.com/Haifa/al-Tantura/>

As revealed in the site's Mission Statement (see Appendix V), *Palestine Remembered* has a distinctly political agenda involving issues such as the Palestinian Right of Return, an issue closely interwoven with the site's memorial role as a gathering place for Palestinians with a connection to Tantura and other sites in the former Palestine. Here, history, memory and politics are inextricably linked, as they are in the Middle East conflict in general.

As can be clearly seen in this troubled part of the world, practices of historical remembrance have implications ranging from the formation and maintenance of tribal, religious and national identities, to the building of cases for land claims (or the negation of rival claims). A further anecdotal example: during my year in Israel I lived for some months in Akko (Acre), the ancient northern port city. Whilst there I heard the (unsubstantiated) story that, whilst digging a stormwater pipe on the beach, the local council had uncovered Byzantine Christian grave sites, complete with rare artifacts. The council, the story goes, posted a security guard to the site on the first night but failed to do so for subsequent nights, leading to some graves being plundered. The response of the council was to cover up the graves, where they still lie under the sand. Similarly, I heard other local stories such as roads being built over the mosaic floors of Byzantine churches. I encountered such a mosaic floor myself whilst walking along the beach north of Akko: it was falling apart, unprotected and only partially covered by a flimsy and disintegrating shelter:



Figure 72: Mosaic floors near Akko

The question can be asked: would such an approach to the country's archaeological history have been taken if the sites were Jewish, thereby reinforcing the Israeli claim to the land? Again, the question arises of what is remembered and what is not - and why?

Even within Jewish Israeli society's view of itself and its history, 'the Zionist narrative of liberation [has] dissolved into openly contesting versions' (Ezrahi, cited in Beinart 2010) with the gap becoming ever wider. In his 2010 New York Review of Books article, Peter Beinart discusses Israel's growing ideological divide



between aggressively nationalist and liberal-democratic, individualistic interpretations of Israeli identity. The effect of this gap is not just political but historical and archival. It can be seen, says Beinart, in the gap between 'new historians' – 'those who have 'fearlessly excavated the darker corners of the Zionist past' - and others who, influenced by the worst episodes of Jewish history, wish to uphold Jewish power and unity at all costs. A prime example is the debate over the Tantura massacre claims: a fight undertaken, it seems, with no holds barred.

The subject of competing claims for historical and political authority in the Middle East is vast, ongoing and certainly beyond the scope of this study. The point here, however, is that these cases, related indirectly as they are to my own experience, pointedly show how archives can undertake actively political roles by creating (and trying to control) narratives about the past.

### **The amateur archivist: to perform is to remember**

In her review of *Archive Fever*, Julie Enszer (2008) paraphrases Derrida's postscript, stating that: 'while archives only contain trace(s) of what happened there, not the thing itself, we will always yearn to know what was lost, what burned and disappeared with the ashes'. As we have seen, the archival urge is a product both of the desire to mitigate loss and obliteration, and to maintain authority: it is jointly about fear and control. But can it also be about something more, something a little less stratified, more constructive - more about creating than locking down?

Here, I would like to turn to amateur archival practices, particularly those concerned with immediate family and home life. Unlike the Freud archives spawning Derrida's investigations, it could be argued that the more homely of archival practices have less to protect; there is less at stake because their focus is less political in its larger sense. Of course, as the *Thorpes.org* case study reveals, family stories can also be intensely political, full of competing versions of what happened in the past. The difference, however, is that family archiving often happens *as life happens*, and this 'just-in-time' archival process can itself be a performance of reconstruction that, in its immediacy, is not as prone to the revisionism of nostalgia and legacy-seeking (although, as explored in the Context and Framing section, *how* and *what* we choose to record does certainly play its part). Here, the 'we' referred to in Enszer's summing up of Derrida can be seen as active participants, actors who create memory on the fly.

One example is the practice of home video recording, examined by Patrick Tarrant in his *Planet Usher* project. To Tarrant, 'the home is rendered photographic in a bid to understand, remember and in some

respects, take control of that space' (2003, p. 3). Tarrant also quotes the work of Robert Stebbins on amateurism, which:

...turned up eight durable benefits found by amateurs in their various pursuits: self-actualization, self-enrichment, self-expression, recreation or renewal of self, feelings of accomplishment, enhancement of self-image, social interaction and belongingness, and lasting physical products of the activity. (Stebbins, cited in Tarrant 2003, p. 8)

In Tarrant's words, Planet Usher 'tells the story of, and through, the home video archive of the artist's brother, Peter, a man who was born deaf, took 20 years of home videos, and has slowly gone blind due to the effects of Usher Syndrome' (p. 1). In engaging with 'the fantasy that new media might somehow revive the lost home video archive', Tarrant is more hopeful than one might expect, stating that:

...it is productivity, not simply loss, that is at work here, and the figure for this productivity is the 'remembered home movie'. This facilitates an approach to disability and home movies that eschews the sentimental in favour of something more alive, or indeed, more live. (p. 1)

This 'live' element is the process of creating the Tarrant family video archive, an undertaking of ongoing interest to both Tarrant and his brother because 'it continues to privilege an ethos of production over conservation, the latter proving itself to be a perilous pursuit and the former being an attempt to render the home in such a way that makes it available in the space of imagination for producers and audiences alike' (p. 4).

This is something that resonates strongly with the Small Histories project. The focus of conservation is, as stated previously, to lock down, to construct a definitive narrative about the past. Production, on the other hand, is about generating new possibilities for remembering. Tarrant and his brother are undertaking a performance of reconstruction using video technology, creating a new form of memory in the 'space of imagination for producers and audiences alike' through 'a process of memory-making capable of generating an afterimage in a space beyond the time of images.' This 'afterimage' is as much an outcome as the archive itself (p. 8).

## 5. Databases, narratives and the order of things

### The database as narrative engine

Norman Denzin's concept of narrative as 'an account involving the narration of a series of events in a plotted sequence which unfolds in time' (2003, p. 240) is central to this project. I will take the liberty of interpreting this definition, however, to include not only written or spoken events, but also any form of media that can be combined into a sequence meaningful to readers/listeners/viewers.

Today's social software systems are powered by databases connected to websites, with snippets of programming code ('scripts') passing data back and forth between the database and website. They are designed to be easy for novices to use, but 'under the hood' employ coding technologies in increasingly sophisticated ways.

Much of what is currently being uploaded and shared using social software can be described as narrative of one kind or another. These may be complete narratives in themselves (Podcasts, videos) or they may be groups of individual items that collectively make up narratives when uploaded and arranged or sorted (eg photo collections, serial blog entries, forum threads). The Small Histories project is based on the latter, the use of web-based tools to dynamically mould narratives from individual constituent items.

The Small Histories site, however, differs from other social software systems in that it explicitly aims to facilitate the creation of *intentional* sequential narratives through the uploading and ordering of media items. Existing upload sites are sometimes used in creative ways to create narratives that emerge over time through the staggered posting of episodic items such as the Lonelygirl15 series of videos posted to YouTube (Davis 2006), but the presentation of ordered elements in narrative form is not usually part of these sites' overt design or intention.

Some commentators have seen the development of sequential narrative as a critical milestone in the development of writing and culture. Writing is described as evolving from pictographs representing objects to sequential marks capable of describing abstract human experience. Ricardo (1998) describes it thus: 'Narrative begins when signification is defined more in terms of sequences than commodities', and frames this as the second of three epochs in the development of writing (p. 2).

However, the principle of ordering elements into a time-based narrative is not unique to writing. For new media theorist Lev Manovich this form of narrative is also the dominant cultural form in cinema (Daalgard 2003, p. 5). It is also at the heart of musical production including the combining of verses, choruses and

bridges in songs or the appropriation and ordering of sounds and samples to construct new musical tracks via the use of a device known, aptly, as a *sequencer*.

The relational databases used in online systems are designed for this kind of processing; namely the storage and retrieval of items and the creation and mapping of relationships between those items. And, furthermore, because the Web is a distribution medium *par excellence*, as well as an increasingly sophisticated display mechanism for the uploading, retrieval and display of data stored in databases, the dissemination and juxtaposition of narratives uploaded by many people now becomes possible. It also offers the advantage of open-endedness: narratives can change over time, be edited, added to and rearranged.

For designers of interactive online systems, databases also help these systems evolve as designers find out how users interact with them. Content is stored in the database, and/or added to by users, and is entirely separate from its presentation. This principle facilitates the development of systems of representation, ordering and collection that evolve over time: you can change the interface that presents the data, the ways data is collected from users and other functionality without affecting the underlying data itself. This is the way that the Small Histories system has been designed; for interface design this is significant because it allows for 'the importance of vague, contradictory and incomplete representations in the early stage of writing or design problems' (Qu & Furnas 2005, p.1). Databases let designers experiment and respond to feedback by users in an evolving way rather than locking down design solutions at the outset.

## 'Text Machines'

As stated previously, a *sequencer* is a machine used by composers to program sequences of audio. Correspondingly, the term *text / machine* was coined by Espen Aarseth in his influential 1997 work *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. It is defined as 'a mechanical device for the production and consumption of verbal signs' (p. 21).

The term resonates with Ted Nelson's term *literary machines* (1981). Nelson, inventor of the term *hypertext*, envisaged a system to link together all writing by harnessing the world's computers, an adaptation of Vannevar Bush's 1945 concept of the memex or 'memory extension' (Nelson 1974). A generation after Nelson, Aarseth looked at the possibility that text machines - anything from a hypertext work to a multi-user online game - can produce effects that might, or should, be called literature.

According to Aarseth, text machines, like other machines, produce outputs by way of mechanical processes. They process and arrange texts, which Aarseth calls *textons* and defines as 'any object with the primary function to relay verbal information', into 'a string of signs, which may (but does not have to) make sense to a given observer', and which he calls *scriptons* (p. 62). A scripton is a 'semiotic sequence' that is 'a work of physical construction' (p. 1). The process of scripton construction is called the *traversal function* and has three elements: the *operator*, or user, the *verbal sign* and the *medium*, or machine. 'The concept of cybertext', states Aarseth, 'focuses on the mechanical organization of the text, by positing the intricacies of the medium as an integral part of the literary exchange'. It also 'centers attention on the consumer, or user, of the text as a more integrated figure than even reader-response theorists would claim' (p. 1). In other words, the role of the machine is central to the production of software-mediated narratives, and the actions of the user are closely interlinked with the machine - a conclusion supported by this project.

One caveat needs to be made though: text machines are not necessarily computer-driven. The term 'ergodic' is used by Aarseth to denote any work within which the operator has to actively construct a narrative. He points out that 'ergodic textuality' has a long history, citing the three-thousand year old *I Ching* and wall inscriptions on Egyptian temples that connect in two dimensions from wall to wall and in three dimensions from wall to wall and room to room (p. 9).

Another example is the Talmud, a written record of learned discussions by Rabbinic sages connected to Jewish law (Porush, viewed 2010). Some have observed that the Talmud's structure is similar to the non-linear, web-like structure of the internet, with rabbis referring to the Talmud as a *yam* (or 'sea') and tractates being called *masechet* in Hebrew, meaning 'webbing' (Rosen 2000). The Talmud as a whole has no beginning or end, and students are able to jump in at any point (Alexenberg 2004).

The Talmud's use of the visual and associative, along with the sequential, can be seen as creating a space for the 'argumentative uncertainty in the exposition' (Ricardo 1998) that some 1990s hypertext theorists saw as excluded from the Western, Hellenistic tradition of discourse. This tradition, they believed, culminated in the written novel, a form that, as previously stated, is locked, sequential and designed for solitary consumption and reflection.

These hypertext enthusiasts saw the hyperlink as the next leap in the development of writing. In it, they saw potential for the loosening of control that sequential argument represented, so that voices other than that of the author's might be embraced (Barthes 1975). These enthusiasts, however, tended to see hypertext as *replacing* linear, author-controlled text, and insisted that readers, once introduced to such freedom, would choose to leave behind their attachment to the sequential. This argument, however, fails to recognise the

importance of sequential narrative structures to human sensemaking, even when combined with explorative opportunities for taking circuitous paths through content (Goldblum et al, 2007).

Indeed, the field of literature has a long tradition of incorporating non-linearity and openness, ranging from the use of diagrams and footnotes to arrangement of text on the page and multiple points of view. Works include, amongst many others: James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), Guillaume Apollinaire's *Calligrammes* (1966), *Pricksongs and Descants* (1969) by Robert Coover, a founder of the Electronic Literature Organization, Milorad Pavić's *Dictionary of the Khazars: A Lexicon Novel* (1988), and hypermedia-like works like the card-based *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (Hundred Thousand Billion Poems) by Raymond Queneau (1961) and, as Marie McLean explores, Baudelaire's *Petits poèmes en prose* or *Le Spleen de Paris* (1869).

Each are composed of fragments of one sort or another that are combined and recombined to form different narratives. Similarly, explains McLean, Baudelaire describes his work as a kaleidoscope and adds:

...here we have a series of texts which have cohesion in that each text is a perfectly conceived and executed whole, but no syntagmatic closure in their arrangement, since any 'combination' of these 'fragments' is possible. They can and should be read by changing the order and making different selections according to the choice of the individual reader. (McLean 1988, p. 44)

Such works, says Aarseth, 'demonstrate that paper can hold its own against the computer as a technology of ergodic texts'. However the arrival of digital computers heralded that 'a new textual technology had arrived, potentially more flexible and powerful than any preceding medium' (Aarseth 1997, p. 10).

Regardless of the medium deployed in ergodic works, the role of the operator is performative (Aarseth 1997, p. 21). In web-based narratives, users traverse screens of information connected by hyperlinks. In more computationally complex systems such as computer games, operators create unique scriptons on the fly by undertaking actions within a range of possibilities defined by the machine. This is what Aarseth refers to as emergent behaviour, 'systems that are complex structures evolving unpredictably from an initial set of simple elements' (p. 29). Such systems are not the ones with which this document is largely concerned; I am looking more at what are essentially hyperlink-based systems created and navigated by operators via the internet. A system like *Small Histories*, unlike a computer game, does not directly facilitate complex emergent narratives, although one could say that the networks of user interactions generated by hyperlinked systems (as seen in Facebook) can indeed become complex and unpredictable.

Nick Montford, in his review of Aarseth's book, elevates complex systems such as games above hyperlink-based ones and announces the death of the link-based narrative. When published in 2001, this generated a

number of critical responses (Hayles; Luesebrink; Rosenberg; all 2001). These responses point out that, amongst other things, game systems and literary works differ in their motivation, stakes and outcomes. The role of the medium/machine also differs. One of these responses takes to task Aarseth's and Montford's perceived privileging of the machine above the traditionally literary aspects of electronic writing:

Scholars mostly interested in computer games, such as Espen Aarseth, cut up the territory so that the literary component is largely obscured; scholars who come out of the literary tradition, such as George Landow, parse the new electronic forms so that they end up sounding like old wine in new platforms....From computer games come interactivity, major tropes such as searching for keys to a central mystery, and multiple narrative pathways chosen by interactors; from literary traditions come devices developed over millennia of experimentation and criticism such as point of view, narrative voice and literary allusions. To omit either of these resources would be to reduce electronic literature to something beyond our recognition. (Hayles 2001)

This brings to mind Ziegler's identification of readers' 'desire for intimacy' (2002, p. 3). Perhaps tried and tested literary ordering and structuring strategies can help to create a comforting sense of order out of the chaos of randomness, in the same way that narrative itself orders and makes sense of life? Echoes of this desire can be observed in the emphasis placed by software creators like Google and Jonathan Harris on ordering the world's information, and in some computer games' successful use of narrative structuring devices like Joseph Campbell's *Hero's Journey* story model (Delmas et al 2007).

A final point: perhaps one motivation for performing oneself online is the promise of reciprocated intimacy, even if this promise is not always realised. Montford's review was written before the explosive growth in social software use, and his pronouncement of the death of the hypertext story could be seen, nine years later, as premature. What are users of social software but writers of their own story, performers creating their own ergodic, hyperlink-based pathways as they create scriptons by generating a series of textons over time through traversal function, and within the parameters of the medium?

This leads to the observation that, in a hypertext system like *Small Histories*, the machine is less important in what it *does*, but in what it *sets up* for operators to do themselves. Although the machine may generate some scriptons - such as ordering content by date, theme or author - a large chunk of the meaning-making work is undertaken by operators. As stated in another response to Montford: 'In a hypertext, the reader is doing most of the computing. The reader assesses the possibilities inherent in each link or navigation option, judges the probability of a desired outcome, executes the action that triggers the response; the reader commands. Computation takes place in the brain of the operator, not the machine' (Luesebrink 2001).

This is particularly the case with social software, environments used to simultaneously consume, create, repurpose and publish content by people defined as *producers* by Alex Bruns (2007). Producers don't just traverse links to content, they also create items of content, recreate new content from existing items, and create the paths to get to the content.

One example of a social software system that generates produsage, and the creation of hybrid online stories, is *Bubblr*:

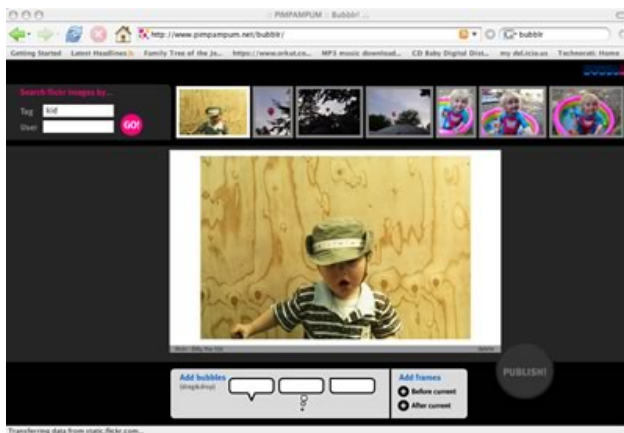


Figure 73: Bubblr website. Source: <http://www.pimpampum.net/bubblr/>

The Bubblr website lets users search for and download publicly available photos from the *Flickr* photo sharing site, then turn them into comic strips by ordering them and adding speech bubbles. Bubblr is one example of what databases do well, and is in fact one of the closest mechanisms I have found to that of *Small Histories*, via its principle of facilitating sequential narrative creation through the use of existing online media.

## Narratives, databases and collections

When does a collection of items become a *narrative*? When does it become *meaningful*? I propose that this occurs when a collection is consciously ordered, either sequentially or visually, by the operator. It is the difference between a shoebox full of photos and a family photo album - although one could argue that the juxtaposition of photos in a shoebox may also reveal surprising narratives (see previous discussion on juxtapositioning in the Context and Framing section).



But other caveats apply. If all the photos in our shoebox are related to one family or to a period of time, a level of classification or meaning-making can already be said to be embedded within the collection. An example is Andy Warhol's *Time Capsule 21* (1973 - 1987). Also, as explored previously, individual personal artefacts can tell, or at least hint at, buried narratives.

So what about databases? Lev Manovich's view of the database is somewhat like the shoebox of random photos. Manovich makes a sharp distinction between what he sees as the structured framework of narrative and the unstructured, random access model of the database, where every item is seen to have the same value as any other. This view embodies the idea of meaning-making through ordering, but also has embedded within it a problematic view of what a database is and does.

As Rune Daalgard (2003) points out, Manovich's notion of the database is broad, encompassing everything from collections of links on websites to highly structured relational databases. These are in fact very different in their structure and function. Web-based groups of links, text or images are to be viewed directly; they contain as much or as little order and classification as their creators determine. Databases, however, are by definition ordered and are not designed to be viewed directly. The Oxford Dictionary of English defines databases as 'a structured set of data held in a computer, especially one that is accessible in various ways' (Soanes et al 2003, p. 441). Databases are the *organisers of collections*; they are constructed with the intention of recording, cataloguing and making accessible data. This usually involves the creation of classification schemas, data relationships and/or hierarchies. On the internet, databases are used as content creation and delivery engines that drive the ordered display of items on websites; they are not in opposition to narrative, but are frequently the mechanism by which narratives become embodied.

Furthermore, although the internet as a mass of data may appear random and chaotic to some users (as outlined by Manovich and online commentaries like *The Internet is Shit*), most websites contain at least some degree of internal ordering. And when we zoom out, we see that the Web is in fact a 'network of collections' (Daalgard 2003, p. 6), an overlapping multiplicity of more-or-less ordered systems. There is an important difference between the clustered network structure of the internet and the experience of someone traversing a part of it, a case of 'not seeing the forest for the trees'.

## Stumbling through the web forest

At the heart of online narrative is the hyperlink, the explicit connection between items of data. It is the basis of the internet itself, as first presented by the 1945 article *As We May Think* by US military scientist

Vannevar Bush, which proposed a mechanical machine called the *memex*, 'a device in which an individual stores all his books, records, and communications, and which is mechanized so that it may be consulted with exceeding speed and flexibility. It is an enlarged intimate supplement to his memory'. But after having been realised through the development of the internet, Bush's vision of instant and unfettered referencing has also led to a sense of being overwhelmed by information, especially when confronted with access to data generated by millions of other individuals.

In discussing changing attitudes towards hypertext, Ziegler defines the reading experience as 'strategically building many contradictive voices of a text into a mental whole' (2002, p.1) - something he describes as escaping him whilst viewing Stuart Moulthrop's 1995 hypertext work *Victory Garden*. Here, Ziegler has difficulty arriving at 'a mental model of the digital rhizome'. Unlike books, hypertext works do not tend to let users see the entire text, and therefore to scan and skip sections. Aarseth concurs, referring to having to do 'all that jumping around'; he notes the disorienting effect of being forced to negotiate a 'hypertext labyrinth' in order to work out where you are and what you have missed (p. 78).

The result is not Barthes's 'textual bliss' (1975b, p. 3); hypertext narratives do not, it seems, engage readers by mirroring the processes of the post-modern associative mind. Rather, what follows is a sense of alienation from the text and other readers, as noted by Ziegler (p. 3), as well as, in Aarseth's words, 'textual claustrophobia' (p. 78).

It seems that, for narratees, a feeling of control is important. As both museum and web usability research has found, it is empowering to have a map of the territory, to know how to make your own way around (Moscardo et al 1985; Spool et al 2004). The trend towards user-driven content ordering and classification tools shows that internet users are keen to eke out a sense of order, control and purpose in a chaotic and overwhelming online universe of data. One example is the user-generated 'tags' or themes in social software such as *Flickr* or *Technorati*, which *Small Histories* also deploys.

Furthermore, there is a (more passive) pleasure in being led on a narrative journey by the text, safe that you will be delivered to your destination in due course. This can be seen in Umberto Eco's rejection of Marc Saporta's 1962 loose-leaf work *Composition No 1*:

I did not feel the slightest desire to read even one of its loose pages, despite its promise to yield a different story every time it was shuffled. To me, the book had exhausted all its possible readings in the very enunciation of its constructive idea (Eco, cited in Aarseth p. 52)

## 'Open' and 'closed' Narratives

Yom Kippur 2000

Riding to work

My breakfast-free body slips out of the house and into a bright untroubled morning. I've decided to fast, to adopt the spirit of inner amends-making, but there's a gap. A gap that this clear sunny Melbourne morning mocks as I ride my bike workwards.

In my head, last night's news video of the Arab boy cowering in a Gaza corner, alive, terrified, then, suddenly, dead, struck by Israeli bullets, his father trying to protect him, shouting at them to stop, then himself succumbing to a sudden, horrifying sleep.

And then, the denials, the blame-passing, the resigned shrug. That's what happens. He shouldn't have been there, throwing stones. (Was he? Does it matter?) My mind is a world away as I cross Nicholson Street.

You fuckers. You better make bloody good use of this day, the Day of Atonement. I turn into the Canning Street bike path. Will you apologize to the mother, or do only Jews count? My head is clouded, swollen with the reports on the Internet I've been reading for this last week of blood. And more, no doubt, to come when I reach work.

I stare absentmindedly at the eaves of the renovated workers cottages as I ride by, their names betraying English country yearnings: Pansy, Heathmont, Mill Cottage. Then something hooks the corner of my eye - a Star of David, triangles entangled like lovers' limbs, sitting in relief atop a small cream cottage. I'm a little stunned at this confluence of paths.

Those people (my people?) - they migrated to Carlton, led poor quiet lives in its cottages, gave money for the homeland, then shipped out to the other side of town. Their cousins and brothers - the grandparents of the twenty year-olds aiming their M16s at the stone throwers?

*Small Histories: text item*

Returning to my own story: after having found my father, lived in Israel and returned to Australia, I realised that how I saw my own story kept changing as I changed and world events came and went. The Middle East was (and is) constantly in the news and I found my views and reactions adjusting to new development. I realised I needed to be able to reflect these changes within my online narrative.

In *Database as a Genre of New Media*, Lev Manovich posits that narratives should possess a defined formal structure and that databases undermine narrative integrity because they allow for the formation of works

whose content may change over time. This results in what he calls the 'anti-narrative logic of the Web', adding: 'If new elements are being added over time, the result is a collection, not a story. Indeed, how can one keep a coherent narrative or any other development trajectory if it keeps changing?' (2001 p. 1)

I would like to propose that it is indeed possible to retain a sense of coherence within open-ended narratives. Indeed, I would suggest that databases open up the potential for renewal and relevance in online stories that is not present in 'closed' or locked narratives. However, it should also be noted that open narratives predate the database in forms such as oral storytelling; a story or legend will evolve over time with every re-telling and in doing so will remain relevant to the needs of the society at that time.

The effects of both open and closed narratives can be observed in the Jewish Talmud. Now closed and codified in book form, the Talmud presents a snapshot of former narrative openness. This consists of a hybrid mix of authoritative reference points and fluid responses to those reference points. The printed Talmud arranges text visually on a page to create a narrative of layered conversation and debate. At the centre of the page is the Mishnah, the first recording of oral Jewish law undertaken during the Roman era. This core text holds court as centuries of commentaries by Rabbinical scholars gather around it; the result is a narrative of proposition and response, an inter-generational dialogue of sorts that makes up the revised oral law.

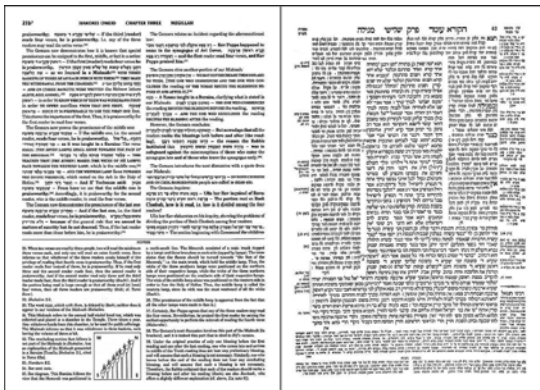


Figure 74: Talmud page and English equivalent. Source: Temple Emanu-El of San Jose, <http://www.templemanjose.org/JudaismInfo/Torah/Talmud.htm>

The Jewish Museum of Berlin describes it thus in its exhibition text, as encountered by me in 2005:

The discussion of the content of the Written Law (the Five Books of Moses) and the oral law is a never-ending process. The commentaries are studied and newly interpreted from one generation to the next.

As in other legal systems, the laws are discussed according to certain prescribed rules, while constant debate of the text keeps it alive. At the same time, the exchange of ideas with commentators living many centuries earlier assures that the interpretive tradition is carried forward.

Gluck (2009, online) has pointed out, however, that once the open system of the Talmud described above became closed through its codification in book form, it lost its dynamic interaction with the present. Although the Talmud is still actively debated in Jewish seminaries by two learning partners known as *bevrutab* (Alexenberg 2004), this, according to Gluck, more often than not tends to be 'study for study's sake' rather than 'self-reflective examination of process, and open-ended searching for how contemporary concerns can be addressed in new ways'. The old spirit of inquiry 'has been replaced by study of the text as the object for memorization of recorded positions and the argumentation that led to them. It is a second hand look at people who actually engaged in the kind of dynamics that one would hope for but cannot find in the present' (2009, online).

When looking at auto/biographical narratives, Jens Brockmeier suggests that the desire for narrative closure is tied to the pervasiveness of the narrative form itself. Brockmeier describes modern culture as immersed in narrative, and reiterates that we depend on narrative structures to make sense of our lives: a plot with the beginning and end neatly tied together (2001, p. 249).

Brockmeier's concept of *retrospective teleology* distinguishes the *narrative event* (the telling of the life story) from the *narrated event* (the life story, or sequence of events). He proposes that the moment of telling a story marks the end of the story being told: 'The practice of autobiography involves, therefore, not so much documenting past events but positing possible pasts and possible beginnings in the light of the end' (1997, p. 177). This may help to explain why some (like Lev Manovich, whose background is in film) find the idea of open-ended narratives troubling. It goes against the grain of our narrative culture: even Denzin states that 'a story has a beginning, a middle and an ending' (2003, p. 240). A generational influence may be involved here. Young people look forward to unrealised possibilities, whereas old people look back to tidy up loose ends and preserve their legacies (Brockmeier 2001, p. 265). As stated by Marianne Hirsch, 'as (memory's) direct bearers enter old age, they increasingly wish to institutionalize memory, whether in traditional archives or books or through ritual, commemoration, or performance' (2008, p. 110).

A number of longstanding *narrative technologies* (Tamboukou 2010), however, counter this by supporting narrative open-endedness. Maria Tamboukou discusses the need to resist the temptation for closure that can accompany examinations of historical data. She refers to diaries and letters as particularly effective narrative technologies, fuelled by the human desire for ongoing connection and communication. Another narrative technology is the oral folk story. PhD student Senem Yekenkurul (2010), a Melbourne-born, second-

generation Turkish immigrant, describes her mother's recollection of a Turkish folk tale that connects Yekenkurul to her displaced Turkish identity. The story is unfinished; her mother cannot remember the ending. The unfinished story parallels the life of its teller and opens up the possibility of an imaginative, postmemorial retelling.

Historians, too, talk about the need for open-endedness. On the homepage of the website [milkbar.com.au](http://milkbar.com.au), an online local history project by Australian historian Craig Bellamy that traces the changes in the multicultural post-industrial (and now rapidly gentrifying) suburb of Fitzroy, a quote reads:

"History must, in its scholarly and in its many more public tellings, suggest a story always as yet unfinished". Rhys Isacc, *The Historian's Conscience*

## **Open narratives on the internet**

Varying levels and types of openness exist on the internet, a result of the nature, function and design of the web systems that fuel them. Many automated website creation environments (such as the open-source, PHP-based Drupal and Joomla platforms) allow administrators to set up a large number of access levels and types for users, both in terms of core content creation (through levels of access to content management areas) and more marginal interactive activities such as the ability to comment on posts or start discussion threads.

Types of systems also differ in their level of openness. For instance, the wiki model, described in (fittingly) Wikipedia as 'a website that allows the easy creation and editing of any number of interlinked web pages via a web browser using a simplified markup language or a WYSIWYG text editor' (Wikipedia, viewed 2010) is relatively open, whereas the personal weblog model deployed by the likes of Google's Blogger is based on the principle of a single user controlling the 'core' content but allowing moderated peripheral input from other readers/viewers. And even within models there are considerable differences, as can be seen in the Wikipedia case study (Appendix III).

Others' visions of open-ended web-based stories consist of creating evolving repositories of other people's data, gathered automatically and presented online. Artist and programmer Jonathan Harris (see Appendix IV for a detailed review of Harris' practice) outlines this vision in his artist's statement:

These works are never “finished”, as they continually add new data from the Internet as it becomes available, growing and changing every few minutes like organic digital creatures or creative machines. In this sense, my works become alive and autonomous the moment I release them.

Whether these kinds of works should be considered 'narrative' is open to debate. But they do point to new and increasingly sophisticated forms of mechanical text-based practice, in line with Espen Aarseth's cybertext theories.

In summary, and referring back to previous discussions about authorial control, the degree and type of narrative openness in online environments will depend largely on the assumptions made by system creators. In other words, the way online narratives evolve will depend heavily on issues of system design and intention, access rights and ownership - which content is gathered, how and from whom it is gathered, who can affect and add content, and how.

## 6. Designing the 'stage'

### Working with time and space

Sequential ordering works with time, and visual ordering with space. I hypothesised previously that narrative seems suited to presenting ordered, reconstructed experience, whereas visual methods suit the presentation of the shards of experience, the unordered fragments. These can intersect to present practices of memory and history in ways that deploy the strengths of both.

In his childhood memoir *A Berlin Chronicle*, Walter Benjamin's 'life-mapping' concept explores the potential intersections. For her own life-mapping article, Griselda Pollock sets the scene with Benjamin's quote: 'I have long, indeed for years, played with the idea of setting out the sphere of life -bios-graphically on a map' (1932, p. 63). To this, Pollock adds:

On one hand, for Benjamin the city is an exciting relay of spaces where experience takes place. On the other hand, the spatially cued events come equally to inhabit the subject by providing the spatial coordinates by which its formation can be recalled, linked, and assembled into the subject-sustaining structure: memory. (2008, p. 66)

For Benjamin, 'Language shows clearly that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theatre' (1932, p. 314). Within this theatre, Pollock, as well as artists like Sebald and Boltanski, undertake sophisticated performances, making use of both the shards and their weaving together into narratives: the textons and the scriptons, together. Pollock's article deploys Benjamin's life-map as 'a frame for an art-historical but also cultural-historical archive that interweaves the issues of childhood, place and memory with the very cataclysm in which Benjamin's life was brought to a premature and tragic end' (1998, p. 62).

The internet offers a promising setting for the undertaking of new forms of auto/biographical performances that combine time and space. This includes using the languages of maps and other forms of visual representation, integrated with the use of interactive user-driven processes and data from other sources (such as Google Maps). The work of Jonathan Harris shows what is technically possible in networked database-driven environments. Such works point the way for Small Histories' next stage of long-term development.



## What now?

### Where the Small Histories website is at

When I and my programmer partners created the Small Histories prototype in 2003 and 2004, one of our main aims was to provide the right balance between allowing for audience *immersion* and *engagement*. Immersion is a reading pleasure that Douglas and Hargadon (2000, p.2) define as arising out of 'the lack of demands the act of reading...places on us'; engagement is more actively exploratory, less guided and preferred more 'by those who are widely read, since they have access to a vast array of schemas and scripts'. This meant examining the kinds of online stories that were then predominant. The (pre social software-era) stories I found tended to have simple interfaces promoting the more passive pleasures of immersion; they replicated the experience of reading printed material. These stories tended to contain content (mainly text and images) that scrolled down the screen, with a button or link leading to the next screen:

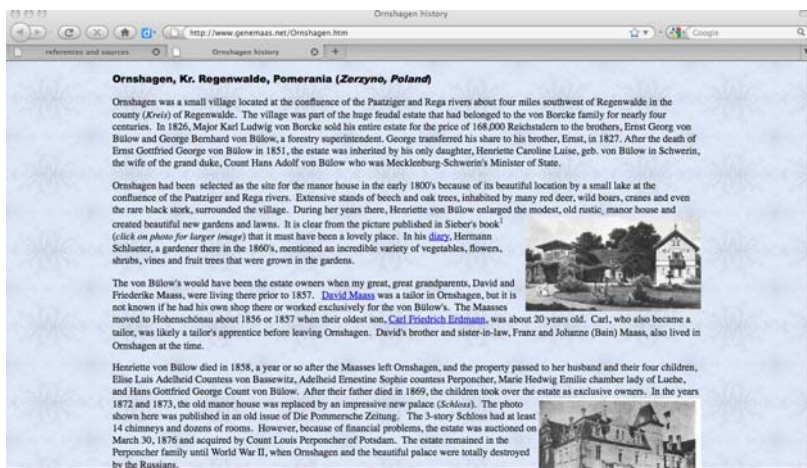


Figure 75: Screenshot of common online narrative format. Source: <http://www.genemaas.net/Ornshagen.htm>

As a result, we decided to maintain this form as a core presentation style in the first iteration of the site and combine it with more exploratory models, such as the 'shoebox' presentation style.

Since those days the internet has evolved and new forms of arranging, viewing and interacting with information on the screen have emerged. As Qu and Furnas (2005, p. 4) point out, the internet is not just a 'bag of facts' for people seeking out information, but also a source of models for how those facts might be organised. Developments such as the iPad and iPhone formats, with their touch screens and relatively sophisticated interface design, offer new possibilities for the future. This applies to both Small Histories' narrative creation process and the presentation of its narratives. This, however, will need to be balanced with

one of the site's core aims: to be accessible to, and usable by, a wide range of people with varying computer skills and equipment.

Some of Small Histories' current functionality could work more effectively. There is still much to do - work which, thankfully, the technical architecture of the site (ie the *Model View Controller design pattern*) will accommodate. As it stands the site - with its pop-up boxes and submit buttons - is what might be called an older generation of functionality. Newer models, such as those enabled by technologies such as AJAX (a technology already adopted in some areas of the site) may well provide more usable and engaging solutions for users. Possibilities include better drag, drop and display functionality, more appealing ways for people to interact with the data, and the ability to generate sophisticated visual display models such as 'map-style' interfaces to display stories. Some new generation design principles have been incorporated into the current site: the use of tab metaphors, color coding and clear, simplified instructions to help users through the upload and narrative creation process. Much more, however, could be done.

I initially opted not to use the proprietary software Adobe Flash, despite its possibilities for visual sophistication. This decision has since been borne out in developments such as the lack of support for Flash in devices such as the Apple iPad and the release of HTML 5, a free and open World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) standard that offers some of the design possibilities of Flash. Using proprietary software leaves websites vulnerable to the possibility of obsolescence and the inability to read the material in the future. There are also 'searchability' issues with vector graphics-based programs like Flash: web search engines are unable to find and log text strings within Flash files.

Given the Small Histories project is now over seven years old, it has surprised me that to date I have not found another system that allows users to create their own online narratives by undertaking intentional sequential ordering of their media items. This principle seems quite simple, obvious and replicable, yet based on a series of website software reviews I have undertaken over the years, there appears to be little else out there. The last of my software reviews occurred in late January 2010. This involved reviewing a broad range of popular genealogy websites (see Appendix II), constant ongoing monitoring of technology sources and keyword searches of the Open Source software clearing houses *Freshmeat* and *Sourceforge* using the words *story*, *stories*, *communities*, *genealogy* and *narrative*. There are website systems that contain all the various individual elements deployed within Small Histories - media item uploading, ordering, presentation and commenting - but seemingly not in combination to my knowledge, and especially not ones designed to enable people to construct and publish ordered narratives.

## Where to from here with the website?

Development of the Small Histories system will, I suspect, continue for years yet. It may even, like the open-ended narrative itself, never end as new aspects and directions continue to emerge.

To date, the new understanding I have developed through my research about the relationships between author, audience and performances of the self have helped me to more effectively gauge what is essential to a system like Small Histories and what is not, and to thereby better understand what makes an effective online story creation system.

Paradoxically, as I have undertaken more complex and wide-ranging conceptual research as part of this project, the site's designs have become progressively simpler, especially in terms of how the story creation process works. This has now led to the current Storymaker project, whose explicit aim is the development of an easy-to-use story creation interface that has a wide range of applications and is based on the same narrative ordering principles as Small Histories.

## In the short term

As stated previously, I am now working on StoryMaker, a project to develop a new and simplified version of the site, specifically designed in the first instance for TAFE teachers to share their workplace stories and in future for general use. The first 'vanilla' test version of the site has recently been built and is being trialled:

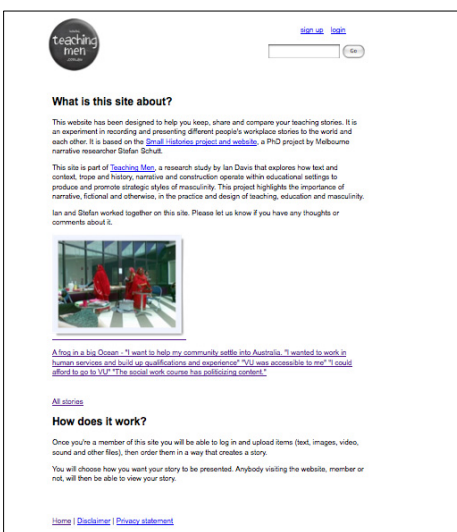


Figure 76: Current StoryMaker homepage (Teaching Men project version)

Although firstly conceived as a spin-off, theStoryMaker system site is now looking like it may replace the current Small Histories system due to its superior CodeIgnitor PHP platform (which was not available when Small Histories was being built) and its improved functionality – this is a decision I will make soon.

StoryMaker has implemented a number of improvements not seen on the Small Histories site including the ability to include media items from third parties (YouTube, Vimeo, Flickr etc), the ability for users to self-register, better story presentation formats and the ability to upload items as part of the story creation process. In essence, StoryMaker’s simplified interface involves two boxes for ‘My items’ and ‘My stories’:

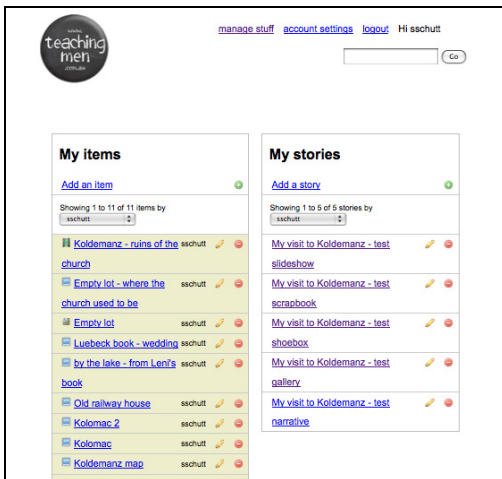


Figure 77: StoryMaker: My items and My stories boxes

To ‘build a story’, a user drags items from left to right as per Small Histories, but also has the chance to add new items throughout by clicking on the ‘Add a new item’ link:

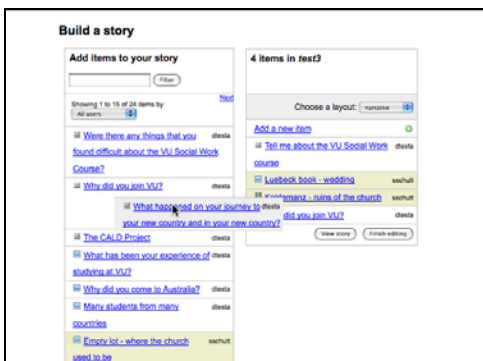


Figure 78: StoryMaker: Build a story

The StoryMaker system is still currently in its infancy, but planned improvements over the next 12 months include:

- allowing users to keep copies of previous story versions (as can be seen in wikis or Google documents)
- allowing users to upgrade the permissions system so that contributors have more control over their contributions
- the ability to create dedicated, customised site environments (ala Wordpress, Drupal)
- the choice of disallowing others to use particular media items
- creating private stories that can only be seen by invited guests (ala YouTube and Flickr)
- the ability to sharing one's repositories of items with others
- co-creation of stories.

#### **In the longer term**

I hope to keep developing the story creation software I have created as part of this investigation. This will involve the generation of new projects and uses for the site, and hopefully the resourcing support that goes with it.

Future long-term development of the site will be influenced by a number of factors. One current source of inspiration is *Cultural Probes* (Gaver, Dunne and Pacenti, 1999), a self-reporting mechanism also known as 'diary studies', in which 'participants are briefed, given a kit of materials, and briefed about the requirement to record or note specific events, feelings or interactions over a specified period.' (Gaffney 2006). Central to the way Cultural Probes works is a focus on informality, friendliness and a sense of (that word again) intimacy. It also deploys 'tactics of ambiguity, absurdity, and mystery throughout, as a way of provoking new perspectives on everyday life' (Gaver, Dunne and Pacenti 1999, p. 26). This approach could spark a number of intriguing 'next stages' for the project, with one being active intervention in the story creation process through the insertion of material designed to generate lateral responses – though one would need to carefully think about issues of trust and expectation. An allied possibility is the use of mobile devices; Cultural Probes are mobile in an 'analogue' way, with participants recording impressions on paper, camera or video. Such an approach could combine location-based data processing, such as seen in the Street Museum application for iPhone highlighted previously, with the creation of personal narratives, possibly on a mobile platform (the technical architecture will support this)

Visually and technically, a number of models offer inspiration. The *Simile* project at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology is based on the 'semantic web' concept of World Wide Web founder Tim Berners-Lee: online technologies that allow machines to process and understand the meaning ('semantics') of information on the internet (Berners-Lee, Hendler & Lassila 2001). The Simile project is rolling out a range of 'robust, open source tools that empower users to access, manage, visualize and reuse digital assets'. This includes the *Simile Timeline* project described earlier, and may include future software that could work well with Small Histories.

Some commercial websites are interesting in the ways they allow users to create, edit and share their content in new ways. One is *Piczo*, a site for teenagers developed in Sweden. Piczo has a corporate aim: to help 'consumer brands reach and build relationships with teenagers ages 13-18 throughout the world':

Piczo's customizable content, colorful graphics, glitter text, video, and photo tools spotlight member creativity without requiring technical skills. Members share their life stories with friends by designing their sites with multiple pages featuring photos, graphics, videos, music, comment boards, games, and more. Each site can be linked to other friends' sites and users can interact with them and their friends, and meet new people online. (About Piczo, viewed 2010)

The sharing of data between different servers and databases also offers new possibilities for Small Histories, especially in combination of historical and geographical data with narrative. Data 'mashups' are becoming more widespread, and are demonstrated by *Senghor On the Rocks*, an online novel described as:

...the first novel that has been annotated in its entirety with online satellite imagery. The novel is presented online in an interface made up as a virtual book and every page of text is accompanied by a satellite view of the current location of the story. Readers experience the novel's action as a journey on the map including smooth panning from location to location as the characters travel around or different zoom-levels showing areas in close detail or as an overview. (Benda 2008)



Figure 79: Senghor on the rocks screenshot. Source: <http://www.senghorontherocks.net/part1.html>

It is tempting to ponder how W.G. Sebald might have used such tools.

Visually, I would like to look at developing an interface where stories are seen within topographic maps as journeys (roads) between items (nodes). One inspiration for this is the website *They Rule*, described as follows:

They Rule aims to provide a glimpse of some of the relationships of the US ruling class. It takes as its focus the boards of some of the most powerful U.S. companies, which share many of the same directors...It allows users to browse through these interlocking directories and run searches on the boards and companies. A user can save a map of connections complete with their annotations and email links to these maps to others.

*They Rule* is a Flash-based offering that essentially visualises connections between nodes:

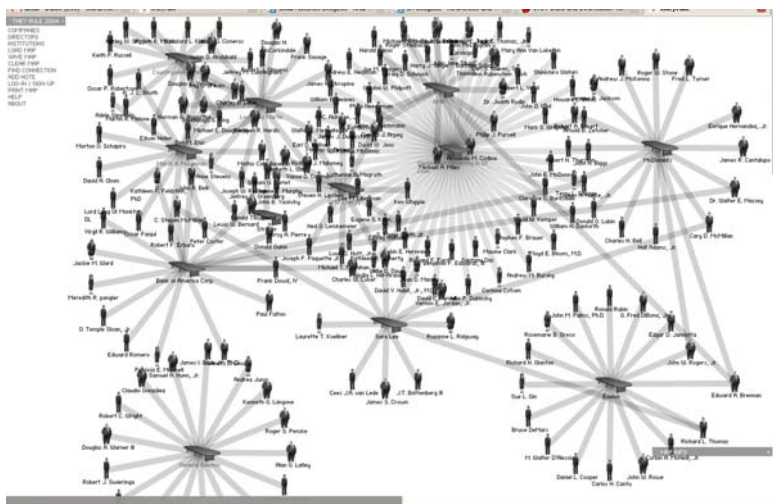


Figure 80: They Rule. Source: <http://www.theyrule.net/>

The development of a Small Histories map interface will involve scouring online data visualisation techniques, such as the list provided by meryl.net (viewed 2010)

One element that will be taken into account in any future development is how people use these systems. Currently, every Small Histories page has Google Analytics code incorporated into it, providing a rough snapshot of how people enter the site, which page they enter the site from, from which page they leave, the keywords they use to find the site, where they are located and the like. This is currently of limited use, but will grow in usefulness when others begin to use it or Storymaker, particularly in terms of how the site is accessed, where most referrals come from, and what people are looking for when they stumble on it.

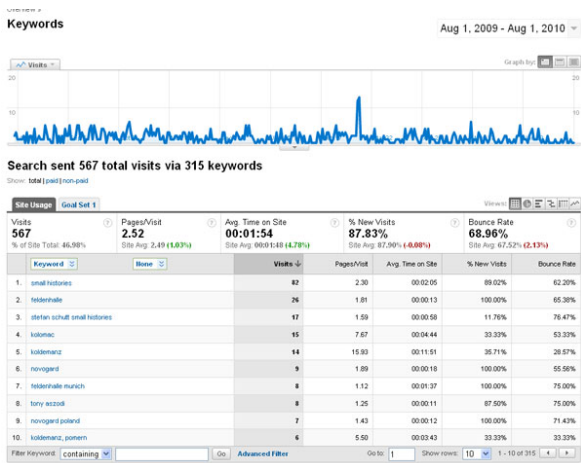


Figure 81: Google Analytics report for Small Histories. Source: <http://analytics.google.com>



## Other activities

Apart from the development of the website, I am looking at using my own project content to expand into new areas of media, particularly into artistic modes of meaning-making. In terms of digital multimedia, one source of inspiration is experimental filmmaker Peter Greenaway's *Tulsa Luper Suitcases* project (Greenaway, 2003-2005), a true multimedia extravaganza that, like Sebald, plays with notions of the real and the fictional. It incorporates three 'source material' films released in non-sequential order, a Flash website with 92 online games (created in an apparent competition for Flash designers) as well as forums, books, DVDs and CDs, and a three-year run of 92 international exhibitions, undertaken in conjunction with local artists and due to end in 2011. The project is, according to Greenaway, premised on the building of an online reconstruction of the life and adventures of 'professional prisoner' Tulsa Luper and his 92 suitcases containing symbolic objects; 92 being the atomic number of uranium (the project is also called 'a personal history of Uranium'). The character of Luper is a collector of records himself, and the work comments on archival processes in a digital era.

Many possibilities exist for reworking the content of my travels and discoveries over the last decade and a half, including teaming up with artists to reinterpret the material. In this PhD project I have only scratched the surface of my own auto/biographical material, which includes thousands of items of family historical data (images and writings), recorded interviews with people such as the historian at the Kibbutz where I was living), soundscapes, my own extensive notes, traces of ancient Middle Eastern artifacts and the like. As a musician, I would also like to work more with musical material, something I began in an album of music I released in 2004 under the name Schmozzle (you can hear the relevant song, *Alle Sachen*, here: <http://www.last.fm/music/Schmozzle/%240.08> )

As well as works of multimedia - and still taking the cue from Greenaway - I would like in future to investigate notions of truth, perspective and history (albeit on a much smaller scale than Greenaway) by way of exhibitions that deploy my family history as a lens to examine truth in personal narratives and objects.

The first of these will take place from 15 March 2011 at the Level 17 Artspace in Flinders Street, Melbourne. For this exhibition I have gathered together a group of 13 artists who will present a range of works on the theme of 'the haunted image', based on a post-PhD article that my supervisor Marsha Berry and I have written for the journal *Current Narratives*. Work will include projections onto dressmaker's dummies, cyanotypes, experimental video work and manipulated photography:



## AURA: THE HAUNTED IMAGE

**CATH BARCAN, MARSHA BERRY, PETER BURKE, GREG GIANNIS,  
MARK HOLSWORTH, MARK LEAMAN, GINA KALABISHIS, DEAN KEEP,  
SUE KNEEBONE, STEFAN SCHUTT, MATTHEW STANTON, IRENE WELLM**

### OPENING NIGHT

Tuesday 15 March, 6 – 8pm

### EXHIBITION RUNS

15 March – 8 April 2011

### GALLERY HOURS

Monday to Friday, 10am – 5pm

Victoria University  
17/300 Flinders Street  
Melbourne 3000  
Telephone  
(03) 9919 1931  
(03) 9919 1583  
Facsimile  
(03) 9919 1540

**LEVEL  
17  
ARTSPACE**

Image: Sue Kneebone, *For Better or for Worse*, 2010, giclée print (detail)  
[www.vu.edu.au/creativeindustries](http://www.vu.edu.au/creativeindustries)



Figure 82: Flyer for *Aura* exhibition

For this exhibition I am creating a replica of a museum exhibit made from cardboard boxes (that formerly housed refrigerators) and foam board. It will feature items connected with the 1944 image of my grandmother's family estate house discussed previously. Its intention is to comment on notions of impermanence and preservation in relation to family memory. Below is a photograph of the work as it is being built, at the time of writing:



Figure 83: Work-in-progress for *Aura* exhibition

I plan to create more of these kinds of works in forthcoming years. To this end I have collected a large number of objects, including pottery shards from locations throughout Israel, Jordan and Egypt, as well as a large number of my own photographs and documents. A further inspiration source here is the 'culture

jamming' work of artists such as the art and music group KLF and street artist Banksy, whose work is outlined in a newspaper article (The Age, 19 May 2005):

Staff at the British Museum have been left with red faces after discovering a hoax exhibit on display - a cave painting of a primitive man pushing a supermarket trolley.

The "rock painting", entitled Early Man Goes to Market, depicts the outline of a spear-wielding caveman pushing a trolley, next to the outline of a pig.

The work was planted by anonymous "art terrorist" Banksy, whose creation failed to raise eyebrows at one of London's most famous museums.

This is not the first time Banksy has stuck fake objects to gallery walls and waited to see how long it takes before curators notice.

## 7. In summary

After more years than I care to think about, this point of the document represents an end. Of what, I'm still not exactly sure. But here I am, heating the wax, sealing off this motley patchwork of strategies for continuity overlaid over an amorphous and unwieldy mass of data. As a writer, I'm familiar with generating narrative strategies for continuity. In this document I've tried to do the same, but for a narrative larger and more cumbersome, detailed and fragmentary than anything I've tackled before.

The previous version of this document ended with some of the paragraph above, followed by the final statement: 'I hope it holds together long enough before it breaks forever'. This version was submitted for my PhD examination. From this, alongside the examiners' ticks of approval (representing the final 'whew' for me), I received some wonderful and incisive feedback that I wish I had seen before submitting because it would have improved this thesis. So now I'm looking once more at this document with new eyes, through a revised frame. But where to finally stop? I technically don't need to be writing this since no rewriting was required for the final submission - but here I am again, tinkering some more, putting off the moment when I will send off the final electronic copy to RMIT to be sealed, like an insect in amber, as an artifact, dated July 2011.

In the feedback, more than one examiner discussed this document's structure and order (or relative lack thereof) in relation to its claim to academic validity. This feedback showed that the examiners were grappling with the same expectations of clear structure and continuity that has been a constant theme of this exploration: how coherent and sequential should one make a document that examines, and is immersed in, an era of networks, collisions and intersections? And how does recognising the artifice inherent in creating strategies for continuity undermine a document that discusses these strategies, but ironically by the very processes it critiques? And then, of course, there is the other side: to what degree might the thematic meandering of this document be simply the result of my own patchy discipline, in both the personal and academic sense of that word? I don't think I can properly answer that yet. I think I need some distance, and perhaps to learn more about what it means to be 'an academic'. For now, once I finish this small revision, the document will be done and dusted.

In terms of summing up my PhD exploration, I agree with one examiner that Bal's notion of 'travelling concepts' encapsulates this project as well as any other, and is probably my best bet for structuring subsequent publication efforts without compromising too much the aforementioned sense of structural ambiguity that informs this thesis. Still, I admit that at times I have felt like the perpetual travellers I used to

meet during my world travels. These travellers lived everywhere but nowhere; they had no home to speak of and they laid their sleeping mats in any manner of places. Such an existence evokes, in me at least, a sense of unease, of being exposed and unprotected by a group identity. And now I notice how curiously similar my deliberations on this are to my deliberations on identity and belonging outlined earlier. Which club, with its set of rules, traditions - and perhaps dogmas – will I choose to join or adopt, with all the restrictions and protections that this choice entails?

Perhaps I will ‘settle down’, theoretically speaking. Or perhaps the ‘travelling concept’ itself will be the home, an interdisciplinary home, a theoretical citizen of the world.

That is looking ahead, but I also need to look back at my exploration and summarise its main claims.

The central motif of this document is the travelling concept of ‘performances of reconstruction’. I arrived at that concept by, firstly, looking at online life stories. When such life stories are viewed as performances of the self, new ways of thinking emerge about the internet’s role as a facilitator of life story production, publication and sharing. Website systems now emerge as active partners in the recording and sharing of history through the interactions they engender. If the internet is the stage for millions of performances, then media sharing, social networking and other collaborative online systems are the directors, their content processing and display rules dictating the outcome on the screen. This process is a dance that involves both the technology and the operator, echoing Espen Aarseth's 1997 *cybertext* production model.

Secondly, I examined the influence of disruptive historical events on people’s sense of identity and belonging. Our era has seen the rise of the internet as well as traumatic disruption and changes in society that have uprooted and dispersed cultures, identities and histories, the pieces lost or scattered. Like those digging through the rubble after a bombing raid, people are searching for and reassembling what they can, what’s left of the wreckage, in order to find out where they come from and where they belong. I posited that, as an enabler of ‘performances of reconstruction’, the internet has an important part to play in this search for identity and belonging, even in its very enabling of people to undertake such performances, regardless of the artifacts created. Yes, narratives create structure and meaning from the chaos of life, but so too, it seems, does the process of narrative creation itself.

This kind of reconstructive practice is not just about trying to stick the pieces back together. It is essentially a creative act, a mosaic created from the shards of the broken past. As such, this allows for a fresh approach to auto/biography by diminishing its focus on truth and emphasising the sense of ongoing, subjective emergence and on awakening emotional response, particularly to traumatic events, as opposed to presenting a definitive account of one's life and times with all its claims to narrative authority and control.

The business of personal storytelling is unreliable and people's stories are subject to change over time, just like in real life. Database-driven web environments allow creators to change their stories as they change. This may challenge some existing expectations of auto/biographical practice, but it appears that these expectations are changing anyway as more mutable, less codified view of the self and community emerge in this wired, mobile, restless age. And, ironically, the internet is itself responsible for the increasing dispersal of the self as more and more people willingly deposit traces of themselves on remote databases around the world. The urge to assemble and to disperse, it seems, are the two contrapuntal movements of identity in a networked era.

Meaning is created when nodes of information are linked in new ways, when connections are drawn between nodes, new networks are formed and data juxtaposed. This is where the internet offers an unparalleled opportunity for reconstructive practice, because it supports every stage of the process - finding data, collecting data, ordering data, publishing data, sharing data, comparing data. The Small Histories project hopes to make use of this potential by providing useful and engaging ways for personal stories to be collected and published on the internet, then for those stories to be connected and compared. As the internet evolves, so too will the tools for doing this.

One consequence of this, however, is there is no guarantee of closure in an open-ended world. We cannot rest and no classification system will lock down the world for us, though some try. As posed by Dirk De Bruyn: '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?'

In fact, as Anne Michaels and W.G. Sebald have told us, there is no way to eliminate the melancholy that accompanies modernity and its relentless changes. Technology, certainly, will not save us. But there are ways to mitigate this, to find pockets of meaning and belonging. Technology can at least help us there, even as it fans the tumult.

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# Appendix I: the Small Histories websites

## Technical overview

The Small Histories website is has been built in PHP, with the intention of being released as open source code for others to develop further. The site has been built by programmer James Cartledge using the Model View Controller (MVC) design pattern, a model also used by large open source web content development systems such as Drupal and Joomla. 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.

Since the Small Histories site was built, new and better php frameworks have emerged that also use the MVC design pattern. The StoryMaker site is built on one of these, the Code Ignitor framework, which promises to make future development easier, both by our team and open source developers.

## The accompanying blog site

A project weblog (blog) site was set up in May 2005. It was created in conjunction with the project that was then a Master of Arts project called the Isreal Project before it morphed into Small Histories. It is a kind of online diary, charting the progress of the project and providing reflections and a clearing house of things to chase up and examine further: <http://art.tafe.vu.edu.au/sschutt/isreal/blog>. The blog uses a system created by colleague Lisa Cianci in the School of Creative Industries at Victoria University. It is password-controlled (to post, not view) and runs on a Creative Industries server at VU. It currently contains around 370 posts. I will quote from blog entries to this site throughout this document.



Figure 84: Small Histories weblog site

## Appendix II: Genealogy on the web - a software review

The meteoric growth of online genealogical activity illustrates the depth of the desire for what might be called continuity of memory. Promotional copy on commercial genealogy websites plays on this desire, selling the promise of keeping families connected both in the present and with the past. Some services embody this desire for continuity through their very design, such as combining specific genealogy-related functionality (such as family trees) with social networking services for family members, thereby emphasising the link between the past and the present.

### **The Mormons and online genealogy**

A surprising number of the genealogical resources available today owe their existence to the extensive work undertaken by the Church of Jesus Christ and Latter-day Saints (the Mormons). The church is considered the world leader in genealogical search. It began microfilming early church records in 1938 (Mayfield 1983, p. 125) and now has over 2.4 million rolls of microfilm, containing two billion names, stored behind 14-ton doors in the Granite Mountain Records Vault, a 'climate-controlled repository designed to survive a nuclear impact that is built into the Wasatch mountain range, about 20 miles southeast of Salt Lake City' (Eastman 2001). The church's vast array of online and other genealogy resources now including over 4500 free Family History Centers (Akenson 2007) and the GEDCOM standard for genealogical data sharing.

What has driven this effort is a church belief in the continuation of family life through the past, present and future - in fact, for all eternity. Members 'trace their ancestry as a solemn duty' because they believe that not only that 'life does not begin at birth nor does it end at death', but that the 'family unit can continue into the eternities, not to be dissolved at death'. (Mayfield 1983, p. 125). The Mormons believe that performing 'certain sacred ordinances' such as church baptisms and confirmations ensure that families continue for eternity. These ordinances also go back in time: it is the duty of church members to extend this into the past since 'most people have not had the opportunity in this life to take part in these temple ordinances. They believe they have a divine injunction to do this ordinance work by proxy in the temples in behalf of their kindred dead.' Hence 'in order to accurately and fully identify their ancestors so that this vicarious work can be accomplished, Mormons undertake genealogical research in the libraries established by the Church for that purpose.' (Mayfield 1983, pp. 125-126)

That work currently includes a large-scale IT project to convert all genealogical data collected by the Mormons to searchable digital formats. As church journalist Brittany Karford relates in an online article:

“I call it unlocking the vault,” says Heath Nielson, the program’s lead software engineer. “I cannot wait for the day when accessibility to these records becomes available to all.”

When that day comes, the records will be available to everyone, both Latter-day Saints and the public—“God’s children everywhere”—according to the project team. And for those researching family history under either title, it will mean no more microfilm, and no more eyes strained from looking at film under dim light. (Karford 2007)

The scale and breadth of the genealogical work undertaken by the Mormon church is a telling illustration of the power of the desire for continuity, and the level of activity this desire can generate.

## Examples of online genealogical tools

### Ancestry.com

Ancestry.com (<http://www.ancestry.com>) is the largest commercial genealogy company in the world (Wayner 2004). It claims its network of nine websites offers four billion searchable family history records, 13 million family trees and 30 million uploaded photos and stories (Ancestry.com, viewed 2010). The company, like many in this field, has had strong connections to the Mormons. It started as a service called Infobases that offered Mormon publications on floppy disks (Deseret News 2000), and until 2007 Ancestry provided free access to its services at the Mormon church’s Family History Centers (Eastman 2007).

Like other online services, the Ancestry.com website offers access to genealogical databases and a family tree creation tool plus the opportunity to upload and share photos and text, known on the site as 'stories'.

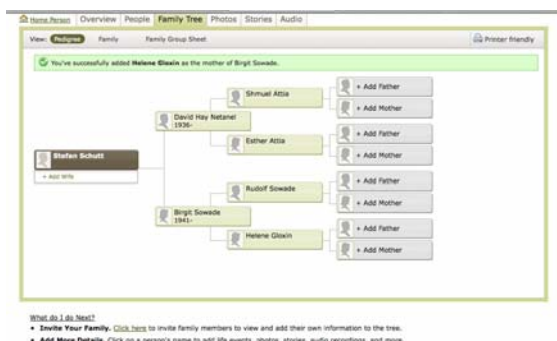


Figure 85: Ancestry.com: family tree tool

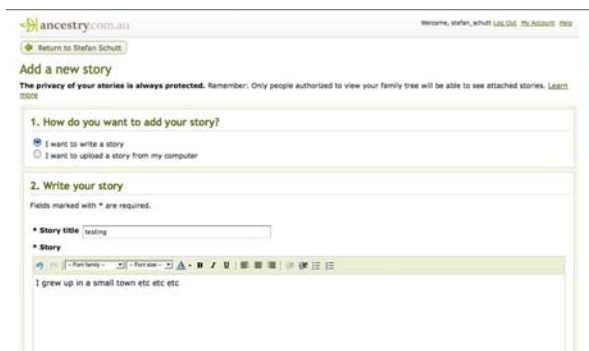


Figure 86: Ancestry.com: story uploading tool

This story upload feature is the closest I have found to Small Histories in that it explicitly flags the publishing and sharing of personal narratives, not just media items such as photos. Attached to the stories are items of metadata somewhat similar to Small Histories:



Figure 87: Ancestry.com: story upload tool: metadata items

However the 'stories' on Ancestry.com are uploaded via one text field. At the time of writing there is no opportunity within the Ancestry site for members to combine or order text, images and other media items into stories, as per Small Histories. It does, however, offer the opportunity to automatically create a personal timeline for text and other information it calls 'Life Events'.

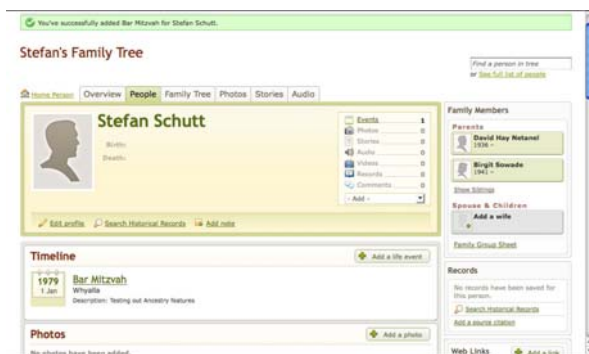


Figure 88: Ancestry.com: life events

The Ancestry.com network includes a number of sub-sites, many of which were separate services that have since been bought out by Ancestry.com. Genealogy.com (<http://www.genealogy.com>) is one, whose homepage includes a number of enticements to find lost relatives and ancestors:

Figure 89: Genealogy.com: homepage

Another of Ancestry's services is Rootsweb (<http://rootsweb.ancestry.com>) which allows local historical societies to create their own web pages and publish basic historical accounts.

<p><b>LATEST NEWS</b></p>	<p><b>Mt YORK-HARTLEY CEMETERY TRANSCRIPTS</b> This Book along with another new publication <b>Transport Workshop</b>, were available for sale at the annual State Conference of Family History Societies held in Wyong 18th-20th September, 2009. Both books are now available from the Society</p>
<p><b>LATEST NEWS - MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL</b></p>	<p>THE SOCIETY'S membership year runs from 1 January to 31 December. Thus all memberships are now due for renewal. There has been no change in Membership Fees for 2010. Fees remain \$25 single membership and \$30 family membership. If members require their Journal - 'Explorers' Tree' - to be mailed then an additional \$5 is required. Membership can be paid at all meetings, at the Springwood Library (when a volunteer is on duty) or by mail to PO Box 97 SPRINGWOOD NSW 2777. Please download a Membership Application (essential for both new AND continuing members) from <a href="#">here</a>.</p>
	<p>February General Meeting Our first meeting of the new year will be held on Friday 12th</p>

Figure 90: Ancestry.com: Rootsweb



The other important Ancestry site to mention is myfamily.com (<http://www.myfamily.com>) which is a social networking site for family members, and which, since forming in 1998, has been redesigned to be more user-friendly in what can be deemed 'Web 2.0' style. Like the social networking function within the MyHeritage site (see below), this site allows paid users to create profiles, upload and share media, and communicate with other family members.

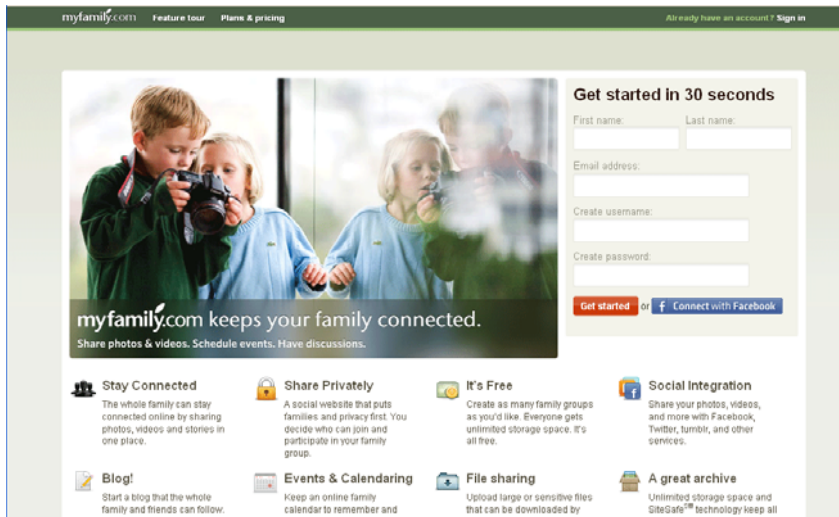


Figure 91: Ancestry.com: myfamily.com

### An aside on timelines and other narrative ordering software

Timeline features such as the Ancestry.com 'life events' timeline mentioned above are now becoming commonplace across the web, with examples of new-generation timeline tool development including the interactive Simile Timeline project (<http://www.simile-widgets.org/timeline/>) at the MIT Media Lab:

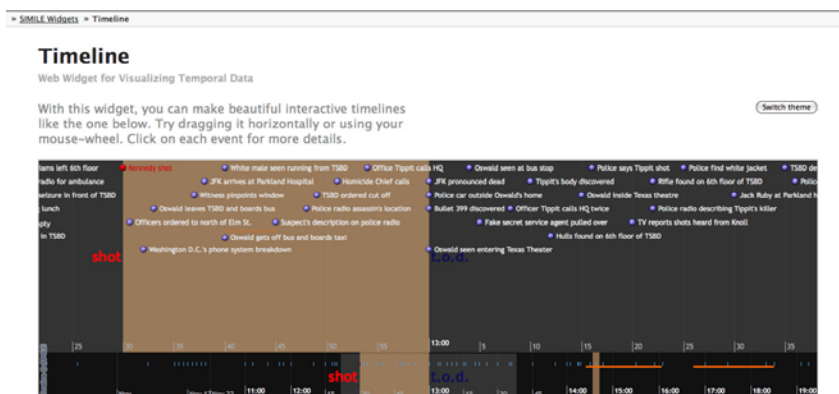


Figure 92: Simile Timelines example. Source: <http://www.simile-widgets.org/timeline/>

Blogs and other website systems that automatically arrange content by date can also be said to be deploying time-based ordering. Such tools are a form of automated narrative ordering. At the time of writing, however, I am not aware of the existence of manual story ordering tools as per Small Histories - though ordering tools for visual material alone do exist in the form of comic creation websites like Bubblr (<http://www.pimpampum.net/bubblr/> - discussed later) and software such as Comic Life (<http://plasq.com/comiclife/>). An Australian software development project-in-progress called FABtale (<http://www.fabtale.com/>) does promise to do something like this in the near future, but seemingly not in an online environment. Little information is currently on the website, which describes the project's first test work as:

The founder, a writer and filmmaker, joined with a software developer to create the world's first FAB or Film Audio Book. It was the first story of its kind to incorporate all the components of text, film, photography, music, voice-overs, and 'click-notes' into a single multimedia experience.

The manuscript is a 'stand-alone' story/book with the other media supplementing the narrative. With its success, Fabtale has now released the author based software which enables consumers to create their own stories/FABs using the various media in whatever proportion they desire.

## **My Heritage**

The second-largest for-profit online genealogy company in the world is My Heritage (<http://www.myheritage.com/>) Started in 2003 by Israeli IT and genealogy enthusiasts, the company has grown to encompass a range of smaller genealogy services and now claims to host 548 million online profiles, 14 million family trees and 79 million photos (My Heritage website, retrieved 22 February 2010.)

The creation of IT specialists, MyHeritage has a more user-friendly, "Web 2.0" interface than Ancestry.com. It is in effect a combined genealogy resource site and social networking service for family members (whereas Ancestry.com offers separate services), and has implemented special features including facial recognition tools for photos (<http://celebrity.myheritage.com/face-recognition>). The site, like Ancestry's myfamily site, does not mention life stories at all at the time of writing, and only allows for the uploading of photos and videos in gallery form.



Figure 93: myheritage.com: member homepage

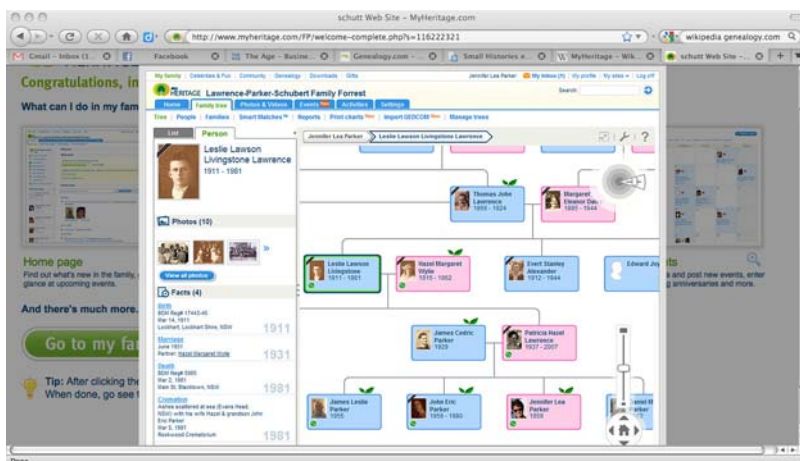


Figure 94: myheritage.com: family tree creator

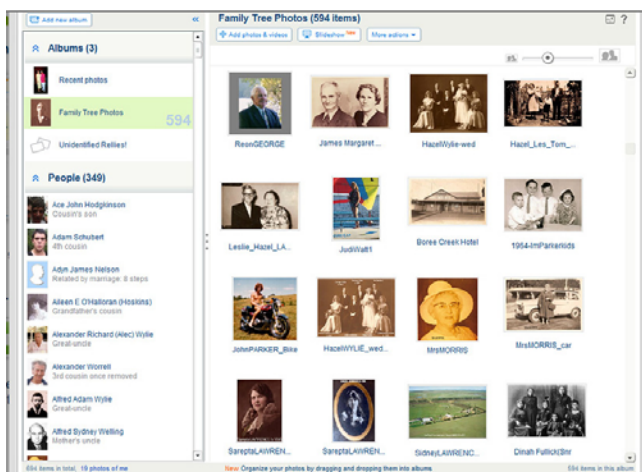


Figure 95: myheritage.com: photo gallery

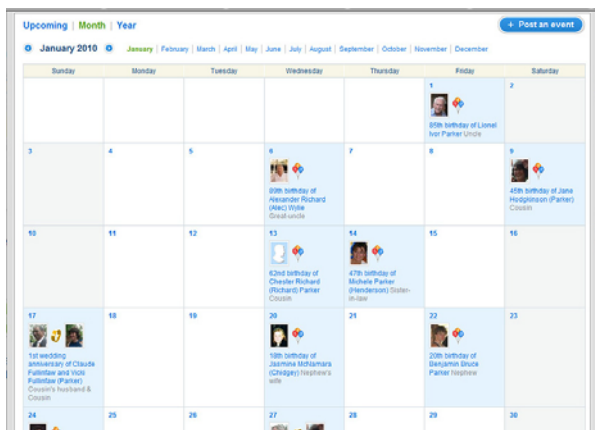


Figure 96: myheritage.com: calendar

## Family Search

The Family Search group (<http://www.familysearch.org>) is the Mormons' genealogical arm - the largest genealogical organisation in the world. The group's website emphasises the importance of family connections and continuity, and alludes to the Mormon belief in the eternal bond of families into the afterlife (Family Search, viewed 2010).

The Family Search organisation runs an interrelated cluster of websites and focuses on ancestral research in its pure sense rather than on facilitating connections between living family members. It does, however, encourage users to actively contribute to its records as volunteer transcribers of historical documents:



Figure 97: Family Search site

## Web Biographies

One online family history service almost certainly not connected with the Mormons is Web Biographies (<http://www.webbiographies.com/>) founded in 2006 by Scott Purcell - an internet entrepreneur who is also the founder of a social networking site for swingers. Interestingly enough, in the two months between adding and revising the following details, the Web Biographies site appears to have gone offline. This highlights the tenuousness of placing responsibility for the safekeeping of one's family history with an unknown third party. (Note: on a further check some months later in March 2011, the site appears to be online once more).

This service is similar to others in that it allows registered users to create family trees, connect with others and upload text stories about different aspects of one's life. As its title suggests, its focus is the creation of online biographies, presented in the form of mimicked books with tables of contents and life tales in chronological order.



Figure 98: Web Biographies site

The site's 'message from our founder', although in essence a sales pitch, also suggests that the site began with Purcell's personal interest. Despite the fact that Web Biographies is not religiously based like other genealogy sites, this statement echoes a similar concern with legacy as well as the preservation of family memories through life stories:

My grandfather passed away, and shortly afterwards I realized I knew almost nothing about him. I missed him, and I wished I knew more about him. But he was gone, and with him, we lost all of his stories and memories. It was almost like he never existed.

I looked in the mirror and realized the same fate awaited me: One day, my stories and memories would be lost, just as his were. And my grandkids and great grandchildren would long to know about me, but not be able to. So I decided to write my biography as my gift to them, since a memoir really is the only legacy you can leave for the future.

And then I ran into a problem... although ancestry.com, genealogy.com and other sites are wonderful for researching your past, there are no sites for preserving and sharing your memories, your stories, your photos, your scrapbook mementos and your family tree. I couldn't believe such a thing didn't exist, how could it not? But it didn't. Luckily, my team and I are some of the most senior and experienced internet people alive (see below)... so we decided to build a service to preserve and share people's personal legacies and family heritage. And Web Biographies was born!

### Other genealogical software

A large number of open source or free genealogical software products are available for download on the internet. Many of these, like the Agelong Tree software (<http://www.genery.com/>) represented below, focus on the creation of family trees.

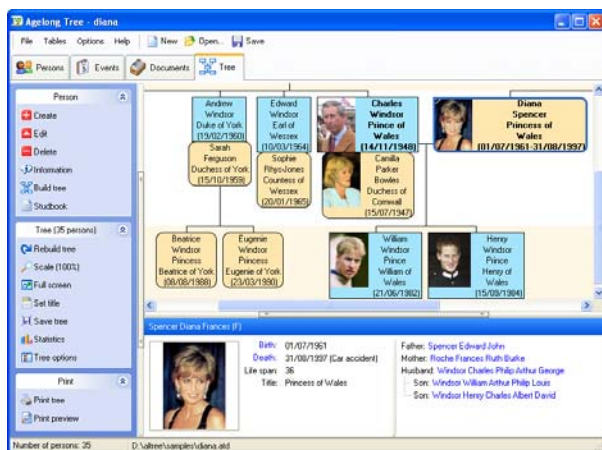


Figure 99: Agelong Tree screenshot. Source: <http://www.genery.com/>

### Online genealogical communities

A large number of online forums have existed for the exchange of genealogical information for many years, one example being the Jewish Genealogy newsgroups on which I posted my 'Looking for Father' messages

in 1997. Whilst some of today's forums are hosted by organisations such as Ancestry.com's Rootsweb, others have emerged independently, such as Rootschat.com (<http://www.rootschat.com/>) which claims over 80,000 members and which was founded by a British couple in 2003 by combining, as the site states, 'Trystan's knowledge of Computers and Sarah's love of Genealogy and History' (RootsChat, viewed 2010). The site's posts and topics (which vary greatly - see screenshot below) are moderated by a group of enthusiast volunteers:



Figure 100: Rootschat – homepage

Today's Newest Topics		
[New Zealand] BMD experts please by leandra		Today at 02:55:12
[Australia] Jane Dickson ROXBURGH - Melbourne 1927 - ? by judb		Today at 02:54:29
[Census and Resource Discussion] Findmypast 1911 not working? by Dee3		Today at 02:50:31
[New Zealand] McGowan & Rowley families Dunedin?? by SandraAust		Today at 02:48:02
[Australia] william john lyall by ~MERLIN~		Today at 02:47:01
[The Common Room] Tonis OH Sc Hunt part ye 6 by regress		Today at 02:39:02
[Photograph Restoration & Dating.] A big ask by Freckle		Today at 02:37:18
[The Common Room] NINE illegitimate children! by drodgers34		Today at 02:32:19
[Berkshire] Visitation Berks - Sir Christopher Barker vs Robert Barker by dunvr		Today at 02:30:21
[Sussex] 1841 - 1871 Census 'Look Up' - Charman/Bourm by big_guy		Today at 02:28:22
[Dublin] Sweny of Dublin by kenneth cooke		Today at 02:28:01
[Australia] Help with finding Edmund Charles CLARK. by antongf		Today at 02:27:26
[World War Two] Henry H E Tindall by EdCan		Today at 02:25:18
[Photograph Restoration & Dating.] Please Can anyone restore my Dad by Damuan187		Today at 02:22:21
[Lancashire] Birth Annie Wilson Abt 1881 Lancs Earlstown. by plimmerian		Today at 02:20:03
[Canada] Jarvis longhurst - victoria british columbia by LemonMallie		Today at 02:17:46
[Ayrshire] Parentage/first marriages of John MILLER & Mary LYMBURNER by Ruskie		Today at 02:16:33
[Armed Forces] Soldiers who fought in the Battle of Waterloo by missbelle		Today at 02:15:58
[Cheshire] Henry Harrison Warrington by denmac		Today at 02:11:21
[Australia] SA Railway Workers by AnnieOZ		Today at 02:11:12

Figure 101: Rootschat - homepage: further down screen - list of newest topics

An interesting feature of newer genealogy-related online communities is their harnessing of volunteer effort through the internet. This can be seen in the volunteer moderation roles created by Rootsweb, the volunteer transcription processes developed by the Mormon church's Familysearch.org site, and sites like Random Acts of Genealogical Kindness (RAOGK), (<http://www.raogk.org/>) which claims to have over 4000 volunteers signed up and which describes itself as:

a web-based genealogical research co-op that functions solely by the services of volunteers.

Volunteers from any part of the globe may offer services to any requester, such as research of birth and death records, public records, obituaries, marriage records and deeds. Other volunteers

photograph burial sites, cemeteries and tombstones. Our volunteers have agreed to do a free genealogy research task at least once per month in their local area as an act of kindness. (RAOGK, viewed 2010)

In all these sites, the search for cohesion looms large, as does the sense that such activity is useful and worthwhile, whether framed in a context of religion, family togetherness or generational continuity. By bringing together social networking and genealogical research, it could be argued that some sites are positioning themselves as a unified strategy for countering fragmentation of identity, thereby seeing to make themselves indispensable to people concerned about keeping the pieces together in an age of fragmentation. Ditto for the increasing prevalence of time-based ordering software, such as timeline programs that either allow people to create manual timelines (see Simile Timeline above or others such as Beedocs - <http://www.beedocs.com/>) or those that automatically pull in date-stamped data from other sites such as Facebook and Flickr.

## **Other relevant life story projects**

### **StoryCorps**

StoryCorps (<http://storycorps.org/>) is a US-based non-profit organisation whose mission is described in its website as 'to honor and celebrate one another's lives through listening.' Stated on the website is that StoryCorps aims 'to provide Americans of all backgrounds and beliefs with the opportunity to record, share, and preserve the stories of our lives' (StoryCorps, viewed 2010). It does so by digitally recording and making available personal life stories. Recording occurs in StoryBooths, mini recording studios located in public places and MobileBooths, portable studios that record stories in a variety of locations around the US. StoryCorps also offers a door-to-door story recording service and do-it-yourself story recording kits. Interviews are most often undertaken by family members or friends, although trained facilitators can guide the sessions. Participants receive a CD of their interview, and StoryCorps lodges a copy of every interview with the American Folklife Center at the US Library of Congress. People can also listen to stories on National Public Radio or through StoryCorp podcasts.

As with other life story services, the organisation conveys a focus on legacy and memory, with the website stating that StoryCorps 'tells people that their lives matter and they won't be forgotten', coupled with a focus on humanist values: 'the stories we disseminate demonstrate our shared humanity. We preserve and present interviews with the deepest respect for the participants whose stories we are celebrating.' StoryCorps is



influenced by the work of oral historian and broadcaster Studs Terkel and the Works Progress Administration's Federal Writers' Project of the 1930s, for which Terkel worked. Echoes of the StoryCorp project's emphasis on humanism and listening can be observed in the work of participatory artists such as Xavier Roux, whose work was outlined earlier in this document.

## Journeys

Journeys is a Master of Arts project developed by programmer and new media artist Greg Giannis that explored issues of personal identity and migration through linked images and text. These items are linked by hypertext protocols but presented in a zoomable, experimental 3D interface. The Windows-based software was developed by Giannis in 2003 using the C and Tcl/Tk programming languages, and draws on Giannis' own family history as the Australian son of Greek migrants. The software and more information can be found here: <http://www.runme.org/project/+journeys/>

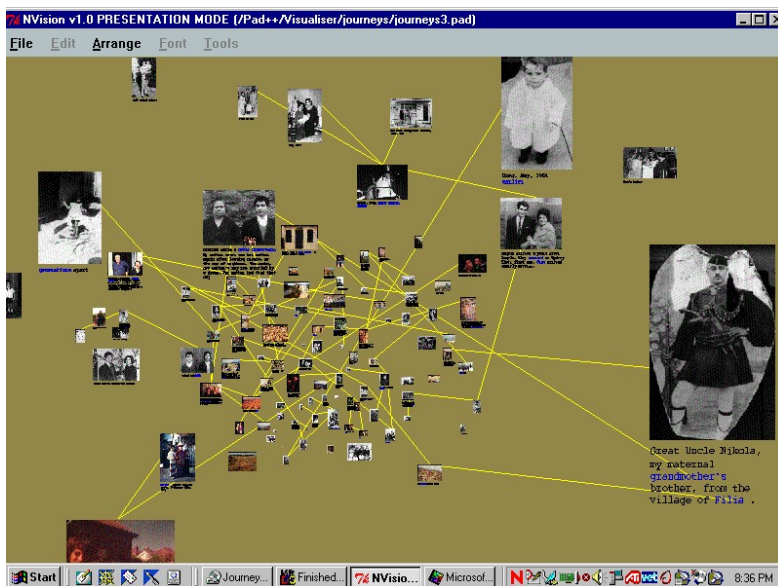


Figure 102: Journeys screenshot. Source: <http://www.runme.org/project/+journeys/>

## WW2 People's War

Not dissimilar in some ways to Story Corps is the project *WW2 People's War*, (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar/>) 'an archive of World War Two memories - written by the public, archived by the BBC' (WW2 People's War, accessed 2010). The project started when 'the BBC asked the public to contribute their memories of World War Two to a website between June 2003 and January 2006.

This archive of 47,000 stories and 15,000 images is the result'. I discovered the People's War website through an internet search for the names of my German relatives Kathe Von Normann, who turned up in a series of *WW2 People's War* stories relating to the experiences in Pomerania by the Von Thadden family, who emigrated to the UK after World War II:



Figure 103: WW2 People's War screenshot. Source: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar/>

The *WW2 People's War* site is designed as both a public archive and educational resource, with searchable transcripts of interviews and digital copies of images available for perusal. Its primary purpose is as a self-generating archive, as stated below. This statement from the site also highlights the importance of choices in technology in ensuring accessibility:

The archive site was created to make sure that this valuable collection of stories was maintained in a format that would ensure their long-term presence on the web.

The stories were gathered on the BBC's DNA platform, which had been created specifically for users to add content to the BBC site. However, for users to be able to access this on the BBC and other sites, and search and download the content in the future, it was necessary to change the format. The archive content has been transformed into .xml, with an .html interface. (WW2 People's War, viewed 2010)

After closing the site to contributors in 2006, the BBC made the decision to keep the site as an archive, including related personal data contributed by users. It is interesting that social media-style data was also retained. Details of data kept are:

- All the stories and images.
- The forums attached to each story.
- Users' Personal Pages, which contain links to stories and images they contributed, messages they left on other users' stories, and links to people they identified as 'my friends' while the site was active.
- The Timeline of fact files.
- Educational content: lesson plans and worksheets to encourage families and community groups to use extracts from the archive when teaching or raising awareness about World War Two.
- The classification structure - see the Archive Listing. All 47,000 stories have been categorised. Read more about how the content was classified ([link](#)).
- A project history has been included, which details the key stages in the life of the project, the outreach activity and how the stories were gathered.

Also of interest is the BBC's strategy for ensuring that the data is retained in the long term. This touches on issues I explored further in this document's section on archival practice:

The WW2 People's War archive site will be hosted for the foreseeable future on the BBC servers. The archive will also be deposited at the British Library's UKWAC (the United Kingdom Web Archiving Consortium) to ensure its long-term presence in the public domain.(WW2 People's War, viewed 2010).

## **Rakontu**

Rakontu is downloadable software described on its website homepage ([www.rakontu.org](http://www.rakontu.org)) as:

...a free and open source web application that small groups of people can use together **to share and work with stories**. It's for people in neighborhoods, families, interest groups, support groups, work groups: any group of people with stories to share. Rakontu members build shared "story museums" that they can draw upon to achieve common goals.

Developed by Cynthia Kurtz from IBM Research's Knowledge Socialization group, Rakontu offers an interesting combined use of social software and storytelling. It focuses on the development of new learning through the focused sharing and interpretation of stories:

Rakontu is about **small groups sharing stories for a reason**. Rakontus are invitation-only, private spaces where people share personal experiences about something they all care about, and in the process build something they can all use. Usually people who start a Rakontu will have something they want to do together, some common goal, and they will be interested in collecting and working with their stories as a means of getting there.

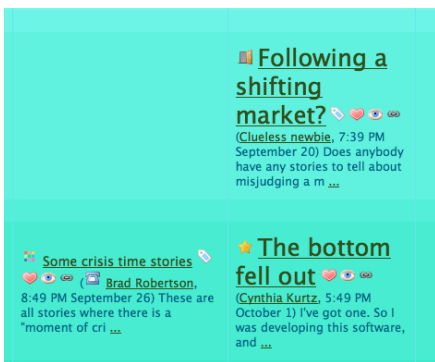


Figure 104: Rakontu: browsing stories



Figure 105: Rakontu: story editing options

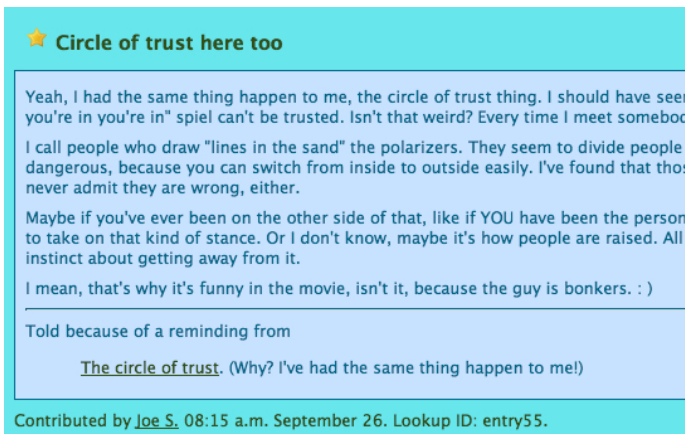


Figure 106: Rakontu: reading a story

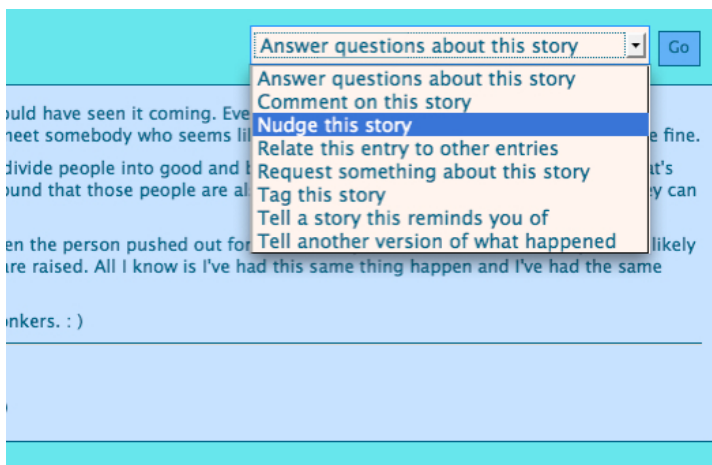


Figure 107: Rakontu: reacting to a story

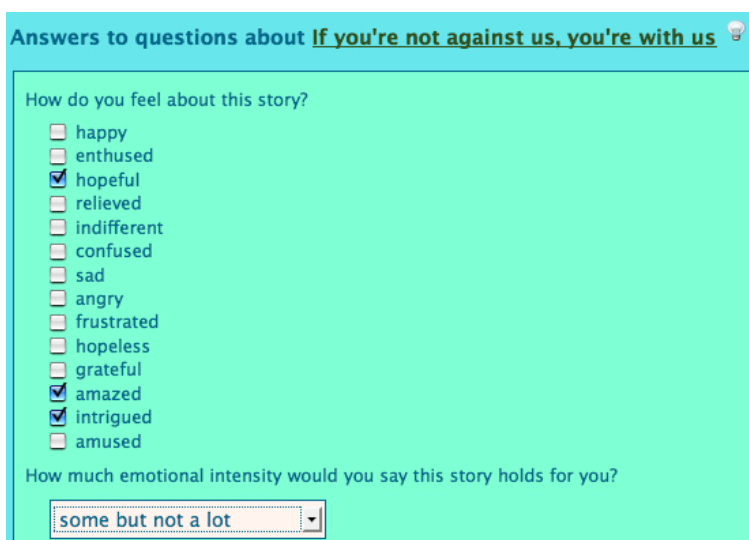


Figure 108: Rakontu: story questions

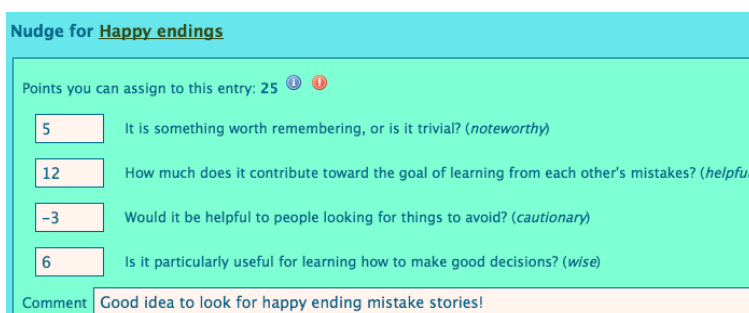


Figure 109: Rakontu: story 'nudge'

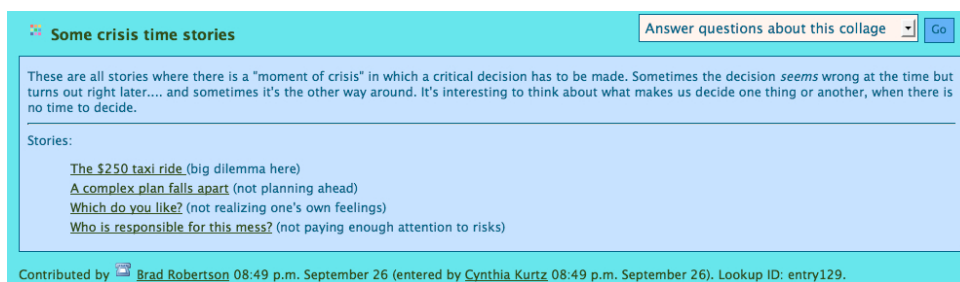


Figure 110: Rakontu: story 'collage'

Although some of Rakontu's processes and interface elements seem to be complex and cerebral - something recognised by Kurtz in her final 2010 report on the project (Kurtz 2010), the project is nevertheless interesting in its focus on group process, based on the idea of 'story circles' (Kurtz 1999). It looks at the story as facilitator of an active process of interpretation and meaning creation, rather than as an artifact or object.

On the Rakontu website's theory page, Kurtz outlines her observation that 'online storytelling is in a sad state':

All during this time, I kept looking at how people told stories over the web. This is what I found: stories embedded in miles of discussion posts; stories piled up in heaps and accessible only by slowly reading one story after another; stories of personal experience hidden among factual articles; stories measured by their creative-writing 'quality' instead of utility in moments of need; stories organized in simple, static, purely factual categories that offered little help for people in need of complex solutions and perspectives.

Here, Kurtz contrasts these practices with her own corporate knowledge management work, stating that 'the juxtaposition of factual elements with elements of **resonant collective meaning** has huge utility for helping people make sense of complex topics, discover patterns that reveal insights, find perspectives that relate in meaningful ways to their unique situations, and come to informed decisions'. In other words, the tacit and explicit contexts around a story offer potential to provide new forms of useful knowledge:

To give one example of how better organization of online stories could help people in need: say a story site for disease sufferers asked people questions like this:

- Who told this story? A patient, family, friend, medical staff?
- How did this story turn out? How do you feel about it?
- How much support does this story show? From family and friends? From medical staff?

- At what point in the progress of the disease did this story take place?
- Do you think the experiences described here are common or rare?

Kurtz's work offers some ideas for a potential new focus of the Small Histories software beyond its current focus on autobiographical narrative: as a system to generate, draw out and share organisational knowledge.

## Storybook

Storybook is described on its website as 'Open Source Novel Writing Software for Novelists, Authors and Creative Writers'. Designed as a 'plug in' for the popular open source website creation and management system Joomla, I am including this as it is the closest software I have found to that deploying the Small Histories principle of narrative creation through sequential ordering. However this software is designed for writers to organise and visualise their work, not to publish or share it online, and it is only for text, not other forms of media.

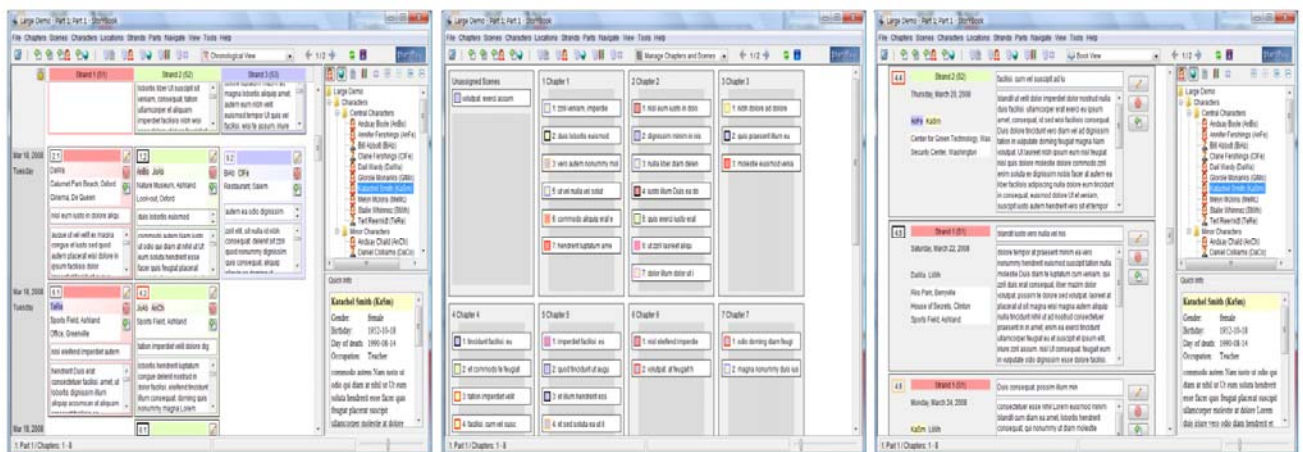


Figure 111: Storybook: interfaces. Source: <http://storybook.intertec.ch/joomla/>

## The Thorpe Saga - a case study

Over the last five years, a Melbourne IT project manager has been gradually constructing, using open source tools, a website to record his family history. This is known as *The Thorpe Saga* (<http://thorpes.org/>)

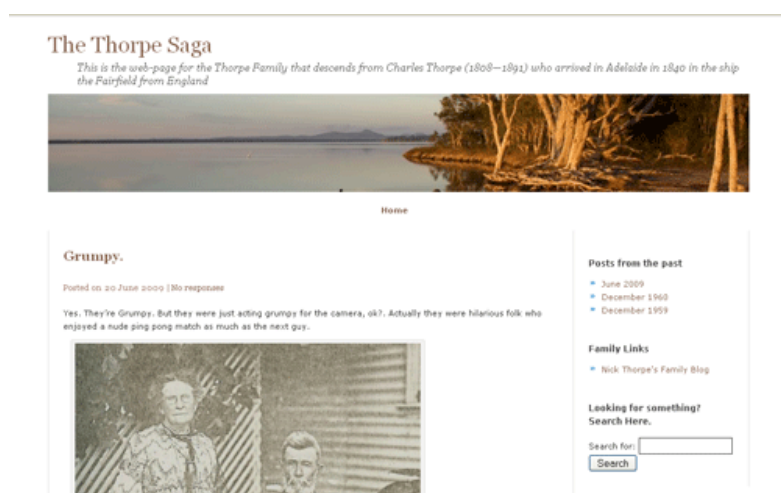


Figure 112: The Thorpe Sage website homepage

In discussing this project with its creator, I encountered many of the same issues and realisations I'd had in connection with the development of the Small Histories project.

Following our discussion, I then arranged to conduct an interview that would inform this study. The interview took place on the 23rd February, 2010. I took notes with a pen, later writing up the notes in narrative form and sending them back to the interviewee for checking before publishing here.

Here are the results; I have added headings, edited and rearranged the order of some statements to suit. I will refer to the interview throughout this document.

### Background

It started with my grandfather who created a family history that covered the 1850s to 1970s. Seven copies of this document were made. When I was young I always wanted to add to it...it was quite controversial and certain people in the family weren't allowed to see it.



For instance it tells the story of someone who died by falling under a train. You wonder: did they actually fall or did they kill themselves? There's a history of depression in the family. In this document my grandfather has created one version of the family history. But there are others.

### **Motivation**

I wanted to find a way of creating my family's history as it happens, as we go through life rather than at the end, looking back.

Also, our family is often in disagreement about our history. Disagreement swarms around the family stories but it's not recorded; there are different versions of the same story. I wanted to find a way of putting these different versions on the record.

### **Creating the Site**

It's been happening for some time now - I got the domain name 15 years ago. A few years ago Dad was incapacitated for a year. He was feeling a bit bored and down; he was thinking about what he was leaving for the family; a lot of family information was in his head.

We decided to do a project around images. Dad had 20,000 slides of photos he'd taken over the years - he's a keen photographer. So we worked out that he would sort through them, pick out the important ones and add metadata to them - location, date, brief notes on the story, main subject of the photo and other subjects. He did this by hand on a paper form we drew up. In the end Dad picked out 2,500 slides and had them scanned. We worked out a naming convention for these images; Dad worked out who features the most in the image and we used the first letter of their names, followed by a number.

Since then my partner has transcribed all this metadata onto an Excel spreadsheet - it took her six months! - and now we're ready to import this into a database that will power the site, which I put up last year but doesn't have much on it yet.

Last Christmas I gave out DVDs of all the images to everyone. It generated a lot of discussion - lots of jokes and stuff. It stoked a hunger.

### **Implications**

One thing we realised is that the selection process created one version of the story. There was a negative space around the slide selections - what did Dad choose to leave out? This created a lot of discussion in the family. For instance my nephew wondered about what happened to all my Dad's beautiful landscapes. There was a new appetite created for all the things that weren't included. I also realised that the resourcing bit is a big part of all this. It's expensive to scan slides, so we couldn't use them all - plus all the time to process all the photos. But that in itself means that some things are left out.

There was a similar issue with the metadata, especially when Dad determined who the main subject of the photo was. What if there was more than one 'main' subject? Which one did he choose and why?

That thing about different versions of the story came out strongly. One family member felt that my mother, who died of cancer when I was young, was excluded from the story. But this is a theme that has already existed for a long time - other family members have a different view. One thing that came out for me and others was actually the opposite - my mother featured in a lot of photos, and we all noted how beautiful she was.

### **Related issues**

Lately I've found that my family is increasingly using Facebook in the way I'd planned for the Thorpes site to be used, to share photos and stories. It's annoying - we have no control or ownership of this data so it's like our history, the history that's being created every day, has been handed over to someone else.

Again, the desire for family continuity is evident in this account. However in this example the creator of the family website is aware of the need for divergent views of the family history as opposed to an authoritative, singular 'grand narrative', the desire for which I have discussed in the section *The archival dimension: preservation, destruction, partisanship*.

The case study also makes a useful point about the importance of (largely technology-driven) processes and resourcing in the memory gathering process and how tied this is to subjectivity. All along the way, choices have to be made, and these choices determine the shape and viewpoint of the final narrative.

## Appendix III: Case Study: the deleted Wikipedia article

Wikipedia is an encyclopedia content creation environment described variously (by itself) as 'the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit' and 'a free encyclopedia built collaboratively using wiki software' ([www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)). Launched in 2001, Wikipedia now claims some 15 million articles including three million English-language online articles, and one million registered contributors (Wikipedia 2010b). It was founded on a 'bottom-up', self organised approach to article creation, editing and vetting (the philosophy of Wikipedia leader Jimmy Wales), with editors amassing administrative powers over time based on performance and peer review. Wikipedia now has considerable cachet in what is recorded and seen online and what is not - it is used as the default information source by many, despite lingering doubts in academic and school circles about the reliability of its content, and its articles appear high in lists of Google search results.

In 2005 I uploaded to Wikipedia an article about *Peachfuzz*, a locally known Melbourne band that had toured and made records in the early to mid 1990s, and in which I played. When I checked the article in June 2010, I saw that, after having existed for five years, the article had been marked for deletion by a fellow editor. A week-long online debate between myself and other editors followed that covered the merits of the article, the 'notability' (a central term used by Wikipedia) of the band, and the possible conflict of interest of having a former band member create the page. Other editors voted for the deletion of the article, often with minimal justification, and the page was deleted by an administrator after I had added extra references and discussion was still underway.

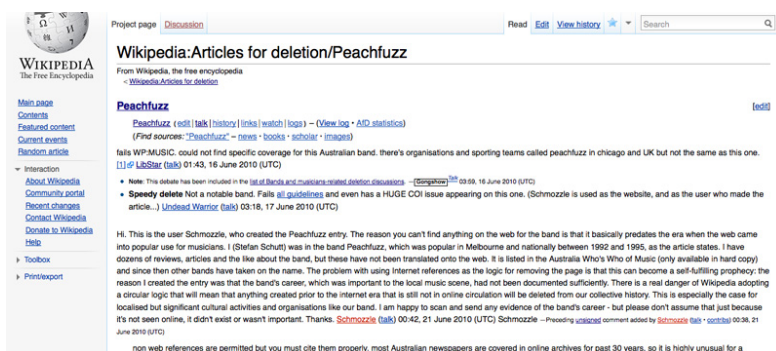


Figure 113: Wikipedia: Peachfuzz deletion discussion page

Curious about the strangely arbitrary process that had occurred, I dug around and soon uncovered a war raging within Wikipedia between what has been called 'inclusionist' and 'deletionist' editorial schools.

Inclusionists (such as founder Jimmy Wales) advocate for the open, more *laissez faire*, grassroots approach to Wikipedia content creation that have guided its early years and explosive growth, arguing that more content is better than less in an online encyclopedia, that there are no cost or scalability issues with having more content in such an online environment, and that even sub-standard articles will improve over time. The deletionists, who appeared to have gained power after widely publicised cases involving the posting of inaccurate information on living figures, argue in favour of making Wikipedia a more exclusive, vetted resource with only selected coverage - meaning the deletion of all articles that do not have wide appeal or interest, or are perceived to be lacking in some way. (Kostakis 2010; Kostakis 2010b; Johnson 2009; Douglas 2007).

In discussing this stoush in 2009, Guardian journalist Bobbie Johnson described Wikipedia as stratifying into a gated environment controlled by a group of high-level editors. This was seen as linked to the stalling of Wikipedia's once-stellar growth and the alienation of casual contributors and editors (Johnson 2009, Bauwens 2008). In his article, Johnson described the summary deletion of articles. The deletion discussions for these articles, said Johnson, featured a veneer of community-based transparency but were in fact easy to manipulate due to a confusing hodgepodge of governance measures, a criticism also taken up by other commentators such as MIT Media Lab scientist and Wikipedia contributor Barry Kort (Kostakis 2009). This, in effect, was seen as serving to lock out casual editors and consolidate power in the hands of the old editorial hands, who were then able to make decisions with increasing impunity - decisions affecting the way millions of people read history, and in turn what is remembered and what is not.

In his review of John Broughton's *Wikipedia: The Missing Manual* (itself an interesting work concerned with helping Wikipedia contributors work effectively within Wikipedia's Byzantine web of processes and guidelines), Nicholson Baker notes the rise of the culture of deletionism within Wikipedia and its accompanying 'notability purges', and recounts his subsequent attempts to save dozens of doomed Wikipedia articles after joining a group called the *Article Rescue Squadron*. As Baker says:

Still a lot of good work - verifiable, informative, brain-leapingly strange - is being cast out of this paperless, infinitely expandable accordion folder by people who have a narrow, almost grade-schoolish notion of what sort of curiosity an online encyclopedia will be able to satisfy in the years to come. (Baker 2008, p.3)

For me this saga has brought up, amongst others, two large issues relevant to the preservation of memory and legacy in the internet age. Firstly, there is the increasing sense that the internet is becoming its own, self-perpetuating feedback system. In the case of my Wikipedia article and others (Segal 2006), editors' initial notability checks came in the form of a Google search. How, then, does this relate to information created

*before* the internet? If it's not digital and online, will it be dismissed and forgotten? In my case, the band I was in broke up in 1996. The magazine reviews, articles and references sit largely in hard copies of publications. What if someone like me (or possibly Google) doesn't take the time to digitise and reference them (and thereby, ironically, draw the accusation of Conflict Of Interest by the likes of Wikipedia)? And now that we live in a world where ever-increasing numbers of us have grown up with the internet, will anyone understand that things happened before the web, and that these may not always have online traces? The web is self-archiving, especially where media is concerned: any band these days will generate discussion, review and other data on the web, through the web. In reframing the earlier discussion of redundancy and obsolescence, will anything pre-internet now be cast aside to rot in perpetuity unless (like the Herr Scheunemann memoir that was put on the web by his grandson) there are others interested enough - either through personal connection or, for larger topics with a persistent interest, other interested parties - to bring this content back from the dead and onto the web? What, in this world, will become of the areas of localised, less noted and less mainstream pre-web interest? I had assumed that this was what Wikipedia was, in part, meant to be for - a reference source for all the things other reference sources miss.

The second issue is the one I began with in this section: the issue of power and control in the archival process, and how this relates to the internet. Much of this, as raised earlier in the case of Wikipedia - ostensibly a non-heirarchical system where contributors enjoy equal power and decisions are made by collective wisdom - is connected with process, and how people use systems and their ambiguities to consolidate their power base, leading to stratified power relations through the development of hidden heirarchies, described, in the case of Wikipedia, by Kostakis (2010) as 'largely invisible and vulnerable to the tyranny of structurelessness'. In fact, says Kostakis, Bauwens (2008) argues that the push to redefine Wikipedia in deletionist terms - a push that Kostakis sees as unproductive and divisive - is itself a power play because it seeks to create an artificial scarcity where none exists. And where there is scarcity, there is control and exclusion.

## Appendix IV: participatory art, intimacy and the internet

Here I would like to compare the approach of programmer and artist Jonathan Harris to that of Xavier Roux. Harris, according to his biography, 'makes projects that reimagine how humans relate to technology and to each other' and that combine 'elements of computer science, anthropology, visual art and storytelling' (Harris 2009). Though a collector of stories like Roux, Harris' works deal explicitly with - and often through - networked technologies, particularly the use of the internet to gather, present and visualise data. Sometimes that data is collected by the artist, such as in the project *The Whale Hunt*, 'an experiment in human storytelling' which saw Harris living with a group of Alaskan Eskimos for nine days and taking photographs every five minutes, then presenting these photos on a website ([www.thewhalehunt.org](http://www.thewhalehunt.org)) that allows viewers to 'rearrange the photographic elements of the story to extract multiple sub-stories focused around different people, places, topics, and other variables' (Harris 2009). Like the genealogical timelines examined earlier, the project's online output is essentially a form of automated data ordering, in this case by timeline, pinwheel, automated and 'mosaic' modes, with filtering options to customise the focus of the photographs presented:

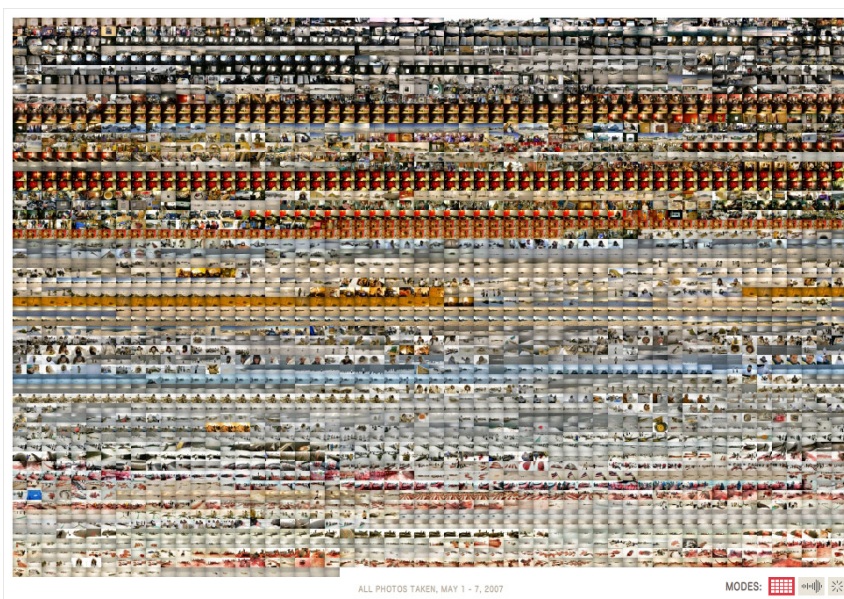


Figure 114: The Whale Hunt - Mosaic mode. Source: <http://www.thewhalehunt.org/>

In other projects Harris presents visualisations of aggregated data collected from the internet. One example is his 2007 project *We Feel Fine: an Almanac of Human Emotion*. This project mined a database of 12 million sentences with the words 'I feel' or 'I am feeling' harvested from personal blog sites over a three-year period and combined the statements with the largest (in file size) image from the same blog posts via an automated

process to produce what could be described as a computer-generated glossy coffee table book with content categorised by theme including gender, age, location and emotion type, as well as a range of visualisations of emotional states. The creators promise 'a comprehensive contemporary portrait of the world's emotional landscape, exploring the ups and downs of everyday life in all its color, chaos, and candor' (Harris 2007b).

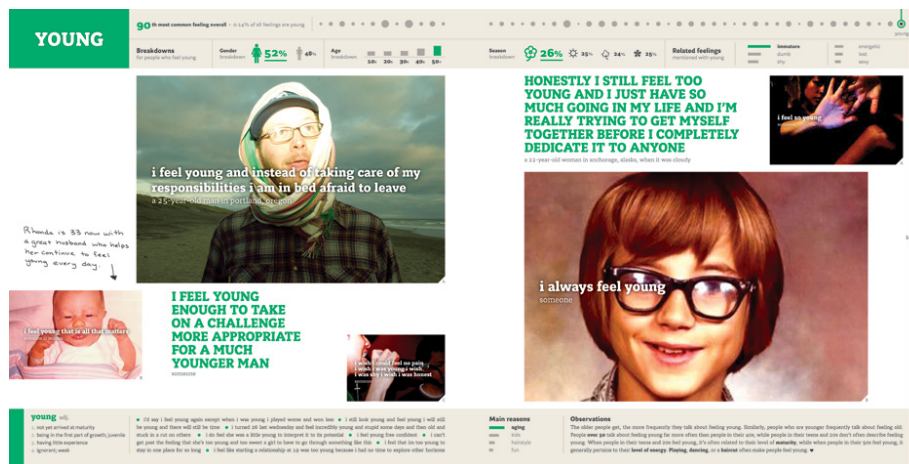


Figure 115: We Feel Fine book - "Young" theme page

Whether it does so or not, however, is open to question. Notwithstanding questions about whose 'emotional landscapes' are collected and the context in which they were uploaded via online diaries, exploring the *We Feel Fine* projects resulted (for me anyway) in both a sense of bedazzlement at the technical sophistication of Harris' visualisations and an odd sense of discomfort when looking at the conflagrations of very personal snippets of feelings presented. In thinking about why, I returned to my earlier reference to Henning Ziegler's observations about hypertext: that narratees respond to a sense of overall context and structure when traversing fragments of data. This is related to their 'desire for intimacy'. Automated filtering and presentation on the internet, no matter how illuminating or sophisticated, does not as yet seem to make some of us warm to the content presented. The works of Xavier Roux have a quality of human warmth that the abovementioned projects of Harris lack, despite Harris' technical prowess at creating highly visually appealing order from the chaos of the web, and the claim made by the *We Feel Fine* book's 'FAQ' section:

*Is this a book about blogs?*

This is a book about people. Blogs are just the medium. (Harris 2007b, p. 22)

Is this 'lack of intimacy' the lot of anyone who works with stories on the internet? My tentative conclusion would be not, based on some further observations: firstly, that other online stories I have viewed have not led to the same reaction (such as the much more 'low tech' family history explorations I have encountered in

my research like the *Thorpes.org* site and stories of discovering old family villages on genealogical sites); and secondly, that some particular structural aspects of Harris' work promote this sense of the 'lack of intimacy'.

As alluded to above, the arbitrary way in which snippets and photos were selected within the *We Feel Fine* project does not lead us to develop rapport with the subjects whose feelings are presented. We are told they are 'stories', but perhaps, in their one or two-sentence statements, they merely *hint at* stories that are as yet untold. This is especially the case if we accept Denzin's proposition of narrative as having an element of sequence: stories take us on a journey. Additionally, the *We Feel Fine* project replicates the sense of voyeurism about other people's lives generated by looking at others' blogs and social networking pages. We are looking at people from the 'outside', as it were, through the screen; to truly engage and empathise with another's story, it seems we must be able to enter their world, to establish the sense of trust between narrator and narratee.

In regard to *The Whale Hunt* project, although the project is presented as a visual narrative composed of sequential photographs, it is not clear whose story it is: that of Harris or the hunters. It is composed entirely of photographs taken at five-minute intervals (or quicker in times of excitement) by Harris and his photographer collaborator - a device that itself compounds the confusion of whose story it is because it is simultaneously randomised and designed to roughly replicate Harris' own rising and falling heartbeat. There is no other context given: no indication of what Harris felt towards the photos and the family he lived with, and, on the other hand, nothing from the hunters themselves. Again, we are voyeurs, looking through the screen at a series of windows into the lives of the Eskimo, with Harris' and the second photographer's presence framing the shots but otherwise a silent presence.

Lastly, it seems that the technical aspects of Harris' works (the dynamic visualisations: colour coding, slick presentation styles, intricate forms of filtering) have the potential to be seen as the point, rather than a vessel to present the content. Perhaps this leads to one of the dangers of telling stories on the web these days: the combination of text-based and visual presentation styles, combined with databases and ever-sophisticated forms of dynamic programming, have just as much potential to conflate form and function as they allow us to tell and experience stories in new and engaging ways.

The key here is, again, the word 'intimacy'. It is something that Harris himself seems to have been looking for in his work, and found in his 2007 project *Balloons of Bhutan*. Inspired by the kingdom of Bhutan's use of a Gross National Happiness index, Harris visited the reclusive Himalayan kingdom and interviewed people about their lives, taking photographs of both their hands and their life's wishes written on colourful balloons, which were then exhibited publicly. That was the extent of the project, and seems to have been the



one that generated the most heartfelt reaction from its creator, judging by his presentation at the EG conference in December 2007 (Harris 2007b).

It is helpful to note here that Harris is, not unexpectedly, an apologist for the benefits of new technology, as evidenced by his August 2009 Artist's Statement:

As an optimist, I prefer to illustrate the utopian promise of technology by focusing on its human, emotional side, which constantly battles the widespread belief that exponential technological growth will produce a dystopian future.(Harris 2009b)

The full extent of Harris' technological utopianism can be seen in the final paragraph of his statement:

One final theme running through both bodies of work (and why I place so much faith in technology) is a belief that science and spirituality will soon converge (despite the rift that has traditionally separated them) and that technology will be the mediator to broker the deal. As developments in fringe physics and cosmology start to suggest a model of reality that resembles the ancient spiritual teachings of Hinduism, Sikhism, and certain mystical religions, I imagine a future where technology itself becomes spiritual, and this is finally something I can believe in. (Harris 2009b)

The modernist promise of renewal, and even salvation, through technology shines strongly in Harris' statement, as it does in other signposts of technological innovations such as the Google mission statement and, a few years before that, former MIT Media Lab director Nicholas Negroponte's best-selling book *Being Digital* (Negroponte 2005) which championed the internet and the move toward the convergence of data. It can also be seen at the interface of science, computing and the internet in projects that promise to unlock physical secrets of the universe. This includes the network physics work popularised by Albert-László Barabási, as well as physicist, inventor and programmer Stephen Wolfram's *Wolfram Alpha* engine (<http://www.wolframalpha.com>), a combination of natural language search and computational engine that aims to make 'all systematic knowledge immediately computable and accessible to everyone' (Wolfram 2010) and whose ultimate aim is to discover and model the physics that make up the universe.

Whilst I agree in part with the idea that technology has the potential to keep improving, and even revolutionise our lives and understanding of our world, the warning attached to modernist technical utopianism in the earlier Marshall Berman quote remains. To organise and facilitate access to information is certainly worthwhile, but it is something else altogether to assign metaphysical properties to technology - a view that, along with the promotion of the merging of 'man and machine' appears to be aligned to the views

of transhumanists such as those expressed in Ray Kurzweil's *The Age of Intelligent Machines* (1990) and *The Age of Spiritual Machines* (1999).

My (highly subjective) reading of Harris' statement, combined with his Bhutan experiment, is that it reveals a hunger for meaning, and perhaps for an organising principle for the chaos of life - something that Harris' software does quite deliberately. Harris reminds me of a highly sophisticated version of myself at 14 years old in Whyalla, seeking connection with the world through a short-wave radio and a map on the wall. This urge for connection is also reminiscent of Jean in *The Winter Vault* - we are all products of an age that has lost its moorings, as summed up by the Leonard Cohen quote beginning this section . For me (and I am essentially a writer), narrative is the raw material that makes sense of of life, and technology is a tool to achieve that aim, particularly in ways that take advantage of the movement towards a culture of technology-mediated collaboration (Leadbeater 2008) to pool information and viewpoints in ways that enrich our understandings of our and others' histories. It seems that for Harris (a computer scientist), it is the opposite: technology can be deployed to make sense of life, and narrative is produced through the workings of the intelligent machine. I question, however, whether what it produces is, in fact, truly narrative.

For my own purposes, my mixed feelings about the internet do not negate the value of online projects like those of Harris, or like Small Histories, to help people 'pick up the pieces' and undertake their reconstructive process. The same urge to connect and belong that seem to drive Roux, Harris and people researching their family histories make the Small Histories project, I believe, a useful and relevant one for these times. Exactly how the website will be used and how it will develop over time is anybody's guess. But for me it's about the intention, remaining mindful of that as it progresses to build in technical systems that support these intentions in a positive way.

Returning briefly to my friends from Sarajevo: recently they showed me a remarkable photo that illustrates the power of people to reclaim a sense of purpose and connection in the face of traumatic events. It's from their wedding day in 1994, in the middle of the Bosnian war. The photo shows the bride and groom in their wedding outfits, the bride with bouquet in hand, laughing and running down a street next to a high concrete wall. From the other side of the wall, snipers are shooting at them. What a performance.

And the week before writing this, my friends and their seven year-old Australian-born son returned to Sarajevo to begin a new/old life in their homeland. For some, the past is not locked in amber, but is dynamic and can be recast in a new light.

## Appendix V: Palestine Remembered, website Mission Statement

- *To emphasize that the CORE issues of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict are the [DISPOSSESSION](#) and [ETHNIC CLEANSING](#) (compulsory population transfer to achieve political gains) of the Palestinian people for the past six decades. In our opinion, the conflict would have been at the same level of intensity even if both parties had been Jewish, Muslims, or Christians.*
- *To create an easy medium where refugees can communicate, organize, and share their experiences amongst themselves. The refugees are encouraged to attach their stories, memories, pictures, movies, music files, join discussions at the message board and guest book sections, directory service listing of the refugees and their contact information, and URL links related to each listed town.*
- *To provide a comprehensive source of information about the villages and cities that were ethnically cleansed, looted, and destroyed by the Israeli army. At each town's homepage, you will find [pictures](#)[personal accounts](#) from the refugees themselves, and above all [live interviews](#) from refugees reciting their experiences before, during and after al-Nakba. (both before and after 1948), the current status of the town, the Israeli colonies that occupy the town's lands, a brief history of the town before and after Nakba, detailed accounts of atrocities and any acts of terror, [personal accounts](#) from the refugees themselves, and above all [live interviews](#) from refugees reciting their experiences before, during and after al-Nakba.*
- *To preserve the memories and the experiences of the Palestinian people around the world, especially the 726,000 Palestinians refugees who were [ethnically cleansed](#) from their homes, farms, and businesses as a result of the 1948 war. Currently, the dispossessed refugees number 6.5 million and constitute the great majority of the Palestinian people. On the political front, so far their voices have gone unheard, and we at PalestineRemembered.com hope to amplify their voices in cyberspace.*
- *To increase refugees' awareness of their rights to return to their homes, farms, and businesses based on United Nations General Assembly [resolution 194](#). Based on this resolution, every single refugee has the right to go back to his or her home, and to be compensated for any loss of their properties, pain, and suffering.*
- *To respond to the widely popular Zionist myth that: "Palestine was a country with no people for people with no country", at length we have [responded](#) to this myth. With the help of our online community (made up of tens of thousands of refugees), visitors to the site can verify how Palestine has its people who are rich with history, culture and values.*
- *To reach out to Israelis so they can feel the human behind this "Palestinian" or "the enemy", who was forced out from his home, farm, and business to make way to persecuted European Jewish refugees. We are proud to be one of the few mediums where*

*Israelis and Palestinians can reach out to each other and meet, of course other than at the humiliating checkpoints. It should be noted, that the majority of the site's page views comes from Israel, and many of the pictures and [films](#) that we have of the destroyed villages were shared by Israelis. We understand that many Israelis and Jews around the world support the Palestinian struggle for justice and are willing to do their part in bringing an end to the wrongs of the past.*

- *To send clear and an unambiguous message to all the Westerners that the Palestinian people cannot be crossed for what they have sinned against their Jewish citizens. Palestine and its people cannot be the saviors for their tortured consciences and souls for what they have done to the Jews who used to call Europe home. Their blind support to the "Jewish state" and its racist policies is blindly guided with their guilty consciences. Locking Jews, Palestinians and Arabs into eternal struggle will neither bring peace to the Middle East nor to the whole world.*

## Appendix VI: One (of many) examples of an evolving narrative

One example of an evolving narrative is the weblog attached to a website that became famous in 2005. The *Million Dollar Homepage* (<http://www.milliondollarhomepage.com/>) was the brainchild of a young UK business student who, wanting to pay off his university fees, devised a scheme where advertisers would pay \$1 a pixel for virtual 'real estate' on a one page website (there are roughly this many pixels on a standard browser screen) that would remain live for five years. The idea captured the public imagination, traffic to the site increased exponentially, advertisers flocked, and the site did indeed make a million dollars for its creator.



Figure 116: Million Dollar Homepage

Up until 2006, the [weblog, or online diary](#), accompanying the Million Dollar Homepage, was ongoing. It captured, as diaries do, moments in time: beginning with the author's initial exploration of his idea in 2005, moving through his excited reaction to his sale of the first 100 pixels, and so forth until February 2006, when the author decided to 'close off' the narrative by announcing that he would no longer update the blog. Up until that endpoint it was a kind of evolving narrative whose power to engage was enhanced, not diminished, by the fact that it was open-ended. It was no less a story then than it is now, as a kind of sealed, archived time capsule of one young man's experience. One might at this point make a comparison to other off-line evolving life stories such as the remarkable *Seven Up* series of documentaries, a Reality TV show or even an obviously fictitious ongoing serial like *The Bold and the Beautiful*. There is a sense of voyeuristic

engagement in witnessing the unfolding of a life story, which appears to closely resemble the pleasure we experience in reading or watching the development of a character in a novel or film – we are taken on a journey along with the character. That there are no definitive elements of, wrapping-up or denouement in the ongoing online narrative does not seem to affect our sense of engagement in the narrative. As in reality TV, the sense of the online narrative's 'realness', however constructed, may even add to this engagement.

Database-driven online narratives may be problematic for some with backgrounds in areas like cinema (like Manovich) because the trajectory and order of the narrative is rendered unstable; database-powered systems can be, and often are, set up in such a way to allow creators to edit and change their texts, or story elements. Even in the example quoted above, the author can go back and edit previous blog entries; history and narrative elements can be rewritten, tweaked and rearranged in a variety of ways depending on the system. This transient take on recorded history is part of life on the age of the Delete key; there is no longer a true 'official' version of the narrative with a set beginning, end and shape.

## Appendix VII: The evolution of the Small Histories website

The Small Histories website was first proposed in an application to RMIT University in 2003, for what was then a Master of Arts by project. Since then, the site design and functionality has undergone a number of iterations, but its underpinnings have not: the principle of online narrative creation and publication through sequential ordering of media items.

### The beginnings of the site (pre-2004)

As previously described, the initial design of the Small Histories site in 2003 was influenced by the typical online story containing text, images and some vertical scrolling. However, the site also needed to make explicit the flow of the story. As a result, I constructed a number of static interface mockups that used bright colour-coding and the use of (now-outdated) HTML frames to present the narrative items in turn, with the top frame presenting the sequence of story items.

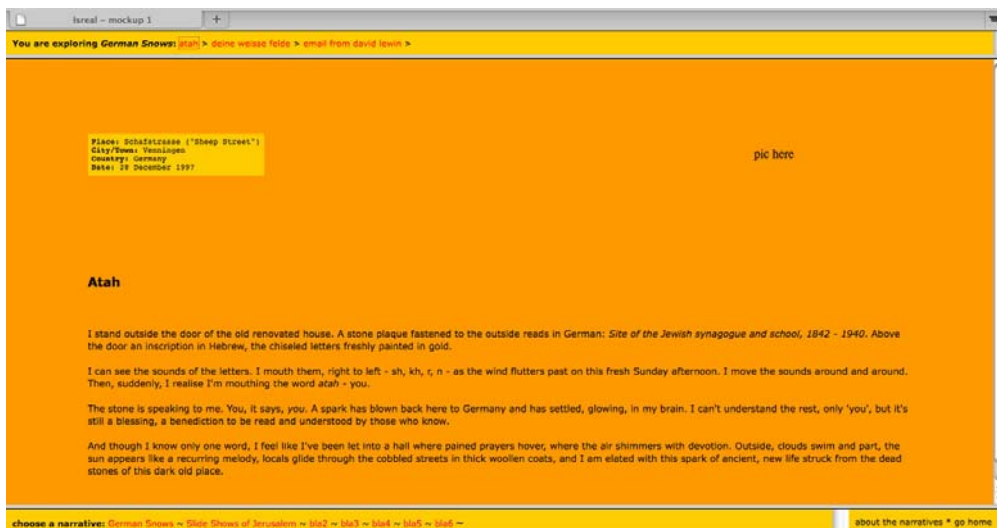


Figure 117: Small Histories HTML mockups - story page



Figures 118 & 119: Small Histories HTML mockups - story pages 2 &3

I also incorporated the idea of a slideshow (via pop-up windows) combined with geographical mapping:

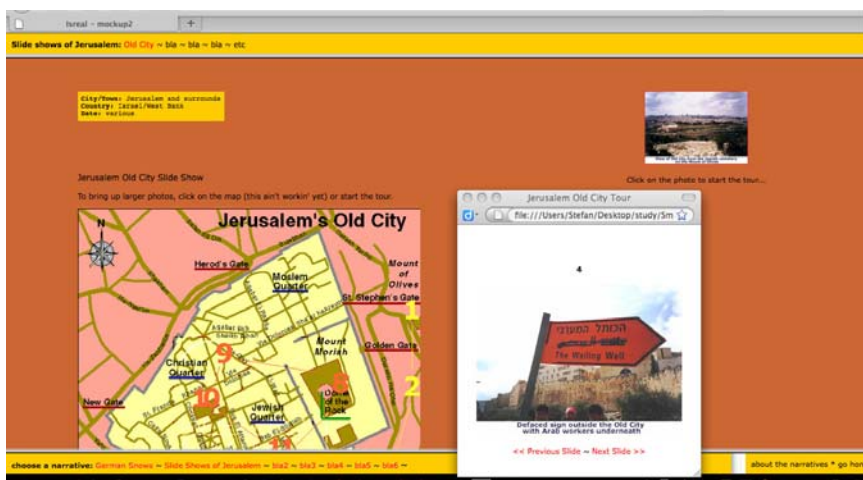


Figure 120: Small Histories HTML mockups - slideshow



Then I started to think of ideas of juxtaposition, influenced in particular by the work of Dan Eldon:

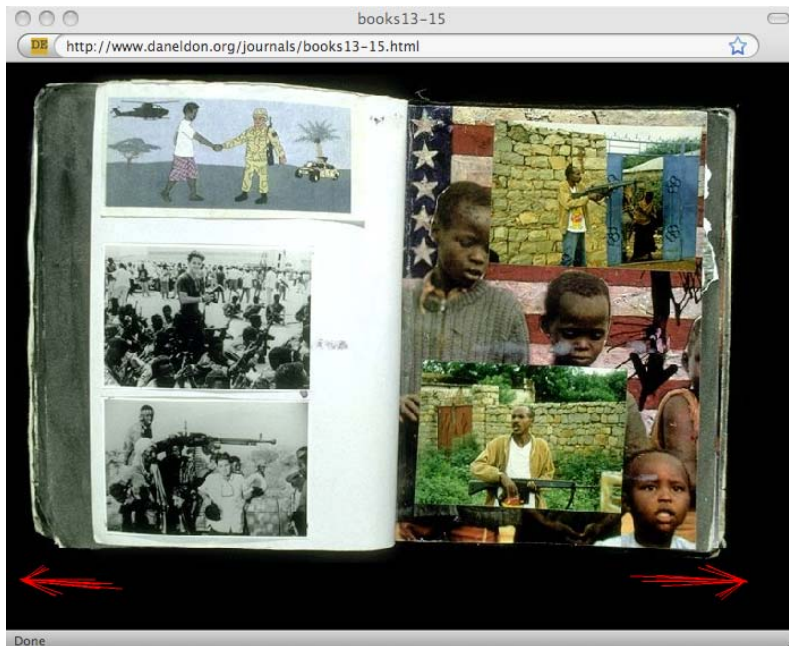


Figure 121: Dan Eldon, *The Journey is the Destination*, Books 13 - 15. Source: <http://www.daneldon.org/journals/>



Figure 122: Dan Eldon, *The Journey is the Destination*, Books 13 - 15. Source: <http://www.daneldon.org/journals/>

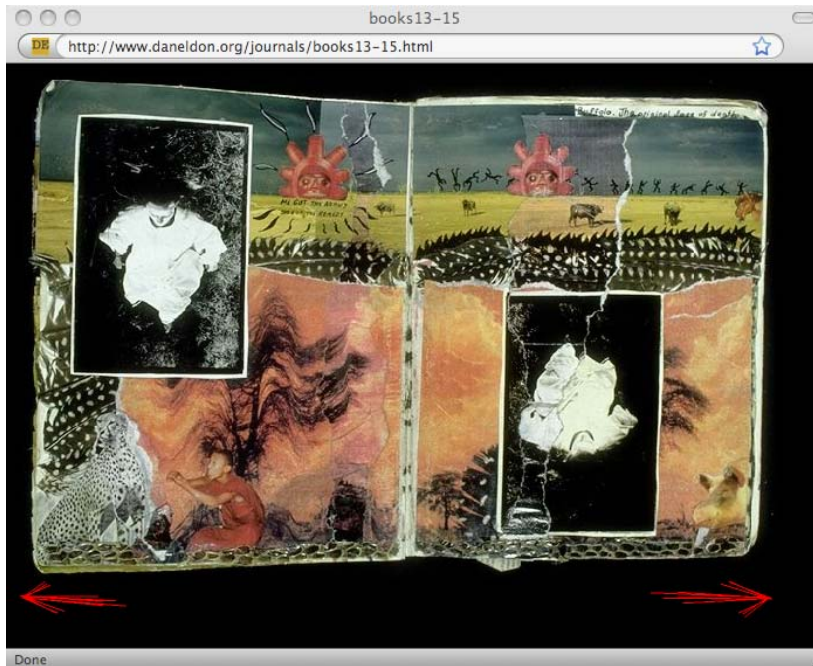


Figure 123: Dan Eldon, *The Journey is the Destination*, Book 13 - 15. Source: <http://www.daneldon.org/journals/>

I began to experiment with HTML Cascading Style Sheet 'layers' as a way to create new options for users that combined time-based and space-based narrative styles, an idea culminating in the current 'shoebox' presentation style and the forthcoming 'scrapbook' style and influenced the website for Paris bookshop Shakespeare & Company:



Figure 124: Shakespeare and Company website. Source: <http://www.shakespeareandcompany.com/>

I also started to play with the idea of horizontal scrolling to present image galleries, which was influenced by the previously mentioned Bonian artist Shoba. Initial HTML mockups included the following:

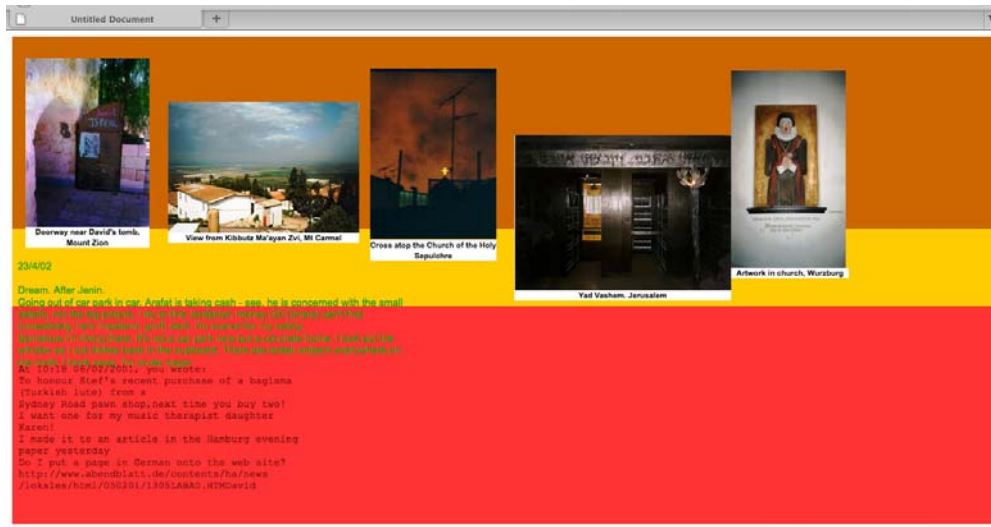


Figure 125: Small Histories HTML mockups - juxtapositioning

## The prototype site: stage 1 (2004 - 2006)

The first Small Histories website was written in 2004 using the scripting language Cold Fusion and with assistance from programmer Neil Johnson, with whom I had worked for an internet development company. This prototype was a 'bare-bones' working prototype, with visual material kept to a minimum until the functionality was working well:



Figure 126: Small Histories Prototype 1: login page

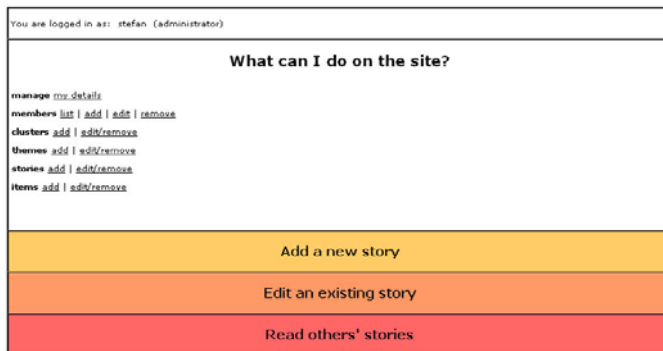


Figure 127: Small Histories Prototype 1: logged in homepage

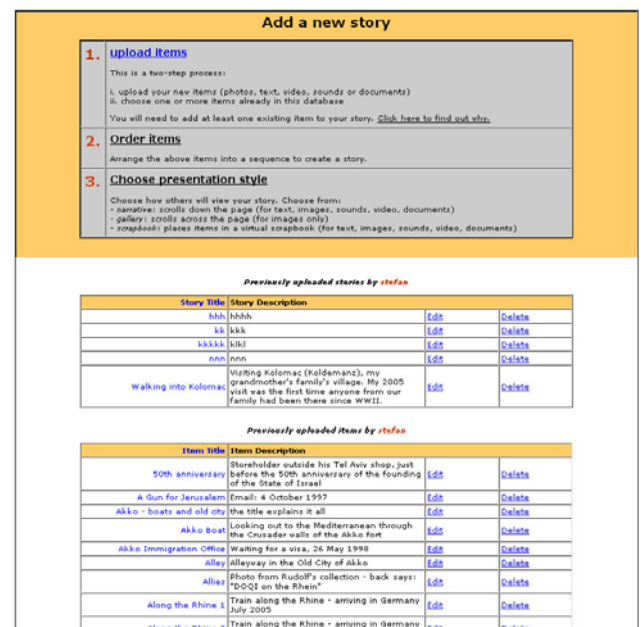


Figure 128: Small Histories Prototype 1: Add Story page

UPLOAD ITEMS
close window

Stage A - Upload new item

What kind of item is it?

**Text:**  short text (100 characters or less):

long text (unlimited characters):

OR...

**Image:** Your image (gifs, jpegs or pngs) should be 70kb or less in size.  
You can choose to display your image as follows:

portrait  (225 x 300 pixels)

landscape  (300 x 225 pixels)

OR...

**Other file:**  document (Word, pdf, Powerpoint, Excel etc)

video file (mp4...etc)

sound file (mp3, wav, etc)

Image or other file? click Browse to upload it from your computer.

**About your item** (\* means mandatory)

Figure 129: Small Histories Prototype 1: Add Item popup

### Add a new story

- 1. upload items**  
This is a two-step process:  
i. upload your new items (short text or image)  
ii. choose one or more items to add to your story  
You will need to add at least one item
- 2. Order items**  
Arrange the above items into a sequence
- 3. Choose presentation style**  
Choose how others will view your story:  
- narrative: scrolls down the page  
- gallery: scrolls across the page  
- scrapbook: places items in a virtual album

CREATE YOUR STORY
close window

Name of Story:

Short Description:

**Order files:**

File name	Description/caption	Order in sequence
<a href="#">idea.jpg</a>	a little picture of something	1
<a href="#">sitting on a porch</a>	describes sitting down somewhere doing something	2

Story title	Item
hhhh	hhhh
kk	kkk
kkkkk	kkk
nnn	nnn
Walking into Kolonias	visit great visit fant

Item title	Item	edit	delete
50th anniversary	50th anniversary		
A Gun for Jerusalem	Done		
Akko - boats and old city	Done		
Akko Boat	Looking out to the Mediterranean through the Crusader walls of the Akko fort	edit	delete
Akko Immigration Office	waiting for a visa, 26 May 1998	edit	delete
Alley	Alleyway in the Old City of Akko	edit	delete
Allies	Photo from Rugbolf's collection - back says: 'p000 on the Rhine'	edit	delete
Along the Rhine	Train along the Rhine - arriving in Germany July 2005	edit	delete

Figure 130: Small Histories Prototype 1: Add Story popup

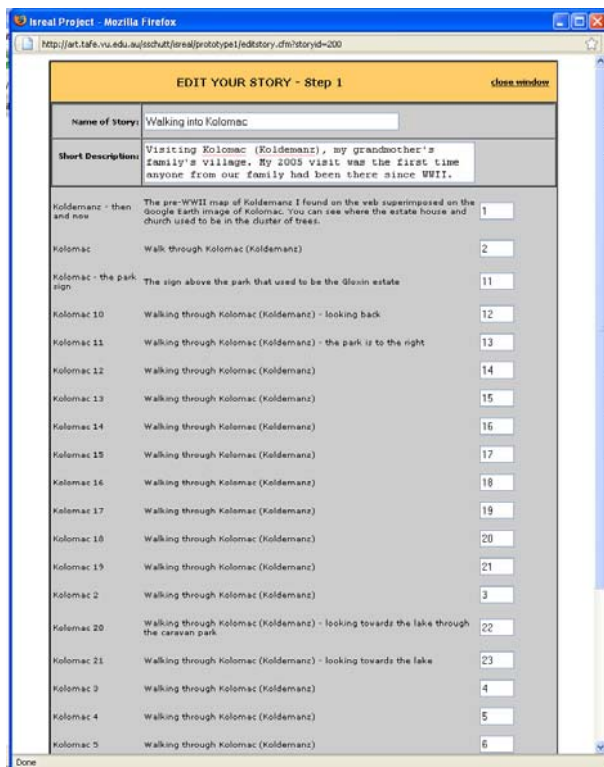


Figure 131: Small Histories Prototype 1: Edit Story popup

### The prototype site: stage 2 (2006 - current)

In late 2006 I decided to abandon Cold Fusion scripting language in favour of the Open Source, more widely used and more flexible PHP. I worked with PHP programmer James Cartledge to convert the existing site to PHP using the flexible Model View Controller design pattern.

At the same time I hired a graphic designer Tony Aszodi, with whom I worked at Victoria University, to undertake a graphic redesign of the site. The result is the current work-in-progress website outlined early in this document.

## Appendix VIII: summary of interview with Carolena Heldermaann, creator of Positive Stories

*October 2005*

Questions:

How many people visit your website?

Have you encountered any issues connected with people interacting or commenting with your website?

What kinds of moderation strategies do you employ on your site? Do you do this manually, via automated processes, or both?

How have you responded to any potential legal, privacy or ethical issues connected with people's responses on your site?

General:

- Expected to have a lot of trouble with people's reactions
- Expected flaming and faked stories didn't eventuate – 99% of stories were genuine
- Overall, expected negativity hasn't eventuated. But site isn't dynamically generated – wonder what would happen if comments could be attached to stories dynamically
- Started in 1999, now site receives 23,000 visits a month
- Used to check and update site manually every 2-3days: now, every 2 weeks to a month
- Quiz was useful and well-used addition to site. Quiz focuses on personal stories, doesn't give factual information

Submissions:

- All submissions emailed to Carolena. C makes call: if full of hate, don't see point of putting it up

- Any requests to change email addresses etc are also emailed to C
- Sometimes C will point people in right direction: people assume there is a team of people working on site – can be time-consuming. Say “I’m not a professional...try this site...” This has bolstered the directories section of the site
- C sends them email with link to where stories are posted so they can check it
- Do start to get fatigued from having it going that long; start to care a little less. Also don’t get as much help anymore
- Do get cases of “first time I’ve told anyone” – anonymous posts can be good as well as bad

#### Legal/Ethical Issues:

- Only publish first names in case of slander
- Publishing of email address is opt-in:
  - One contributor had hundreds of responses; as a result he started his own website
  - Above is example of the positive aspects of revealing personal information
  - There have been very little negative effects to date
- Conspiracy theory posts go up: hasn’t happened a lot, even considering the existence of such groups in the US
- If submissions are abusive, C emails back to see if they’re happy to have their email address associated with their posts.
- The way some abusive posts were written, C thought they were high school students: were actually Indian men. C would ask them a question: if no answer, would know it was fake
- Fundamentalist posts: C publishes but attaches own thoughts/comments to posts
- Don’t edit stories for grammar – this tells you about people
- Sometimes have needed to make value judgements eg how sexually explicit stories are, esp. with primary school age children looking on site
- Nobody has tried to hijack site agenda; pleasant surprise
- Didn’t publish submission by someone claiming to be spreading HIV deliberately – difficult issue
- Did have one issue of a company trying to piggyback off site success and make money from contributors
- Have policy of not publishing info on cures, vitamins etc
- If get a submission such as “I want to kill myself”, feel obliged to make comment. Not qualified – what do I know? Instead act as facilitator, refer people to other sites...need to make some kind of comment in that case. Will then post comment as well as story