

# WRT: Writer Response Theory

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## Networked Narratives and Search Fiction

Published by Christy Dena January 5th, 2006 in Uncategorized, search, code, poetry, generators, hyperfic, bots, Criticism, email.



Dave Miller emailed me late last year and I only just followed up by checking out his blog and thesis. He has created and researched networked narratives. You can find out about his works at [his blog](#), where you can also get a copy of his Masters: ??? When the Network Becomes An Author: A Critical Analysis of Today???'s Interactive Narratives on the Internet'. The following is an overview of his Masters and therefore of the area of networked narrative works.

Dave begins by outlining how he began with the area of networked narratives. He describes his work: [The Chinese Cocklepickers](#). This work is a kind of manual "search fiction" and "search art". Dave conducted searches on subjects in his story and then cut and paste the resulting text and images into the work. The webpages are collages to "connect the work with the outside world...to make them appear more 'live'." Dave notes that there can be surprising juxtapositions that "subvert" the "original story's intentions". This juxtaposition of contrary text and image works very well with networked and simulated networked pieces and interactive comics.

Here is the thesis intro:

“ This is a critical analysis of interactive stories being told across networks. My particular interest is in networked stories told in collaboration by many authors, even stories where the network itself is an author, and in stories that play with fact and fiction. This research will inform my practical work, to extend my experiments into new forms of interactive online stories.

I like the key areas he is looking at:

- \* networked stories;
- \* collaborative writing/"collective authorship"/emergent narrative/...;
- \* computer-generated content;
- \* fact & fiction.

Dave explores these topes through some of the greatest hits of new media arts: Stuart Moulthrop's '[Victory Garden](#)'; Michael Joyce's '[Afternoon](#)', Tim Wright and R. Bevan's '[Online Caroline](#)'; Joseph Weizenbaum's '[Eliza](#)'; [Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy IF](#) (1984 version); Rob Wittig's '[The Fall of the Site of Marsha](#)'; Scott McCloud's '[5-Card Nancy](#)'; Andy Deck's '[Panel Junction](#)' and [Oldton by Tim Wright](#). Oldton is a story that is visually delivered through playing cards. When the card is turned over you get a part of the story of the fictional town and real memories of Tim and invited contributors. This work reminded me of Mind Candy's ARG [Perplex City](#) and the use of cards with puzzles that gives the player further information about a fictional town. But what is interesting about Oldton is the collaborative

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aspect and how people can input content. Oldton is manual in that items submitted are not immediately added to the system. Tim needs to input the content. The input is in the form of stories and pictures. Andy Deck's *Panel Junction* allows for a lot more modes of input: "via digital cameras, colour laser printers, scanners, mail, voice over IP (Skype), file uploading, and email".

Dave also refers to Jim Andrews' "dbcinema" as being in similar territory. Indeed, all "database narrative" excursions relate in this generated-content paradigm, regardless of the networked and single-author or collaborative specifics. There is also Lev Manovich's "database narrative" and his "soft cinema project" as well as Marsha Kinder's "database narrative" and her *Labyrinth Project* (and upcoming book called *The Discreet Charms of Database Narrative*); and Ross Gibson's database narrative too — which I think has some nice correlations with *The Chinese Cocklepickers* story as they both deal with real incidents and content.

To describe the phenomenon of stories that are networked and generated, Dave utilises Jill Walker's theory of "distributed narratives" and her helpful observation that we can describe narrative as distributed according to time, space and authorship factors. Dave then goes on to discuss more networked projects, such as Mongrel's *NetMonster* (which looks like another great "search fiction"). The process of *NetMonster*, labeled as "generative social software" by Mongrel, is described as follows:

- “
- (1) The user enters a series of key phrases to search for, eg ???Bush, Blair, War???
  - (2) *NetMonster* searches for images related to those terms and places the text around the images- this is a Google search
  - (3) *NetMonster* arranges the found images according to algorithms, and adds the date the URL was found to the image.
  - (4) *NetMonster* then searches for information around the found images (contextual search) and assembles this into the image. It takes 12 hours to render each image.

Dave also refers to Kate Armstrong and David Tippet's *Grafik Dynamo!*, where images are loaded realtime from blogs and news sources. The complaints about this random inserting of content reminds me of my response to Simon Norton's *Testimony: A Story Machine*. Dave also refers to Lewis LaCook's 'Black Holes'. Lewis describes this work — which creates poems from images, text and sounds from web searches — a "generative networked literary object". Dave also refers to the use of Google poems in Rob Wittig's fictional blog: *Robwit.net*. Lastly, he refers to Johnathan J. Harris' '10 by 10'. This project is described on the website as follows:

- “
- Every hour, 10□10 scans the RSS feeds of several leading international news sources, and performs an elaborate process of weighted linguistic analysis on the text contained in their top news stories. After this process, conclusions are automatically drawn about the hour's most important words. The top 100 words are chosen, along with 100 corresponding images, culled from the source news stories. At the end of each day, month, and year, 10□10 looks back through its archives to conclude the top 100 words for the given time period. In this way, a constantly evolving record of our world is formed, based on prominent world events, without any human input.

*Corrugation Street* is Dave's final work as part of his Masters. It is "a less conservative soap – exaggerated, quite surreal, working class life gone mad. A spoof on existing soaps, particularly *Coronation Street* (UK TV soap)" (50). Dave describes the 3 levels of collaboration as follows:

- “
1. **The user:**  
 ??? Author, suggests search topics and subjects, which decide the content of the networked collage  
 ??? Sub-editor: changes the layout and appearance of the networked collage  
 ??? Researcher ??? adds news feeds.
  2. **The Generator script:**  
 ??? Sub-editor: changes the layout and appearance of the networked collage  
 ??? Author: from scene 2 onwards it searches for words within the RSS and performs it???'s own images searches based on those words. Then it repeats this process for each scene. In this way the generator script grabs progressively more authorship involvement than the user, as the story progresses.
  3. **Myself**  
 ??? The main author. Providing not only the main story as a series of

scenes, but a framework for all future stories to fit into (the soap opera) (page 52)

Future iterations, Dave anticipates, will have “to invite people to add their own stories/ episodes, and take the soap in directions they wish. Users can add true stories, or stories related to what???'s happening in the news. Contributions can be in different forms: short stories, jokes, and poems.” Ultimately, the his “vision for Corrugation Street is for it to grow into an online soap opera that is owned and shaped by both the community and by the Internet itself.”

Dave ended the thesis discussing the lack of use of the networked abilities of the Internet (beyond publication) by creatives. He cites the recent survey by [trAce](#), which “showed that only 7% of writers had used the Internet in a creative way.”.

So, Dave, I look forward to following your work and reading more about your discoveries. Check out too, Andrea Zapp's book on '[Networked Narrative Environments](#)' and the whole area of Telematic Arts and so on. I think the most valuable parts of Dave's thesis is the writing-up of the creative and theoretical development of his creative project 'Corrugation Street' and the interviews with Tim Wright about Online Caroline and Oldton. The former, the writing-up of the creative work versions is helpful because it shows the decision-making process a creator of an interactive-work deals with. Indeed, the stages of evolution of an interactive creative work over time and the stages of acceptance of interactivity by an audience. Daves journey is akin to the development of interactive works and provides, therefore, a valuable insight into how people learn and acclimitise to interactive entertainment and associated theories.

[Originally blogged at [cross-mediaentertainment.com](#)]

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