

SHOTS FROM THE OBSCURE
an Interview with Tal Halpern
by Patrick F. Walter



Arriving at the site for The Case Collection, you enter a dim corridor of what appears to be either a library or a museum. "The flood threatened to destroy everything," the text explains as you're carried through the corridor. You learn that not all was lost. The flood rescued "two diaries, an illustrated children's book, a journalist's sound recording" and other "artifacts from a naturalist's secret collection." Next you enter a study of some sort, with papers, books and tiny figurines scattered across a desktop. As you drag your cursor over the artifacts, clicking on them to take a closer look and listen, stories begin to take shape, connections are made, various voices echo from the almost erased history. Footnotes, searching functions and maps recover the debris of story. There was an explorer, a naturalist named Sir Francis Case, whose exploits and mental state seem important, but why? His identity, fragmented by both a vaguely described "mental disorder" and the tangential nature of the artifacts themselves, lingers over each artifact like a phantom.

The Case Collection presents the debris of a colonialist narrative, and invites you to explore, map and interpret this debris. Using new media to comment on old mediums and signifying practices, the piece presents a landscape of fragmented documentation.

For the past few months I've been sifting through these artifacts, playing the role of the archeologist, and maintaining a correspondence with Tal Halpern, the creator of The Case Collection. What follows is the result of this process of salvage and correspondence.

PATRICK WALTER: I guess the best place to start is the beginning, meaning the intro. In a sense, this short flash movie is the least interactive part of the piece, yet it also seems to place the user's interaction within a larger narrative.

TAL HALPERN: While the 'introduction' may or may not be 'interactive', it certainly serves as a contextualizing device. It points to other 'artifacts' and experiences in the Collection, and in so doing, seeks to entice the user to explore further. In the 'introduction' as in much of my work, I'm interesting exploiting the tension between linear narrative and interactivity.

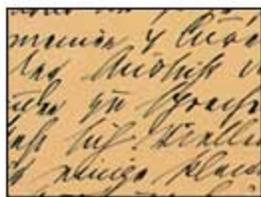
PW: During the introduction, the flood becomes major part of this "orienting" process, and reoccurs in the artifacts themselves. The image of the flood seems to operate on at least two different levels.

TH: Yes, the very term "flood" serves as a keyword by which different 'artifacts' are archived, organized, linked, and made searchable. In this sense the flood operates as a taxonomic category like any other. On the other hand, the flood is unique, a singular event. It presents a semantically rich unit, a symbolic placeholder in an unfolding sign system. In the Case Collection, floods constantly raise the specter of total destruction, pure loss, the annihilation of meaning. In the 'Archivist's Introduction', as you said, Patrick, users are recruited to respond to the flood, to participate in a 'narrative of salvation'. This act of recruitment is

not as innocent as it might seem. It harbors an imperative to recast the possibility of the contingent, accidental and unwieldy in terms of its opposite—a desire for structure. My use of flood imagery, then, can be thought in terms of certain type of traumatic event, the type of trauma Freud describes as a shock to the psyche, a shock that is unassimilable, its impact felt years later when another accident renders its terms legible. This is why the Case Collection is shot through with references to floods, to repeated events, which shore up the residue of previous experience.

For example, in the Diaries, overflowing rivers render genocide visible in the human bodies washing ashore. Accident sets in motion a whole chain of eventualities culminating in love, loss, life, death and history. Time itself is subject to structure. I want to relate this chain of eventuality specifically to digital media. For not only is time a subject of literary language, but it is also central to an architecture of data that tracks users, creates links, processes queries and implements command lines on run-time. I don't think, however, that there is a one to one correspondence between the literary languages I use and the programming language I use. I do, however, want to suggest that time is a preoccupation of all these different registers, a problem that must be figured, represented, and literalized as experience at the moment. >>

1 | 2 | 3 | 4

Interview with Tal Halpern, page 2

PW: Since this is a narrative of salvation, I'm wondering how you struck a balance between salvaging "artifacts" to provoke a narrative and allowing the user to decide what this narrative will be.



TH: In selecting 'artifacts', two principles guided my decisions. First, I was looking to explore issues of re-mediation and transmission or, in other words, the process by which older forms of representation like a photograph, travelogue, or archival film clip circulate, accrue new meanings, and recombine to generate new forms. Second, I wanted to explore how different media forms interact to produce a broader field of perceptual possibilities delimiting what can be said and seen within a given historical moment.



In this respect, I was thinking about the production of 'artifacts' more in terms of defining the contours of what could be said and seen in my project than as concrete 'artifacts'. I saw myself as looking to advance a grammar of representation more than producing a singular statement of expression. This logic led me to work backwards or in software development terms to take a 'top down' approach. This approach entails: first,

defining a series of general principles that determine the ontological status and autonomy of different 'content' elements, second, working from these principles to produce a system (narrative apparatus), and third, producing the different 'content' elements ('artifacts').

In short, I tried to strike a balance between the concrete 'artifacts' and abstract user-defined space through recourse to a grammatical or systematic approach to developing my project, advancing from the general to the particular.

PW: The pun on "desktop" seems to organize these artifacts. The image of the desktop in the office, like the "desktop" of my computer, provides a tool for information retrieval. While The Case Collection supposedly "exploits popular forms of information culture", puns, such as "desktop" also critique of these forms by linking them with a colonial mindset.

TH: I think you are right to identify a tension or ambivalence here. I'm clearly interested in both the progressive and regressive impulses of computational media. I think the emergence of technologies of mechanical reproduction, part and parcel, with the colonial project birthed a fantasy of desire and difference that defined the limits of representation. Travelogues, colonial photographs, and naturalist's maps all corroborated in the production of a set of perceptual possibilities, dictating what must be represented, what cannot be represented, and what exceeds representation.

In noting this, however, I do not mean to trace a direct lineage from colonial mapping practices to a computer-mapping interface or your personal "DESKTOP". Nor do I think that a computer "DESKTOP" is merely a representation of a terrain, an early 21st century variant of the colonial map. Clearly, it is also a tool for accessing, modifying, and organizing the memory on your personal computer's hard drive, a task that the colonial map never set out to do. What I am attempting to do with the Case Collection is something far more ambiguous. I am trying to explore what different organizations of the perceptual field achieve and how computational media both draws upon and reorients previous perceptual practices. I'm looking to account for the distance traveled between the colonial map and the computer interface. As images, texts, videos, and computer games converge in today's networked multimedia environments, I'm trying to provoke users to think about how the violent heritages of different media forms like the novel or cinema assemble and reassemble to produce new possibilities for perception and new grammars of meaning making.

PW: Since this does involve a process of re-mediation, how did you decide on format? To be more specific, as I was viewing the children's book, I almost unconsciously submit the pictures to film analysis. Likewise, in the diaries, the user is allowed to see the handwriting of the diaries themselves, yet typed script transcribes the handwriting. In a project such as The Collection, how did you negotiate between the direct simulation of the medium and a rupturing of mediums?

TH: I'm not entirely certain I can account for my process of negotiation. What I can say is that I'm preoccupied with questions of attention and temporality. In this respect, I often find myself drawing on my background as an interface designer. I'm interested in maximizing screen real estate, but not to saturate the user, bombard him or her with messages, but to create focus areas that will move the eye from one frame to another. This is why I presented the Diaries in the format I did. I wanted the aesthetics and movement of the handwriting or page turning to incite the eye to read the type. I wanted different formats to serve as frames and focus areas, which could then be compared to promote further reading and narration. At the same time, my approach to negotiating different media formats makes woefully clear that regardless of form or focus, I endow the computer screen with meaning, its real-estate serves as the over arching arbitrator of perception.

There are elements of the Rhino's Tale that lend themselves to a cinematic analysis, although I would caution against seeing the Tale as essentially cinematic. Indeed, there are a good many ways in which I would hope The Rhino's Tale resists narrative cinema, or at the very least, provokes a rethinking of dominant understandings of cinematic perception and the construction of cinematic time.

For example, I feel sound is often assumed to complement the flow of images in narrative cinema. The dialogues, background noise, and musical score all contribute to the general production of an experience of the narrative's thrust forward and a coherent environment in which the spectator is drawn in and immersed. This is not the Case in the Rhino's Tale. There is no sound; animations and text serve as the raw resources from which the Tale unfolds. In presenting the Tale, I was more interested in producing an experience of autonomous elements, and making the integration of different elements a problem, one that must be thought and constructed in order to experience the work. This is why the animations in the Rhino's tale supplement the text below them in an almost Derridaian fashion.

They attempt to dramatize a series of textual exclusions, and in so doing, present the possibility of driving meaning in new directions. The animations are as much complementary of each other and the text below them, as they are antagonistic. Likewise, I footnoted the text so that users might be catapulted out to other sources of knowledge, other types of texts. I think this strategy is probably more in keeping with dominant understandings of Web based media than narrative cinema, with its well-documented history of containment. Regardless, cinematic grammars informed the choices I made with the Tale and I imagine provide users with a point of reference from which to understand the piece. >>

[1](#) | [2](#) | [3](#) | [4](#)

Interview with Tal Halpern, page 3

PW: Noticing such things as the absence of Arloz from the frame in most of the third chapter, and the use of extreme close-up POV shots from the rhino's perspective, the visual story seems to narrate a sort of becoming, a shift in identity as Arloz learns language, and likewise a de-centering of the reader-subject.

TH: I am operating with a concept of de-centering here or at the very least unfolding. The introduction and accrual of new information constantly creates a demand to reconstruct the user's mode of apprehension or, in other words, her/his position vis-[^]-vis the text and its temporal unfolding. I think its fair to say that the very transformation in POV becomes an engine of the narrative.

PW: . . . and yet *The Rhino's Tale* seems rather ambivalent toward the potential for this becoming to transcend the politics of representation. On the other hand, this is a self-reflexive tale, which seems to relate the act of reading to a metamorphosis.

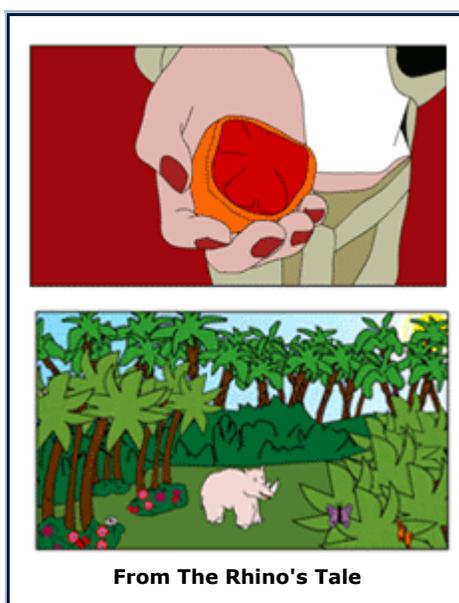
TH: Yes. *The Rhino's Tale* is obsessed with remediation, transformation and becoming. True to the language of digital media in which it unfolds, it is chalk full of loops, morphs, and repetitions. (Might I draw your attention here to the caption in which a woman's hand spreads jam on a slice of bread in a continuous loop in Chapter 3 or the repetitive appearance of butterflies throughout Chapter 2) In identifying these moments, however, I would like to suggest that metamorphosis is a central strategy of narration.

The Rhino's Tale encourages users to point and click, and to search out ways of accruing more information so as to fill in the ostensible gaps between different visual and textual registers. For example, the presence of butterflies in the visual narrative becomes a cause for association of the *Rhino's Tale* with other artifacts in the Case Collection. Integrating the users/reader into a sort of pattern of textual reading becomes a problem, a central preoccupation of the *Tale*. As the user becomes adept at following the story, pointing and clicking, and integrating different information streams and aesthetic strategies a reading practice develops. I would hope this reading practice comes to be seen as one that rests as much on concepts of metamorphosis and supplementation as cinematic codes of time's forward thrust.

PW: You comment elsewhere on the sort of rigidity associated with cinema. Am I correct in assuming that you see loops and morphs themselves as breaks from the linearity of the cinematic timeline?

TH: Yes and no. From a historical perspective, I can tell you that the idea of loop was not born with computational media. At the turn of the last century, motion picture technologies were often shown in loops to their audiences. Indeed, older terminology borrowed from cinema has often served as a guidepost on the road to the development of multimedia, igniting a series of attempts to produce new modes of perception. I, therefore, think my comments about cinema must be situated in this context since cinematic time only appears rigid retrospectively. Who's to say how my present efforts to capture and produce time will withstand time? Perhaps they will appear just as rigid as cinematic time in the near future...

PW: In *The Rhino's Tale*, specific forms of mediation, (moving image supplementing text) don't represent a metamorphosis. Instead representation is a process of metamorphosis.



TH: Sure. What is at stake is the very process of representation. I wonder if this is not a question that seems to emerge at specific historical moments like the present one in which new conditions throw into sharp relief older concepts surrounding representation, its limits, and imperatives. In such a climate, it is not hard to understand how a direct concern for the process of representation can mobilize familiar relationships like inside/outside, self/other, and content/form for radically new and ambiguous agendas.

PW: The two diaries have probably been the artifacts that have intrigued me the most. The language of The Black Diary seems invested in rupture; the narrative constantly suggests human bodies penetrating each other, images of the setting blending with the body of the subject, and various illusions to exhalation and inhalation. On the other hand the white diary appears to incorporate the very rhetoric of colonialism. What is unique for me, is that neither the more fluid representation in the black diary, nor the more striated representation of the white diary seems to overcome the politics of representation. Could you comment on how you constructed both the narrative and rhetorical styles of both diaries.

TH: I think you're right to point to the failures of the Black and White Diaries and to note that neither diary overcomes the politics of representation. In my defense, I can attest that it was never my aim to overcome representation -a far too ambitious mandate for the space of one work. Indeed, I wonder if indeed it is at all possible, or at least worthwhile, to commit to such a project.

The Black and White Diaries attest to my on-going interest in forms. Both texts reflect too much time spent reading explorers journals, colonial novels, psychoanalytic case studies, and Edwardian era history books even if they are not exact replicas of any one of these earlier media forms. In producing the diaries, I was interested in transmitting experiences and concepts that these earlier forms put into representation, produced as symptoms and visible signs of discourse, and in so doing gesturing to new perceptual possibilities. I wrote the Black and White texts simultaneously, thinking of them as operating within a broader field of forms. I wanted readers to be able to recognize them as autonomous works, but I wanted this autonomy to be haphazard, fragile. In a certain sense, I wanted the autonomy to be predicated on the Diary's relationship to other 'artifacts' in the collection. The White Diary, then, can be said to provide the codes for the interpretation of the Black Diary; it casts the Black Diary as a work of literature, a register of desire, one which blurs the boundaries between depraved acts, new experiences of time and space, and dreams. Alternatively, the Black Diary frames the White Diary as authoritative, documentary, official. Together they corroborate in the production of a set of perceptual possibilities, an experience of time and space mitigated by forms that are intelligible only retrospectively through the terms of the archive.

PW: So, though neither diary is exempt from embodiment, within the variation between diaries there seems to be a sort of liberating play of subjectivities. A flood if you will.

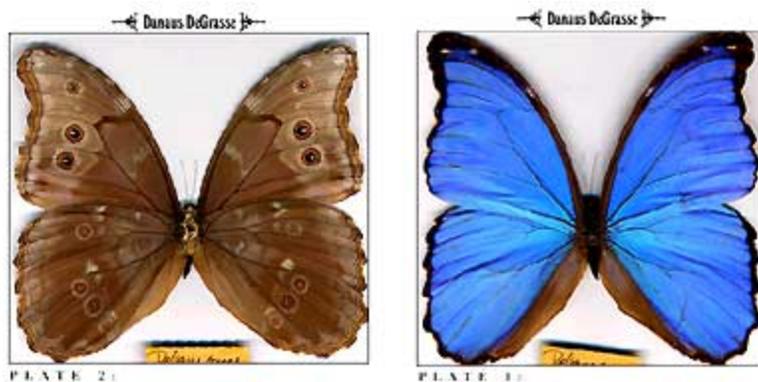
TH: Two points here. I'm glad you made this association since my use of flood in the Collection is similar to my explicit focus on change and metamorphosis in the Rhino's Tale. In both cases, I'm interested in exploring and extending the particular possibilities presented by different media forms to structure and advance a sense of time. Moreover, I'm interested in exploring the relationship between different structures of time and the production and maintenance of a point of view or subject position. In the Rhino's Tale, time became a problem for me, but one that had to be thought not solely in terms of representation but also in terms of functionality, a point that I will try and expand on in relation to the aspects of the Collection shortly. At the same time, I think I'm quite clear through my transformation of POV, through my explicit use of different colors, and through my inclusion and exclusion of detail in the different Chapters that I'm looking to ask-- what would it mean to produce a narrative time which seeks to capture, structure, and delimit concepts of dynamism, change, and morphing and not strictly movement forward along a timeline?

Second, the idea of subjectivity is also subject to the same duress as the concept of time. While in many respects it maintains many of its ontological trappings, my construction of the Rhino's Tale seeks to temper purely ontological concerns

surrounding subjectivity and its liberation or oppression. What I'm essentially trying to say here is that my orientation to the production of subjectivity in the Case Collection is primarily functionalist. As I designed the different 'artifacts' I continued to ask myself 'how will users get from point A to point B? How will they be able to interface with each 'artifact?' In light of these questions, I came to think of subjectivity as an assignment, a role that readers and writers could take up in order to navigate an emerging information space. >>

[1](#) | [2](#) | [3](#) | [4](#)

Interview with Tal Halpern, page 4



PW: Sir Francis Case seems to be a major force of subjectivity in the work, but a uniquely de-centered subject. Could you talk a little about how you developed the character of Sir Francis Case? He seems to be a locus for the ambivalence of representation. While his collections of butterfly specimens seem to enforce a very colonial attitude, the fractured voice of the two diaries resists this colonial attitude.

TH: Case is important to the Collection, not so much as a figure before or outside language that must be represented and expressed, but as a locus of discourse. In this manner, Case is more a series of narrative strategies than a character or consolidated subject. He presented me with a means of asking questions. What are the possible relationships between different media forms? How can media forms reflect and advance different forms of experience and concretize and literalize perceptual positions? Indeed, the ruptures and splits in Case's personality must be seen as perceptual possibilities made available through the archive. This is why I tried to develop Case's character through the production of different perceptual possibilities and different relationships between 'artifacts' and not through a turn inwards into a narrative of confession, as one might be lead to expect when first presented with the Diaries for example.

PW : How does mapping, temporality and dynamism function in your peice. The Case Collection seems to consist of bodies, encasements of bodies, and maps of both spatial and temporal territories, yet the interface allows the user to map these preexisting maps, creating a sort of temporal play between geometric relationships.

TH: The map is important to my work since I began with mapping. I wanted to cover a terrain, but as is so often the case, the map exceeded the terrain. It became an interface, a way of calling new things into being, engaging with newly imagined social worlds. It made me less concerned with representing an external out there and more with producing something new on screen.. My earlier work was much simpler, in part, due to the conditions I was responding to (I was commissioned to create the work for a project on ethics and science) but in setting out to map a terrain, I learned that I was more interested in creating one. Most of my projects are failures in one way or another. They set out to do one thing and then in the process lead me somewhere else. I hope these failures are productive. Sometimes they are, sometimes they aren't. In any case, I'm aware that the experience of productive failure, projects that never quite happen, is central to the historical and philosophical trajectory of the computational media in which I work...

PW: In one of your earlier projects, Chromosome 22, you also incorporate the mapping function. How did this earlier piece comment on The Case Collection?

TH: Chromosome 22 was a much earlier work and one that barely scratched the surface of the issues I explore in the Case Collection. It was commissioned for a project on science and ethics, so I don't feel I was as free to conceptualize the piece as I would have liked too, and yet you're right to point out that many of my interests are reflected in the work, my concern for maps delimiting and producing

a terrain, an information space, and my desire to explore the history and construction of knowledge.

My emphasis on mapping, in the earlier work, was a response to what I saw as an increasingly difficult information space surrounding the public discourse around biology that needed to be navigated, organized and re-conceptualized. At the same time, I saw myself relating the idea of the map to the interface, an effort echoed in my attempts to relate the Colonial map to the Desktop interface in the Case Collection. In both cases, the distance between a map and an interface became increasingly hard to maintain. Both Chromosome 22 and the Case Collection present an ostensible map, but in each case the maps are interfaces to storage systems that can be transformed through use. I think the unifying theme here, is a desire to open up and explore the ambiguities rife in mapping an information field. I think in both cases, I was more interested in exploring the perceptual imperatives shaping mapping practices, their transformation and spread and not with reaching a definitive conclusion about my chosen information fields.

PW: On a more personal note, could you describe your creative process a bit?

TH: My work process is often impulsive. I have ideas, fear I will forget them and this breeds anxiety and a desire to act in the here now... I turn to what I know and try to do things, Java, HTML, Flash, pen, paper, word-processing.. Sometimes this works. More often than not I get caught up and pulled into problems that, hours later, I realize where insignificant, unrelated to my aims. While I ascribe this process to my personality, I'm well aware that this desire for instantaneity, this form of response is conditioned, a natural outgrowth of too much time spent behind a computer screen..... ■

[1](#) | [2](#) | [3](#) | [4](#)