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The reader-assembled narrative: Representing the random in print fiction

Abstract

The growing interest in co-created reading experiences in both digital and print formats raises interesting questions for creative writers who work in the space of interactive fiction. This essay argues that writers have not abandoned experiments with co-creation in print narratives in favour of the attractions of the digital environment, as might be assumed by the discourse on digital development. Rather, interactive print narratives, in particular ‘reader-assembled narratives’ demonstrate a rich history of experimentation and continue to engage writers who wish to craft individual reading experiences for readers and to experiment with their own creative process as writers. The reader-assembled narrative has been used for many different reasons and for some writers, such as BS Johnson it is a method of problem solving, for others, like Robert Coover, it is a way to engage the reader in a more playful sense. Authors such as Marc Saporta, BS Johnson, and Robert Coover have engaged with this type of narrative play. This examination considers the narrative experimentation of these authors as a way of offering insights into creative practice for contemporary creative writers.

Keywords: narrative form, narrative order, interactive narrative, creative writing

The growing scholarly and creative focus on the convergence of traditional forms of writing practice and digital technologies suggests that creative writing, as a discipline, has begun to embrace the power of digital writing practices, or has at least started a meaningful discussion about the issue. Much has been written about traditional writing practices in the digital age and about digital interaction, but often the writing at the intersection of these two areas goes unmentioned. Interactive print narratives, for instance, sit at the meeting point of print and digital and provide one of the most energising spaces for experimenting with narrative form. The practices of the ‘reader-assembled narrative’ (RAN) offers scholars and writers a space in which to experiment with narratives that engage with a history of experimentation in print, and have been at times influenced by cutting edge digital developments. The RAN is therefore one element in the increasingly expanding arc of creative writing production, which includes the digital humanities. In this field, creative practice within print narratives can inform the digital, and often the opposite is also true with digital practices having an influence on the production of print narratives. Stuart Moulthrop, an important scholar and practitioner in digital writing, states that ‘creative practice can animate and inform the Digital

Humanities' (Moulthrop 2015). Here I argue that creative writing, in the form of interactive print narratives, can not only inform the digital humanities but that print formats can also provide an important space for experimentation in creative practice. This new area of creative engagement offers much for writers who are interested in the intersection between traditional and digital writing.

In this discussion it is important to note the significance of the RAN to writing in a digital space, and the way in which interactive narratives have encouraged writers to adopt new writing practices. Recently, scholars such as Kenneth Goldsmith and Paul Dawson have commented on the interaction between technology and creative writing, stretching from a focus on experimenting in traditional formats through to the inclusion of everyday and now entrenched technologies in creative practice. Goldsmith suggests that 'the workings of technology and the Web' have provided younger writers with new ways of 'constructing literature' (Goldsmith 2011: 2). The result of this, as Goldsmith argues, is that 'writers are exploring ways of writing that have been thought, traditionally, to be outside the scope of literary practice' (2011: 2). This exploration of writing process has exploded in digital writing spaces, such as hypertext, over the past several decades, but similar experimentation has existed in print for some time. Paul Dawson suggests that:

a new aesthetic has emerged in Creative Writing in the New Humanities. There has been a shift from the 'sublime' (operationalized in the workshop by praising the well-wrought line, the striking metaphor, the finely constructed scene, the authentic 'voice') to the 'avant-garde', the goal of which, in Peter Burger's well-known formation, is 'to reintegrate art into the praxis of life'. (Dawson 2007: 84)

Dawson's argument is that experimentation leads to a more relevant and practical understanding of how writing operates on an individual level.

A multitude of creative writing spaces emerge from experimentation with the technological aspect of storytelling, but also from experimentation with the writing process itself. Creative writing modes such as hypertext fiction, where readers interact with the story by following links and making choices, and physically assembled narratives, where readers interact with the narrative in a tactile manner, are instances of this combined experimentation. These narrative forms have continually proved to be of interest to creative practitioners and readers alike. The RAN is a great exemplar of a writing space that experiments with the technological aspect of narrative as well as creative practice. In addition, the important focus that the RAN has on reader interaction provides an interesting link between print formats, which are traditionally not interactive, and digital formats, such as hypertext, which thrive on interactivity.

The term RAN is used to describe a type of story that requires the reader to physically assemble a fragmented narrative. [1] I developed this term while researching the shuffled narratives of those before me and producing several of my own. A recent example of this type of narrative is Robert Coover's 'Heart Suit', published in 2005, which consists of a deck of 15 cards that the reader literally shuffles before reading. The RAN (or shuffled narrative) provides the reader with a distinct and interactive reading experience that allows the writer to play with their creative writing process and explore the limitations of form and narrative structure in an environment of generative co-creation. Of course, the term co-creation applies to all forms of narrative, because as theorists such as Roland Barthes (1967) and Wolfgang Iser (1978) have argued, the reader contributes as much to the storytelling process and the construction of meaning as derived from the text or produced by the author. However, the focus of this

paper is a narrative form that requires both mental and physical construction. The physically assembled narrative is distinct because the reader is able to interact with the story in a tactile fashion and change the order of the narrative, and, in some instances, alter the outcome. The RAN represents an interesting intersection between the established narrative form of the bound novel and the emerging form of the interactive narrative. In the following discussion I examine historical and recent examples of this writing process and I argue that this form of experimental writing is valuable and demands further critical and creative engagement.

In tracing the development of this tradition of interactive work, this essay investigates foundational work by authors such as Raymond Queneau, Marc Saporta, and BS Johnson, as well as a more contemporary example in the work of Robert Coover. Some of the early innovations were a reaction against the conventions of the period: Johnson was extremely critical of conventional narrative form and the traditional novel, insisting that after Joyce the Dickensian novel was all but obsolete, and stated that this type of novel ‘cannot be made to work for our time, and the writing of it is anachronistic, invalid, irrelevant and perverse’ (Johnson 1973: 14). Others, such as Coover, were interested in the act of play, evidenced by the publication of ‘Heart Suit’ as a physical deck of cards. Today, interaction is more commonplace in digital formats (videogames and websites for instance), however, as Katherine Hayles and Nick Montfort (2012) show in their review of interactive print narratives, interaction still holds an important place within print formats. The writing process associated with this avant-garde history (specifically the RAN) and the works produced continue to challenge and interest writers and readers, including myself.

Some critics argue that the disassembled narrative appeared in the 1960s out of a post-war opposition to form. Julia Jordan observes that the period from ‘the mid-1950s up until the end of the 1960s, saw writers and artists return to the avant-garde, obscurantist and experimental aspects of early twentieth century modernism (especially Dada), that had been in retreat in the 1940s and early 1950s’ (Jordan 2010: 89). For Jordan, this period of experimentation is characterised by ‘[a]n awareness of the possibilities of new forms and a desire to move away from the conservatism that distinguished the art of the immediate post-war era’ (2010: 90). According to Jan Baetens this movement was not necessarily an awareness of new forms but an opposition to form altogether:

In Western literature, the experimental styles that we associate with the various avant-gardes (from the Cubist and Futurist movements through the neo-avant-gardes of the 1960s) are often characterized by their refusal of any form of traditional rule or convention... In certain cases, the avant-garde not only opposed all these regularities, it also made a strong case for its diametric opposite, namely the use of *anti-form* (as in the revolutionary work of many Dada artists, for example) or the use of chance as a compositional tool (as in the work of a Fluxus artist like John Cage, for instance). (Baetens 2012: 116, italics in original)

Baetens introduces the idea of chance as an element of artistic process. The term ‘anti-form’ is also important, especially in relation to the RAN, which is made up of a physical form that is far removed from the bound novel. Anti-form is also important as a term that links the RAN to other avant-garde practices within art and music composition. Jordan argues that during the early and middle stages of the twentieth century ‘indeterminism or chance became a guiding explanatory force for the world, philosophically, novelistically and

scientifically' (Jordan 2010: 31-32). Jordan lists the work of John Cage, Jackson Pollock, and Robert Rauschenberg as instances of artistic processes influenced by chance. I would add William Burroughs to this list as he engaged with the notion of chance and randomness by way of his cut-up technique. Jennie Skerl explains this technique as 'a mechanical method of juxtaposing in which Burroughs literally cuts up passages of prose by himself and other writers and then pastes them back together *at random*' (Skerl 1985: 49, italics in original).

According to Jordan, by the middle of the twentieth century chance had become an important philosophical and scientific factor that contributed to the human experience but that the traditional novel was unable to accurately depict this aspect of everyday life:

the novel, which is supposed to be the cultural form which is expansive enough to echo our experience most nearly, is left exposed and uncertain. Its inability, in its traditional form, to render chance suddenly begins to look fatal: a gaping hole opens up between our (chancy) lives with its hopeless reliance on cause it [*sic*] and effect, its continued provision of reasons and motivations, its vast psychological scope, and plotted deterministic structure. (Jordan 2010: 33)

From Jordan's point of view the fixed, 'deterministic' structure of the novel is unable to authentically represent chance. However, by breaking down that structure into its constituent parts chance can be represented more realistically.

Raymond Queneau's 'A hundred thousand billion poems' (1961) is an important work in the history of the RAN, as it was one of the first narratives to combine the elements of chance and reader participation. The reader is presented with 10 sheets, each containing 14 lines of a sonnet which they are instructed to cut out and assemble. If the reader elects to carefully select each line then the notion of chance is somewhat diminished, however, if they choose to select lines at random, chance becomes a contributing factor to the finished product. Queneau was a part of a group known as the OuLiPo (the Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle, or the Workshop of Potential Literature) that consisted of mainly French writers with an enthusiasm for literary experimentation and 'inventing new forms of writing' and perhaps just as importantly for this paper, 'new forms of constraint' (Baetens 2012: 117). The OuLiPo's focus was not born out of a lack of rules, but instead a strict adherence to them. For example Georges Perec's *A Void* (1969) which was written without the letter 'e'. In the case of Queneau and 'A hundred thousand billion poems' the rule (or constraint) is the strict formal structure and rhyming scheme of the sonnet.

Ravi Shankar, a practitioner who employs chance in his writing process, suggests that 'these aleatory techniques often have the effect of freeing the subconscious and pushing the writing into new, unexpected territory, changing the familiar into the unexpected' (Shankar 2012: 301). I have also experimented with chance and other constraints in my own work, and while I do find it incredibly liberating at times, there is also an ever present tension between freedom and constraint. This tension exists in all forms of writing, but it is particularly evident with the RAN. The shuffled narrative provides the reader with a distinct and interactive reading experience that frees itself from a fixed sequential narrative structure, however, in order to produce this type of narrative the author must adhere to a number of constraints. The two most prominent limitations being the restricted word count per segment, and, somewhat ironically, the inability to rely on the concrete foundation of a

narrative structure. In the RAN the structure is constantly changing, which inherently creates problems for the author.

Through the process of textual analysis and my own creative practice I observed two key techniques that writers employ to ensure that the shuffled narrative is both consistent and cohesive. The first technique is that of ‘ambiguity’ where the writer introduces and finishes each section in a non-specific way that does not draw attention to a specific time or place, meaning that the segment can occur at any point within the narrative. [2] Ambiguity ensures that each segment is self-contained and can logically lead on to any other segment. The second technique, which is just as present in any form of narrative, but essential to the RAN, is the use of what I call ‘constants’; these are people, events, objects or locations that occur repeatedly throughout the narrative and thus create an anchor point in the mind of the reader. [3]

The use of these techniques allows the writer to experiment with their writing process and incorporate the element of chance while maintaining narrative coherency. The absence of these techniques would most likely result in a jumbled mess of incoherent pages of text. Ambiguity is present in ‘A hundred thousand billion poems’, however, the use of constants are minimal as this is a short work of poetry and lacks characters, events or locations that are required for this technique to be functional. To observe more accurately how these techniques operate we have to look at some extended narratives. Marc Saporta’s *Composition No. 1* (1962) represents a significant development in the RAN as it was the first long form narrative – 150 loose leaf pages, each with a separate segment of the novel – to embrace the physical cut-up as an integral part of its form. Tom Uglow argues that *Composition No. 1* was ‘the first book to demand active participation, or what, today we might call interactive’ (Uglow 2011).

Composition No. 1 is an ambitious narrative that explores the lives of several different women who live in a house in the German-occupied French countryside during World War II. Perhaps the most impressive aspect of the work is that Saporta fully engages with the form of the RAN, regardless of the limitations, and is able to create an emotionally captivating and dynamic narrative. Saporta employs both ambiguity and constants in order to make this possible and to maintain narrative consistency and coherence. Take, for example, this ambiguous opening of one segment of the novel: ‘Dagmar is at the vanishing point. She gradually diminishes as she moves away toward her horizon. As if she were being watched through the wrong end of a telescope. She is nothing more than a black patch with a blond luster at the top’ (Saporta 2011: np). This ambiguous opening has no grounding in time or place and therefore can occur at any point in the narrative. The closure of the same segment is similar: ‘At the emptiest end of memory Dagmar stands, a tiny point on the horizon, whose details melt into a black patch with a blond luster at the top’ (Saporta 2011: np). This page is indicative of the majority of the segments in the novel which often read like self-contained short stories, linked by theme and character.

The use of constants in *Composition No. 1* is just as prevalent. There are a handful of different characters, however, three female characters (Dagmar, Marianne, and Helga) are present in 90 out of the 150 pages of the narrative. The presence of these characters creates a consistency within the narrative regardless of what each character is doing in specific segments. There are many other constants that operate in this story, but I will draw attention to one in particular: the rape of Helga. Helga’s rape is depicted many times, generally viewed from a distance, almost in a scientific reporting fashion: ‘Her limbs are terribly delicate. The forearm, held back against the bed, reveals its defenceless

pallor, which the lips caress, provoking a shudder along their path' (Saporta 2011: np). Sometimes, however, the narrator seems to sympathise with Helga: 'Helga turns, is motionless, goes tense and then limp. Her hard arms are like an iron collar as she clutches her torturer' (Saporta 2011: np). This constant instantly pulls the reader back to the intensity of the moment, regardless of where chance has led them beforehand. Returning to Helga's rape at different points (before, during, and after) also adds information that might have been left out in previous segments.

Reading a shuffled narrative is a lot like piecing together a jigsaw puzzle. All of the puzzle pieces are in the box and the more pieces the reader can fit together the better view they have of the full picture. It is the combination of the physical and the mental acts of piecing together this puzzle that defines the RAN. Saporta, in an introduction to the work requests the reader 'shuffle [the] pages like a deck of cards: to cut, if he likes with his left hand, as at a fortuneteller's' (quoted in Burgess 2010: 318). He appeals to the game-playing interest of the reader and presents an opportunity for the reader to physically engage with and manipulate the narrative. Saporta suggests that 'the time and order of events control a man's life more than the nature of such events' (Burgess 2010: 318). He invites the reader to take part in the physical construction of the narrative and in turn influence the outcome of the story. The order of events and the resulting effect on story is at the heart of Saporta's experimentation with *Composition No. 1*. By abandoning the predetermined structure of the bound book and opting instead for an assortment of loose leaf pages, Saporta is allowing chance and reader interaction to determine the order of events, which he claims is more important than the events themselves. Saporta is testing a hypothesis with *Composition No. 1*, which is of course at the heart of all experimentation.

As Dawson (2007) observes, a lot can be learned from experimentation that cannot always be gained by analysing the formal qualities of great writers. That should not suggest, however, that one method should take the place of another; these two methods can and should accompany one another. For instance, creative writers studying or practicing a technique such as fragmentation might study the works of TS Eliot or William Faulkner; they might also try imitating this style of writing in their own way. But creative writers could also employ the RAN to explore this technique in a different way altogether. Practitioners could use this form of writing to experiment with structure in general: the plot of a story could be laid out in chronological order and then rearranged systematically, or shuffled at random, to see what other arrangements might work better than the original. The practical implications of the shuffled narrative for writers are vast and exciting.

BS Johnson, the next practitioner to engage with this form of writing, saw experimental writing in a different light to Saporta. Whereas Saporta set out to test a hypothesis and experiment with narrative form and his creative process, BS Johnson saw his works as 'problem solving':

'Experimental' to most reviewers is almost always a synonym for 'unsuccessful.' I object to the word *experimental* being applied to my own work. Certainly I make experiments, but the unsuccessful ones are quietly hidden away and what I choose to publish is in my terms successful: that is, it has been the best way I could find of solving particular writing problems.
(Johnson 1973: 19, italics in original)

Johnson is an interesting figure in British writing: writers such as Jonathan Coe argue that Johnson was 'the one-man literary avant-garde of the nineteen

sixties' (quoted in Jordan 2010: 102), whereas scholars such as Eva Zsizsmann observe that Johnson 'has long been doomed to a marginal position in the academic world, his work being considered secondary to the post-structuralist and postmodern project' (Zsizsmann 2005: 177). Johnson published several experimental works during the 1960s, such as *Albert Angelo* (1964), which is notable for having holes cut through several pages, abruptly foregrounding an event that occurs a couple of pages later. This strategy is an example of Johnson's problem solving. Johnson (1973: 22-23) says that this technique, and others used in *Albert Angelo*, were 'devices used to solve problems which [he] felt could not be dealt with in other ways'.

The Unfortunates (1969) marked Johnson's one and only foray into the RAN. The work comprises 27 different segments, two of which are pre-determined start and end cards. The remaining 25 segments are intended to be read in random order. *The Unfortunates* is based on a trip that Johnson took to Nottingham when he was employed as a sports writer, and the novel recounts the process of writing a football article, mixed with recollections of his good friend Tony who had lived in that city and died from cancer. This visit to Nottingham was a deeply-felt experience for Johnson and he felt obliged to replicate it in the form of a book. The problem that Johnson faced was representing the random, non-linear, often fragmented workings of the mind. His solution was to create a shuffled narrative that was able to interlace past and present in an unpredictable way. In using the form of the RAN Johnson attempted to more faithfully reproduce the randomness of memory.

Although the shuffled narrative did not entirely solve the problem he faced, Johnson did feel that this method was 'a better solution to the problem of conveying the mind's randomness than the imposed order of a bound book' (Johnson 1973: 26). Johnson's search for a method to represent the workings of the mind relates to the discussion at the beginning of this paper involving Jordan's and Baetans' ideas about finding a way to more accurately represent chance and randomness. The experimentation of these writers is, of course, to be understood in the context of the development of Modernist literary techniques, such as fragmentation and stream of consciousness in the early twentieth century. However, most of the influential Modernist works confined the writing to the imposed order of the bound book. Johnson, who freed himself from an imposed order, placed himself in a position to replicate the chance and randomness of everyday life in a different way.

My own creative experiments with the RAN have been heavily inspired by Johnson's work in *The Unfortunates*. Like Johnson, I found the scaffolding of memory to be an essential part of constructing a compelling story. We accept that memory is fragmented, non-linear and often random, therefore the form of the RAN naturally lends itself to the depiction of memory and the workings of the mind. This is another exciting application of the shuffled narrative that practitioners could utilise. The format of the RAN could be used by memoir writers, or anyone wishing to record memories. The benefit of this format is that there is no pressure on the order of events or when they occurred, they can just be self-contained memories that exist outside of time. However, there is a catch; in order to make sure that a RAN can be read as a coherent piece of literature it must abide by the techniques of ambiguity and constants discussed earlier.

Johnson employs many constants throughout *The Unfortunates* and the start card, in particular, allows him to establish some of these constants, knowing that they will soon be followed by other constants that link back. The main constant in the story is Tony, Johnson's deceased best friend who appears in some form in almost every segment. Pubs are also a frequent location in *The*

Unfortunates. In 11 out of the 27 segments a pub plays a significant role in the narrative and these sites provide interesting examples of the use of constants. In one segment Johnson reminisces about a conversation he had with Tony in a specific pub: ‘Here it was that he talked about the RAF’ (Johnson 1999: np). He refers to the specific detail of the RAF in a separate section: ‘His RAF career I remember him mentioning, can see the places we sat, the table, the low ceiling of that darkly-varnished pub’ (1999: np). Each section references the low ceilings and dark varnish that distinguishes the pub. This is an example of the way one constant can refer to another and even build upon it.

While the use of constants makes *The Unfortunates* an engaging and cohesive narrative, Johnson’s use of ambiguity helps ease the transitions between segments. The following is an example of an ambiguous introduction: ‘Away from the ground, the crowds gone, this rough forecourt littered now...’ (Johnson 1999: np). This line works because it is vague and has no grounding in a specific time or location (it could be any littered forecourt), meaning that it can follow or precede any other segment. The segment that describes Tony’s funeral demonstrates the ambiguous closure: ‘there was a straight column rising from the chimney of the crematorium, it went straight upwards, as far as smoke can ever be said to move in a straight line, into the haze, the sky, it was too neat, but it was, it was’ (1999: np). Although the segment is grounded in a specific event (Tony’s funeral), this final paragraph serves as an ambiguous, somewhat poetic transition onto whatever segment may follow.

The use of ambiguity and constants are an essential part of the shuffled narrative, a form that was integral to Johnson’s telling of *The Unfortunates*. In England Johnson was able to release the novel the way he intended, in its unbound form, but elsewhere in the world he was not so lucky. When *The Unfortunates* was released in Hungary it was not as a loose leaf novel but as a bound book. Johnson was obliged to add an explanation to the reader at the beginning of the book on how the work was supposed to be read. In this explanation he describes how a Hungarian reader can replicate the central element of chance in the original work by cutting out a group of different symbols printed in the back of the book, throwing them in a hat, drawing them out at random and matching them to the same set of symbols that are included in the heading of each ‘chapter’ (Coe 1999: xii). Even using this method, Johnson laments that ‘what all Hungarian readers cannot help but miss is the physical feel, disintegrative, frail, of this novel in its original format; the tangible metaphor for the random way the mind works’ (quoted in Coe 1999: xii). The introduction to the Hungarian edition of the book highlights that although Johnson had written *The Unfortunates* primarily to accurately document an experience in his life, there was also an interest in the participation of the reader and their tactile role in constructing the narrative.

After Johnson, this type of narrative production declined. It is difficult to give a definitive answer to why this decline occurred, but one contributing factor was the emergence of innovations in digital technology, such as hypertext. Hypertext fiction presents the reader with various segments of text containing links that they can follow to other sections of text contained within the network that the author has created. The focus of this article is on the RAN, which is specifically a print artefact, however, hypertext should be mentioned as it represents an important development in interactive storytelling, namely, the shift towards the digital. George Landow argues that digital writing can be seen as ‘a direct response to the strengths and weaknesses of the printed book’ and that this response has ‘profound implications for literature, education, and politics’ (Landow 2006: 1). Landow observes that scholars of both hypertext and literary theory, such as Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Theodor Nelson, and Andries van Dam, have argued that we ‘must abandon conceptual systems

based on ideas of the center, margin, hierarchy, and linearity and replace them by ones of multilinearity, nodes, links, and networks' (Landow 2006: 1). Hypertext was a medium that most closely embodied these ideas.

Hypertext was important in terms of its theoretical applications, but it was also an exciting medium for creative practitioners who were interested in non-linear writing and other forms of experimentation. Andreas Kitzmann suggests that hypertext in particular became a 'technological embodiment of the avant-garde' and that it was a space for 'writers, artists and intellectuals who were literally ahead of their time and, as a result, often misunderstood or underappreciated' (Kitzmann 2006: 28). David Bolter proposes that 'what is unnatural in print becomes natural in the electronic medium' (quoted in Landow 2006: 2). In the context of this discussion, a shuffled print narrative with no fixed order could be considered unnatural. Therefore, according to Bolter, in the digital medium, modes of writing such as hypertext fiction make aspects of the RAN, such as non-linear structure and reader interaction more natural. Goldsmith, in a similar vein to Bolter, argues that digital writing technologies provide writers with new ways of 'constructing literature', some of which 'have been thought, traditionally, to be outside the scope of literary practice' (Goldsmith 2011: 2). Goldsmith specifically mentions tasks such as word processing and programming, both of which have become prominent, not only in hypertext, but in the wider digital ecology.

The hypertext narratives produced during the 1980s and into the 2000s took the principles of the RAN and delivered them in a digital form, which Espen Aarseth suggests was 'potentially more flexible and powerful than any preceding medium' (Aarseth 1997: 10). Hypertext, like the RAN, was seen as a way to break free from some of the constraints of conventional print narratives. As Jane Douglas observes, 'readers of print narratives generally begin reading where the print begins on the first page of the book, story, or article and proceed straight through the text to the end' (Douglas 2001: 39). Hypertext was seen to have the means to challenge this convention by presenting a narrative with no set beginning or end (Douglas 2001: 39).

Stuart Moulthrop's *Forking paths* (1986) is a fine example of the potential that hypertext fiction offers. *Forking Paths* is based on a Jorge Luis Borges story called 'The garden of forking paths' (Borges 1941), a text that explored the concept of branching narratives. 'The garden of forking paths' is a complex work; one could argue that it was released ahead of its time. It was the digital platform of hypertext that emerged over 40 years later that allowed Moulthrop to expand upon Borges's idea. *Forking paths* 'is a hypertext fantasy built around a skeletal arrangement of the Borges short story, with fully fledged narratives branching off from each of the episodes and scenarios depicted in the original print fiction' (Douglas 2001: 51). Due to the constraints of print narratives, Borges was unable to fully explore the concept of the branching narrative. However, hypertext provided the tools that allowed Moulthrop to explore these possibilities. Hypertext is an important development in interactive storytelling and places the focus largely on the reader, however, I have not included these narratives in my definition of the RAN, or in relation to this discussion, because there is no physical assembly required.

Only a few RANs have been published in recent years, but each has highlighted the specific physicality that print possesses and the tactile manner in which readers are able to engage with the story. While interactivity continues to evolve in the digital format, the RAN makes a case for the importance of the physical. Robert Coover's 'Heart Suit' (2005) is presented as a deck of cards, which the reader shuffles before reading. The cards look and feel almost identical to traditional playing cards, complete with the suit and numbers or

titles. While Johnson had treated the shuffled narrative in a serious manner, Coover is quite playful with his presentation of 'Heart Suit', framing it as a card game. There is a parallel here to *Composition No. 1*, where Saporta requests the reader to 'shuffle [the] pages like a deck of cards: to cut, if he likes with his left hand, as at a fortuneteller's' (quoted in Burgess 2010: 318). Both Saporta and Coover treat the process of reading the RAN in a slightly more playful way than Johnson, however, unlike Saporta's work, Coover's 'Heart Suit' physically emulates a deck of cards, lending a further element of authenticity to the work as a playful experience for the reader.

In 'Heart Suit', as in *The Unfortunates*, there is a start and end card which the reader is instructed to read in order, but every other card is intended to be read in a random sequence. 'Heart Suit' tells the story of the King of Hearts trying to track down the person who stole the Queen's tarts. Coover, like Saporta and Johnson employs the techniques of ambiguity and constants so that in each instance of reading there is a unique narrative progression and at its conclusion, the King hangs a different culprit. The main constants are the King and Queen of Hearts, as well as the stolen tarts. For the purposes of this paper the stolen tarts constant is more useful to examine, as each instance is tangible and distinct: 'the King of Hearts passes through the pantry in search of the missing tarts, presumed stolen...' (Coover 2005: np). The tarts are also referred to in relation to the suspects: 'The Knave, from his humbled position on all fours, asks: 'If it is not certain that I stole the tarts, Sire, why must it be certain that I get beaten?'' (2005: np).

The use of constants in 'Heart Suit' is necessary for narrative consistency: however, it is Coover's use of ambiguity that makes the work an engaging and noteworthy RAN. The first page introduces eight culprits and provides reasons why each could be the offender. Each segment ends with a character about to do something and each segment begins with an action, thus, when placed together, one section flows seamlessly into the next. For example, the end of one section is simply: 'The Flautist...' (Coover 2005: np), which matches up to the start of any other section, for instance: '...ate one of the tarts and nearly died' (2005: np) or '...runs forth naked out of the pantry and through the palace' (2005: np). This ambiguous linking mechanism means that not only does the order of the story change each time it is read, but so too do the specifics of the events. With each reading one of the randomly selected eight suspects is hanged and in each reading the Queen fornicates with different combinations of her servitors. This variation is important because it places importance on the reader's role in the storytelling process. Hayles and Montfort comment on the way interactive narratives require 'the user to make choices and that these choices affect how the narrative proceeds in a literal (not merely interpretive) sense' (Hayles & Montfort 2012: 452). While this statement applies, on some level, to all of the works discussed in this paper, I believe that there is another level of reader interaction present in 'Heart Suit', where the reader also changes the narrative outcome, as opposed to just influencing the narrative order as in *Composition No. 1* or *The Unfortunates*.

The elements of chance and variation present in the RAN could have many different practical applications. In education, for instance, Ravi Shankar (2012: 299-301) has successfully employed chance and fragmentation in his creative writing classroom in order to excite students' imaginations, encourage collaborative writing, and make the familiar unexpected. More specifically, Coover's contribution to the RAN, the 'Heart Suit' linking mechanism, could also prove valuable. Imagine a class of students constructing a narrative together using the power and simplicity of this linking mechanism. In a primary school context there might be a straightforward narrative such as 'James opened his front door and found his sister holding his favourite toy'. This story

could easily be turned into a fun, educational game. For instance: ‘James opened his front door and found...’ can be linked to any number of things (premade or student generated), such as ‘...a spider wearing a tutu’ or ‘...a penguin on roller-skates’. This technique could encourage students to think about writing in a fun and playful manner; it could provide an introduction to interactive or collaborative storytelling; and it could also be used for more rudimentary applications, such as teaching students how to structure a sentence or use verbs properly.

Six years after ‘Heart Suit’ was released in 2005 there was an interesting development in the RAN. In 2011, Visual Editions updated and re-released Saporta’s *Composition No. 1*. Artwork now accompanies each page, which not only enhances the reading experience but ensures *Composition No. 1* feels like a literary artefact, something fragile, and something to be treasured. Saporta’s work has also been reimagined in digital form to be released alongside the new physical version. Uglow celebrates the dichotomy that these two editions represent: ‘The physical edition of *Composition No. 1* is an object to be held, owned, and loved. The digital version is to be read, pushed, shared, discarded, and reinvented’ (Uglow 2011: np). The fact that *Composition No. 1* was reproduced as a physical text as well as a digital text is telling. It would have been easier and more cost effective to have just produced the digital version, however, Visual Editions insisted on recreating the original text and updating the story with artwork. This dedication shows an interest in the physicality of this form, one that is mirrored by the readers of this new edition of Saporta’s work. In November of 2011 Visual Editions, in conjunction with the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, ran a mass reading of *Composition No. 1* where the 150 pages of the work were divided between an equal amount of readers who read each page aloud in different locations around the museum, the result being that visitors could walk around and hear the whole book read in whatever order they chose.

Saporta, Johnson and Coover each engage with the RAN in different ways: for Saporta the RAN is a new way to present a complex and compelling narrative while experimenting with his creative process; for Johnson it is a way to more authentically recreate the workings of the mind; and for Coover it is about playing with his own creative process as well as playing with the reader. For Saporta and Johnson the RAN was not only an innovative narrative form, but perhaps the only one available to convey what they wanted to say. But for Coover, having published his work many years after the advent of hypertext and digital delivery, there was a wealth of choices. Coover could have released ‘Heart Suit’ as a digital text or a computer game but instead he chose to publish it as a tactile, physical product, presumably because it was the most faithful method of producing the story he wanted to tell. Of course ‘Heart Suit’ could be adapted for tablet computers or mobile phones, however, digital is unable to replicate the tactile sense of a handling a deck of cards or the physical act of shuffling them.

The past of the RAN is far easier to define than its future. The most sceptical view is that the RAN, like the printed book, is destined for extinction. Although there has been a dramatic growth in eBook sales in the past five or six years, eBook purchases seem to be levelling off. Nicholas Carr (2013) argues in ‘The flattening of e-book sales’ that recent reports from the Association of American Publishers, BookNet Canada, Bowker, and Nielsen indicate that the decline in eBook growth is a global trend. [4] Some predicted that electronic books would consume the print industry entirely, but the curve of eBook uptake already appears to be levelling off, so perhaps a more realistic view is that print will continue to exist alongside digital literature and the RAN will operate as an intriguing aspect of interactive fiction, especially if print focuses on what it

does best. In 1973 Johnson observed that when poetry was overthrown in popularity by the novel it continued by focusing on the things it was best able to do and he argues that the novel ‘may not only survive but evolve to greater achievements by concentrating on those things it can still do best’ (Johnson 1973: 11-12). Granted, Johnson wrote this statement before the rapid developments in digital delivery, but perhaps we can say that the novel and the interactive representations of fiction in print, such as the RAN, will continue to remain important in an increasingly digital world.

Each of the creative works discussed in this paper focuses on what the RAN is able to do best, which is to allow both the author and the reader to take part in a distinctly physical storytelling process. Readers can engage with a bound novel in a tactile manner, thumbing through the pages or feeling the texture of the spine or cover, but they cannot physically manipulate the narrative as the reader does in a RAN. In a similar vein, readers can interact with a hypertext or a transmedia novel, they can make choices and follow paths that create individual reading experiences, but they cannot engage with the text in a physical manner, only through the proxy of a keyboard and mouse or a touchscreen. Combining tactile and interactive elements is what the RAN does best and as long as there is a desire from authors and readers to engage with storytelling in this way the future of the RAN seems positive.

For readers the shuffled narrative presents an exciting and empowering reading experience and for authors the shuffled narrative allows for experimentation with creative writing processes, problem solving, and the ability to engage with the reader in a different, more playful manner. This paper has investigated the different types of experimentation and problem solving that has taken place at the helm of the RAN and proposes two techniques that can be used to produce this type of narrative. I have argued that the RAN is a powerful narrative form that allows writers to experiment with structure and physical fragmentation, memory, and also the playful aspects of narrative, such as collaborative storytelling and even educational games. It is my hope that by drawing attention to and illustrating the various applications of this innovative yet under-publicised form of creative writing, practitioners will see the benefit in further exploring this mode of storytelling.

Notes

[1] Several scholars have coined similar terms. Hayles and Monfort (2012: 454) discuss several forms of ‘print interactive fiction’ with one of the subheadings dedicated to ‘Random shuffle’ narratives. Alison Gibbons refers to this type of narrative as ‘card-shuffle’ or ‘model kit’ (Gibbons 2012: 428). These terms are useful, however, they do not place enough emphasis on the reader’s role in this type of narrative and for this reason I use my own term, the reader-assembled narrative, which emphasises the reader’s physical engagement with the text and limits the audience engagement to readers, excluding ‘users’ or ‘players’ which are often associate with games and not literature. return to text

[2] The principle of ambiguity that I refer to is informed by a colleague, Leanne Taylor-Gilles, whose Master’s degree examines dialogue structures in roleplaying video games. The operation of dialogue in roleplaying games is similar to the operation of the RAN given the player’s participatory role in the narrative. Taylor-Gilles refers to ambiguity as the use of ‘non-specific’ language and scenarios, which, in the context of her work, gives the player the illusion of choice. The term non-specific is particularly important in relation to the RAN because each event (or segment) must be able to occur at any point during the narrative. return to text

[3] The term ‘constants’ is my own, but it is influenced by the important work of narratologists Seymour Chatman. Chatman argues that ‘some principle of coherence must operate, some sense that the identity of existents is fixed and continuing’ (Chatman 1978: 31). While Chatman is referring to all narrative, this statement carries particular weight in relation to the RAN,

where the continuity between segments is of key importance. For the sake of simplicity, I refer to these recurring ‘existents’ – characters, events, objects and locations – as ‘constants’. return to text

[4] The Association of American Publishers provides data for the USA region, BookNet Canada contributes data on Canada, Bowker and Nielsen both analyse the UK market. return to text

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