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Consideration of the trAce Projects

The trAce online writing community, directed by Sue Thomas, originates from Nottingham Trent University, England; the URL is <http://trace.ntu.ac.uk>. I was the second virtual writer-in-residence at trAce (following Christy Sanford Sheffield); I used the six months to write a diary; work on my own texts; participate heavily in the Webboard (BBS) discussion (this also included initiating a number of conferences); and developing four projects, all of which are concerned with writing, semantics, organization, and deconstruction. Three of these projects - *LoveandWar*, *The Yours*, and *The Traceroute* (or *trAceroute*) project - are at <http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/writers/sondheim/index.htm>; the *Lost Project* is at <http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/lost/index.htm>. The following is a brief description of the individual projects, and some of the issues involved in them.

A) LoveandWar

Five pages or backbones - anyone can add text to any of these. The content/direction was a 'novel' based on several characters I have used in my own work, including Jennifer, Julu, and Nikuko. Participants added other characters (Cybele for example) and texts, which may or may not have contributed to the narrative. Threads tended to wind around each other, disappearing from one backbone, only to appear on another. As with *The Yours*, below, each backbone developed its own characteristics, its own mood. During the course of the project (about two months), one or another backbone would be busy - at most, two at a time. The second and last were popular, but all of them eventually became fairly lengthy. The total project time was based on a felt optimum - after a while, the pages seemed to have peaked - and it was announced (on the Webboard and elsewhere) that the project would soon shut down. This gave participants a chance to add final sections. There was also an accompanying Webboard conference; this was eventually closed and archived as well.

B) The Yours

Out of *LoveandWar* came *The Yours*, which contained four pages or backbones; this time, there was no overall direction indicated. The project quickly self-organized around various themes, which flowed in and out of each other. It was fascinating to see this in operation. In particular, narratives appeared, only to disappear - the same was true of poetic or prose forms. One could consider the project a form of linear seeding. Both this and *LoveandWar* can be read 'anywhere,' but there is more of a sense of overt structure or articulation in the latter; *The Yours* almost seems to spread out forwards and backwards in time.

C) The Traceroute

The Traceroute or *trAceroute Project* centered around the Y2k problem and the 1999-2000 New Year's celebration. In this case, there was only one page; I asked participants to use the traceroute or tracert application in Unix/Linux or Win95/98 to trace Internet connectivity at

that time; some Webpages with traceroute applications built-in were also employed. The result is a record of the (very healthy) state of the Internet - connections were faster than usual. In addition, participants were asked to comment on local Y2k problems, other items of interest. I didn't want any sort of graphic interface - they're all too common on the Net, and many aren't that useful - but wanted instead a narrative of the world-membrane, during the period of supposedly peak computer difficulties (which didn't materialize). The final result is a textual mapping of the telecom world around the millennial moment. Participants, by the way, not only were able to enter traceroutes from their local nodes, but, through the Webpages, were also able to connect various sites with each other - for example, Moscow with Perth. The resulting topology was more of an overall skein than a multiple-star topology.

D) The Lost Project

One page or backbone; users are asked to give name, email address, and description of lost object or person. The three entries are presented in three different files; the project page itself is created (by Simon Mills and myself) as broken html and linking. The form on the page shakes; the background image peels off around it. But the html isn't broken, and the error message (after submitting the information, an Error 400 appears) is false; clicking on it leads to the entries so far. In this project, the lost object is disassociated with the name and email address - to date, many of these are falsified or playful in any case. Things tend to disappear into one or another file, just as nodes, objects, people, languages, protocols, and media disappear in the real world; I have 5" floppies, for example, that are now completely unusable, the information lost forever. *The Lost Project* is also a Project that is Lost - that has disappeared, to the extent it appears submerged in error, removed from perhaps a previously pristine or pure existence, when everything existed in the world, and everything worked.

1. Inscription-machines

The Yours, *LoveandWar*, and *The Lost Project* are inscription-machines: spaces for writing/inscribing within a specific form (name/email address/text) based in a specific server, organized through particular protocols. The operation is the same for everyone; the content is configured/ articulated within a space regulated by invisible background programming. In the *Lost Project*, the regulation itself is suspect; the background is foregrounded to the extent that it is a false background, unworkable, unworking - which is not the case at all.

2. Linearities

All four projects have the potential for links placed by participants, but their structure is linear or comb-spaced. *LoveandWar* has five tines or backbones; *The Yours* has four; the other two (*Traceroute* and *Lost*) have one each. At times, I would place cross-referencing links within the first two (i.e. one backbone connecting to another), but the overall tenor of the pieces are linear. There is, in other words, a tension between collaborations/texts which extend and differentiate, and linearity, which tends to unify, concatenate.

(However, the linearity of *Lost* is slightly broken, since there are three sheets - the name, email address, and lost object sheets - which are only roughly correlated. These may be considered three tines, added to simultaneously, to the extent that name, email address, and object text are entered at all.)

3. Peripheral Phenomenologies

Peripheral Phenomenologies - what shows up at the margins (grey page, white page, flash page, image page - on *Yours* - start page, end page, intermediary pages - on *LoveandWar* - traceroute residue page on the *Traceroute* project - triple pages (two as residue) on the *Lost Project*...

The four projects organized their inscriptive spaces (tines or singular writing-page) variously. *LoveandWar* is based on a narrative involving Jennifer and other characters/avatars I have written through; two of the tines are based on opening and closing strategies, and three others emphasize narrative moments. These bases are, at best, initiations into the tines, which quickly organized into other characters, narratives, breakdowns, and flows.

The Yours has four bases, one for each backbone. The first is a three-dimensional 'organic' image I produced in *Blender*; the second, a flashwork by Miekal And; the third, a light grey background; and the fourth, a white background. There was nothing else provided; texts self-organized within a much more open space than *LoveandWar*.

Traceroute, based on tracing interconnectivity during the 12/31/99-1/1/00 turnover, had a basic purpose which more or less controlled the content - a monitoring first of Internet routes, and second of local (i.e. the user's) environments. And *Lost*, whose purpose is the recording of lost belongings, or a longing for belonging, has to date produced more noise than anything - as if the broken portal were a catalyst for broken or hacked purpose.

It's odd that, besides this, the projects have remained almost entirely free from spam, and there has been only one case in which a writer asked to have her contributions removed after the fact (which took some doing on the part of the administrators).

4. Bottom-up governance - scratch sheets, "level playing field," anyone participating

Within the projects, each participant was equal; anyone could bend the text or imagery in any direction within the overall configuration. To this extent, the projects were scratch sheets. One constraint, however, was that the latest text would be entered only at the bottom - i.e., unlike a webboard, there was no way to place comments or material interstitially.

Of course, and we take this for granted - the pages were open for writing and reading twenty-four hours a day; they were vulnerable, unguarded spaces, without monitoring. Only the *Lost Project* has minimal monitoring - email sent to sondheim@panix.com whenever an entry is made.

5. Literatures plural, "modalities" of writing

The modes of writing included flash, html and dhtml pages linked to the backbones, inserted images, texts in various fonts, sizes, colors, and effects, etc. The styles are also extremely varied, ranging from traditional forms to animations to graffiti.

There is not one literature, but literatures; there is not one writing, but writings. The projects are multivalent, heterological, contradictory; they also possess "aura" to the extent that there are additional elements - not only the programming itself, but also back-channel, back-project private email correspondence; talk about them on the Webboard; advertising for them across the Internet (on various email lists and Webpages); discussion in chat on trAce and elsewhere; lectures and seminars describing them at universities, real-life conferences, etc.; and so forth.

6. Writing and "wryting"

In some of my theoretical work, I've made distinctions between "writing" and "wryting" - the latter referencing an almost hysteric embodiment, in which writing becomes symptomatic of physical absence - as if it were a residue or skin itself. It's the extreme positioning of text to re-present the body online. The image of the "tine" or "backbone" is an image of a body inserted online, a body of text and textual body. I see these projects as inhabited, inhabiting, online spaces, as if avatars and avatar ghosts were present. The writing styles often reflect this, pushing the language to the limit of re-presentation. The projects are simply in terms of design, animation, and programming content; they're rough, open to the semantics of reading, linking, seeing, hearing. Whatever is "clever" about them is invisible.

7. Non-dhtml/web aesthetic orientation

The Internet has changed radically in the past few years; the two major changes have been (following the abandonment of the NSF backbone, etc.) the emerging of a dominant corporate Net culture, and the development of the World Wide Web as all-encompassing. Accompanying both of these has been a slew of proprietary protocols as companies vie for online dollars and demographics. Almost all Net art is Web-oriented, animated, etc. I wanted to have an anti-aesthetic - pages that would be readable in a text-based environment, such as a linux shell account. I also wanted the emphasis to be on written content - almost as if the pages or backbones were spoken, instead of written - almost as if there were a body embedded within them. And I wanted a sense of poverty, of bleakness, as if these pages were the last place or inhabitation of writing, as if these were all there was. I wanted them to load with minimal bandwidth, as if there were an ideal universal accessibility, as if the rest of the world could see them, without modems or Internet. And I wanted a certain hunger to prevail...

8. Writing and rewriting on the Webboard - other URLs, openings

Beyond these projects, I wanted to contribute as much as possible to the Webboard, which tends to archive everything. There is a tension because of this - on one hand, an informal dialog framework, and on the other, larger and larger files, and increasing difficulty of navigation. It's as if the past creates its own articulation, formalization - interesting from a philosophical-epistemological point of view. I have been surprised that there are not more rewritings, reshapings - which owners of posts can do - and which would create detours, ruptures, in a flow already broken by multiple responses. I used the Webboard as a home-space, opening it, at least for myself, by posting numerous other URLs that represented the kind of work that most interested me.

I did find the board increasingly conservative as time went on, and I have spent more of my own energy in the 7-11, nettime, webartery, and other lists, which are valuable resources for anyone interested in experimental work or the deconstruction, so to speak, of the desktop and its protocols and interconnectivities. The board operates somewhat as a teaching environment, somewhat as chat, somewhat as resource center; it is also an ongoing body of work or working body - I tend to think of an inscribed body, not sexualized or psychoanalytical, but on the order of a limited telephone exchange, flooded with messages. The board is everyone's and no one's project, and that has been part of the fascination - while, at least for me, there has always been an overall tenor to it, the tenor changes constantly.

Finally, there has also been the diary for me - which breaks down into diary.txt, diary2.txt, and diary3.txt, also at the projects URL. I have written about the function of the diary elsewhere; it is the first time I've kept one, and, like the backbone pages themselves, it has tended to extend linearly. At first an exercise, it became more and more a public portrait from my viewpoint - something anyone would look at, in order at least to begin to understand me and my work. It was also an occasion for venting and thinking about depression, obsession, exhilaration, despair, poverty, intensity. It rapidly developed into a work itself.

9. Rupture, hacking, spam

There has been very little rupture, hacking, or spam across the projects or board, and that continues to interest me. There have been very few pieces that have worked 'across' the webboard, for example, breaking deliberately through the conference categories (one of them was an early version of the *Lost Project*, in which I went looking in various conferences for the missing). I'm surprised at this acceptance of boundary - it would have been easy for someone, for example, to link *The Yours* to *LoveandWar* and confuse texts. There was a form placed in one of the backbones that imitated the entry form at the portal - but this was an isolated instance.

10. Conclusion of Writing

The object of the *Lost Project*, the unattainable object, part-object, flow or flood, *objet petit a*, masquerade, lure, seduction, transitional object, memory, drive, instinct - always a hunger or teleology, always a tendency-towards - this drives the epistemology of the projects, which portend new ontologies as the millennium progresses. Philosophically, the results and the processes are fascinating, fetishizations of language and space, the leaving of feathered traces across an infinitesimal corner of the Net.

And all of these spaces or projects are ergodic texts, in the sense of Aarseth; they are also therapeutics, requiring different modalities of writing and reading. They foreground writing in a space of infinite choice, a literally chaotic space; and as such, they also foreground the reception of a writing which tenaciously holds its own.

For Alan Sondheim see <http://www.anu.edu.au/english/internet_txt/2/00>. This article refers to collaborative web writing projects he designed during a residency with the trAce online writing community, Nottingham Trent University, UK, in 2000.

TEXT

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