

The Flickerman: Re-creating narrative as augmented reality.

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Abstract

This paper will discuss the use of both social media tool and diverse media platforms in the construction of a narrative that inhabits the hybridised space that has grown out of cyberspace and into the ‘real’ world. It will concern an ongoing creative research project, *The Flickerman*, that began as an attempt to explore the possibilities offered to writers by working outside conventional broadcasting networks, and has grown into a piece of open-source story telling. The project is discussed in terms of its methodology being one that breaks through the ‘fourth wall’ of the computer screen and works with cyberspace as a form of augmented reality.

The Flickerman is a multi-platform sci-fi thriller that was written and produced as part of a PhD in Creative Writing based at University Bath Spa and funded by the Society of Authors. By combining real world events, audience interaction, live writing, found online objects and uploaded ephemera *The Flickerman's* narrative recreates traditional story telling as a digital audio bricolage, one in which the distinction between real space and virtual space is not made and the real and imagined are seamlessly blurred. The series was launched in 2009 across Facebook, Vimeo, SoundCloud, twitter, Facebook and iTunes, with the audio elements being broadcast on radio international (it is currently being serialised on ABC Radio National in Australia). The project is a fully functioning experiment in new forms of story-telling, one which aims to go beyond possibilities offered by Alternative Reality Games by creating a narrative based experience that is both engaging and inviting to even the most casual of audiences.

Key Words

Narrative, alternate reality games, radio drama, user-generated content, The Flickerman

Facebook Instant Messenger – 15th February 2010

Laura MS: Hey Cornelius you can crash at mine if you need a place.

Cornelius Zane-Grey: You do know I've got a girlfriend?

Laura MS: Of course I've heard all three episodes.

Cornelius Zane-Grey: Well then, I don't think I should take up your offer.

Laura MS: Get over her, Cornelius I mean she as good as tried to kill you.

Cornelius Zane-Grey: She did nothing of the sort.

Laura MS: Well that's the way a lot of people see it.

When the denizens of Second Life began their exodus to their Facebook and Twitter accounts Cyberspace did not die, it just became a very different kind of space¹. The metaphoric construct of cyberspace as separate space, as a realm of infinite creative and conceptual possibilities became moribund, an anachronistic view of what the future would be. The failure to realise the utopian predictions of John Perry Barlow and or the dystopian visions of Neil Stephenson's *Snow Crash* has not been the result of a failure to implement technology or of networks of users rejecting its techno-social implications. Rather, the synergistic relationship of user and interface has served to re-create the lived environment as hybridised digital-space. Cyberspace, no longer a digitally sealed metaphysical realm, has expanded outwards and fused with the 'real' life. The old distinctions between online and offline are no longer applicable, Meatspace has now become a virtual space and *visa versa*.

This presents the writer, the artist and the constructor of narrative (linear or non-linear) with an enticing set of creative possibilities. There is a clear and explicit invitation to break the *Fourth Wall*, to extend narrative beyond the screen and to begin to tell stories and create art that seamlessly meshes with the audience's empirical experience of the world. Locative Art is one versioning of this working methodology, and for a brief moment Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) have offered the possibility of a new creative form wherein the boundary of the fictive and the real are permeable. This paper details my own attempt to develop a new form of digital storytelling that exists in real and virtual space, Augmented Narratives. The most potent and extended version of which has been the drama series *The Flickerman*.

A sci-fi conspiracy thriller, *The Flickerman* concerns Cornelius Zane-Grey and the trials and adventures he faces after learning that his life is being monitored, recorded and posted onto the Internet. It is a project that I have been writing and producing since 2008 the story being told on the radio and on-line, through film, social networks, blogs, podcasts and mobile applications. *The Flickerman* is an active attempt to explore the creative possibilities offered by a postdigital vision of Cyberspace.

Cornelius Zane-Grey Facebook Wall: 20.09.09

Sarah: Dude, you really ought to change your passwords.

Cornelius Z-G: That's slightly ominous... what do you mean by that?

Sarah: Listen, I don't want to get involved in all this, but I don't want to see you get hurt either. Someone is hacking your fb and email, or at least was while you were gone.

Cornelius Z-G: I'm not sure I should trust you... I'll ask Travis what to do...

Sarah: For fuck's sake Cornelius, who do you think is messing with your accounts?!? Listen, all I know is I thought I was IMing you a couple weeks ago, but it was actually Travis logged into your account... he said he was 'poking around' in your files.

Cornelius: I find this hard to credit... he's a friend.

Sarah: Oh grow up will you!

The Flickerman began as a radio drama, a form that allows the writer and/or producer unbounded creative potential. It is one of the great truisms of the medium that it is limited only by the extremes of the imagination, the audience work for you; they create the pictures, the effects, the drama takes place inside their heads and as such it is perhaps one of the hottest of hot media². In radio drama there are no significant logistical considerations involved in the creation of the most extreme events and/or locations, there are no sets to build or there is no CGI to render in the creation of armies, the destruction of worlds or the obliteration of a flying whale. This the audio dramatist has in common with the great meta-programmer-controllers of Stephenson's or William's Cyberworlds – any vision or realm can be conjured and made real on a whim and with a simple flick of the imagination.

Having worked for the BBC and internationally in radio drama for 15 years I learnt that there are very real and very practical creative limits to the form. The radio industry is driven by considerations of audience demographics, of how a particular set of listeners will respond to a broadcast, of whether it is suited to their tastes and whether it will keep them listening. Audience is the commodity that contemporary radio produces, a commodity that is sold to advertisers or, in the UK, exchanged for the right to demand a licence-fee. Station content is produced simply to attract that audience, programming is programmed and risks are rarely taken. As I developed *The Flickerman* it became apparent that the project was not suited to the confines of terrestrial broadcasting, the possibilities and freedoms offered by online distribution were enticing for a project that I wished to develop into more than just a simple radio drama, and that also, quite possibly couldn't have been legally broadcast on terrestrial radio.

The Flickerman was written using a technique that involved appropriating, referencing and re-contextualising materials that have been uploaded to the Internet by the public, via Web 2.0 technologies, and in the first episodes to the website Flickr. Contributors to Flickr, who number in their millions, upload private photographs and ‘tag’ them with words or phrases so that they can be found and viewed by any Internet user. I developed a writing methodology of using these tags to gather a series of random images that I would then incorporate into a narrative. This story and the associated images would be part of a multi-episode arc, the details of which I had plotted in advance. My intention was to write in a fashion that did not demand that the audience be online and viewing the photographs as they listened, descriptions would serve to re-contextualise the pictures for those viewing them and to realise and describe them for those who were not. The legality of this technique is an area of some uncertainty. The photographs were not appropriated, they were not lifted from Flickr and used elsewhere, I simply directed the audience to look at them, and told them how to interpret their content. At no time did I ask the owners’ permission for their images to be used in this fashion, hence the initial reticence of mainstream broadcasters to become involved in the project³.

When *The Flickerman* was launched both online and through broadcasts on arts and alternative radio stations⁴, the audience were presented with a number of opportunities to extend their involvement with the story. They were given directions and clues as to how they could explore the parameters of the world that had been created, and as they did so they discovered that it extended far beyond the confines of a handful of podcasts and a clutch of third-party images found on Flickr. *The Flickerman* website (www.theflickerman.com) had become the hub for an array of links to Web applications through which I told Cornelius’ story. I wrote a prequel blog that detailed the events that led up to the first three episodes (back dating the entries across two years), Google Maps was used to highlight locations featured in those episodes and Facebook identities created that would allow the audience to interact with the major characters. Clues as to what was happening to Cornelius were sown, sub-plots created and forthcoming events and characters hinted at; this material was created in order to augment the listening experience to develop *The Flickerman* beyond being a simple audio or radio drama, and made it something far more intriguing - a piece of interactive as-live online multi-platform story telling – an augmented narrative.

Excerpt: The Flickerman - Episode 2

Barney Tuggle: It's like an onion Cornelius. You peel one layer away and another is revealed, you peel that away and beneath you find another, peel that away-

Cornelius Zane-Grey: I get the point.

Barney Tuggle: It's like what is happening here, we're slowly peeling away the layers.

Cornelius Zane-Grey: And you know what happens when you peel away all the layers of an onion?

Barney Tuggle: You find the truth.

Cornelius Zane-Grey: There's no onion left.

Alternate Reality Games such as *Rachel's Room*, *Push* or *Nevada* are constructed through a similar methodology, clues and information and hidden across the Internet and cross-referenced to locations in the outside world. ARGs are not overtly concerned with story or the development of character, they are a game experience and their purpose is to present a series of mysteries or puzzles to the participants. . They require an enormous degree of input and consistently active involvement on the part of the players in order to generate a valid experience. There is no place for casual involvement in an ARG, you cannot drop in and drop out of them easily or simply join halfway through the narrative and easily pick up its flow. Associated with film, television and game franchises they require an enormous base of potential players to become viable, for what they demand is that their audience radically redefine its relationship to entertainment media, they must actively and consistently engage⁵. *The Flickerman* offers a layered experience, with the audience able to choose their level of participation. Requiring that the audience access the diverse wealth of online material would have excluded huge numbers of potential listeners whom have neither the time nor the inclination to trawl the Internet in order to assemble the component parts of an oblique narrative. The audio episodes and the unfolding of the story were kept at the centre of the project. The listener was given leads and clues that would encourage them to investigate the story and in so doing transform their role to one of active participant in a drama that seems to have no bounds. The source material for the generation of narrative has grown to encompass almost any materials that may be harvested from the Internet: film and video, blogs and forum posts, Twitter feeds, status updates and news reporting. The immediacy of online writing allows macro-level issues and events to be woven into the unfolding of Cornelius'

story; if it snows in the ‘real world’, if the stock market collapses or a new technology becomes available then the same things happen in *The Flickerman* and will have an impact. Local stories and more trivial incidents are amalgamated into the very fabric of the drama – seamlessly becoming part of the flow of the narrative⁶.

The Flickerman Episode 4

Cornelius Zane-Grey: ABC National Radio had taken an interest in my story and chose to broadcast it... on something called Airplay... their ‘drama’ slot.

Really I ask you. Like all this is some kind of made up entertainment constructed purely for your benefit.

The characters in *The Flickerman* know that their lives are being dramatised, they know that the traumatic and terrifying experiences they are undergoing are being packaged and produced and reduced to a piece of entertainment. When ABC National Radio, Australia’s public service broadcasting network, funded the fourth episode of the radio series they asked the audience to submit photographic evidence that would help Cornelius locate his estranged partner Lucinda Lamb. This appeal to the listening public garnered a huge response in terms of images, film clips and a wide range of stories, sightings and observations. These narrative shards could have been incorporated into the final story, that is if Cornelius hadn’t been aware of this process and become convinced that it was actually just another part of the conspiracy against him. He rejected the audience’s claims, accusing each and every member of his audience of lying to him. The audience cannot contribute to the telling of his story because as far as he is concerned it is not a story, it is really happening⁷. It is his life and if you want proof then you can contact him, or the people who have taken pictures of him or look at the news stories he has been involved in. You are not directly invited to contact him, he may not even be in the mood to respond and not everything you say will directly affect the events that surround his life. This is an interactive narrative where the characters, just like real people, don’t always want to interact, and when they do they can be moody, charming, manipulative, bitter, scheming or flirtatious. They are never predictable and their realm of correspondence is not limited to a particular application or forum, it extends across the Internet.

www.dreadcentral.com - forums – topic: “Drawing Blood”

(06.02.10)

(Dreadcentral is a horror fan-site and on this thread the members are

discussing the sharing of T-Shirt designs and fan art. Hooklam and Dudley are characters who have been searching for Cornelius since January 2010).

arandomthought: Any chance on a shirt spawn in your style?

YouGetNoArt4FreeFanBoys: Yeah right and can I also get a design of Dudley Moore spitting the work "Spam" at Spike from the Goons with that asswipe shill for the i_phone Apps who wrote the lines for Cornelius Flickerman standing in the BG rubbing his hands in glee?

HooklamandDudley: CZG? What do you know anything about where to find that filthy wasteral... you know something about Mr Cornelius Zane-G don't you? Go on... out with it boy... where is he?

YouGetNoArt4FreeFanBoys: ... you want to know where he is?

Simple. Like all co-funding and apps sponsored PUTAS, he's waiting for his check to be signed by the FlickrTwats and their co-pimps in the 'cross-platform' R&D depts. that have conned Mr. Jobs and the various "I dealerships" into thinking it was all a good idea.

Both audio drama and radio drama are realised in sound but for radio what really matters is not sound, it is the act of *broadcast*. Radio artist Gregory Whitehead describes radiophony as the "autonomous, electrified play of bodies unknown to each other" (Whitehead, p.262), a precise and direct communication with a listener at a particular moment in time. This is why 'live' radio is so appealing, because you as 'listener' know that there is someone out there talking to you at that precise moment, what Neumark describes as "a whole affective or emotional microclimate and locus of encounter where listeners feel themselves to be part of a listening community" (Neumark, p.213). Online audio is narrow casting and private, an intimate and controlled experience; listening is no longer shared but communities can grow outside of the moment of audition. Radiospace, that realm which exists between transmitter and receiver, becomes cyberspace and this in turn has become part of social space. Just as radiowaves, the physical realisation of radiospace, can heat and warm bodies so the transmissions of cyberspace causes bodies to move and collide in Meatspace. New communities of interaction are formed wherein the tenants that underpin behaviour are broken – language is fluid, relationships are fluid and which of our 'companions' are real and which are invented is no longer an issue. In 1967 Michel Foucault presented the idea of the "heterotopia", places that were apart from but constitutive of human society. These are spaces in which the rules of ordinary behavior are, in different ways, suspended to permit the enactment of a variety of processes and rituals that do not occur in ordinary spaces. This perhaps is where *The Flickerman* is taking place, cyberspace re-constructed as heterotopia – a fictive space but a real space all the same.

The conceit of *The Flickerman* is that its events are real, the project benefits from a visceral thrill that ‘all this might be actually happening’. Verity production techniques have been explored extensively from Welles’ *War of the Worlds* through the *Blair Witch Project* and onto *lonelygirl15*. Audiences to the augmented narrative appear to know, at an instinctive level, that they are engaging with a work of fiction, but the invasive quality of the work is disturbing and disorientating. Theories have grown online about what *The Flickerman* really is, not concerned with the in-world plot but the source and production of the project itself. There are claims that it is a piece of corporate sponsorship, that it is Apple funded viral marketing, an elaborate recruitment campaign for the Australian secret services or that it is an extended piece of applied creative research developed to explore the possibilities of creating a fiction in the realm where RL and virtual space meet. Cornelius Zane-Grey, of course, would deny all these theories.

E-Mail Communication to Josephine Lamb (6th March 2010)

Brendon P: Hi Josephine, I'm embarrassed to admit that upon closer scrutiny of the evidence I had accumulated to support my theory, I find that my conspiracy theory collapses. I can no longer claim to have any substantial evidence to support my theory that British and Australian Intelligence agencies had any connection to the Flickerman... This Flickerman thing is really quite insane, you're playing with some bad juju here.

Are all the fans slowly going mad? Brendon.

Notes

¹ The visionary who descends to the marketplace and proclaims that cyberspace is dead will most probably be met with knowing glances and wry grins of those who have already realized that truth: which is why it is not my intention to use this paper to make such a claim.

² “I live right inside the radio when I listen. ‘The Medium is the Message.’” (Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 1964).

³ Early in its development, the project was discussed with a BBC producer. He was initially interested, he asked; “Oh so you put the images up on the Internet yourself?” he asked. “No” I replied. “Ah, so you ask people’s permission.” “No” “So you just use them without telling them what you’re doing.” “Yes.” “Oh goodness, well the BBC could never do that” he replied and I was shown to the door.

⁴ Including KPFA (Berkeley, California), WFMU (New York, USA), Third Coast (Chicago, USA), Radio Reverb 87.7fm (Brighton, UK) and Resonance 104.4fm (London, UK)

⁵ The Flickerman suffered the same fall-off in terms of the audience’s willingness to actively participate and contribute to the evolution of the drama. In the 18 months since the project launched approximately 500,000 people have heard the series through conventional radio broadcast channels, of whom 10,000 have visited the web-site, of those 1,000 have actively become involved, signed up to mailing lists or ‘friended’ Cornelius on Facebook of whom perhaps 100 have attempt to communicate with the characters.

⁶ Cornelius’ prequel blog details his fraught working relationship with a Dutch artist and their attempt to create installation piece that involves floating a 3 meter plastic Lego Man across the English channel. Their scheme ends in failure, with the figurine washing up on a local beach the next day, an incident is detailed on the BBC’s website and various other online media sources. The blog was written after the event and the entries backdated to give the impression that they were created in the days leading to the news story. This has caused debate in *The Flickerman* community about who exactly was responsible for the incident and its meaning.

⁷ This facade extends to interviews with the press I have carried out. For instance when I stated in The Age newspaper in Melbourne that Cornelius was my creation he responded with a tirade of abuse posted on his web site.

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Lance Dann is a writer, sound artist and radio producer who has previously worked with the BBC and the acclaimed New York theatre company The Wooster Group. He is in the process of completing his doctoral research at Bath Spa University into the BBC’s commissioning processes of radio drama and also runs the BA (Hons) Sound Design at Ravensbourne. Currently *The Flickerman* is in hiatus while he writes a novel based on the premise.

Cornelius Zane-Grey was unavailable for comment at the time of writing.