

# Geeks Inadvertently Making Net Art: SXSW 2005

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I recently attended a conference on "interactivity" where the participants were active flickr.com users. What resulted was a form of online, indexed photo-blogging of a common event that comes closer to achieving the holy grail of compelling non-linear narrative than anything I've come across in a long time. That's the short version. Here's the long version...

## The Network is the Massage

*Eddo Stern has speculated that he finds the net as a whole more interesting than any individual art project. I think it was Brad Brace who wondered why anyone would bother to archive or collect individual net art projects when Brewster Kahle's Alexa is archiving the Internet itself. Just query it.*

- Steve Dietz (1999)

In the Google offices, there supposedly is an LCD screen behind the receptionist's desk that acts as a sort of real-time ticker tape display of the noosphere. Parading across the screen are actual search phrases that people are typing into google.com at that very moment: "terrorist bombing"... "Britney Spears"... "freestyle topiary sculpture techniques"... the queries march on like a live, perpetual glimpse into the collective mind of the World (Wide Web). Net artist T. Whid declared this piece to be the best work of net art ever, and he may be right if you define net art in its strictest sense -- as art which could not exist apart from the network. The online equivalent of this google LCD screen is metaspy.com. With such conceptually rich implications built directly into pre-existing commercial net technology, all that's left for the aspiring net artist to do is take the technology and "contextualize" it (a.k.a. surround it with the requisite academically aware artist statement, wrap it in a visual style that suppresses any residual search engine commercialism, and get some grant money for it). Thomson & Craighead have done just that with their automated\_beacon project. It's basically metaspy.com dressed up for the net art crowd. To their credit, the artists have added a radio broadcast component to further remix the concept, but the richest component of their project is still derived directly from existing commercial search engine technology. If it's true that the network itself is more interesting than any individual art project on the net, then the most interesting net art is probably not being made by media activists with

Foucault fetishes. It's probably being made by Internet geeks so immersed in the every day communicative uses of the network as a normal lifestyle that they don't even realize they are pushing the network into hypertrophy. All that's left is for some new media critic to shine the spotlight on such uber-geek activity and recontextualize it as net art.

## Y'all Write Your Own Story

*Non-linear narrative is the holy grail of new media art. - A paraphrase of something Lev Manovich may or may not have said.*

**There are all sorts of theories that attempt to explain why creating a forking, write-your-own-story story should be so tricky. The most optimistic say it is a relatively new genre that is still struggling to find its voice and its audience. The most pessimistic say there is something inherently linear about narrative (we live in time and therefore relate to stories set in time)...**

One of the most difficult genres of new media art (for both "reader" and "writer") has always been non-linear narrative (which encompasses the sub-genres of hypertext literature, hypermedia literature, interactive narrative, and certain forms of gaming). There are all sorts of theories that attempt to explain why creating a forking, write-your-own-story story should be so tricky. The most optimistic say it is a relatively new genre that is still struggling to find its voice and its audience. The most pessimistic say there is something inherently linear about narrative (we live in time and therefore relate to stories set in time), which a multiple-trajectory, user-navigated plotline necessarily thwarts. In his book *Pause & Effect*, hypermedia artist and writer

Mark Stephen Meadows describes several non-linear narrative structures, one of which is multiple perspectives of the same event. Unlike *Run Lola Run*, which consists of multiple events from the same perspective, this approach is more akin to Kurosawa's *Rashomon* -- the same event from multiple perspectives. However, unlike *Rashomon* (which is, after all, a linear film), a true non-linear multiple perspective approach allows the reader / viewer to switch perspectives mid-narrative. Meadows' story *Crutch* is an early online example. Now imagine one of these multiple-perspective, non-linear stories -- not fiction, but based on an actual event -- written not by one author but collaboratively by multiple authors. Imagine this story exists online, across multiple URLs. Imagine the story consists not only of text, but also of photographs of real-world space. And imagine that the authors themselves aren't really meaning to write a story at all. I've just described the blog and Flickr coverage of the 2005 South by Southwest Interactive Conference.

## I See You See Me

South by Southwest Interactive (or SXSW Interactive, as it is more geekily known) is the Mecca of US blog culture. At a net art festival (does such an event exist?), the celebrities of note might be Mouchette or Entropy8/Zuper. At a web design conference, the celebrities of note might be Josh "Prystation" Davis or Mike "TrueIsTrue" Cina. At SXSW Interactive, the celebrities of note are elite bloggers like Jason Kottke and Wonkette. To give an idea of the level of blog activity at the conference, people were blogging their notes of the panel sessions in real time via wireless during the actual panel sessions. I spoke at the conference, and I was able to read online reviews of my talk within the day. By the second day, late-coming blog-

gers were quoting the previous day's bloggers in reference to my talk (meta-meta-commentary). More interestingly, the attendees weren't just blogging their opinions of the scheduled speakers. They were blogging about the evening awards ceremonies and the para-conference club events and their own personal dinner engagements and just walking around Austin.

So far, so what? Bloggers regularly give multiple, iterative perspectives on common world events ad nauseam. Bloggers also regularly give personal, idiosyncratic coverage of their individual (and often banal) lives ad nauseam. In the first instance, there is a common event, but it's thrice- removed and heavily mediated before it ever reaches the average blog. In the second instance, a non-mediated, experientially immediate event is being covered, but it's nothing that the blogger has in common with anyone other than himself and maybe a few close friends. What makes the SXSW blogging phenomenon so unique is that it combines these two usually disparate aspects -- *a common event with a first-hand experience*.

Far more interesting than the weblogging was the attendees' use of flickr.com as a kind of group photoblog. Flickr lets you upload your own digital images to be viewed by anybody. Furthermore, Flickr lets you tag and index your pictures topically. You can even anno-

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tate your actual images with notes (like cartoon thought bubbles), so when someone rolls over your friend's head in that group photo shot, your friend's name (or "bad hair day!"), or whatever pops up. Finally, other Flickr users can add their own comments to your images. Thus I'm able to locate a photo of myself playing music at an Austin bar and discover that Jeffrey Z. thinks I'm not a bad performer. This is just the tip of the interactive narrative iceberg. Add Flickr's indexability (database media) and interactivity (multi-user media) to a common event like a conference (particularly an "interactive" conference with a bunch of digital camera-clicking, wireless laptop-toting, online junkies), and you get something very close to Rashomon-esque non-linear narrative.

How does one "read" such a narrative? Actually, there are multiform ways to read it, as one would expect from a non-linear narrative. I can read the narrative via several different navigational modes:

1. by event / time: what was happening on Friday night?
2. by setting: what was happening at the opening night party at Frog Design?
3. by narrator: of what did my friend Nick F. take pictures?
4. by character: how many pictures are there of Jeffrey Z.?
5. by subject: where are the pictures of beer bottles?

One way to read the narrative is by following a character. This allows me to "follow" my personal acquaintances around and see what they did when I wasn't "there." For example, on Monday night, we left Molly H. actively calling friends on her cell phone in hopes of finding some people with whom to get drunk. And sure enough, here's a picture of her in a Hilton hotel room late Monday night, bottle of whiskey in hand (too much information, really). Another way I can read the narrative is by following a subject. Walking down 6th street with a group of folks after lunch, Jason K. took a snapshot of a groovy VW motorcycle and said "that's going on Flickr," and indeed, there it was. Furthermore, since each photograph is indexed and cross-

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referenced with meta-tags, I can switch my navigational mode at any time during my "read" of the "narrative." For instance, I could "follow" a narrator named Gayle around, viewing the pictures she shot (navigational mode is "narrator," keyword "Gayle"). Maybe Gayle takes a picture of an interesting looking character named Bill. I can then see if anybody else took a picture of Bill (navigational mode switch to "character," keyword "Bill"). I can even hop ship, abandon Gayle as my narrator, adopt Bill as my new narrator, and surf all the things Bill himself has photographed (navigational mode switch to "narrator," keyword still "Bill"). Perhaps Bill photographed an interesting Thai restaurant. I could then see who else took pictures of that restaurant (navigational mode switch to "setting," keyword "Thai restaurant"). Perhaps someone named Emma took a particularly well-composed picture of the Thai restaurant. Now she becomes my new narrator, and I follow her around (navigational mode switch to "narrator," keyword "Emma"). What emerges are convergences of interest. For example, lots of people photographed this brilliant piece of graffiti:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/booboolina/6701812/>  
<http://flickr.com/photos/jmccnally/6530732/>  
<http://flickr.com/photos/laughingsquid/6581935/>  
<http://flickr.com/photos/58944004@N00/6794855/> and lots of people took (lots of) pictures of this dancing bird

**Tags / sxsw2005**

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girl: <http://flickr.com/photos/sirepaintball/6689824/>  
<http://flickr.com/photos/somedirection/6879388/>

## You Got to Be In It To Win It

Do these group photobloggers know they are harbingers of possibly the most innovative form of collaborative non-linear narrative since Borges' "Garden of Forking Paths?" Yes and no. They know they are participating in a form of collective storytelling. They are hoping that others will interact with their particular perspective on the group story. There is even a kind of celebrity tourism involved. One blogger described how people would walk right up to CSS guru Eric Meyer and have their picture taken next to him, without even asking, as if he were Mount Rushmore. Not in order to keep the picture in their private scrapbook, but to show to their friends on Flickr that their own narrative trajectory had crossed paths with one of the consensually agreed "star" characters of the common narrative. What makes all of this the least bit interesting is that I was actually there, so at Flickr I am able to discover locations, events, narrators, characters, and objects that were somehow related to my real-world personal experience. And the time-shifted, cross-referenced database allows me to expand my personal experience (locationally and temporally) into perspectives previously not possible. For instance, I ate dinner with so and so at such and such a restaurant -- where did so and so go and what did they take pictures of after that meal? Who took pictures of so and so? Who else ate at such and such a restaurant? What did they take pictures of after their meal? In one instance, I was even able to view the same dinner party from multiple diners' perspectives. Such common-event, indexed photoblogging is engaging in the way that Role Playing Games are engaging. If you have ever observed a session of Dungeons & Dragons without actually playing, it can be pretty boring. But when it's your imaginary character who needs to roll an 18 in order to escape the dragon flames, the narrative tends to be a bit more engaging. Now imagine it's not your imaginary character, but you are the actual character. True, there are no dragon flames, but there is your geeky micro-scene reputation and your blog traffic at stake! It's a kind of micro-Hollywood or micro-Washington DC for the masses. In Hollywood and politics, you get media coverage by spinning your activities to the news and entertainment media (which traditionally operate as one-to-many media). In the blogosphere, you can cover your own story (many-to-many media), and you can read your friends' stories. You become simultaneously journalist, star, and fan. Or, to put it more literarily, you become simultaneously narrator, character, and reader.

## Steal This Recontextualization

As a new media art critic, I have recontextualized common-event photoblogging as non-linear narrative. I'm not personally interested in delineating the culture the-  
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ory ramifications of this phenomenon, but if you are, here are some phrases and references to get you started: \* Barthes' death of the author (always requisite). \* Oscar Wilde's "life imitates art" (although blog geeks don't exactly qualify as decadent). \* Warhol's "everyone gets their 15 minutes of fame" maxim (and its Internet corollary, "on the net, everyone is perpetually famous, but only to 15 people at any given time"). \* Foucault's panopticon, surveillance cameras, self-surveillance, and culture jamming (the photoblog narrative form is actually the antithesis of the panopticon. Coin some phrase like "dyspanopticon," "polyopticon," "rhizomopticon," etc.) \* Foucault's flaneur ("flaneuropticon!" I love it!). \* Psychogeography as networked narrative / networked narrative as psychogeography. \* Open source (always requisite). \* Semi-virtual / semi-physical. \* Flash mobs, warchalking, geocaching, online RPGs, multi-player Japanese cell-phone treasure hunt culture. \* Brenda Laurel! (No matter what it's about, it's always about Brenda Laurel!)

If you are an artist or a curator or the host of a digital arts conference, you can steal this recontextualization and run with it willy nilly down the following suggested paths: \* As an artist, do exactly what these photobloggers were doing, except do it with a bunch of your friends. Stage a common event. Make it sexy, like a murder or an act of vandalism. Then leak the story somehow to the press or the blogosphere. People will go to Flickr, search based on your given keywords, and navigate your faux event with incredulity and horror. They will get all up in arms about it, and then the media will investigatively report how it's all been nothing more than a great big art prank. Give interviews. Darko Maver meets *The Blair Witch Project* meets "check out these cute picture of my kitten, Fluffy!" \* As a curator, curate an exhibit about networked narratives. Encourage patrons to photoblog their visit to the exhibit on Flickr, and then make their coverage of the exhibit one of the installations in the exhibit. \* As the host of a digital arts conference, encourage your attendees to do exactly what the SXSW photobloggers did. The difference being that your attendees will proceed with a conscious awareness that their photoblogging is actually art. Plus, the photographs themselves will be more oblique, because digital artists take more oblique pictures than CSS programmers.

## Y'all Read Your Own Story

To "read" your own SXSW non-linear narrative, here are a few suggested entry points:

<http://www.technorati.com/tag/sxsw>  
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/tags/sxsw> <http://www.technorati.com/tag/sxsw2005>  
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/tags/sxsw2005>  
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/tags/sxswinteractive>  
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