Anarchaweb: Design Notes

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When Petra Kuppers first talked with me about creating a "sticky" website, what came to my mind what Espen Aarseth calls "ergodic literature," hypertext that requires more than a trivial effort to navigate, and that which can be rightly called cybernetic in that there is opportunity for feedback to re/arrange the content.

Just to give a brief connection to well-known examples of ergodic literature--although they precede the term by decades in most cases: Nabakov's *Pale Fire*, Queneau's *Cent Mille Milliards de Poèmes* and their logical outcomes in hypertext that were created for the "small screen" using HyperCard and Storyspace: Michael Joyce's *afternoon, a story* (now twenty years old), Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*, or Stuart Moulthrop's *Victory Garden*.

Our original idea, and one we still are working on, as this site is a work in progress, was to recast Anarchaweb as a Wunderkammer; in the renaissance, these cabinets gathered together both technical masterpieces and the strange, unusual, and exotic. The "Wunderkammer" idea is a metaphor for the architecture of the Anarcha site--it need not look like an enlightenment era collection amassed by a prince or patron, in fact, it resists the idea of enlightenment science whose tradition produced J. Marion Sims (I had to shake my head when I learned that Sims was the first physician in the US to have a statue in his honor).

To begin our part of this collaboration with a common language, we looked at four sites that incorporate some ergodic characteristics to varying degrees of success:

- Jennifer Ley, Light is Silent/Illumination is not
  http://www.heelstone.com/light/javatest.html

This is a collection of poems coupled with instructions for how to perform some sign language phrases that are embedded in the text. Navigation is simple and is easily discoverable by the viewer, by clicking either on hypertext cues as words or one graphic link. Java script randomizes the database responses and a browser (or keyboard) back button will take the viewer back through the pages visited, but nothing other than retracing steps will return to "home."

 Graphically and textually, the site is too elementary to take anything substantial from, other than the confirmation that JavaScript, flash, or php can be used to gain desired effects on hypertext instead of having to rely on the Storyspace program, which, while quite adaptable, has a steep learning curve, and has not been widely adopted.

- Stuart Moulthrop, Hegirascope: A Hypertext Fiction
  http://iat.ubalt.edu/moulthrop/hypertexts/hgs/.
  As I looked at it again and again, this space was only slightly more useful for us than Ley's piece. Here there are more choices embedded, and a timer will take the viewer to another page if there is no choice made in a fixed time. The viewer can be active or passive. As we talked about what we wanted the viewer's experience to be, we decided that too much instructional information surrounds the piece. To the contradiction of user-centered design, for this environment we felt that the viewer should not be given any instructions for navigation. We make the assumption that all users know what the colored lines under text on a web page mean, and that they know that when they mouse-over a graphic and see the cursor icon change from to a pointing finger that links are embedded.

  So, the mouse-over, with java or flash can trigger a change of page, a change of picture, and an embedded sound file. Why tell us what will happen? Isn't some of the delight in the Wunderkammer in picking up an object and having it reveal itself privately to us?

Having the same set of instructions for everyone robs us of some of the particular delight in thinking we are the first to discover it.

The "hegira" metaphor also doesn't work for me. Yes, we are on a journey, but is it really anything comparable to Mohammed's journey from Medina to Mecca? The index: http://iat.ubalt.edu/moulthrop/hypertexts/hgs/HGSTable.html is a valid navigational tool, as Moulthrop uses it here. The text in any of the columns takes the viewer to a predetermined rather than random page (that is the same choice will result in the same page every time), but the text of the index link has no apparent connection to the landing page. Each "interior" page has four choices that take the reader to another page with four choices and so on. The choice to extract those choices as navigation exterior to the text is problematic though. I'd prefer to embed the link in the text--I played with other ideas, such as a consistent graphic (as in Ley) to take the viewer to another location, but I guess I do agree with Moulthrop that pulling four links out (North South East West?) and connecting them to words allows the viewer to be swayed by the impulse of the words.

But what happens when the reader makes a choice on her hegira? Should she choose the prompt [Lenin, Marx, Freud] or [Changes] or [Mao, Derrida, Reagan] or [Middles]? What is problematic though, is that the choice doesn't reward her-- the destination page has no apparent connection to the prompt, so she might as well let the program run through changing the pages for her using the default timer. Choosing "begin," while a slideshow, is ultimately static.

Repeated viewings result in the same 16 slides, the second 8 repeating the first 8: the first 8 offer no viewer interaction and the viewer must sit through them, the second 8 repeat, but have the 4 hypertext "escapes" available. One reason I find this awkward is that by choosing begin, I must sit through at least the first eight slides, and the index is only available if I know to choose "Introduction" or "Copyright" from the title page. Either make the navigation

intentional or don't! And don't promise me a hypertext journey if I can't choose my own path.

My favorite of these sites is

- Shelley Jackson's My Body, A Wunderkammer & Notes. http://www.altx.com/thebody/.
  She offers no navigation other than the embedded "moving hand." One click takes the viewer to an index that doesn't need to be called an index--it is explicitly an index and the viewer can choose where to go. Greg Ulmer talks about the method of constructing movement through a hypertext-- once the narrative is (mostly) set, the task is to make a second pass through the image set, matching "attunement images with the discourse of the database."

Jackson's hypertext presents a realization of this concept. Allow me a moment or two of academic theory-speak: Ulmer talks of the "inference procedure" as I alluded to about Moulthrop's construction; but, he says, images are not strictly "deductive, inductive, or abductive, but conductive," and ideally promote "an aesthetic dreamwork pattern" where we "follow the signifier."

Ulmer's work draws on Derrida's interpretation of the classic aporia, the moment of impasse, where two or more conflicting concepts occupy the same space. Where the Greeks saw the aporia as a problem that could then be solved through dialectic, Derrida calls aporia a moment of absolute impasse without solution, and so the inference procedure then leads to the set of impossible solutions, recalling Alfred Jarry's science 'pataphysique.

We envision Anarchaweb as a place for these aporia, a way of moving through image and text without any agenda of problem solving, instead proposing imaginary dream sequences. Looking at Jackson's Wunderkammer, the topography of her body maps onto the text behind it. Links in the text take the viewer/reader to other destinations within the overall body of the text. But unlike Moulthrop's Hegira, the word or phrase does have a connection to

the landing place. The limitation, here, though is that clicking on a similar word or phrase on the landing page almost always takes the viewer back to the last viewed page.

There is no other explicit navigation, however. You either click on embedded links or browse back to the body/map and select another body part.

The most sophisticated, overreaching example of a multimedia Wunderkammer that we looked at together is Steve Tanza's The Central City http://www.thecentralcity.co.uk, which Tanza calls a labyrinth—and the part that appeals to me about this is taking the viewer on a journey that is labyrinthine—there is no simple way back.

I also love the incorporation of ambient, yet manipulable sound loops. The viewer is in control of her content, but may not easily know where the journey is headed. With the explicit violence and potential shock of confronting the Anarcha story, we think that the soundtrack should not be aggressive, but neither should it be soothing, and can also incorporate spoken word files to accompany either text or image. (Unfortunately, at times Steve Tanza goes completely aggressive.)

Tanza is rarely invested in the straightforward exposition of text or narrative, more the architecture and archaeology of space. Stanza's sites continually evolve with digital technologies and dynamic mark-up languages—of note is his incorporation of closed-circuit TV with cybernetics, but while that might be a piece of some future work incorporating QuickTime or flash video of performances, it is not part of our design plan for Anarchaweb.

But where Tanza excels in the combination of text/image/navigation is in the layered choices. In a window where either a word or a poem or a short exposition appears, often these are accompanied by small boxes or circles, horizontally or vertically

arranged. We know through our accumulated experience that these are navigation devices though they carry no tag.

Instead, when we rollover, the image changes, but will also change back as soon as we are off of these navigational cues. But clicking on the button takes us to another page entirely--or to another subsection of the site. The Central City is richly, thickly complex-- much more than we need for Anarcha, but the idea of multiple layers of travel appeals to us.

Our final reference is to Christine Boese's hypertext dissertation: *The Ballad of the Internet Nutball: Chaining Rhetorical Visions from the Margins of the Margins to the Mainstream in the Xenaverse.* http://www.nutball.com/dissertation. We include it here for her exploration and documentation of the feedback loop, showing that fans of the Xena show affected the course of plot lines and also affected aspects of character development. The site itself is unremarkable, but one of the possibilities we discussed in our design plans and one that is part of Petra Kuppers' working methods on projects such as Anarcha, Tiresias, and her latest project, Touching Time—is in encouraging community participation and contribution that transforms the space over time.

Where Moulthrop's piece incorporated contributions that were added over time, the group of contributors was known, limited, and edited. Boese incorporated substantially more "outside" input and contribution to her Xena site. The ultimate authorship rested with her, but it's clear that she welcomed and honored contributors known to her only through web forums, chat rooms, discussion lists. Anarcha, or perhaps another future project, will have the ability to offer readers a way to respond to what they see and read, and those contributions will be edited and added.

And where dynamic markup programming offers advantages over Storyspace is that by randomizing the responses (with an algorithm that would serve to minimize repeating the same page) new material would be added without having to remap the entire site.

And so our plan as it is evolving:

A database containing:

- images
- chunks of texts--from one word to paragraphs to as much as 150-250 words
- sounds--sound loops, words, spoken pieces of similar length to texts

A "front page"/title with an image, drawn or perhaps a photograph that on one click leads to the interior—to a Wunderkammer, either a metaphoric body of Anarcha (one of the Olimpias visiting artists/contributors has done work with students where they shoot individual body parts and an "exquisite corpse" of sorts is constructed) or perhaps a collection of medical arcana drawn from the lived experience of the crip community--prosthetics, devices, appliances, and, of course, the Sims speculum.

In this map of liminal space (whether body or medical arcana or other) are embedded links. These links will allow the viewer to follow her own 'aesthetic dreamwork pattern' and the click leads to whatever page the database generates. On the destination page, image accompanies text. Text and image can have links embedded, or the navigation may be more like Central City with unlabeled cues that provide changes on rollover or click, depending on how complex we want this to be.

Some months have passed by since the initial design talks, and if you are reading this, you have already begun to see some of the final choices that were made. Some of choice, some of necessity, and some by confronting our own limitations in composing for digital spaces.

What was possible? How did we arrive at the decisions? At one point, we decided that this site would not be able to be as dynamic as we might wish. The original plan to use a dynamic page that called out to a database presented maintenance problems that none of us

could commit to owning, and so, whatever we created would have to be self contained. We also wanted this to be a useful site for community artists who might see possibilities for documenting their workshops. We wanted to give a place of entry that was welcoming, and would provide a frame for those who might join us in a less scripted exploration of the site.

We settled on JavaScript for the elements of randomization. PHP/mySQL was our first choice, but again, we needed a site that we could count on being stable with little additional oversight. We believe that our choices will be of interest to the visitor to the site. Some of the randomization is explicit, and some can only be found by exploring. Only on a few interior pages are there any navigation bars that will lead a visitor forward or back. Large photo files are intentionally left large so that the viewer tactilely engages with the image through the mouse.

In most of the random navigation, the visitor will discover that clicking the same link will most often lead to another destination. The size of the array is necessarily limited so that if something "breaks" as so often something will on a Website, the time spent searching for the resolution will be manageable. After all, we are not Web designers by profession, but as avocation, and as teachers, showing by example that composing for digital spaces can be both rich, varied, and entertaining as well as grounded in theory, based on research and on pedagogy and performance.

We will leave you to discover the paths and the destinations.