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Edge3: Multimodality, Dialogics and Fiction

Abstract:

This paper sets out to explore fiction, literary multimodality and dialogism using the example of *Wikipedia* as an enabling hypertext technology. It will be proposed that the digital architecture and the user conventions of the genre offer a strikingly adaptive framework for the writing of fiction. The notion of the wiki as a collaborative creative site will be examined as a (virtual) spatial and temporal medium for the shifting multiplicities of narrative voice. Dialogical engagement with the linear textual conventions of story-telling and authorial voice are brought into play, in this context, through vocal, textual, visual, and spatial elements. In order to locate this discussion, in terms of both theory and practice, I will address the development of my in-progress novella, *Edge3,* a fictional account of an online creative writing community where members occupy a virtual, or digital, studio in which they improvise online textual responses to themes and provocations. This project emerged from my experience of producing and editing pages on Wikipedia, as a way of exploring literary character development and generic transformation as a possible challenge to the linearity of standard literary forms. Adopting the nominal structure of a 'wiki', or digital encyclopaedia, the story's themes are enmeshed with its methodological frame: displacement, isolation, randomness of loss and the pursuit of literary form.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Writing – Dialogics – Multivocality – Multimodality – Wikipedia – Objective correlative – Digital writing – Narrative.

'Belonging is the fine edge of a sand wave/ visible yet indefinite/ the tide mark of loss.' (Green/Xenophon 2011)

1.   Inception

The purpose of my creative manoeuvre, within the context of this conference paper, will be to explore fiction, literary multimodality and dialogism. I investigate the use of the digital communications mode known as the 'wiki' as a methodological and interrogative approach to narrative fiction. Stephen Muecke observes that creative texts often emerge 'in the interstices of a hypertext environment' from where they engage with canonical and contemporary writing (2010). By virtue of the cultural and media dominance of online communication, however, contemporary writing is increasingly informed by digital modes of textual expression. This occurs indirectly through textual references to digital forms of communication, such as emails, forums, text messages, social media, websites, etc. In other instances, writers appropriate one or more genres of digital technology as a mechanism for writing fiction or poetry, as Jennifer Egan does in the powerpoint chapter of her novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2011: 234-309). Rather than conditioning established forms of creative writing in terms of an interstitial relationship with online textual production, I will argue that the wiki digital architecture and user conventions offer a dialogical method: an enabling hypertext technology for narrative inquiry and production. Using the example of *Wikipedia* I will set out to show that the digital architecture and the user conventions of the genre offer a strikingly adaptive framework for the writing of fiction. The notion of the wiki as a collaborative creative site will be examined as a (virtual) spatial and temporal medium for the shifting multiplicities of narrative voice. Dialogical engagement with the linear textual conventions of story-telling and authorial voice are brought into play, in this context, through vocal, textual, visual, and spatial elements.

The wiki is familiar to most online users through its popular manifestation as the digital encyclopedia *Wikipedia:* a vast enterprise of information gathering, with innumerable topic entries created by several authors and editors and which are subject to ongoing modification. As an online information repository, *Wikipedia* has achieved astonishing reach as an accessible information source and has, in itself, become a subject of scholarly study, particularly with respect to discussion of systems of collaborative authoring and conflict resolution between contributors. In this context, the original conception of the wiki promised a fresh approach to authorship, providing a platform for knowledge-gathering and information exchange upon which inclusiveness and collectivism might triumph over a single hegemonic or authoritative voice. The chief benefits of collaborative authorship, for the construction of an online encyclopedia, are that the combined efforts reduces bias, while improving accuracy, clarity and comprehensiveness (Kittur and Kraut 2008; 2010). At the same time, in some areas of *Wikipedia*, such as religion, politics or history, the sustained reliability and coherence of entries is challenging to achieve (Korfiatis et al. 2006). *Wikipedia* articles are seen to be at their most authoritative when they emerge as well-coordinated accounts by several experts, or open texts in which diverse perspectives

are included in an agreed and coherent way.

The extent to which Wikipedia is in the truest sense 'collaborative' is variable, however, since articles may represent the work of only one author/editor, or a dominant author/editor with a particular point of view. Just as often, and more interestingly for my purposes, articles are the negotiated outcome of conflicts played out behind the scenes in the 'Talk' area of each site, sometimes over a long period of time. Congruent textual outcomes can be elusive in such cases, where contributors with different disciplinary, philosophical or values-based stances disagree, and articles are sometimes subject to ongoing conflict, discussion and/or intervention by moderators. Researchers writing from the perspective of both information systems sciences, public discourse and governance studies, point to the importance of coordination, moderation and leadership for achieving an effective collaborative result (Puntschart and Tochtermann 2006; Viégas et al. 2007). Some scholars use Wikipedia as a model for demonstrating the importance of reparation through forgiveness in social system design (Vasalou et. al. 2009), or as a conversational learning tool for online communities (Massingham and Diment 2009). O'Halloran argues, with reference to Halliday and Matthiessen, for an interdisciplinary approach to our understanding of the relationship between interactive digital technology and our patterns of thought, expression and communication (O'Halloran 2009: 17). This entails the analysis of meanings produced by the multimodal use of languages, codes, images, sound, patterns, shapes, 3-D architecture, gestures, and so on, in relation to dominant cultural and social meanings. O'Halloran asks: 'does digital technology function to reproduce more effectively and efficiently knowledge which already exists, or does it produce new theories and approaches?' (2009: 2).

Partly in order to address O'Halloran's question, this paper explores the idea that digital communications technology, specifically the wiki, offers the creative writer an adaptive methodology – and possibly a new epistemological strategy – for the construction of narrative fiction. This is not to suggest that the production of 'new' work entails the abnegation of established narrative forms or the decoupling of cultural and technological developments over time. As Sinnerbrink points out with reference to Derrida, contemporary technologies do not represent 'a break with the order of *arche*-writing but rather another version of the differential economy of traces' (Sinnerbrink 2009).

Practitioners of digital writing, such as Jason Nelson, set out to create texts untrammeled, as far as possible, by formal literary conventions and concerns. He regards digital poetry, in particular, as a departure from print-based textual tradition for a new kind of writing enterprise, 'where there no clear rules, no dominant conventions, no semi agreed upon canon of 'great works' (2011). For Nelson, digital writing is a realm of its own with a constantly evolving array of techniques and practices, where the writer must incorporate the roles of website developer, programmer, designer, game maker, visual artist as well as that of wordsmith. The work of the digital writer he suggests, referring to Strickland, is to 'recreate the cosmos, to rebuild the micro/macroverses around/inside of us … language, relearned and changed by each new speaker' (2011).

How digital communications technology, namely hypertext, may contribute to the technics of creative writing cannot, in this writer's view, be wholly divorced from the influences of the literary past. Broadly speaking, creative writing does not occur within a vacuum, but speaks to, from and within its cultural, historical and social context, generating interactions between new and old meanings.

> The language I speak, the gestures and norms that I learn, the technique that shapes my thought, action, and bodily comportment; all of these elements enable me to inherit a world in which I can individuate myself as part of a community that also individuates itself in time and history. And for this to be possible we must recognise the central role of technics in making possible the inheritance and transmission of meaning – language, technique, culture – across generations inhabiting distinct, even temporally and spatially distant, social-historical worlds (Sinnerbrink 2009).

Intentionally multi-vocal, composed from textual, visual and hypertextual modes of communication, even when single-authored, the wiki offers an inherently dialogical technology for knowledge-gathering, opinion-exchange, online learning, and the production of a text by multiple authors. *Wikipedia* identifies itself as 'a free encyclopedia written collaboratively by the people who use it' (Wikipedia, 'Introduction'). It is therefore set up in such a way as to encourage a process of public contribution, discussion, contestation and mediation between several contributors through online dialogue.

According to Tella and Mononen-Aanonen, dialogism is a 'perspective' or way of approaching communications theory, education and practice: a 'standpoint with reference to communication' (1998: 13). Dialogics can be approached as an epistemological strategy predicated upon engagement between self and other (Pearce 1994: 2; Tella and Mononen-Aanonen 1998: 15). Furthermore, dialogism entails the accommodation of the other's ideas and understandings (Gardiner 2004: 39), leading to adaptation and changes in authoritative stance. The literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin uses the term 'dialogical' to explicate a process of intersubjectivity in the linguistic production of meaning. Language is not neutral and impersonal, he writes, 'rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions' (1981: 294). The many different voices of discourse, including marginal opinions uttered within the theatre of public communication, may invite or provoke a dialogue with hegemony, including through direct vocal engagement with figures of authority and power. Through this form of 'heteroglossic' discourse, Bakhtin suggests, social values and practices may be gradually transformed. In the context of narrrative analysis and production, heteroglossia speaks to the ways that textual narrative emerges through the polyphony of the characters' voices, both through direct speech and as reflected in shifting patterns of authorial voice. As this inquiry sets out to show, *Wikipedia* offers a highly performative hypertext technique for the generation of fictional narrative, in particular for its embodiment of polyphony and multi-vocality.

2.   Inquiry

This inquiry into the relationship between narrative and digital writing aims to

embrace both theory and practice. In this section of the paper, I will discuss dialogics, multi-modality and narrative technique with reference to my in-progress novella, *Edge3*. The work takes its title from its subject, 'The Edge', which is the name of a fictional digital studio project, where a select group of internationally acclaimed contributors improvise textual responses to randomly generated words, images or themes on the theme of transformation, which are then published selectively on The Edge public access website (Green/Xenophon, 2011). To some extent, these improvised writings will form a part of the narrative as a whole. Primarily, however, this piece of work aims to experiment with the model of the online wiki as a narrative form: that is, as a hypertext architecture for the construction of a story told from different perspectives.

In *Edge3* I set out to make a creative work that could also offer some critical reflections on the process of narrative construction by employing elements of digital multimodality. I chose *Wikipedia* as the starting point from which to experiment partly because it is a text-based form which observes strict visual and textual protocols. As indicated, I was also drawn to *Wikipedia* because of its structural capabilities, in other words, the way in which can encapsulates the voices of several different voices or characters and themes or narrative strands, within a layered and extendable virtual architecture.

As an online encyclopedia, *Wikipedia* presents informational components using a clearly demarcated layout, with key sections marked out by boxes and lines and lexical links to other sections and/or articles. The layout defers to page design elements common in traditional print-based encyclopedias. As Jewitt argues with respect to multi-modality and communication, some of the 'ways in which modes of representation and communication appear on the screen are therefore still connected with the page, present and past', while similarly, 'the page is increasingly shaped and remade by the notion of screen' (2005: 317). Arguably, at least in first world cultures, the defining characteristics of the printed page are being blurred by publication formats which reflect online publication protocols; such as content flagging, object naming, text framing, image placement, and so on. Jewitt's key point, however, that the 'image and word relations in a text impacts on its potential shape of meaning' (316) is a crucial one for the reproduction and/or evolution of literary traditions.

This is exemplified in the work of Jarryd Luke, who experiments with typographical figures, framing and text positioning to challenge established conceptions of narrative flow and form and to break down the distinction between the production of print and online text. Luke's approach to the potentialities of multi-modality is evident in the playful title of his short story 'Halfway House' (2011), or in his 'Sleeping Patterns', where the theme, narrative sequence and compositional elements are induced by means of a grid or table, which frames key actions, feelings and observations of the central characters (2011). Although such an approach may use text fragments, broken sequencing, patterns, etc., the multi-modal approach is not necessarily or inherently consistent with deconstructionism; even when it is posited as an attempt to break down established conventions of textual and literary ideology. Even more powerful and significant than their contribution to the radicalism of evolving narrative form, may be the 'reconstructive' manner in which such devices and structures can function

as 'objective correlative': a term defined by Eliot as; 'a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked' (1921).

Aspects of these questions are explored in my project, *Edge3*, where the story is told in the guise of a *Wikipedia* entry, through demarcated and laterally linked sections. Adopting the layout of the *Wikipedia* page, in the form of a main online 'article' with open links, affords both physical and conceptual advantages. In particular, the form confers an illusion of completion, authenticity and authority, which the writers and contributors with the story can potentially challenge, make fun of, break out of, or exploit. The novella purports to be an actual encyclopedic record as a contribution to the repository of collected knowledge, much in the sense that the French enlightenment philosopher and encyclopedist Rene Diderot conceived it (1755). Following the formalized structure of a *Wikipedia* entry, the story's themes and characterizations are enmeshed with its methodological frame: displacement, isolation, the randomness of loss and the experimental pursuit of literary form.

 The emergence of multiple narrative threads, lateral linkages and linear ruptures all serve to foreground the compositional elements of the work, while providing a cohesive but extendable narrative architecture within which a story can unfold. More specifically, *Edge3* is composed of a series of 'stand-alone' sections which can be linked or combined in various ways to form a larger narrative. The idea of this story/project emerged from my experience of producing and editing pages on *Wikipedia*. It is used in *Edge3* as a way of exploring character development and perspective, providing a mode in which some degree of collaborative authorship is assumed; enabling the narrative voice to shift in a seemingly authentic way while keeping the whole project in view. This adopted framework also offers a means of reflecting on possibilities for, and challenges to, evolutions in the linear conventions of narrative writing. It also invokes traces of the reader response, an aspect of the work that could be more substantially developed in subsequent iterations of the project.

> Reactions to the project have differed widely. Dissident blogger Mono Heron called The Edge web studio project 'an alienating prank that already seems out-dated – worse, it pretends to be inclusive and creative while falsely maintaining the textual upper hand.' By contrast, the Australian New York-based independent publisher Barton Barton, described the project as unique: 'a radical innovation that speaks across time' (Green/Xenophon, 2011).

Edge3 developed as an extension of an earlier a short fictional account of an intentional online creative writing community, whose members occupy a virtual, or digital, studio in which they improvise textual responses to words, images or themes. In this pseudonymous story, I explore their characters, experiences and motivations as a group of individual creative writers who are experimenting with prose or poetry in response to themes such as place and transformation. This adaptation of the online digital encyclopedia enabled me to convey the key characters, events, and related matters that concern them, through a series of clearly demarcated but closely

intersected textual fields, short 'articles' or accounts, which have the potential to function (and may eventually be constructed) as hypertext pages. These accounts each, separately explore the story elements and associated personae in a way that is, on one level, wholly self-contained, but each article is also linked in various ways to others. The project also contains 'vacant' links, or proposed connections to other possible articles and thus to prospective narrative strands. The story elements, and the characters, are held together, as it were, partly by the network of links that connect them, by a somewhat ironic narrative tone and, emblematically by an imagined digital space: the virtual writers' studio.

Of course, *Edge3* differs from a true wiki in three key respects. To begin with, although the story contains several characters, this is not literally the work of multiple contributors. Instead a single author creates multiple characters and presents their stories as if they were part of a multi-authored *Wikipedia* article, or articles. This single-authored fictional enterprise may seem, at face value, contrary to the collectivist ethos of the wiki information communications system. From a dialogical perspective, however, storytelling may be said to entail intersubjectivity, whether there are several speakers or a single narrator. As Frank observes with reference to Bakhtin, 'multiple voices can be heard in any single speaker's voice' (Frank: 33). Secondly, rather than offering a verifiable, sourced gathering of key information, *Edge3* is in fact a work of fiction; albeit one that aims to reflect and comment upon creative writing and its use of communications media. Diderot's concept of a chain of linked categories which together create a body of information for the greater knowledge and understanding of a subject is, nevertheless, just as essential for the construction of meaning in this fictional work, as it is for the encyclopedic gathering of non-fictional knowledge. Finally, in its present form, *Edge3* has not yet exploited its potential for digital development using creative commons shareware with live hypertext links. The work remains in progress, however, and its embodiment in digital form is a speculative goal.

The employment of categorical or encyclopedic or epistolary devices in order to construct a persuasive narrative frame is not, of course, new. Novelists as diverse as Milorad Pavi<u>ć</u> (1888), Italo Calvino (2010) and Karen Rivers (2011) have used alphabetical, phrasal or lexical devices to foreground key themes, characters or narrative actions in their work. Mark Z. Danielewski's novella *The Fifty Year Sword* (2005) uses a variety of typographical devices, most notably colour coding, to indicate the speech marks of each of its five characters. The epistolary novel is an even more familiar technique of the 'objective correlative', from Fanny Burney's *Evelina* (1778) to Paul Torday's *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen* (2007). Orhan Pamuk used the assembly of a collection of personal objects as a way of piecing together his novel *The Museum of Innocence* (2009) with astonishing emotional palpability: now also a museum collection in Istanbul. Some of my own previous short fiction offers experiments with using lists and assemblages of collected objects as a structural tactic (1999; 2012). *Edge 3* offers a playful flirtation with digital writing; exploring the inescapable necessities of story-telling, while also alluding to the evolving dialogical and embedded qualities of contemporary narrative form. Still a work-in-progress, the greatest challenge with *Edge3* has been to resist the tendency of the writing itself to

leave the mechanism, indeed the objective correlative, behind.

3.   Iteration

In its current form, the 'Edge' project has moved through three stages or iterations: first as an unpublished prize-winning short fiction text; second as published creative research in a special issue of *TEXT Journal*; and third, in a gradually expanding form as a 'work-in-progress' novella. Contained within the story itself, however, is what might be regarded as an additional iteration or reflexive adaptation of the project. One of the central conflicts in the narrative is a fictional work known as 'Edge 2', a short story that was first published anonymously in 2010 in an imaginary literary magazine called *The Boat*. 'Edge 2' tells the story of a group of writers who develop a web-based writing game. After the game is published online, each one tries to steal copyright from the others and reproduce it under their own online masthead. One of the characters in 'Edge 2' disappears, a presumed suicide by drowning. The others continue on as if nothing has happened but gradually each one falls to some kind of curse: death, debt, despair, and defamation. It is implied that the suicide is really a murder perpetrated by a member of the group, but the murderer's name is never revealed.

> Nobody knows who wrote 'Edge 2'. Even the editors of *The Boat* claim that the identity of the author is unknown to them. The story was sent to them under the code name 'Anastasia Xenophon' and they published it in good faith as a work of fiction (Green/Xenophon, 2011).

Demonstrably, the Edge project has the potential to generate many more versions of itself, either as a manifestation of individual authorship or as the result of online collaboration. At this juncture, the question must arise as to whether the project could more fully actualize its inherent polyvocality: that is whether the novella might be constructed as – or as if it were – a wiki. This would entail adopting the virtual architecture and hypertext elements of a wiki, with internal and external links. In the fullest sense, a digital realization could open up the wiki to input from others. Contributions could be open to public access or restricted to a selective user list. An ongoing collaborative narrative project of this kind offers creative opportunities and also entails risks; the most significant of which is 'flaming' or disingenuous attack.

There is, however, another way in which the 'Edge' project's potential as an online creative text could be realized, however: one which is closer to Bahktin's idea of the function of dialogism in narrative fiction. Retaining its original form as a single-authored fictional work in the form of a wiki, with the story told by way of an invented dialogical interplay. The wiki entries themselves capture the voices of the central characters through a network of linked entries and footnotes. At the same time, the key players can be shown working in concert together on the production of their digital creative work, introducing another level of narrative reflexivity. This could be achieved by revealing the inner workings, debates, conflicts and creative confluences of the 'Edge Web Studio Project', which in the story is hidden from the public. Alternatively, or additionally, it could be presented performatively, as a dialogue about the project and how it should be explained, which could take place via the

'Edits' page at the so-called 'back end' of the wiki site; resulting in a narrative composed of a history of edits that reveal their debates, conflicts and negotiations. Such a mechanism would embody the ethos that lies at the centre of the fictional 'project'. As the project develops, these possibilities will be tested for their viability in the unfolding of a multifaceted but nevertheless coherent narrative. As the writers of the 'Edge' group avow in their Manifesto:

> Our work is no organized discourse which follows a set of principles, but a body of transitional writings. Although it may be deeply opinionated and argumentative, our work is limitless. Even if we are submerged for a season, we remain under the surface. Our inspiration lies in deep waters, tangled branches, debris, a mingling of elements – the sand, weeds and water of the sun-warmed shallows – unexpected tributaries, possibilities beyond the horizon's edge (Green/Xenophon, 2011).

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