

The Hollins Community Project: New Media, Narrative, and Affective History

By Jen Boyle and Alli Crandell



A group of women place heavy stones on a trail, at even intervals. These stones will guide the women and their children to the college where they serve as body slaves. The trail connects the closest clearings between the slave community and the campus, but the path is long enough that the children could get lost. A century later, the stones, along with the stories of the women and children, are scattered. Some of the stones have been moved to prop up statues in the adjacent field, while others are used to create a border around a community garden. The children of slaves, college employees, students, and artists have traversed this trail. Over time, these various paths and narratives converge, diverge, and fade.

In 1851, some of the most traveled spaces leading into Hollins College, the first chartered women's college in southwest Virginia, were the small trails that linked the Hollins Community to the grounds of the college. The Hollins Community, a term that refers to the community established by African American slaves brought to Hollins in the 1800s and who remained in the area as "servants" at the college after Emancipation, still sits at one end of this trail. At the other end of the trail is Hollins University. Along the trail one finds discarded cookware and turn-of-the-century glassware, remnants from old foundations and small dwellings, as well as wood sculptures and art installations from the contemporary era. These artifacts reflect the trail's many afterlives: footpath connecting members of the Hollins Community to the campus; a waste repository early in the twentieth century; and a sculpture garden for Hollins art students.



Please click on the image for an enlarged view.

The Hollins Community trail has served as a contemporary sculpture garden, an early 20th- century waste repository, and a footpath for slaves of Hollins College.

The new media project described in what follows engages a past that few seek out in the present. The *Hollins Community Project* employs an innovative locative media interface that allows participants to construct collective, incipient narratives of the spaces and places associated with the Hollins Community trail. The project shares features of locative media projects such as *Urban Archeology*, *Sampling the Park* and Hight's project, [34 North 118 West](#), in that it juxtaposes site-specific experiences with the layering of historical and contemporary texts, location-aware technology, and the competing narratives that ascribe meaning and significance to location (Longford, 2008; Hight). Yet, in the case of the *Hollins Community Project*, the location in question is not a dialogic urban atmosphere but a rural borderspace at the literal and figurative margins of a university campus.¹ The trail serves as a physical and virtual trace of the multiple prebellum and antebellum identities of the surrounding environment.

The planning for this project was initiated early in 2006 as part of a collaborative National Science Foundation proposal that linked the resources and faculty of the Center for Human-Computer Interaction at Virginia Polytechnic and State University (Virginia Tech) with a much smaller women's university, known for its unique arts and humanities programs.² The collaboration between Hollins University and Virginia Tech brings together two institutions that are not only very different in size and mission, but with very different relationships to the history of southwest Virginia. Hollins in particular is an institution that has formed its notions of "community" out of an institutional identity grounded in "tradition" and local, self-generative history (many of the narratives describing the unique character of the University draw connections between the cultural and physical "environment" of Hollins and its "creative" aspirations and successes). In addition to being a well-ranked liberal arts university, Hollins also holds the distinction of having been in existence through both the prebellum and antebellum South (founded as a seminary in 1842, Hollins became a women's college in 1851). The physical topography of Hollins is itself a ghostly heterotopia ? a rural landscape that juxtaposes state-of-the-art facilities and "literary landmarks" with ancient foot trails and a "grand old house on the hill" (click

[here](#) for a "virtual tour" of Hollins University).

On one end of campus is a small trail that leads through a small wooded area. The trail, located at the upper eastern edge of campus, is one of the few remaining geographical links to the Hollins Community. The trail is a trace of the two sides of Hollins' institutional identity: a creative, progressive women's liberal arts institution with a strong community ethos, and the first chartered women's college in southwestern Virginia possessing both prebellum and antebellum histories. The trail itself is a fascinating confluence of the real and the virtual. We imagine the diasporic narratives of both communities traversing the trail, just as the physical detritus of cookware, art installations, and modern litter are interspersed between the trees and brush.

A key influence for this project, [Ethel Morgan Smith](#), author of [From Whence Cometh My Help](#), has produced a history of the Hollins Community that mixes extensive archival and field research with personal reflections and creative non-fiction. The rich context she provides for the trail's history plays a fundamental role in both phases of this installation ? from oral histories from members of the Hollins Community who describe leaving stones along the trails so their children could find them at work, to descriptions and images of the psychical, social, and geographical complexities of traversing between two worlds at once spatially and culturally divided and intimately intertwined.

Beginning in 2007, a field research team began forming small groups for the project.

Field sessions were conducted with students of Hollins University (see [New Media and Literature](#), 2007). In each session, the participants meet at the edge of the campus in a borderspace located between Hollins University and the Hollins Community. Each participant is equipped with a laptop and a GPS device, and shown how to use PlaceMark®, the project-specific software. Within the interface, there are two tabbed screens. The first is "New Entry," where participants record their textual observations and experiences as they move about the space of the trail. They can add time/date and location stamps within their entries, which draw from the information retrieved by the GPS device; a time stamp consists of the date and time of day, and a location stamp records global coordinates in degrees and minutes. The participants receive no background information or prompts as to what should be included in their observations, or where they should wander. Hence the content of the entries is quite diverse. Below are some examples of entries submitted during one session (individual entries are separated by bars):

There are poems on the trees in braille.<37°21.4748?N,
079°56.3092?W<Time: 2008/03/14 13:52:01>

A newspaper at the previous location read beware celebrity endorsements," I could have removed the leaves from this document to see how old the paper was (or is) but I did not want to disturb the paper or the space.<Time: 2008/03/14 13:54:24><Longitude: 372"1.5029 N, Latitude: 07956.3240 W>

where is the braille on the tree?

Vine?honeysuckle, grape, poison ivy. Be careful of the hairy vine, folks. Unless you are immune or want an itchy rash. I am mostly immune unless I roll in it because I drank a lot of goat's milk as a kid. I also ate some once on a dare. I was 10, same age as my daughter.

After Emancipation, Hollins Institute (as the college was then known), unlike most of the agricultural South, quickly reestablished a steady supply of labor based on new and continuing residents of the Oldfield settlement. Within a decade, Hollins came to occupy a monopsony position with respect to its labor. While there is no record in the ledgers of payment to any Black worker from 1857 to 1865, most of the female married servants likely remained in the Oldfield community through the Civil War.

Once each entry is completed, participants then anonymously publish their entries to a Tuple space (see Figure A). A Tuple space can be thought of as a virtual "kiosk," a space where entries can be shared and accessed by users without dependence on an Internet connection. While participants are still in the field, they can view all submitted entries and change the order of the entries under the "Organize Entries" screen. When a participant adds an entry or changes the order of the entries, the change is shared with all participants. The "Organize Entry" screen is therefore continuously evolving while the participants are out in the field.

After a certain time, the session ends and all participants meet again at the entrance to the trail to discuss the session, as well as surrender their laptops and GPS devices for future use. The collection of entries is saved and then cycled into the

next session. By mixing entries from past sessions alongside material from Smith's text, participants experience the recursive nature of creating a collective "historical" narrative of the space.

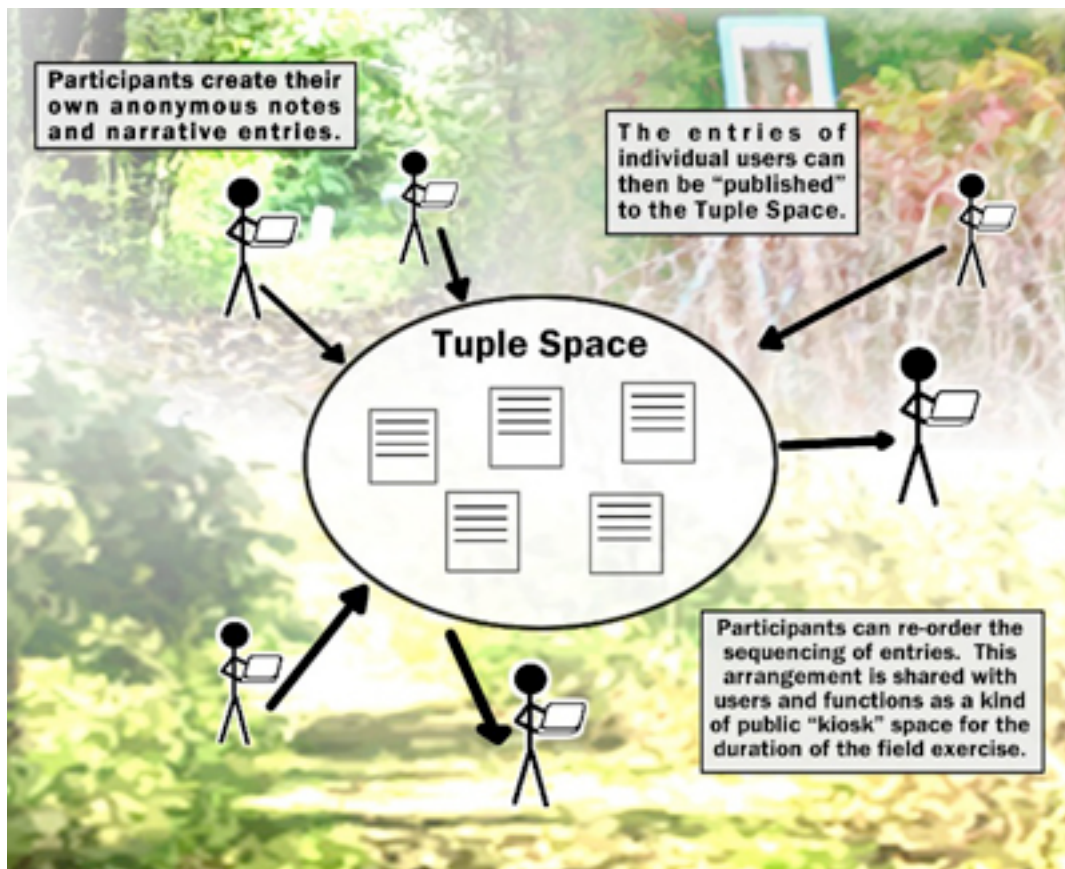


Figure A: Please click on the image for an enlarged view.

The trail is also a physical interface that creates an opening onto the layered pasts and presents associated with "the place" of the university. This project experiments with the creation of new media narratives that define place as emergences that cut across historical and geotemporal territories, and as texts and images in constant interplay and tension with embodied affect.³ As theorists such as Massumi and Herzog discuss, embodied affect refers to the inscriptions of sensory and bodily experience that influence a given event, but which often defy conceptual or representational registers. Suspense and anticipation are examples of embodied responses that influence choices in action and interpretation. The importance of embodied affect to memory and narrative was a crucial principle informing "memory theaters," late medieval and early Renaissance mnemonic devices that allowed for the storage and retrieval of mythical and philosophical "data" for re-constructing meaning making narratives. Memory theaters operate as spaces where embodied action and experience were combined with textual fragments and icons as a means for memory recall (Yates, 1966/2001; see Figure B).

The premise behind memory theaters is that ambulatory movement through a given location, in conjunction with access to icons, textual fragments, and images associated with significant historical and mythical texts, facilitated memory recall. Memory gardens and theaters are physical structures that establish links between texts and spatial specificity. Even in the absence of any direct representational connection between the spatial specifics of the theater or garden and the textual fragments or images, participants experience a greater degree of recall when associating information with embodied movement through space. Connerton (1989) examines how physical gesture and embodied ritual carry meaning that exceed the limits of immediate consciousness, and how such embodied, spatialized meaning can influence social and historical narratives and practices, even when they persist at levels below our span of cognitive attention.

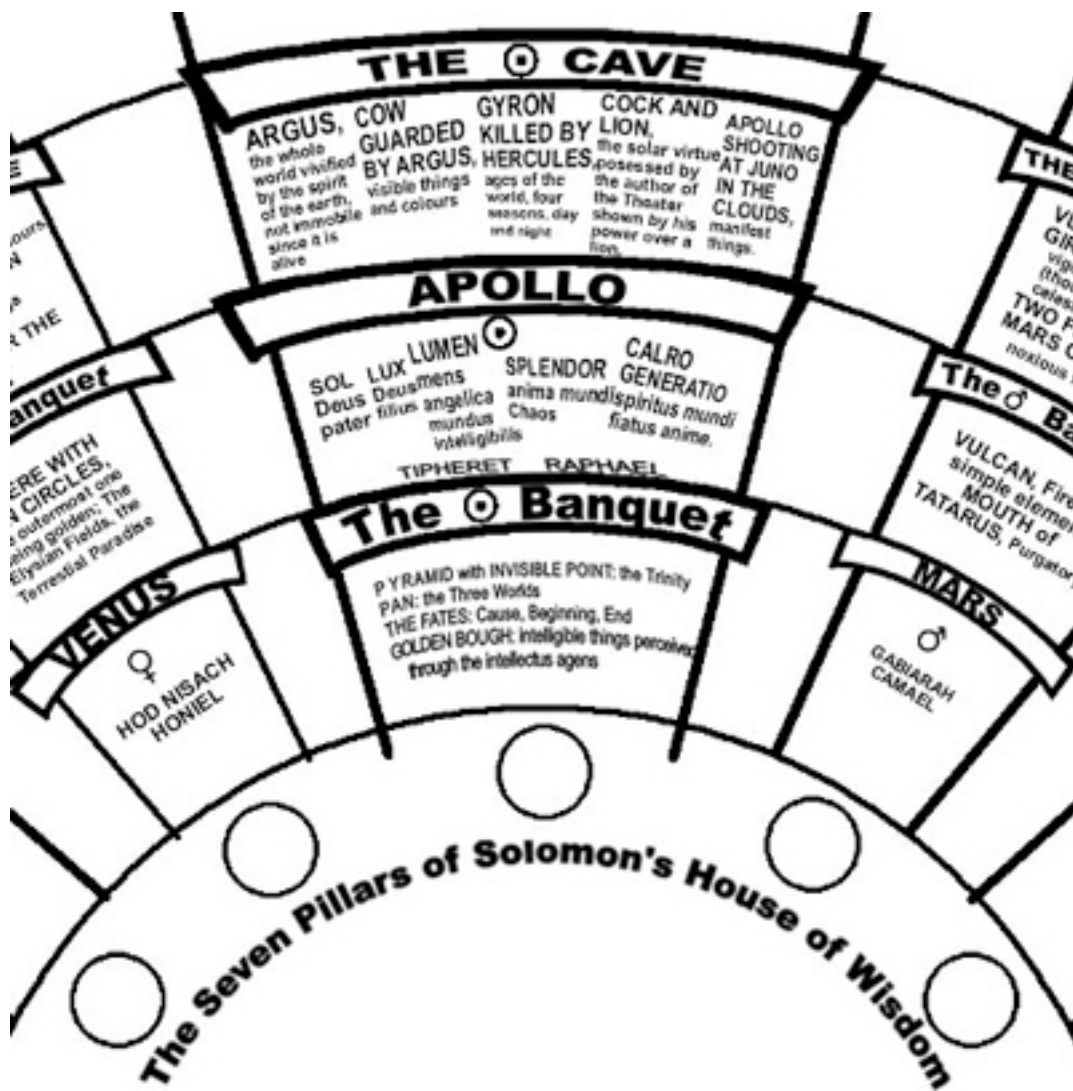


Figure B: Please click on the image for an enlarged view.

Much like a memory theater, the new media interface for and ambulatory context of the *Hollins Community Project* ask participants to engage with the embodied rituals of constructing a narrative of place alongside the construction of textual commentary and reflection. This interactive component to the project also creates an opportunity to reflect on how movement through a given place is imbricated with memory and the construction of narrative. As discussed in the following section, the actions of "read," "write," and "take" within the Tuple space platform are virtual equivalents of the rhetorical and embodied practices associated with early memory theaters.

The spatial positioning of thought as a means for evoking memory is not a new concept. Yet, in the case of a new media installation like the *Hollins Community Project*, we encounter new forms and concepts for thinking about historical and contemporary narratives of place at the level of both textual representation and embodied interaction. There has been significant interest of late in environments that rely on interaction between the participant, the technical interface (computer software, games, and simulators), texts, and images. Penny (2004) has suggested that we are being asked to re-consider how we think about embodiment and ethics in relation to our interactions in these new environments. Affect, in this context, takes on new significance ? embodied experience in these settings, in combination with how we are asked to identify with the perceptions, points of view, and personas represented in these environments - have the potential to influence what kinds of empathic and critical reflections can emerge experientially. The interaction with the interface for this project juxtaposed with embodied action in the environment allows for an affective experience of the ethos of translating experience into a definition and narrative of place. Thus, one of the primary objectives of this project is to demonstrate how embodied movement and affect influence the choices made about how narratives of a place emerge, shift, and take on authority over time.

The trail does not represent a comprehensive history of either the university or the Hollins Community, but instead operates as a borderspace where participants can experience the flows and traces of the narratives from these disparate but connected communities. The new media aspect of the project allows for a sense of collective and individual movement in time ? as well as the "tracking" of such movement ? to involve participants in an experience of both "what" narratives become in relation to a physical location and "how" narratives emerge as experiential events (the technical specifics of the interface are discussed in the following sections). Through these events, the participants experience the registers of place as *incipient narratives* (a phrase the authors have coined to describe the narratives produced during the project). Incipience, in the context of this project, refers to the emergent properties of narrative as they become apparent in situ and give meaning to a given location or site. That is, rather than offering pre-scripted

texts and images that represent a place, this project connects participants with an experience of how embodied interaction with a place works in tandem with acts of reading and writing to construct the multiple stories and meanings of a site.

Tuple Space: Virtual-Communal Narrative as Media and Metaphor

A distinctive aspect of the installation is the technology employed. Participants enter the field with laptops that have been equipped with unique software developed for the project. The software (PlaceMark©) includes a basic screen interface that allows for narrative entries and a GPS locator that gives participants the option of recording geotemporal "stamps" in their textual entries (Tatar et al, 2008; see Figure C). While offering up physical and temporal markers of where participants are writing within the space, these tags also diffuse conventional notions of time and location (two major components in the narrative construction of place). The location coordinates, given in degrees and minutes, are incomprehensible at first glance, but impose a seemingly absolute metric of distance upon the borderspace. The GPS devices are not exact, however? trees and clouds trouble the satellite signal. The coordinates could be off by as much as fifty feet, a large portion of the trail space. The tension between the seeming precision of GPS coordinates and the indeterminate play of exactitude becomes an element in how each participant imagines the authority of their narrative contributions. That is, the empirical data of time and space are themselves artifacts that must be read and written into other narrative contexts. GPS data can only offer an approximation of the empirical registers of time and space, and thus have authority only in relation to the textual and narrative entries that surround them.

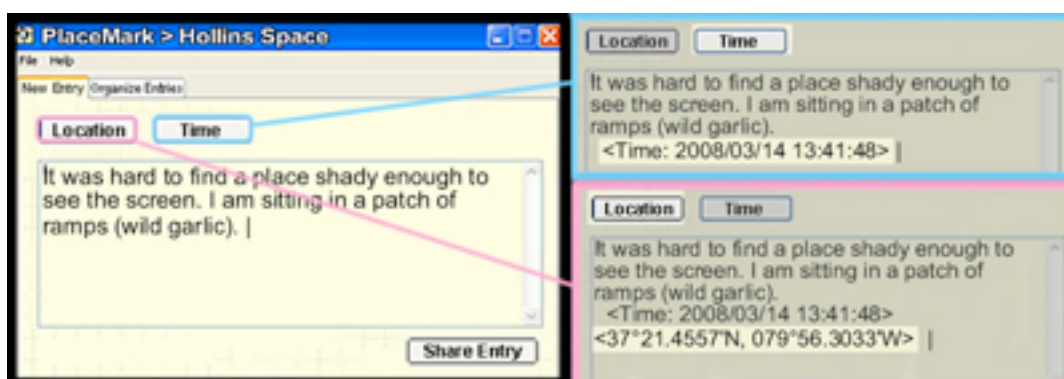


Figure C: Please click on the image for an enlarged view.

Participants create their own anonymous notes and narrative entries, making choices as they proceed about what they wish to focus on in the environment and whether or not they want to ascribe spatial and temporal coordinates to the entries.

User-submitted texts are published without any default indication of authorship, and they are anonymous by function. Within the collective narrative, participants encounter fragments that have no fixed origin. Amid these continually evolving entries, pre-published historical narratives are interwoven into the collective narrative.

Much of the historical material is drawn from Smith's *From Whence Cometh My Help* (2000), which includes documents pertaining to the Hollins Community from the 1800s to present day. For example, in one string of entries one might see an expository on the history of Hollins University and the chapel, a transcription of an oral history about the first African-American landowner at the Hollins Community, and a warning about the poison ivy on the trail, or a series of reflections on a newspaper, old foundation, or sculpture. These fragments represent the various layers of historical and contemporary narrative experience that inhabit the space.

Tuple space is a multi-user, Java-based application built on the Tuple spaces platform and for use in mobile environments (Wade, 1999). The Tuple platform constructs a space where information can be stored and shared without having to rely on physical memory, separate server hardware, or an Internet connection. Informational items, such as narrative entries or time-date tags, literally "float" in a virtual space where multiple users have access to them. In many senses, the Tuple environment can be thought of as a virtually animated form of collective memory. The items in the shared space have attributes but are not classified as the property of any given user. The actions that are allowed within Tuple space are "read," "write," and "take." From a narrative standpoint, then, the physical actions available to participants in working with the textual entries mirror in an oblique way the conceptual issues surrounding narratives of place. That is, as theorists and critics of narrative have stressed, the construction of place through narrative is not only a function of the reading and writing of texts, but also of the ways in which hierarchies of authorship or "ownership" become affixed to narrative elements or forms (White, 1990).

Distributed Authorship

A collective narrative of the trail space is constructed by all participants in the project within the Tuple Space. The order of the entries is continuously altered by the addition of new entries or a participant's reordering of the existing entries. The authorship and authority of the collective narrative is *distributed*: anonymity and collective interpretation/reading are shared acts among the participants. No single person has complete authority as to how the narrative is constructed. Further, no entry is associated formally with an author or historical period; an excerpt from an

1820 newspaper is not distinguishable from a "contemporary" memory of discovering an abandoned house (see Figure D). Distributed authorship further allows for "historical" texts to mingle with the emerging "live" texts in situ. This mingling permits a reading of previously written texts to be read as "contemporary," thus blurring the distinction and reading of historical materials as static text.

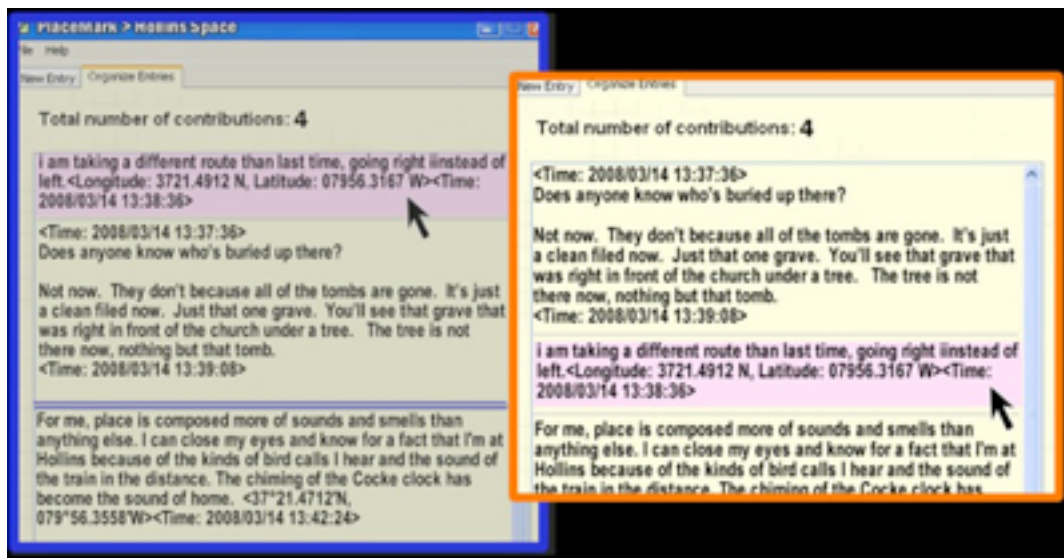


Figure D: Please click on the image for an enlarged view.

Authority over the collective narrative is defined by a recursive relationship between reading and writing an evolving collection of entries. Participants respond not only to the physical and affective registers of inhabiting a space, but also to the entries within the collective narrative. While some participants submit entries, others respond through altering the reading or ordering of these entries or adding their own responses. Entries thus function as evolving textual artifacts of the place. As in Figure D, the content of the entry could be a choice made in navigation, or an expository contribution on the cemetery at the end of the trail. In this way, both the historical and contemporary narratives of the place are in a state of becoming.

It is no coincidence that the majority of mobile or locative media projects take place within cities or urban environments, engaging with what urban archaeologist and theorist Castells (1996) describes as the "space of flows." Many locative media projects have remapped the "flow" of information onto the "static" structure of physical cities. Such projects often adopt the conceptual frame associated with the Surrealist game of *dérive*, which allows participants to transpose maps or directions from one city onto another. That is, locative media in urban environments often draws on the extent to which informational pathways are represented with physical landmarks. Castells' space of flows in these projects is thus not dependent upon

embodied movement of participants. For example, in Hight's installation, audio information is "stored" within physical markers; participants move to predetermined "hot spots" which serve as reservoirs of information from which the participant can draw. The space of flows is thus represented through access to or the "downloading" of these narratives, not necessarily the on-site production of the narratives themselves. That is, the emphasis in these projects is on accessing complete narratives that are interlinked with a physical landmark. With the urban *dérive*, the informational topography is a reinscription of physical borders and locations.

The *Hollins Community Project* challenges this demarcation of physical maps and informational flows. Instead of assigning predetermined physical "hot spots," the artifacts within the project emerge, shift and fade as the collective narrative evolves through the embodied movement and choices of the participants. These artifacts can be viewed as affective attractors. That is, certain physical or conceptual objects accumulate significance as textual entries virtually collect around them. In short, the participants exert distributed authority in determining the significant elements of the collective narrative.

The creation of incipient narratives occurs similarly to how the trails emerge: the accumulation of "detritus" and the traces left by movement through a given location. The physical artifacts along the physical trail testify to its previous uses; the textual artifacts in the collective narrative testify to the narratives that have moved through the borderspace of the trail. These paths are traces of movement and flows that emerge and fade over time. For example, a discarded newspaper was an affective attractor with one participant group, but in another participant group, only one entry noted its presence.

Informational paths are not dictated by the physical movement of a single user. Instead, these informational paths converge and diverge to create a narrative with distributed authorship. These narratives are diasporic, moving between territories and within borderspaces. Diasporic narratives are not defined by origin/destinations, but are instead defined by the movement between and across boundaries. This movement creates and anticipates openings and discontinuities in the borders of these territories. Hence, diasporic narratives depend on the mutability of territories, or a space of flows. Time and location become variables within informational paths instead of absolutes of a place. Location becomes a narrative element that is utilized by rather than imposed upon each participant. Each participant may inhabit many different times and locations within one session, and hence the collective narrative is distributed across these times and locations. Likewise, a physical location does not necessarily transcend time, nor does a

particular time encompass the entire physical place of the trail. The textual artifacts are not separated by static coordinates of authorship, and so historical and "live" narratives merge and become palimpsests of each other.

The *Hollins Community Project* uses local, in situ, and diasporic narratives to create emergent definitions of place. These narratives trace and intersect with one another as they move about in a space of flows. The trail has no absolute metric associated with it, so physical location is mapped through dialogue with one's surroundings. In this way text is affixed to the movement through the space instead of static landmarks. The narratives become traces in the borderspace between embodied movement and institutional or technological territories

Mediating History and Historical Mediation

If, as Cathy Caruth has argued, history is a "lost moment that repeats itself" (1996, p.4) ? and not just through narrative but at the level of cognitive and affective response ? there is perhaps much to be learned in imagining new environmental tangles (technologies, bodies, narratives, spaces, objects) that explore the incipient, mediated aspects of narrative. The *Hollins Community Project* is a virtual memory theatre that creates a palimpsest of historical and incipient narratives of the Hollins Community trail. Moreover, the new media interface created for the project allows for two levels of experiential response: the ambulatory aspect of the project, much like early modern memory theatres, depends on movement through the space as an activator for what is recalled (earlier fragments; personal associations; recorded textual and oral histories); while the interface for the project is a virtual re-enactment of the kinds of actions that create meta-narratives of place ("read"; "write" and "take"). In this sense, affect emerges at the intersection of form and content. Massumi has referred to this mode of affect as a moment where "qualification" (the production and interpretation of narrative) brushes up against the "intensity" of the embodied response to temporal and spatial experience (Massumi, 2002). This paradox informs the incipient narratives that come to define the project.

In contrast with many locative media projects that utilize the fixity of physical positioning or narrative registers, the *Hollins Community Project* produces textual flows that virtually collect around artifacts in the space of the trail. Rather than seeking out specific or determined narratives, participants experientially register the affective attractors in the space, while actively interpreting and organizing the various flows of narrative that emerge. The *Hollins Community Project* further explores how new media environments permit serious play with temporality, spatiality, and embodied affect. The new media interface is often imagined in terms of its capacity to provide "access" and immersion, but there may be greater potential

in the gaps and traces in new media environments that emerge around temporality, spatial definition, and bodily anticipation and response. The *Hollins Community Project* seeks to incorporate these gaps and traces into the creation of embodied, collective narrative. The *Hollins Community Project* is a new media memory theater that animates history and narrative, re-tracing their inscriptions within embodied experience.

Notes

1. We imagine borderspace in this project as a space that serves as the boundary between two territories, and as a space where the physical traces and histories of two environments interact and inter-relate to one another.

2. The National Science Foundation grant for this project originated as part of the "Vivid Embodiment" project at Virginia Polytechnic and State University.

3. Affect is used here not as a referent for emotion in the pedestrian sense, but as a denotation of the inscriptions of sensory and bodily experience that can influence an event but may not be expected or conceptually pre-defined. Brian Massumi discusses affect in Plateaus as, "a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act" (as cited in Shouse, 2005). Amy Herzog (2001) describes affect as "a fluid play of intensities, sensations and thought that disintegrates the distinction between 'subject' and 'object'."

References

Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Castells, M. (1996). *The rise of the network society, the information age: Economy, society and culture, Vol. I*. Cambridge, MA; Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Connerton, P. (1989). *How societies remember*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Herzog, A. (2001). *Affectivity, becoming, and the cinematic event: Gilles Deleuze and the futures of feminist film theory*. In: A. Koivunen & S. Paasonen (Eds.), *Conference proceedings for Affective Encounters: Rethinking Embodiment in Feminist Media Studies* (pp. 83-88). University of Turku, School of Art, Literature and Music Media Studies, Series A, No. 49.

Hight, J. *34 north 118 west: Mining the urban landscape*.

Longford, M. (2007). Territory as interface: Design for mobile experiences. *WI: Journal of Mobile Media*, Winter/Spring 2007.

Massumi, B. (1995) The autonomy of affect. *Cultural Critique*, No. 31, The Politics of Systems and Environments, Part II, Autumn, (pp. 83-109). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Massumi, B. (2002) *Parables for the virtual: Movement, affect, sensation (post-contemporary interventions)*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Penny, S. (2004). Representation, enaction, and the ethics of simulation. *Electronic Book Review: First Person*.

Shouse, E. (2005). Feeling, emotion, affect [Abstract]. *M/C Journal*, 8:6.

Smith, E. M. (2000) *From whence cometh my help: The African American community of Hollins College*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press.

Tatar, D., Harrison, S., et al. (2008). Using place as provocation: In situ collaborative narrative construction. *Journal of the Research Center for Educational Technology*, 4:1.

Wade, S. P. (1999). *An investigation into the use of the tuple space paradigm in mobile computing environments*. Thesis (Ph. D.)?University of Lancaster. doi: 10.1.1.17.2663

White, H. (1990). *The content of form: Narrative discourse and historical representation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University.

Yates, F. (1966/2001). *The art of memory*. Illinois: University of Chicago Press.

Biography

Jen Boyle (Ph.D. English University of California, Irvine, 2003) is Assistant Professor of English at Hollins University. In addition to her work on new media projects, she has published book chapters and articles on new media, queer and transversal theory and film, and early modern technoculture. She has just completed a book, *The Anamorphic Imaginary: Perspective, Mediation, and*

Embodiment in Early Modern Literature and Technoscience.

Alli Crandell is a recent graduate from Hollins University in Mathematics and English. She has worked on several projects in new media and educational technology.

Share and Enjoy

- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 