

Expressing Human Complexity in the Database

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Will Luers is a visiting professor at The Creative Media & Digital Culture Program at Washington State University, Vancouver. In 2010, he was awarded The Vectors-NEH Summer Fellowship to work on his database documentary, *The Father Divine Project*. His video art has been selected for the Media Arts Show at the 2010 and 2008 ELO Conferences and has been shown in various international venues. In 2005, he won The Nantucket Film Festival and Tony Cox Award for Best Screenplay. An early adopter of social media, he was named a pioneer in videoblogging in the *Forbes.com* Top Technology Trends (2004) and in *The New York Times* (2006).

ABSTRACT

Nonlinear digital platforms provide scholars with opportunities to better present and preserve the complexities of human experience. Linear and narrative forms—academic papers, books, and film documentaries—can allude to the multiplicities and contradictions within world models, but lack the expressive means to present this complexity as evidence in itself. This paper describes the processes and discoveries of building *The Father Divine Project*, a multimodal database documentary that works to express the secular and religious complexities of an indigenous American religion.

KEYWORDS

Digital Arts, Scalar, Database, Narrative, Video, Ethnography, Religion, Humanities,

INTRODUCTION

In describing the complex networks of the personal, interpersonal, and embodied expression within human experience, humanities scholars face a challenge. As Edward L. Ayers describes, in the context of the study of history, the everyday, the local, and the ephemeral are continuous with larger identifiable social structures.

“All social life is ‘contingent,’ implicated and unpredictable, because all parts of life depend on each other.... What we think of as public and private, economic and political, religious and secular, and military and civilian are deeply connected.”¹

How do scholars present this kind of “deep contingency?”² Natural and social scientists present complexity through visualizations of quantifiable data. A simple and elegantly designed graph

can provide macro and micro views of multiple and simultaneous changes over time. Humanities scholars primarily use narrative and theoretical structures to represent their subjects, complicating and dimensionizing them by paying close attention to the personal and contingent as well as the quantifiable. They closely examine a single character in a novel, a single week in history, a single philosophical passage. They include subjectivity in the analysis of texts and artifacts by using self-reflexive and dialogic processes. They find new patterns, new paths of inquiry, new theories that best describe their subject, rather than relying on too-familiar categories and time lines.

Until recently, humanities scholars have relied on tools that force linearity on their presentations of complex and dynamic human processes. A scholarly book or film documentary can present the personal and contingent, but it is usually within lines of argument and encompassing narrative arcs. Human communities exist more like loosely organized databases than highly structured narratives. A nonlinear digital text, on the other hand, can provide multiple interpretive paths through a loosely structured database that may include recorded personal narratives, artifacts of expressive culture, official texts, and ephemera. The advantage of a nonlinear text to the humanities scholar is that lines of argument and ordered paths do not have to compete with the rich networks of meaning that their models work to represent. Narrative and database can exist in a productive simultaneity.³

The frustrations of trying to force a complex, multi-dimensional subject into a linear mold, led me to the notion of a “database documentary.” The Father Divine Project, which began as a traditional documentary, has evolved into a nonlinear digital text. Currently being built and designed on the Scalar platform by Dr. Leonard Primiano and me, the project conjoins ethnography and technology, interpretive writing and multimodal design, video documentary and media archive to present, preserve, translate, narrate, and critically analyze the history and creative life ways of a significant American religion.

THE SUBJECT

Father Divine founded the Peace Mission, an interracial and celibate community, in Harlem in the 1919 as a response to the racism as well as spiritual and economic poverty that had followed African Americans since the Civil War. Central to Father Divine’s popularity and his growing community of followers was his economic success during the Depression. The weekly “Holy Communion Banquet Service,” a ritual feast with lavish multi-course meals, singing, dancing, and spirited sermons, must have appeared miraculous in contrast to the surrounding poverty. Through a communal economic plan, Father Divine and his followers had amassed great wealth by the 1940s. They owned income-producing real estate and businesses in cities such as New York, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia, as well as in rural communities along the Hudson River. This economic power enabled the Peace Mission to confront racism. Peace Mission “co-workers” were employed in collectively owned hotels, shops, garages, domestic services, farms and cafeterias. These businesses served members of all races and religions without question, offering African Americans quality accommodations and services several decades before the American Civil Rights Movement.

Peace Mission members believe that Father Divine is “God in a body.” The individual narratives of how followers from all over the world came to this “conviction,” connects the private and contingent to larger social contexts such as poverty, war and racism. In 1946, at the age of sixty eight, Father Divine legally married a twenty-one-year-old white Canadian woman named “Sweet Angel” because she had said to him: “I know you are God.” Father Divine used the inevitable public controversy over this interracial marriage as a way to spread his messages of racial integration and international peace. The celibate marriage of Father and Mother Divine has since become central to the followers’ belief in the union of Heaven and Earth; that the poverty, racism and war experienced in the twentieth century had been transformed into an “abundance” of limousines, elaborate multi-course meals and Victorian mansions that house a peaceful, self-reliant and racially integrated community. Many followers see the election of President Barack Obama as the realization Father Divine’s prophecies. Controversy followed the Peace mission throughout its evolution; the spectacle of interracial gatherings, the marriage, the display of wealth by an African American, and the unusual beliefs all turned Father Divine and his movement into an international religious phenomenon. At its peak of popularity, the Peace Mission claimed tens of thousands of followers.

Since Father Divine “left his body” in 1965, Mother Divine has been the spiritual leader, the CEO, and the public face of the movement, looking after the spiritual and temporal needs of the followers, maintaining her husband's moral and religious standards, and adapting Peace Mission ways of living to larger social, cultural, and economic changes. The community has become increasingly matriarchal, with many female followers besides Mother Divine taking on leadership roles. As a celibate community, the Peace Mission faces a dwindling and aging membership with new challenges related to health and quality of life. Mother Divine has altered the banquet menu from southern-style to vegetarian and even macrobiotic dishes. Peace Mission members maintain contact with their “personally absent” God by sacramentalizing Father Divine’s photographs, films, recorded sermons and printed words within their daily religious rituals and practices.

THE PROJECT

In March of 1996, while I was finishing film school, I received a call from my former professor, Dr. Leonard Primiano. He asked me to document on video the Fiftieth Wedding Anniversary of Father and Mother Divine. Primiano had called not only because of my video production skills, but also because I had majored in Folklore Studies as an undergraduate and was familiar with the reflexive and dialogic methods of ethnography. In other words, I knew not to just arrive at an event and push record. As part of an ethnographic team, I was to engage personally with members of the Peace Mission and to show respect for their ways of expression, manners, and codes of conduct and dress. I was to share aspects of my own background and perspective, to discuss openly our methods of observation and recording and to ask questions that allowed followers to reflect and discuss their own culture within the context of Primiano’s study.

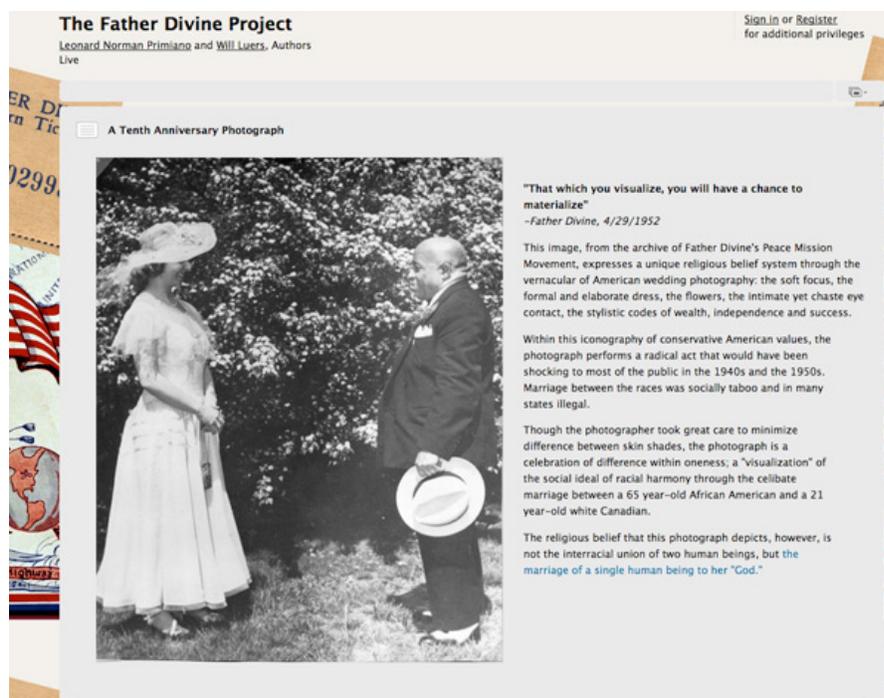


Figure 1 The Father Divine Project interface

During the two weeks of celebrations, I videotaped numerous banquet services, performances and testimonies in an observational or “direct” cinema style. I came to know the Peace Mission visually. Close observation of the expressive, affective, indexical, and contingent aspects of their lived reality gave me an intuitive grasp of the complexity of the subject. Primiano had spent over five years making his own close observations using “reflexive ethnography”, an engaged personal approach to fieldwork, and was able to guide my own “navigation” through Peace Mission iconography and expressive culture. Primiano believes an essential aspect in the study of religion is the ethnography of “vernacular religion” or religion “as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it.”⁴

“Vernacular religious theory involves an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the religious lives of individuals with special attention to the process of religious belief, the verbal, behavioral, and material expressions of religious belief, and the ultimate object of religious belief.”⁵

Primiano wanted me to videotape not only the banquet ritual, but all the preparations before the ritual. Mary Ann Doane writes that in the emergence of cinema technology, with its indexical relationship to reality, the contingent, ephemeral, and unnecessary are given status.

“Contingency...emerges as a form of resistance to rationalization which is saturated with ambivalence. Its lure is that of resistance itself—resistance to systems, to structure to meaning....Accident and chance become productive.”⁶

The expressive ways Peace Mission members arrange flowers, prepare elaborate dishes, “enter the spirit” during song and relate their own memories of Father Divine with humor and passion, all play an important role in communicating the “deep contingency” of religious belief.

After reviewing more than fifty hours of the recorded video it was clear to me that the subject was too vast and complex for a two-hour documentary. The obvious solution was to select a single narrative arc and let “irrelevant” segments—digressions, ephemera, personal narratives—fall away. To me, the “irrelevant” was what made the subject interesting, reflecting within the personal and contingent so much about the changes in twentieth-century America: poverty, segregation, war, Americanism, civil rights, right and left wing politics, women’s liberation, and the alternative health movement. A highly structured narrative centered on Father Divine could too easily fall into the sensational story of a cult leader. A database documentary made of navigable video, photography, audio recordings, personal testimonies, text, artifacts, maps, and time lines would present a picture of American religious and racial history as emergent, multiple and contingent.

THE PLATFORM

The Father Divine Project is currently undergoing another iteration on, Scalar, a new digital platform designed specifically for digital humanities and media studies projects. In the summer of 2010, Primiano and I were part of an NEH-funded fellowship to start building our project on Scalar. It was immediately clear that the platform, even in its pre-beta stage of development, was going to have the flexibility and affordances to express the human complexity of our subject.

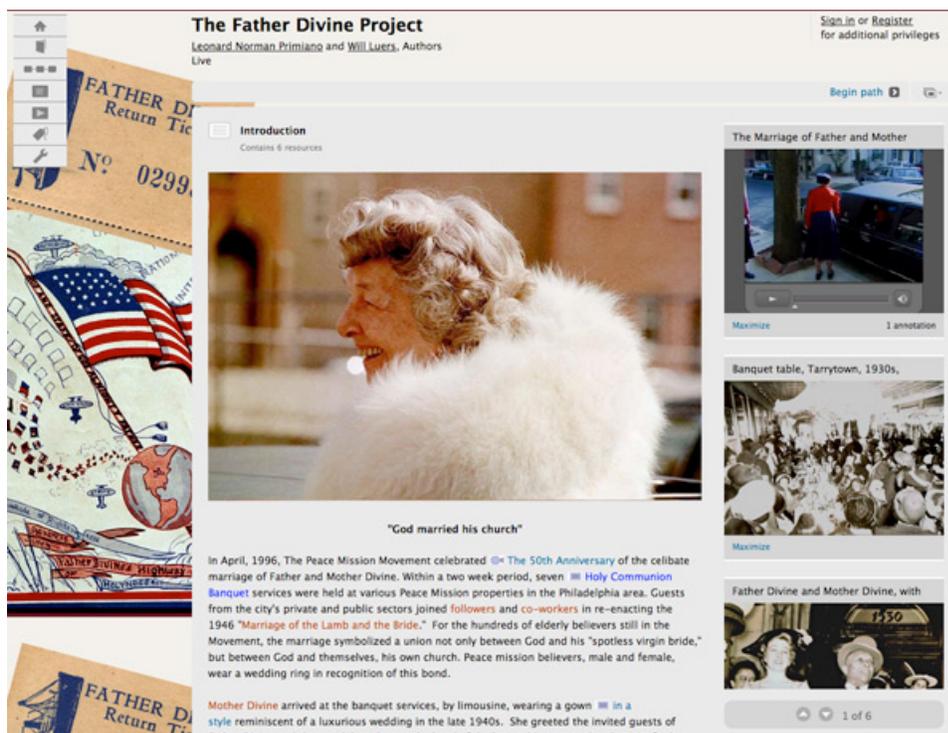


Figure 2 The Father Divine Project interface

Scalar is an online publishing system currently being developed at the Alliance for Networking Visual Culture at USC. With the support of the Mellon Foundation, Tara McPherson, Erik Loyer and Craig Dietrich have listened closely to humanities and media studies scholars to come up with an open source and standards-based system for multimodal publishing. Scalar “aims to combine direct access to media archives with a high degree of flexibility in the composition, sequencing, grouping, threading, and visualization of scholarly writing.”⁷ Authors do not need to download special software nor do they need to learn a new authoring language. Knowledge of HTML and CSS is helpful but not at all necessary, as there are choices of pre-designed CSS “skins” for any project. Unlike most content management systems, the flexibility of Scalar is in how its various elements are structured, or rather unstructured. Authors define their own structures and hierarchies. In other words, structure emerges out of the needs of the content, content does not have to fit into predetermined structures.

The content types for a Scalar project are Book, Page, Tag, Note, Path and Media:

- **A Book** is the highest level and contains all other content types as well as the author/publisher information.
- **A Page** is an individual html file and can contain any amount of text, images, video and links to other content types. Depending on the selected page view, pages display media and text in separate though related panels.
- **A Tag** is a term or label that can be associated with different content types, but in Scalar a tag is also a page, potentially with its own text content, embedded media and links.
- **A Note** can be applied to text within a page and, when clicked, pops up as a movable box of content. A note is also its own page, potentially with its own text content, embedded media and links.
- **A Path** is a sequence of content types that usually are steps of an argument. Paths may intersect (i.e. they may share one or more pages), diverge, converge, and even contain other paths. A path is a page that contains a sequence of pages, and can also contain its own text content, embedded media and links.
- **Media** are the image, video, flash or audio files imported into the Scalar project. Once imported, each media file is given its own URL within Scalar, and can be linked to from any page in the book.⁸

Navigation is a small set of icons representing the various content types. Each icon expands to an alphabetical list giving access to every discrete file of that content type. This means that every file is one link away from any other file in the project.

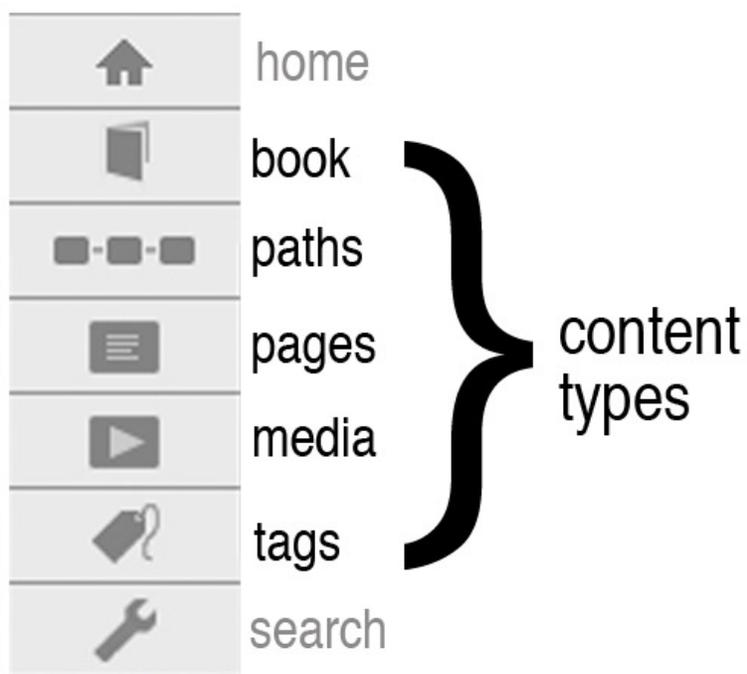


Figure 3 Scalar navigation bar

As one begins working with content inside of Scalar, it can be overwhelming how many choices there are in the information architecture alone. I have seen Scalar projects where the author chose to order material very linearly, making paths the equivalent of chapter subheadings. In other projects, paths were placed within paths within still other paths, allowing the user to “slip down a trap door,” as one author explained it. A Scalar project can easily remediate books and films by turning chapters or sequences into ordered paths, but because the platform is so open to possibility the adventurous author begins thinking outside predetermined structures and instead listens to the material itself. What shape does the data and the interpretation of that data want to take?

To answer this question for The Father Divine Project, I felt it was necessary to create a mind map to help me visualize the relationships between the media artifacts and video segments. Having shot and edited the video, scanned and uploaded the images, I was already very familiar with the content of the database. Seeing the mapped relationships between different kinds of media led to questions—the who, what, where and when—about the movement and its religious and secular contexts. Defining these data, fragments of the larger complex story, then led to main categories, and their relationships and then finally to clearly defined paths for the Scalar platform.

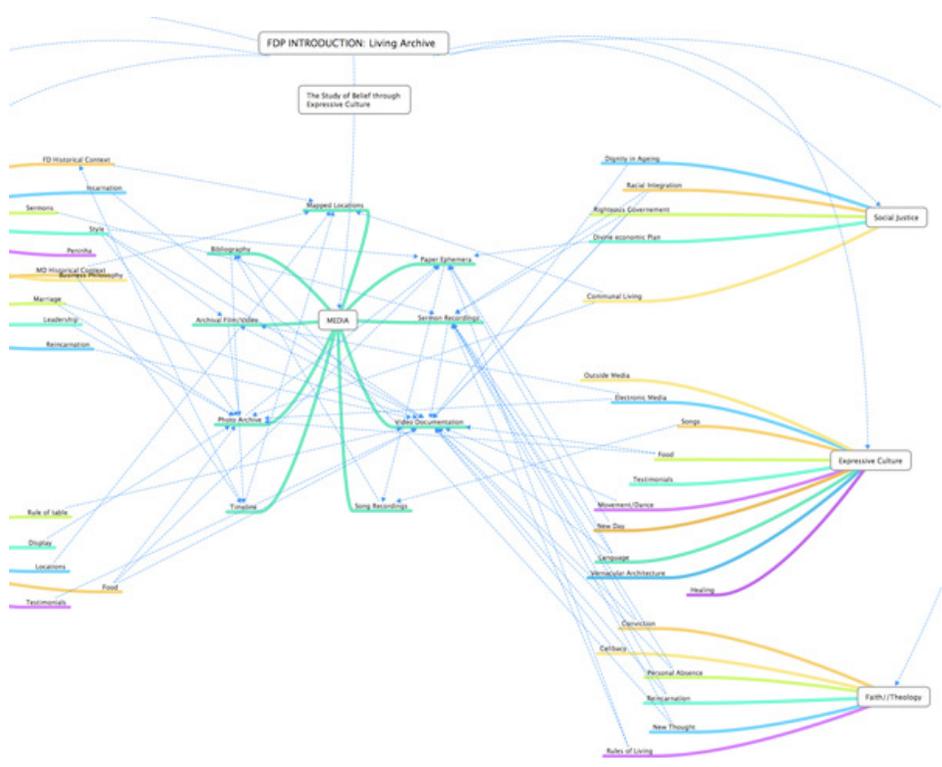


Figure 4 Father Divine Project mind map

Working in the digital environment is iterative. The repetitions of uploading, tagging, editing and saving digital files create the cognitive conditions for discovering structure as something materially emergent. I do not mean to say that there is a single ideal structure within any given body of material, just waiting to be born. As writers play with words on the page or screen to let the emergent process of the mind take over, authors of digital and multimodal texts must play with the files in their database. They must become as familiar with the media as the drafts of text. The Scalar platform is not designed as a publishing system for a project made of some edited text and a gallery of images. It is designed as a rich, multimodal authoring environment with an openness and flexibility that allows for discoveries.

THE DESIGN

Working inside Scalar, seeing it in action with each iteration, Primiano and I discovered our project needed to be made of smaller digestible text chunks than we had originally planned. The affordances of different page views (text view, media view, split view), with simultaneous access to text, video and audio, meant that the attention of the reader could be distributed around the page. In many cases this is undesirable, such as when building a carefully reasoned argument. But in our project, it was important to design a productive ambiguity and tension between text, image, video and audio. For example, a section of text might explain the religious origins of the Peace Mission’s belief in reincarnation, while a link from the word reincarnation plays a video testimony of one followers’ experience with a lost child. A Father Divine sermon about the meaning of the banquet service might play while the reader learns about the banquet service from a scholar’s perspective. These kind of simultaneous link associations—between the

personal and the communal, the official and vernacular, the textual and the visual—produces a text which is dependent on user behavior.

“How do we shift from an observer-dependent notion of self-evident knowledge to an observer-co-dependent notion of emergent knowing?”⁹

The reader of a Scalar project is guided by the author’s designed experience. Predetermined link structures define behaviors. From the reader’s point of view, the discovery of an argument in the text—in this case, the complexity of race and religion in America—can happen in the smallest interactions between content types. Noah Wardrip-Fruin’s notion of “operational logics” is useful in trying to understand how computer-based processes “can also be used to craft possibilities that aren’t simplified models of phenomena from our everyday world.”¹⁰

“An operational logic defines an authoring (representational) strategy, supported by abstract processes or lower-level logics, for specifying the behaviors a system must exhibit in order to be understood as representing a specified domain to a specified audience.”¹¹

As a representational and design strategy, montage between text links and media encourage the user to perform with the interface and this behavior, in turn, can generate questions, provoke lines of inquiry, puncture holes in certain assumptions about race, class and spiritual belief. Described in text, the spiritual beliefs of the Peace Mission can sound very other-worldly. In a video testimony, the affective qualities of a follower—humor, energy, gesture—come across as very grounded and human. The challenge for the author/designer is to make these operational logics, these opportunities for reader discovery, both implicit and multiple. Implicit, because it makes the argument live inside a situated, embodied and readerly context. Multiple, because the text as a whole needs the redundancies to make it navigable and accessible.

Designing the reader’s experience for The Father Divine Project is very similar to editing a video. Juxtapositions move the narrative forward, engage the viewer’s cognitive and perceptual processes and, if properly structured, shape the spatial and temporal maps of the unfolding story-world. A video or film editor focuses on the cut. The choice of what to leave out is not always based on what is or isn’t necessary for the story. Leaving out a seemingly important shot or scene might better engage the viewer, offer an opportunity to fill in the gap with the imagination. Content types in Scalar are distributed across the page in a spatial rather than linear montage. The link is equivalent to the cinematic cut in that it brings into focus a relationship between a word and a unit of media.¹² The semantic structure of a link can be obvious and continuous or provocative and destabilizing. Withholding information or at least hiding information until the reader performs certain actions is a useful narrative technique for creating anticipation, inference and prediction.

The similarity of nonlinear design and traditional storytelling is perhaps exaggerated. A storyteller has the listener’s attention inside a time-based progression. The nonlinear designer creates affordances for a certain kind of behavior, which will result in certain desired inferences

and lead to certain desired outcomes. Such an ideal user/reader does not exist. Even if these relationships remain implicit, not noticed by the reader, the operational logics are still integral to the interface design and must be negotiated.

CONCLUSION

While The Father Divine Project is intended to be an academic resource about a particular religious community, we also see it as a model of a digital humanities project that uses new authoring tools to model and express the complexities and nuances of race and religion in America.

What ultimately matters in any representational model is its usefulness. What do we learn? How can we extract from a representational model meaningful principles or conclusions? With digital production and presentational tools such as Scalar, we can now model non-quantifiable complexity in useful and generative ways. Scalar links the authentic expression of the human experience with the nuanced interpretations of the scholar. Argument and narrative arcs are still important and Scalar remediates these linear modes, but Scalar also allows the scholar to design a “humanistic interface,”¹³ a nonlinear experience that provides the user opportunities to make embodied and situated discoveries in navigating the text. Rather than accepting the sole interpretive schema articulated by the scholar, the user can uncover “operational logics” and implicit patterns in the relations between different types of content.

NOTES

¹ Edward L. Ayers, “Turning Toward Space, Place and Time,” in *The Spatial Humanities: GIS and the future of Humanities Scholarship*, ed. David J. Bodenhamer et al. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 6.

² *Ibid.*, 6.

³ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002.), xx.

⁴ Leonard N. Primiano, “Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife,” *Western Folklore* 54, no. 1 (1995): 44.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁶ Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 11.

⁷ Erik Loyer, email message to author, October 29, 2010.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Johanna Drucker, “Humanistic Approaches to the Graphical Expression of Interpretation” (video presented at the Humanities + Digital Visual Interpretations Conference, Cambridge, MA, May 20, 2010).

¹⁰ Noah Wardrip-Fruin, *Expressive Processing: Digital Fictions, Computer Games, and Software Studies* (Cambridge: MA, MIT Press, 2009), 4.

¹¹ Matthew Mateas and Noah Wardrip-Fruin, “Defining Operational Logics,” *Proceedings of the Digital Games Research Association* (2009): 5.

¹² Adrian Miles, “Hypertext Structure as the Event of Connection.” *Text.Serial.Journal*, (January 30, 2006.), <http://journals.tdl.org/jodi/article/viewArticle/48/51>.

¹³ Drucker, “Humanistic Approaches to the Graphical Expression of Interpretation.”

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