

## ***User: Reflections on the Narrativization of Self within Social Networking Sites***

A presentation and discussion of the project and processes involved in the development of practice research work-in-progress.

**By Sarah Gibson Yates**

This paper explores the subject of narrative and self within social media contexts through a presentation and discussion of the project and processes involved in the development of practice research work-in-progress. The activity has taken place over an eighteen month period from February 2008 – September 2010 with support from the National Lottery fund through Arts Council East, Arc Digital and CODE and the national new writing scheme Gold Dust. The work undertaken so far consists of the completion of a novel manuscript entitled *User* and preliminary investigations in to how elements of the novel could be extended online. The work aims to be dual platform in both subject and form; offering a traditionally authored text about the places where our online and offline worlds intersect as well as a meaningful inter-textual digital experience: One that invites readers to interact with and respond to the work in both critical and creative ways.

### **Shared Stories**

This paper, and the work under discussion, proceeds on an assumption that narratives not only exist within social media contexts on multi-medial and multi networked levels but that narrative-making and sharing permeates all levels of social media activity.<sup>1</sup> Facebook has for some time now offered a function whereby you can *import your stories* from other social media sites. This use of the word *story* here does not refer to the kind of traditionally written closed text objects that we know to be stories and that are merited on what we might call specific *literary qualities*.

Even the most fleeting ephemeral online interaction is now deemed *a story*. Post a video link – a story. Have a conversation – a story. Chat with friends about a group you've just joined – a story. [Extract from *User*]

*Story* here refers to the meandering, seemingly structure-less multimedia threads that constitute online activity from other [in this case non-Facebook] social media sites with a competitive global critical mass use. Your Twitter, Youtube and Flickr activity is deemed to be story and it is in these types of stories that this work sets about trying to better understand. The work is concerned not only to identify and explore how these stories are created, sustained and responded to but also ask why have they become practically indispensable as ways of carrying messages about ourselves to others. What is their role within social networking protocol and in the creation of our online selves? It is through the creation of another, particular, story, that I have entitled *User*, that I present and describe certain findings and

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<sup>1</sup> Lev Manovich's *Database as Genre of New Media* offers a valuable and critical perspective on this subject.

interpretations about some of the dynamics that fuel this new form of cultural public discourse<sup>2</sup>.

## **Contextualising The Work: Some Assumptions**

### **Our Stories, Our Profiles, Ourselves**

Every message exchange, status update, post, friend and link tell you something about a person's particular cultural ecology, their vanities and the environments that shape them. The products, services and applications they used. The places, people and groups they affiliated with. Online, every activity, every post, comment, link shared, group joined, every photo or video uploaded visualise a thought. Like plot points in a story or numbers in a dot-to-dot. [Extract from *User*]

Anthropologist Kathleen Richardson in her 2009 paper *Online Interaction Ritual: Face-to-Facebook* - argues that our online selves represent *enacted proxies of our real selves*<sup>3</sup>. Richardson examines the idea that our online selves represent enacted proxies of our real selves through two key concepts: *Co-presence*, 'the act of physically being presence in another person's company', and *reputation*, 'the estimation and perception that others have of a person'. These two concepts are extended as themes within *User*'s narrative through its articulation of plot, character development and setting. *User* consists in the first person narrated journey of twenty-one year old film and media student Rubi Millar who, home for a long weekend to see her father before her finals, discovers a teenager, Aleesha Stone, brutally murdered in an all night fast food van. She is drawn deeper into Aleesha's world when an old friend is falsely accused of her murder. Rubi's journey takes her through the dark and sinister side of social networking, of indelible digital identities, small town drug dealing and childhood betrayals. As Rubi digs deeper into Aleesha's life she discovers that the girl presented online is not all there is too Aleesha, and furthermore, what she displays there, in fact, represents an attempt to disguise her past.

Any spin-doctor worth their salt knows reputations are *made* not won. Social media has provided us all with the means to [re]make, [re]define, [re]present ourselves online.

### **Writing Oneself into Being Online or How One Becomes What One Is**

Everyone is now both themselves and *themselves online*. We have evolved quickly. In a short space of time we have become our own managers, our own agents, representing ourselves to others in an increasingly competitive social and professional market place. Most of us try to create a *better*, more attractive, interesting, funny, clever version of themselves, but more than what? More than what is otherwise true? More than what or who we really are? Or is it just another me to try on for size?

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<sup>2</sup> This term is introduced and discussed in detail in Jim McGuyigan's *The Cultural Public Sphere* [European Journal of Cultural Studies, 2005]

<sup>3</sup> Richardson says that this is not true of other social networking platforms.

Looking around her [Aleesha's] pages I see a girl who clearly knew the project of online profiling. She presented herself well. Understood the people she wanted to appeal too. [Extract from *User*]

Social media platforms have provided us with spaces with which to create ourselves online. These spaces are changing ephemeral, fluid and in many ways unfixed.

American research in social media, Dana Boyd, writing about the specific way in which teenagers interact and develop their use of social media tools [as distinct from adults], highlights the term 'impression management'<sup>4</sup> as a formative process involved in the presentation of the self online. In *American Teen Sociality in Networked Publics*, Boyd's PhD thesis, she explains how the teenagers she studied used social networking as a way of writing themselves into being online via mediated environments in ways that both formalise and alter the identity process. This is achieved through the explicit creation of profiles.

Profile making within social media platforms can be seen as offering ways in which to test out various aspects of a multifaceted and evolving self. Ways in which perhaps even Nietzsche, a hundred years after his death, may have approved of. On the pages on social media sites *one can become what one is without flowing into being*.<sup>5</sup> Certainly the incessant and continuous flow of media means that no one and nothing stays still for long.

Profile making, and the subsequent iterative acts of impression management, are personally revealing but are they new?

"People used to perform their lives this way to themselves in their diaries, and also through letters to other people. So for me, anything that happens in social media is an extension of stuff we were already doing in some other way. It's all human communication."<sup>6</sup>

While Margaret Atwood [no luddite to technology], speaking here, is right in many ways I maintain that there is something new at work here: All this self-creation, this self-performance and presentation, must now take place in *public*. As Boyd stresses:

'The very creation of this profile is a social oddity, [this] is the first generation to have to publicly articulate itself, to have *to write it self into being* as a precondition of social participation.' [my italics]

Boyd is concerned with how this presents particular challenges for teenagers but one of the more obvious challenges, and one that is not exclusively teen is that *to err is human*. We make mistakes and networked publics have long memories. Nothing is deleted and this brings our past into consequence in distinct and as yet untested ways<sup>7</sup>. I critically address this aspect of the indelibility of our digital identities specifically in

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<sup>4</sup> Erving Goffman 1959 + reference to follow.

<sup>5</sup> According to Alexander Nehamas, being and becoming for Nietzsche are not related. Nehamas's presentation of Nietzsche's thought in his book *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* highlights Nietzsche's insistence on the importance of the processes of change for persons and the world as opposed to what he saw as philosophy's previous preoccupation with constants and what is.

<sup>6</sup> Margaret Atwood speaking at *Literary Figures talk about Twitter*, a series of talks organised by Harvard University's Nieman Journalism Lab. As cited on the website: [www.neimanlab.org](http://www.neimanlab.org)

the plotting of *User*. It is in fact the very cause and to some degree method of the victim's death. Social media provided the victim with a way of positively reinventing herself and advancing her life. In fact that past is retrieved, Aleesha could not put the past behind her, and this trust in the power of social media to have her interests at heart, is Aleesha's undoing.

### **We Are All Users:**

We are service users, computer users, network users and we have user identities. We identify ourselves as users, happily believing it to be progress and in doing so one more permutation of self and society is established. We become what we are, treating services, places, products, networks and others as means for our own advancement, without embarrassment or apology.  
[Extract from *User*]

### **Notes on Narrative Content and Form Within *User***

Narratives in digital social media are continuously being created, shared and rewritten. Users take time to establish and trade narratives between each other, whether it's a narrative around who I am, what I want you to buy or what I want you to care about, we communicate specific pieces of information for a complex list of reasons and are motivated by an even more complex matrix of drivers, but what is particularly relevant to the work under discussion is the discovery that narratives are themselves being used.

*User* is a novel that plays with these ideas of story/narrative as fragmentary, structureless and at the service of users for their own personal or corporate gain. The story of *User* has evolved and been organized in such a way as to maximize engagement with this particular and emerging discourse. Methodologically this has been approached creating a traditional crime detective fiction trajectory, and positioning it in dialogue with new elements of form drawn from digital culture. *User* attempts to combine both traditional and new forms of narrative by forcing the protagonist [and reader] to rely on fragmentary and truth-uncertain information provided by the pages of the fictional social networking site *Digitize Me*, where the dead girl's social networking pages have been turned into an online memorial and through which all the main characters are connected. In order to critically engage the act of profile making within *User*'s narrative I have extended the idea of ordinary profile within the fictional site, taken it a step further. Instead of responding to a list of questions about your education, experience, interests, etc. new account makers are invited to respond in a way that is creative and interactive by responding to set profile *Assignments*<sup>7</sup>. The responses users contribute constitute their user profile information. The following extract provides an example of a Profile Assignment response from the dead girl Aleesha's own social networking pages.

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<sup>7</sup> Journalist Libby Brooks points out that the medium [of social media] actively encourages deception and that 'few people truly appreciate the implications of their digital identities'. Citing Victor Mayer-Schonberger's 2008 publication *Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in a Digital Age*, Books stresses 'the unforgettability of our age may fundamentally alter our individual sense of identity and relationship.' This is very much a theme of *User*'s narrative.

<sup>8</sup> Miranda July's hugely successful interactive online art project *Learning to Love You More* [2002-2009] was an inspiration for *Digitize Me*'s Assignments. Find the project archive here: <http://www.learningtoloveyoumore.com>

*Digitize Me Profile Assignment # 3:  
Write your own obituary in 100 words or less.*

*Aleesha Stone [b.1992 – d.2072] lived a long and prolific life as an internationally respected and much-loved singer and songwriter. She travelled extensively performing and recording with a wide range of singers, songwriters and musicians at the top of their fields. Best known for her distinctive integration of blues soul melodies and jazz rhythms she redirected new music towards a much needed rebirth after the so called 'lost years' of popular music in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.  
[Extract from User]*

In a strange twist of intent this fictional autobiography is read out at a vigil held for Aleesha on the spot where she died. After hearing it Rubi reflects on the words' impact on the mourners gathered.

*The power of this imagined autobiography over its audience put me in mind of a French documentary I watched in class last semester. The film was about a Brazilian tribe who believed their futures could be secured by visions. The documentary showed how these visions were brought about in hallucinogenic states and described how what the tribe member saw in those states represented the life they would come to have. This coming of age rite was undertaken without question by both boys and girls, and its purpose was to give the emerging adult not only a glance of their life to come but to fully accept it. Whether it was to be long and blessed with children, or otherwise. That was their lot.[...] What magic was this?  
Aleesha's fictional obituary imagined a life that sounded real but was not. She was unable to even try and put the life she dreamed of into practice. But somehow in that moment, surrounded by the wet eyes and heavy hearts of others, the power of collective imagining performed its own bit of magic. The life described in that auto-biog-obituary was hers. There were her children and grandchildren, and not those of strangers, populating the first row of mourners.*

Rubi recognizes something transformative is happening with stories here but remains ambivalent. She distrusts stories; their easiness and consolations. For her the problem of stories lays in part with representation. How do you fix something that when in the moment of fixing, it becomes something else? If visions are slippery then language is trickier. This problem of representation is felt by Rubi when she confronts the officer investigating Aleesha's death as to why her friend Pete has been named a suspect. She reflects on something she read:

*The way narratives of crime are performed in public and private spheres can profoundly affect a real crime investigation and has even been known to impact the verdict.*

In other words, in *casting* someone as a suspect - *casting doubt* - they become a suspect.

Pete really was in trouble. [Extract from User]

Rubi is trying to hold on to her own personality/life and not get sucked into media-scripted narratives. Specifically with regard to reactions to Aleesha's death, but also in terms of her clothes, the serious attention she pays to her degree, her ability to make friends across gender and ages and her refusal to make a tragedy out of her parents divorce. *User's* content and narrative construction reflects Rubi's ambivalence about stories by drawing attention to its own unfixedness and the unfixedness of those who inhabit its world.

At the same time Rubi's reflections on the use of images and stories in an entirely different culture [via the documentary], that is to cohere and strengthen community, reveals a genuine *need* for stories. This revelation opens up a way in to Aleesha's world that got Rubi and allows her greater empathy with the mourners.

### **Preliminary Investigations into Extending The Story Online: Multimedia Intertextuality and Reader Participation**

One of the key objectives of this research from the outset was to explore methodologies with which to make this work effective on a dual platform basis. In October 2009 an open public research workshop was held as part of Cambridge's *Festival of Ideas* to test out various ideas and approaches to this end. The workshop was well attended and myself and visual artist Bryony Graham led twenty participants including under-graduate and post-graduate students through a discussion and creative workshop. Activity was centred around creating multimedia responses to the assignments featured on *User's* fictional social networking site, Digitize Me. Responses were mixed<sup>9</sup> but ultimately positive. *User* aims to extend reader participation by inviting readers to contribute content to a real life version of the fictional social networking site featured in the novel. Readers who visit the site would be invited to complete responses to the profile making assignments featured in the novel. They can then upload these in various media, joining those of the fictional characters and thus share a space with the novel's fictional characters. These shared responses and subsequent comment exchange will then create new *stories*. The assignment activities can also be used for generating creative arts education activities that engage in social media technology and can be publicly networked. The multimedia nature of the assignments mean that they can be used for extending critical and creative practice education activities in self-portraiture, life writing, photography, filmmaking, exploring biographical objects and more. Other potential interactive inter-textuality layers around the various media objects embedded within the novel such as real video links and Rubi's blog *evenmorestuffontheinternet*, where she discusses her thoughts about technology and society.

### **User: Book 2.0?**

*User* presents itself as a strong contender for a Book 2.0 text in terms of subject and form. It explores representational elements of digitality in terms of the way it presents and engages narrative information both on the page and within networked screen

<sup>9</sup> There were some interesting responses but many of the participants, notably members of the general public were cautious about responding to the Assignments and in one instance even suspicious. The reasons seemed to be connected to the fact that the Assignments asked for responses that were *too personal, too intimate, [too honest?]* and required a level of engagement the participants had not been prepared for.

publics while striving to maintain narrative cohesiveness in terms of its story telling. It is hoped that both qualities will make this work an engaging, immersive and critical narrative experience however or wherever the reader finds it: A hybrid work for a hybrid time.

For first reader comments on the manuscript, further discussion around any of the above issues, or if you are interested in reading, reviewing or publishing the manuscript and/or developing the online presence then please contact me via my blog: [www.wordpress.sgyates.com](http://www.wordpress.sgyates.com)

Gibson Yates, Sarah, *User*, 2010, unpublished. Contact author for rights to reproduce extracts.

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