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# The Visual Remediation of a Complex Narrative: Reimagining the “Small World” Stories of *Journey to Horseshoe Bend*

Scholarly and Research  
Communication

VOLUME 6 / ISSUE 4 / 2015

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## Abstract

This article has its foundations in a research project that was launched to compile a range of related archival records and media resources into a digital database repository with the intention of hyperlinking this material to specific and significant points in a selected text, T.G.H Strehlow’s *Journey to Horseshoe Bend*. There are elements of the text that are of potential and particular relevance to the Aranda community based at Ntaria – also known as Hermannsburg – in Central Australia. The article traverses across a range of issues pertinent to the knowledge communities marked out by the text, and presents a case for representing and reimagining *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* in database narrative form.

## Keywords

Strehlow; Database; Aboriginal; Narrative; Archive

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CISP Press  
*Scholarly and Research Communication*  
Volume 6, Issue 4, Article ID 0401217, 10 pages  
Journal URL: [www.src-online.ca](http://www.src-online.ca)  
Received June 1, 2015, Accepted July 13, 2015, Published October 29, 2015

Cohen, Hart, & Morley, Rachel. (2015). The Visual Remediation of a Complex Narrative: Reimagining the “Small World” Stories of *Journey to Horseshoe Bend*. *Scholarly and Research Communication*, 6(4): 0401217, 10 pp.

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## Background

In October 2015 Giramondo Publishing will republish T.G.H Strehlow's (1969, 1972) classic Australian memoir, *Journey to Horseshoe Bend*. First published in 1969, *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* has long been recognized as a landmark in Australian literature for the way it weaves European and Indigenous perspectives, namely Aranda, to produce a unique vision of Central Australia. The republication of *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* forms part of a broader project that will lead to multiple iterations of the book, including a hyperlinked electronic edition reticulated with a database. Drawing on the extensive archival collections and media that underpin the print memoir, the database will offer visual mediations between the text and its historical and cultural fields in keeping with what might be called a "database imaginary" (Deitz, 2007; Vesna, 2007). In doing so, it will capitalize on the representational power of the database in conjunction with emergent digital technologies that take advantage of the contemporary "shift in audience attention from the central storyline to the world in which the story takes place" (Wolf, 2012, p. 8) in order to traverse and visually represent what we have called the many "small worlds" of the text.

Operating as a linked networked system, the database will present a newly technologized site of writing and representation, one that has the potential to incorporate interactive and diverse kinds of play on book culture, narrative, history and memory, distributed spectatorship, and a reconsidered idea of the archive. Crucially, given the book's orientation in the stories and landscapes of Aboriginal Australia, the development of the database will also offer important opportunities to engage with the constituent Aranda community about cultural conditions relating to digital knowledge access and sharing. Pivotal to our interests is to determine through conversation and collaboration a culturally and contextually appropriate model that will enable Aboriginal people to discover and create their own relationships to the content of the collections. The article we present traverses these issues but focuses in particular on the case for representing and reimagining *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* as a database narrative in conjunction with locating the project within a contemporary knowledge framework.

## Formulations of the database: A new media species

In *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative Cyberspace*, Janet H. Murray (1997) writes with prophetic vision about the expressive and representational power of the networked computer to transfigure static narrative forms. Taking her cue from the websites that characterized the 1990s, and with an eye on the storied potential of "hyperserialized" television, Murray proffers the view that emerging technologies could eventually lead to the creation of an "integrated digital archive," one that "would present virtual artifacts from the fictional world of the series, including not only diaries, photo albums, and telephone messages but also documents ... The compelling spatial reality of the computer," she writes,

... will also lead to virtual environments that are extensions of the fictional world. For instance, the admitting station seen in every episode of ER could be presented as a virtual space, allowing viewers to explore it and discover phone messages, patient files, and medical test results, all of which could be used to

extend the current story line or provide hints of future developments. ... In a well-conceived hyperserial, all the minor characters would be potential protagonists of their own stories, thus providing alternate threads within the enlarged story web. The viewer would take pleasure in the ongoing juxtapositions, the intersection of many lives, and the presentation of the same event from multiple sensitivities and perspectives. (pp. 255-258)

Looking back, Murray's prediction reads like a manifesto to the narrative present. As the veritable explosion in transmedia narratives, electronic fiction, locative modes, and other forms of networked narratives attest, new developments in digital media technologies have reimagined and expanded the representational space for multiform approaches to storytelling. The encyclopedic capacity of the computer, combined with the networked structure of the Web, has triggered protean text forms that are not only interactive and immersive, but that move between narrative-specific and pre-existing texts, dispersing the boundaries of authored and storied worlds, and expanding the interpretive reach of the way reader-users come into story.

The remediation of the database has been pivotal in providing both the computational scaffolding as well as the artistic and aesthetic stimulus for remediating these emergent reworkings of narrative culture. Once the terrain of information scientists, and most strongly associated with the organization and structural management of data, "database thinking" has crossed into artistic practice to become what Victoria Vesna (2007) has labelled a culturally and aesthetically charged artefact as well as a "metaphor" for rethinking knowledge discoverability. Taken on its own the database – fashioned typically as a series of curated choices and possibilities, not a compositional sequence of cause-effect relations – cannot be said to be a narrative. It is increasingly, however, being used to *support and mobilize* a narrative, working to combine media in what Lev Manovich (2013) has called "endless new ways, leading to new media hybrids, or, to use a biological metaphor, new 'media species'" (p. 45). Figured in this way, and germane to the work we are undertaking, database narratives have the potential to expand and diversify the ecological space of writing and representation, to illuminate and provide a means through which to visualize what we call the many "small worlds" of a text. Through a process of "deep remixability" (Manovich, 2007, p. 76) – where the content of different media types in conjunction with their associated techniques and modes of expressivity are brought into a kind of digital "rub" – designers and reader-users can mobilize the charge nominated by Murray (1997); they can take "pleasure in the ongoing juxtapositions, the intersection of many lives, and the presentation of the same event from multiple sensitivities and perspectives" (p. 258).

An early example of this work can be found in the electronic encyclopedia. Earlier digital versions of encyclopedias, most notably in CD-ROM formats, offered fixed computer-based search-and-read options with some versions linking to the Internet. Now with Wikipedia, the concept of the encyclopedia has moved to a model where users can add to the encyclopedia's database of material – although this is not without controversy, as questions of authorization and accuracy have been raised in relation to the Wikipedia project. More recently media-rich, multisensory database models have been advanced. With new affordances related to open source software tools, 3-D

visualizations, including sonic media and access to knowledge at multiple registers, has become possible. Exemplar projects that incorporate and utilize multisensory, multimodal design combined with multi-perspective storytelling include *Prison Valley*, the *Wall Street Journal*'s "Lobotomy Files" (Wall Street Journal, 2013), and the *Guardian*'s "NSA Files" (Guardian, 2015). As becomes evident with these works, new thinking about the interface (cf Galloway, 2010) has also modified and opened "black box" limitations on ways of interacting within formats (such as is found in gaming and smart phone apps).

As Manovich and Vesna have variously noted then, the space of the database is potent, variant, and dynamic. When used to inform the structural logic of a multimedia narrative, the database can be a rich tool for mobilizing an exploration of auxiliary worlds, each of which can be said to possess its own narrative, or at least the informational components integral to fleshing out and enhancing the deeper textures of the narrative world. The process of retrieving, filtering, and visualizing alternate pathways that enlarge an otherwise bounded narrative environment has the potential to interrogate practices and hierarchies of knowledge construction and concealed values and systems of thinking. In recourse to Murray, this aesthetic combined with a new modality for thinking can be said to supplement and support what has become a broader trend – the increased privileging of what Mark J.P. Wolf (2012) describes as a "shift in audience attention from the central storyline to the world in which the story takes place" (p. 8). Indeed, it has become increasingly crucial that designers and writers – and in the online space the two are inextricably linked – understand how to fully harness the technological and cultural affordances of the database; they need, in other words, to examine the storage, aggregation, retrieval, and expressive potential of data. Manovich (2007) puts it this way: "we need to imagine the possibilities of databases; to actively shape them and participate in how they are used to organise the world we live in" (p. 40). Manuel Delanda, meanwhile, writes with reference to Steve Deitz's "database imaginary," that the redistribution of "stratified matter-energy or sedimented cultural materials" must also keep the aesthetic principles of creative practice in play; it must follow, "a line of flight, or a line of song, or of colour" (Delanda quoted in Deitz, 2007).

### **Textual ecologies: The many small worlds of *Journey to Horseshoe Bend***

The relationship between database and narrative is a key focus for Manovich, and it relates strongly to the interest we have in adapting T.G.H Strehlow's (1972) *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* to include a database format. This is an interest that has dominated our research work from its earliest inception and, after a period of dormancy, it has now been awakened.

The broad ambit of our project sees connected archival materials including geographic maps, genealogical charts, photographs, film footage, government documents, diaries, and correspondence linked to pertinent moments in the text to create a series of interlocking pathways that seek to expand and visually remediate the static nature of the printed form.

Such a mode of representation is in keeping with the inner logic of the book. Despite starting life as a pre-digital print text, *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* reads like a grafted

network of hyperlinked stories, a characteristic that is redolent in the design, structure, and scaffolded approach the author deploys. The structure of the book is such that it showcases multiplicities within narratives, not in the form of episodic structure but rather as a series of interconnected *small worlds* – many of which are self-contained but perhaps uneven in their scale, scope, and distribution. These complex small worlds traverse a range of themes about the history, culture, and people of Central Australia. On one level the book documents how in 1922 pastoralists and Aboriginal people joined together in a gruelling journey down the Finke River in an effort to save T.G.H. Strehlow's father, the Reverend Carl Strehlow, from illness and inevitable death. While this narrative is in itself powerful, the real richness of the book lies in and around this structuring narrative; in the multi-voiced layering of Aranda Dreaming stories;<sup>1</sup> frontier histories, and in Strehlow's own recollections and interpretations of life in Central Australia told from Aboriginal and white perspectives, all of which he acquired as a young boy growing up in Hermannsburg in the early 1900s, and then through his extensive work as an anthropologist in the Northern Territory.

Here, stories like those of the Fish Ancestors of Iltjanmalinjaka, the encounter with Alf Butler at Henbury Station, the tale of Willshire's massacre, and the revenge killings at Irbmangkara are juxtaposed so that as the reader journeys down the Finke River over a period of thirteen days, he or she literally sees the landscape from two points of view: a European landscape of homesteads and buggy tracks overlaid on a far more ancient totemic landscape of Aboriginal history, mythology, sacred sites, and Dreaming tracks. It is, in this way, a sedimentary structuring of culture and history, pulled from testimonies, documented source materials, and the realm of imagining and, like the sedimentary rock faces that characterize the Central Australian landscape, it speaks to the way stories are often deposited in divergent layers and contexts, leading to a range of interpretations and contestations that influence and shape the way history has been, and continues to be, handed down.

An electronic version of the text, scaffolded around a curated, media-rich archive that the reader-user can enter and explore in a variety of ways, offers opportunities to grapple with the kinds of multiple sensitivities and perspectives flagged by Murray (1997) from various points of entry. The layered authoring of the book, for example, distributes the story through the eyes of a 14-year-old but written from the "hindsight" of a 69-year-old – very much the same person but older. Here, the many small worlds become spaces where the boundaries between real and imagined begin to recede. Early in the book Strehlow (1969) places himself as a boy in an exchange with his Aboriginal nannies who express concern with his departure from the village, but then he goes on to a more emphatic speech:

... but it was a group of women who were most regretful in their expression of leave-taking from the white boy whom they had mothered for so many years. One of them was Christina. Don't forget that I am also one of your mothers. Remember me and write to me sometimes. You are not just a white boy, you are one of us. You belong to our people. You belong to the totem of the Twins of Ntaria. You are a true Aranda. (pp. 27-28)

This passage has been the focus of considerable debate as to its authenticity. As a memoir, the author can use the text as a tool of memory retrieval. However, as a case that deals with the subjective accounting of a past event, there is no test as to the veracity of what is recalled. The reader is further reminded of the confected nature of the text as a memoir when earlier versions are examined for changes. For example, in an earlier version of the book, the word “vocal” is used in the sentence, “. . . but it was a group of women who were most regretful in their expression of leave-taking from the white boy. . . .” This is later replaced with a much more nuanced word: “regretful.” The change is the prerogative of the author in the process of the subjective translation of his memory, and while the shift from “vocal” to “regretful” does not amend or transform the events themselves, it imputes a refiguring of the emotional or affective attribution that seeks to capture how the women felt. They may well have been “vocal” and “regretful,” but by replacing “vocal” with “regretful,” the sense here is that the author is moving the emphasis and in this way engaging in a writerly form of memory-making over a form that might take a more neutral approach in attributing emotional and affective states to persons other than himself.

With this example, a debate can be developed around the case Strehlow makes for having an Aboriginal identity or a kind of Aboriginal identity – a notion that is core to the thematic of the book. However it also points to the range of materials that could be placed in a repository that would allow for various comparisons of the multiple versions of the draft text. Data mining can utilize analytics to compare digitized versions of the text to extend this kind of comparison – though perhaps not all would be as hermeneutically loaded as the above example.

Another affordance of the database approach to the narrative returns us once more to Murray’s (1997) vision, where “minor characters would be potential protagonists of their own stories, thus providing alternate threads within the enlarged story web” (p. 258). *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* is poised for such a project. One of the striking features of the narrative is the way it brings the collective biographies of figures from the Central Australian landscape – both European and Aboriginal – into the act of storytelling. While most of these lives are recuperated in piecemeal form in the book, we have located the archival source materials that Strehlow may have used to inform his portraits. Until now, most of these materials have remained scattered in various collections across the country, but our database project brings the materials together to deepen and tease out the relationship between the objects, often illuminating the contestations that emerge from variant points of view.

The legacy of the white police officer, William Willshire, who was principally known for his murderous methods for “dispersing Aborigines,” is a case in point. Willshire was famously put on trial in 1891 for murdering two Aboriginal men, but was let off and sent to an even more remote part of the country as punishment. Yet according to documentary source material he was a complex individual. In addition to his reputation for barbarity, he was also known as a cultural authority on Aboriginal society. He could communicate in many of the Central Australian languages and, curiously, he was the author of four vaguely romantic autobiographical stories, which he tried to disguise as fiction. These novels included reasonable anecdotal ethnology

and word lists located somewhere between what has generally been called sadistic and sexist ramblings. Willshire features in a brief and early section of *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* and the digitization of the police journals, photographs, government reports, and newspaper articles – in conjunction with contemporary commentaries and interviews with both historians and Aranda people who have heard stories about him through the generations – offers an opportunity to re-galvanize history and memory.

A second historical figure of interest is Hesekei Malbunka. An Aranda man, Hesekei famously carried the telegram announcing Carl Strehlow's illness from Hermannsburg to Alice Springs in 1922. The trip constituted a distance of some 125 kilometres and Hesekei travelled it on foot in less than a day and a half. As the story goes, he waited one night for a reply and then walked the distance home in the same length of time. Today, Hesekei has come to represent an important figure, particularly in the Aranda community. He was on the journey with the Strehlows as they made their way down the Finke and he remains a well-known figure in the Ntaria region (Hermannsburg), where his descendents still live. Strehlow's book proffers a brief account of Hesekei, but our research is expanding the representative detail of his life. We have linked him back to the extensive genealogical records that Strehlow made, which are now held in the Strehlow Research Centre, and to film footage, an audio recording, and documentation, including the telegram. Much of this material is culturally significant today, because for many Aranda people it offers a chance to connect, often for the first time, with stories and memories that have been lost.

There is also the potential to link the *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* database to other existing databases that might complement the archival/narrative extensions that we are developing. Online sources such as the "Link-Up" data service for the Stolen Generation offered by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Studies (AIATSIS) (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Studies, 2014), which assists Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who were separated from their families under previous government policy, with tracing and reuniting with their lost families; they may find additional critical information in the Strehlow genealogies. Similarly, the Australian Dictionary of Biography and the Australian e-heritage Portal, which explores Australian heritage with access to heritage databases distributed across the country's states and territories, can also both enhance our project as well as provide critical points of mediation and intersection between existing repository holdings.

Crucially, the engagement with materials such as these offers an opportunity to work collaboratively with the book's chief community of interest to find an appropriate process for accessing, navigating, and sharing digital heritage materials in culturally appropriate ways. In our dealings with the community, we have noted an interest in present-day contributions to existing digital heritage knowledge, principally through the uploading of further stories, interviews, photographs, and other materials – the so-called histories under the bed. Here, in a move that returns us to the political power of database technologies, we hope to see a dispersed articulation of the distinctions between knowledge-makers and consumers, heading instead to a de-institutionalized, democratic process of knowledge sharing.

Developing a culturally appropriate interface is germane to the success of such a project. As curator Jerome McGann (2007) notes, “no database can function without a user interface, and in the case of cultural materials the interface is an especially crucial element of these kinds of digital instruments” (p. 1589). Importantly there is both a precedent, and a groundswell of interest, in Australian Aboriginal communities in working with digital heritage and interface design in culturally appropriate and relevant practices and approaches, which is instructive for the kind of work that we are undertaking with *Journey to Horseshoe Bend*. Over the last decade during the course of *Journey to Horseshoe Bend*'s development phase, a number of other similar projects have emerged in Australia where the chief focus has been on Aboriginal cultural knowledge. The earliest and perhaps most relevant of these to our work is Ara Irititja, a collaborative digital archival database led by John Dallwitz in Western Australia and developed in close collaboration with Aboriginal organizations on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara lands of the far northwest of South Australia. Launched in 2002, Ara Irititja has been updated on numerous occasions and recently formed the basis for a Northern Territory Library database initiative titled *Community Stories*. Researchers and database developers have worked extensively with the various communities to develop a multimedia format that is sensitive to the cultural protocols of the Anangu peoples.

### Conclusion

Accessing and linking the raw materials that both support and extend the narrative world of *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* is redolent of the broader database narrative project that seeks to create multiple pathways and diversify both existing and new relationships between objects. One of the chief aims of our project is not to provide a definitive alternative to *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* through the archive, but to demonstrate through a mode of expressive and representative performativity how different accounts and recollections of late-nineteenth, early twentieth-century Central Australian life – the small worlds of history – feed into and rub against each other to reveal both the interconnectedness and the gaps in the historical record. Users will be able to navigate the central “spine” of the text, but will also have the opportunity to traverse parallel textual spaces to make assessments and, we hope, comment on and add to the narrative so the knowledge base can continue to grow.

For some the question arises as to what might be “lost in translation” when materials are transformed by digitization and presented in a different context, as in the technologized shift from a hard copy version of a book to an electronic database. At the broadest level we are aware that the act of digitizing and hyperlinking the printed text will invite new patterns and modes of reading, principally as it relates to the materialities of textual engagement and the experience of coming into a narrative. In this regard there may well be aspects of the “story” that will be accessed and processed differently, as is the case with any species of electronic writing. With direct reference to *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* one of the chief shifts in the narrative experience that we expect reader-users to encounter as a result of digitization is the process of “imaginative visualization” – the act of seeing and experiencing the story in play. What is worth noting about the hard-copy book version of *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* is that it has no images except for the cover and a frontispiece map. The pre-database reading experience, subsequently, is one where the reader is entirely dependent on how their



“mind’s eye” responds to the “words on the page.” In this way, it might be said then that an electronic database that provides direct visual accompaniment, which was previously left to the imagination, will inevitably alter the experiential qualities of how the reader (e.g., an Aboriginal reader) enters into the spaces of the story and, in this case, conceives of and engages with the landscape and country.

But what we would argue is that our project continues and develops the narrative approach suggested by the “small worlds” structure in accordance with contemporary technological developments. As we have sought to argue, *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* reads like a pre-cursor to hypertext – it almost seems to anticipate it – and, in this way, the work we are undertaking serves to act not as a replacement but as an *extension* to the existing story world proffered by the print text. It is difficult to know if this transformation should be described as a loss, but certainly it can be said that a very different relationship to the visual character of the book will emerge. In this regard it may be compared to a compressed image where the information content of the image remains the same while the file size itself may decrease. In this case, the information content of the book has increased by the database, though the text of the story remains as it is presented in the original book version.

The story of *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* is a “thing in the making.” As we follow the text’s “line of flight” we will continue to examine the full range of strategies and techniques for visually representing and articulating the enlarged story web in order to expand the imaginative and narrative worlds of the work. These explorations will, as we have indicated, span geographic locations of sites and specific totems, conceptual relationships between narratives and elements of place, the historical connectedness and physical migration of the Aranda community over time, cultural ceremonies and myths specific to place, and links to other important motifs in the text. As Cohen (2005) has noted elsewhere, the engagement with the *Horseshoe Bend* story continues to have resonances for contemporary Aranda social practices. The cultural work of articulating a modern social existence in a white-dominated environment, along with an abiding interest in the continuities of tradition, makes cultural practices and the deepening of narrative practices an active, fluid, and dynamic process. While the article is only able to sketch these relationships, it also suggests how the formulation of these interests is related to the full range of remediation strategies available.

## Note

1. The Dreaming or “Tjukurrpa,” as it is translated into Aranda, means to “see and understand the law.” Stories of the Dreaming recall the beginning when “Altyerrengge,” ancestral figures, created the landscape and Aranda Law. These creation narratives capture important knowledge, cultural values and belief systems that are passed down through generations, maintaining culture and connection to country.

## Websites

Ara Irititja Project, <http://www.irititja.com/>  
Australian Dictionary of Biography, <http://adb.anu.edu.au>  
Australian e-Heritage Portal, <http://eheritage.metadata.net>  
Prison Valley, <http://prisonvalley.arte.tv/?lang=en>

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