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Construction of Spatial Narratives in M.D. Coverley's *Califia*

Narratives created in the digital platform, due to the inherent interactivity of the

medium, afford their readers a greater freedom within the text and thus create an

environment resistant to traditional plot development. The problematic marriage between

interactivity and fiction necessitates an approach that embodies an understanding of

narration that is adaptable to the structure of the digital writing environment. In analyzing

the way narrative works in videogames, Henry Jenkins introduces a third term- spatiality

-into the discussion on the relationship between games and stories. He argues that game

designers don't simply tell stories, but rather design worlds:

> Spatial stories are not badly constructed stories; rather, they are stories which
> respond to alternative aesthetic principles, privileging spatial exploration over plot
> development. Spatial stories are held together by broadly defined goals and
> conflicts and pushed forward by the character's movement across the map
> (Jenkins, *Game Design as Narrative Architecture*).

In fact, Jenkins' suggestion of looking at videogames as spatial stories has a broader

applicability that extends beyond this particular genre. In many ways, all authors are

designers of worlds regardless of the medium. But undoubtedly, for those who work

within the digital environment, spatiality has more significance in the making of narrative

than plot development, simply because, it is the reader's movement through a particular

textual space that determines the direction of the narrative.

By arguing for a transformation in the writing space of the digital medium, I will

demonstrate the effects of spatiality on narrative progression in M.D. Coverley's

hyperfiction *Califia*. Michel de Certeau's theory of everyday life that investigates the ways in which the reader reappropriates space will allow me to elaborate on how the extensive use of various types of maps, journals, chronologies, and organizational tools in *Califia* are employed in the development of the narrative while enabling the reader to map out her own trajectories.

The analysis of the narrative development in *Califia* relies on a comprehensive understanding of the transformation of the writing space in the digital platform and the shift in the reader's role within this environment. In describing the writing space as the physical and visual field defined by a particular technology of writing, Jay David Bolter in his book entitled *Writing Space* argues that computers have transformed the writing space into an environment where writing is primarily topographic. As both a visual and verbal description, electronic writing "is not the writing of a place, but rather writing with places, spatially realized topics" (Bolter 25). Such an environment is conducive to topographic writing where "writing in layers is quite natural, and reading the layers is effortless. All the individual paragraphs may be of equal importance in the whole text, which then becomes a network of interconnected writings" (15).

Califia is a hyperfiction that recounts the story of the hunt for the treasure of California. The story, related by three different narrators, Augusta, Calvin, and Kaye, constructs a layered narrative in which three different stories representing alternate realities are juxtaposed to present an overall yet fragmented picture of the story. The reading of *Califia* reveals not only a layered narrative, but a layered reading environment comprised of interconnected documents organized topically. Frequently, the hyperfiction opens multiple windows simultaneously with links to numerous places in the story,

thereby visually reinforcing its inherent layered structure. Moreover, *Califia* is comprised of a network of interconnected documents such as chronology of events, various family trees, journals, letters, and topographical, seismological, and sky maps of California. In order to facilitate orientation amidst the abundance of documents, the reader is equipped with numerous organizational tools, including trail lookouts, landmarks, and the kit bag containing the viewmasters and other useful documents.

The structural alteration of the writing space has inevitably redefined the role of the reader in this environment. Michel de Certeau's analysis of the underlying mechanics of the processes of consumption and production in everyday life, which manifests itself in various daily activities such as speaking, walking, and reading, yields an insightful framework in delineating the function of the reader in the digital platform. De Certeau elaborates a theory of spatial stories that analyzes how the space is used in everyday practices. His distinction between what he defines as *place* and its use as *space* can be employed to analyze the complex role of the reader in the digital environment. The spatial category he designates as *place* is a well-defined, fully structured area which the reader observes from the outside. Viewing a *place* is similar to viewing Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center, where the reader is transformed into a voyeur, a god-like figure, distanced from the fiction that lies underneath and able to get a totalizing picture of the actual *place*. But the ordinary practitioners of the city live "down below," and as walkers of the city, they experience the urban text as a multi-dimensional *space* that eludes an exhaustive totalizing picture (93). As unrecognized producers, the walkers of the city trace indeterminate trajectories that are apparently meaningless, because these trajectories do not cohere with the constructed, written, and prefabricated

space through which they move (34). Ultimately, the difference between the concepts of *place* and *space* is one of *seeing* and *going* or viewing a *map* and taking a *tour*. De Certeau argues that the construction of stories is based on the interplay of the two: "[Stories] traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories" (115). In other words, stories transform places into spaces or vice versa and organize the play of changing relationships between the two (118).

Spatial construction is the underlying impetus behind the narrative of *Califia*. As N. Katherine Hayles notes, the work embeds the verbal narrative in a topographic environment in which the word becomes interwoven with the world. (Hayles 41). The reader is urged to take journeys in California to initiate the construction of the story space. To this end, *Califia* is structured as a roadmap which, if followed, will guide the reader in her wanderings and eventually lead her to the discovery of the lost treasure. Accordingly, the narrative begins at the starting point called the Roadhead that suggests, from the beginning, that the story is designed as a journey in which the reader's itineraries within the textual space will lead to the discovery of the lost treasure of Califia.

The narrative in *Califia* impinges particularly on the tension between what de Certeau characterizes as *place* and its use as *space*. The narrators act not only as story tellers, but also as the readers of their own heritage. They come across numerous documents pertaining to their families and the history of the hunt for the treasure of Califia. As readers, the narrators alternate in their use of the textual environment as *place* and as *space* which require them to assume different roles within the narrative.

Miscellaneous road maps, documents, star maps, and summaries they uncover during their investigation grant them the status of the voyeur where they are able to view the past and present from a detached point of view while inferring a comprehensive picture of the narrative. But they simultaneously reappropriate these documents to transform them into spaces through which they can travel.

Calvin, adopting the role of the tour guide, assists the reader in her journey in *Califia* by illustrating the overall organization of the story with the image of the Solar Table. He assembles the stories into four journeys, each leading to separate directions marked on the solar map. His suggested order begins with the journey south, entitled "Comets in the Yard" which takes the narrators and the reader a few blocks, down Fairfax Avenue in Hollywood, to Paradise Home, the nursing home of Violet Summerland, Augusta's mother suffering from Alzheimer's disease. The journey east, called "Wind, Sand, and Stars," leads the narrators into the desert, where the windmills and goldmines are located, to meet with Milton Kramer the swindler who is attempting to obtain Augusta's mining rights on her property. The journey north, described as "Night of the Bear," is a trip they make to San Simeon. Along the way the narrators receive visits from spiritual presences and participate in a plane ride where they get a birds-eye view of the Summerland-Beveridge mission trail as they would investigating a map. The hyperfiction concludes with the journey west, entitled "The Journey Out," which brings a choice of endings and a suggestion of beginnings (*Califia*).

Apart from the Solar Table designed specifically to assist the empirical reader, each narrator constructs a distinct mental map, characterized as topological maps, representing the process or the strategy of understanding the organization of information.

Kaye claims that the difficulty in constructing a complete picture does not arise from the lack of enough documents left from their ancestors: "…the difficulty is that the linkages between the papers are missing. Instead, we [the narrators] have moveable, slippery artifacts" (*Califia*, The City Builders). She believes that it is possible to reconstruct the original relationships with intuition, read the mystery in the light of the mystery. The topological maps emerge out of the individual attempts of each narrator to reconstruct the original relationships through their wanderings within the textual space of the discovered documents. These mental maps create alternative readings of the materials that coexist in the same environment and offer the reader different paths to follow. Augusta's path gives a chronological recount of events in the present. As the narrator of here and now, she sees information as a neatly organized static file cabinet and maintains that documents are not dances, stars, or features of the landscape. Calvin, as a film director by trade, is unable to suppress his flair for the theatrical and projects the Califia stories as an intricate dance Cabala that displays all parts of the narrative as turning wheels of possibilities. His projection incorporates movement, rhythmic interaction, and a twirling dance into these stories. Calvin's path equips the reader primarily with navigation advice, data, diagrams, and Docudramas that are partly fact but mainly fiction. Kaye, as the third narrator, understands that Califia stories exist everywhere in cosmos, including the stars and the wind. Her account of the story displays a keen sense for the rhythms of natural elements. In attempting to uncover a hidden connection between natural elements and the gold, she creates a layered map that links the Big Dipper to California gold mines and to earthquakes faults that might have buried these mines, hoping that a composite map would reveal the actual location of the treasure.

The reader is encouraged to create her own itineraries within the textual space which may or may not coincide with those of the narrators. In the forward to the story, the narrators acknowledge that there are as many ways to explore as there are seekers and hence suggest that the reader blaze her own trail. Their hope is that as the reader chooses her own way among the paths, she will discover more than they know and her created stories will determine the real location of the lost cache. Predicting the frustration and disorientation that might result from exploring an uncharted story space, they remind her that she can always choose to stay on a path if she follows their footsteps, indicated in the story with actual footprints (Coverley, *Califia* Roadhead).

To avoid trapping the reader within a single trajectory, the three narratives cross paths frequently during the development of the story. Each one is interconnected with others at numerous points and cannot exist independently. The reader who decides to begin her journey in one of the paths may find herself inadvertently thrown off to someone else's path or vice versa. Ultimately, the interweaving of different paths in *Califia* builds a narrative structure resistant to any kind of a totalized version of the story that obligates the reader to personally explore the textual space.

The strategic use of structural tools such as hyperlinks and images facilitate the reader's exploration of the story space, thereby instigating a narrative movement that progresses through space as well as in time. The careful naming of some of the hyperlinks that advance the reader from one scene to the other suggests that the reader will spatially move onto another location once she clicks the link. For example, a link named "North on the 210" implies that clicking the link will take the reader north on highway 210, or a link named "To Paradise Home" will take her back to the nursing

home where Violet Summerland resides. These links function as directions that help the reader navigate through space. Seen in this perspective, hyperlinks serve the purpose of both enabling navigation within the story and within the textual space of the narrative.

The alternation between textual segments and their related images serve a similar navigational function that generates spatial movement. These images advance the narrative by providing the reader with visual elements that depict the actual story space. For example, a narrative piece explaining the mystery behind the painted cave called the Skull, where the treasure is reburied by one of the characters, is followed by a picture of the cave; the segment about the Windmills that Milton Cramer has built to cover up his mining activities on Augusta's property is followed by various images depicting the mills; or the text relating the Summerland cabin at Fish Camp is succeeded by the picture of their findings in the cabin. The strategic placement of the images that take the reader to the actual locations of the events reinforces the movement begun with the use of hyperlinks.

The spatial movement, however, is routinely halted during the reading process with brief recapitulation of past and future events. These brief interruptions provide the reader with a sense of the overall picture of the narrative by clarifying the connections between the story segments. Each section of the story includes a summary, a trail lookout, and an index of the landmarks identifying the significant points in that particular journey. The trail lookout is a list comprised of links to the random access themes, the landmarks page, the trailheads of the paths of each narrator, the kit bag, and finally the point of convergence where the paths of the narrators meet. The page of landmarks, on the other hand, uses images that link to the turning points of the story and to the

trailheads. The reader has the option of either entering the paths of the narrators directly or choose one of the topics specified in the trail lookout or the landmark to initiate her journey.

Other organizational tools such as viewmasters permit additional interruptions within the flow of the story. A viewmaster is a tool that acts as a source of reference which the reader can consult at any time during the process of reading. Respectively named as the Archives, Star Maps, and Map Case, they are structured according to how each narrator views the inherent organization of the Califia documents. Augusta's viewmaster, organized as the Archives, mirrors a file cabinet and is described as an electronic gadget that lets the reader return to Augusta's study to consult documents. The Star Maps, which are included in Kaye's viewmaster, contain information about celestial data and star patterns that function as a guide to Califia's hot spots. Calvin's Map Case, on the other hand, allows you to check out your location in the fictional world or the real one. The Map Case contains the topological maps of the narrators, the treasure maps from different sources and various ancient and modern local area/topographical maps of the region. These maps are complemented with Calvin's "need to know info and index" which includes family trees, timelines, and a summary of the remaining important questions.

While the organizational tools halt the spatial movement to primarily map out the organization of the narrative, the extensive use of roadmaps and journey maps do so to allow the reader to get a snapshot of the itinerary during which the narrative develops. The shift in the role of the reader from a participator to that of a voyeur is unmistakable in these instances. As opposed to roadmaps which are scattered throughout, journey maps

appear at the end of each section as a visual summary of the entire journey. They provide the reader with an opportunity to trace the journey from the point of departure until the very end. Unlike the organizational tools, these maps are interspersed at various points in the development of the narrative and give the reader less control over when they appear within the story.

The manner in which the reader reappropriates the textual space is determined by how this space is presented in the narrative. Designed to be a virtual treasure map, *Califia* invites the reader to discover the lost cache of California through her wanderings within the story space. These wanderings, however, are frequently paused by maps, documents, and outlines to allow the reader to orient herself within the story. Ultimately, the reader's journeys and the adventures she encounters in these journeys guide her in the exploration of uncharted areas not easily visible from the outside. In effect, with these itineraries the reader is able to establish curious links between available information and create a unified sense of the disjointed documents, thereby resulting in the construction of the narrative that foregrounds spatiality as the determining factor in how the story develops.

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