Voices from Everywhere

Sue Thomas

Professor of New Media, De Montfort University, England

http://travelsinvirtuality.typepad.com

The trAce Online Writing Centre[1] was founded in 1995 at Nottingham Trent University, England. It is currently being archived with funding provided by the UK National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts, and has also been selected as a site of national cultural importance to be archived by the British Library. In the last ten years it has hosted a compelling series of international online writing projects featuring snapshots of everyday life which have become primary sources for researchers of contemporary narrative. This paper considers the universality of these voices from everywhere and examines some of the stories contributors have told about themselves and their everyday lives.

One of the topics proposed by this conference is a discussion of narrative uses for emerging technologies. As Mike Sharples says in *How We Write*[2]: 'When we first invent a technology we tend to use it in ways that feel familiar'. In the narratives surveyed here, trAce aimed to create experiences for new web users which were accessible and easy to use. These objectives fitted with the requirements of the organisation's funding, which came mostly from Arts Council England, but were also very much a feature of trAce's ethos of providing creative opportunities to a very broad range of users. The technologies used to create them were of varying complexity and ranged from basic email and simple web-forms running on Access databases to programming in both Perl and Cold Fusion.

Although most studies of text-based interactions on the internet have been written about online communities, where participation is ongoing and contributions usually multiple, the works described here are, for the most part, one-off contributions posted by visitors who have come to the site for that specific purpose and may never return to it. Whilst trAce itself was a significant international online community in the late 90s/early 2000s, and many of the contributors were already members of that group, there were many others who had simply been attracted by the project and desired to contribute.

So these texts have not come from the oral tradition of online community discourse[3], but are more like individual messages-in-a-bottle. They came in the form of valedictions, memorials, revelatory texts, inscriptions and confessionals. Many mark a moment, person, object or memory with a tantalising glimpse of a longer personal story. Almost

all appear to have been carefully polished before submitting to the website, not casually posted in first draft as is typical of so many live internet texts. Despite the care taken to prepare them, however, they generally do not seem to be offered up as literature, but more as a form of open source witness.

The internet is littered with personal accounts of dubious veracity written from various identity positions which may not entirely reflect the real lives of the typists. It is important, therefore, to note that the texts from these projects *feel* authentic, although it is difficult to quantify exactly why that should be. Here are some examples from a range of projects:
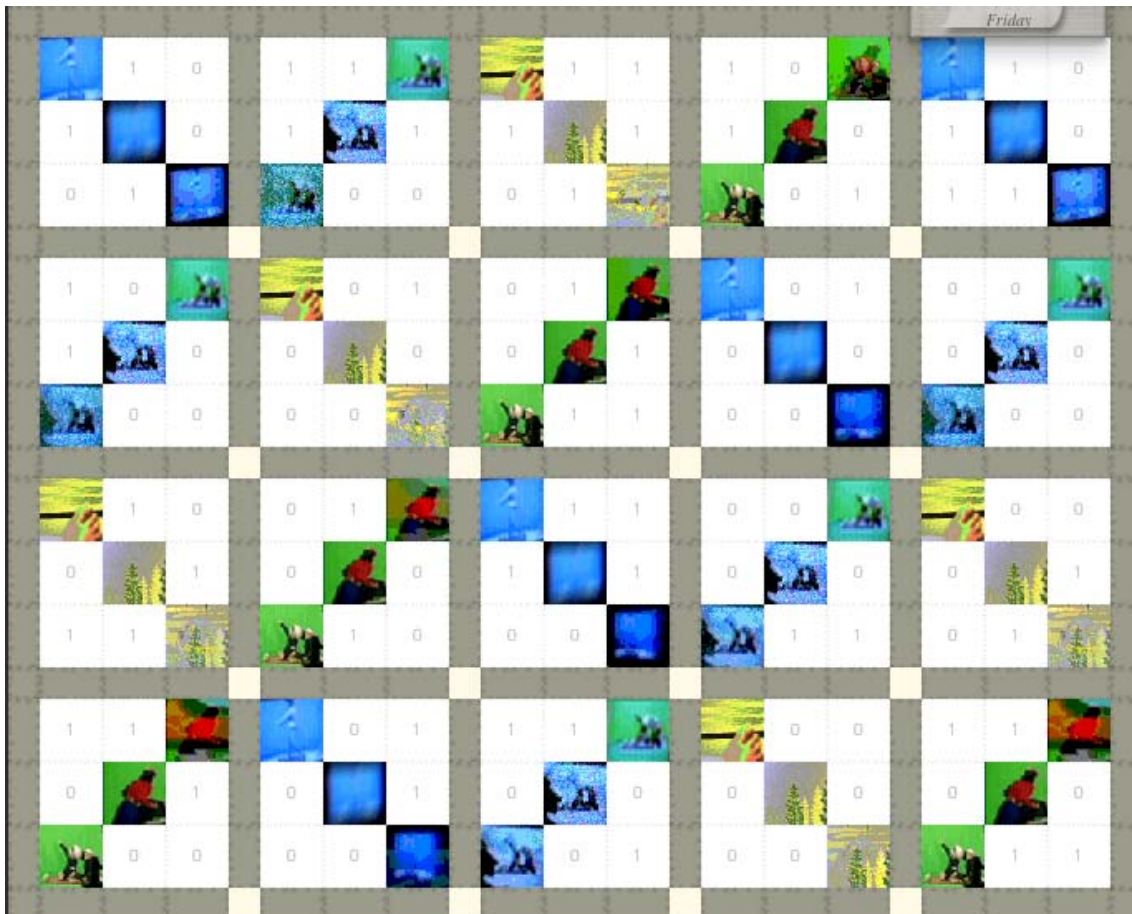
Figure 1

The Noon Quilt (Fig.1) was conceived as a virtual fabric of noon-time impressions by writers around the globe, gathered and stitched together on the web. The project took place over 1998/9 and was developed in several different formats. At that time, the trAce community was growing very rapidly and was looking for a writing project that would demonstrate the connections being made in cyberspace. Designer Teri Hoskin and

Perl programmer Ali Graham, both in Adelaide, Australia, agreed to collaborate on the project and it was planned via email and several meetings in MOOs and chatrooms. Noon seemed a good focus, since we all experience it every day, although of course in different time-zones, and so trAce asked contributors to simply look out of their windows at noon and write up to a hundred words on what they could see. The Noon Quilt opened for submissions in September 1998, and in December of that year trAce gave away the open course code so that interested programmers could build their own quilts. The following year, in 1999, a grant from Arts Council England funded the publication of a book of the Noon Quilt and so the artefact was eventually available in three formats – a website, a piece of software, and a physical book. It has come to be seen as the signature project of the trAce Online Writing Centre and was one of the very first collaborative art projects on the web.

So what did people say about themselves? Many used the opportunity to pause and think about the moment:

> Catherine Francis in Manhattan:
> There's a feeling here of being in a manmade canyon, light bouncing off the walls of windows before arriving at street level. I'm midway, looking up at sky, looking down at a street of cars and buses and trucks, a sidewalk flowing with walkers and small dogs in sweaters.[4]

> Dean Kiley in Melbourne, Australia:
> There's a gum tree on the footpath outside flowering with birds, finches in tidy dull-brown aprons fussing from branch to branch, mynas looking stupid with those bright yellow scuba masks balanced on their beaks, nervous little wrens of a colour you can't quite name. A dog, business-like and too busy to stop, strides past, late for some appointment. An old Ethiopian woman in a tent of powderblue silk, sidles along the path, chequered in sun sieved through the trees, dragging a small boy who speaks in the universal language called 'tantrum'.[5]

Some looked back into the past:

> Froilan Fernandez, Venezuela:
> I see my godfather's house. When I was a child, I enjoyed to play in that street. On the afternoon, everyone got out and sat on the sidewalks, waiting for the sunset. My father tilted his chair against the wall, and whistled old melodies. Time went by slowly.[6]

There was no form to fill in – users emailed their contributions to Teri Hoskin who moderated and lightly edited where necessary before uploading them to the site. The result is a smooth series of texts presented in an attractive format and featuring often quite gently pensive responses to the stimulus question. Our next project, **Lost** (Fig.2), subverted all of that and, having originated the form as it were, we set out to disrupt it.
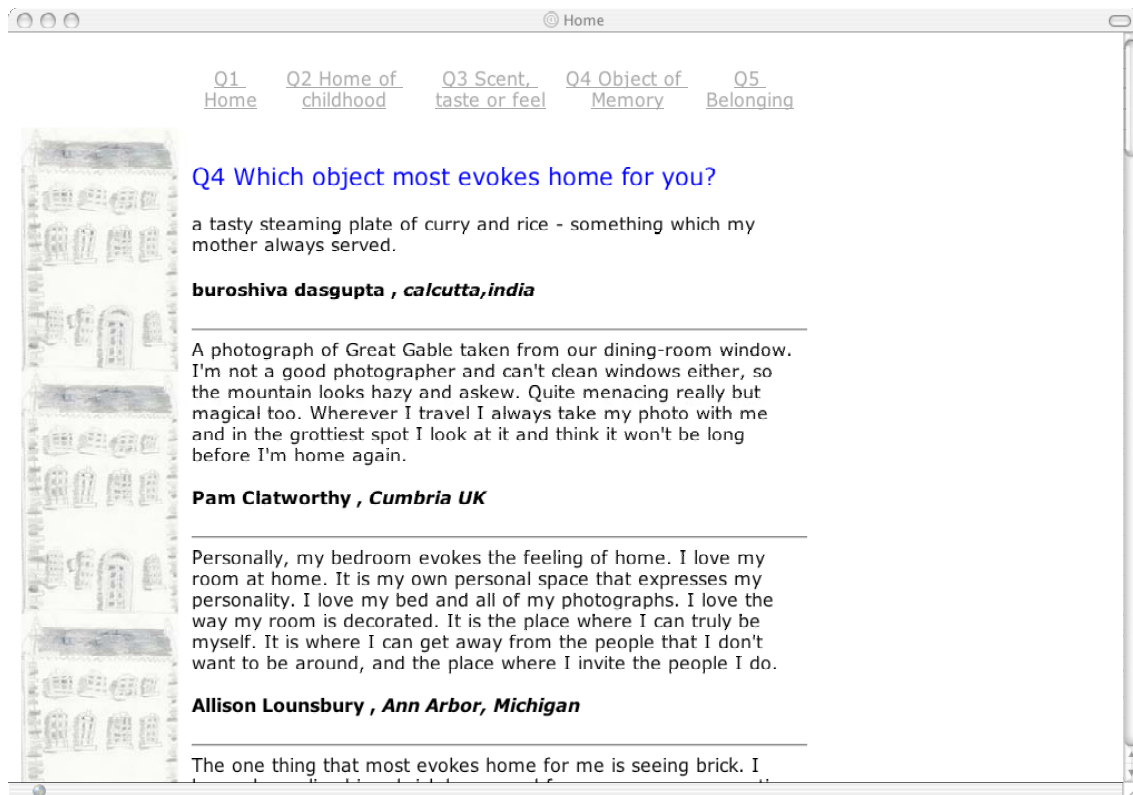

Figure 2

Lost[7] was initiated in 1999 by New York-based net artist Alan Sondheim, Online Writer-in-Residence at trAce at the time. The website was built by Simon Mills to instructions from Sondheim, who wanted it to be an intense collection of 'splits, disappearance, loss and trembling'. The direction was very basic - write about something you have lost – and the website itself appeared to be under stress, constantly shivering and shaking.

Although it featured a small submission form, the movement of the page meant it was extremely difficult to enter text. When the user finally managed to write an entry and submit it, they received a 404 error apologising for the loss of the work. This function caused predictable frustration amongst users until they realised it was part of the functionality, and moved on to find their entry displayed with the others. In this project, entries were entirely unmoderated, unedited and anonymous. They went live immediately on a plain text page where they were starkly displayed in monochrome. Accidental repeats were left to stand, spelling was uncorrected, layout was just as it landed. The result was a poignant, often harsh, catalogue of lost relatives, betrayed passions, mislaid objects, and dashed hopes, as contributors listed the things and the people they had lost:

- my trust. the woman i loved most proved dishonest and ungrateful
- i lost the freshness of my thoughts, then i lost belief in my thoughts and now i have lost control over my thoughts
- My grandmother's rhinestone brooch
- brother
- my temper and my old cell phone
- my sense of judgement with men
- 5 minutes of my time.
- i lost my baby three months ago today
- lost the knack of fooling myself. used to be real good at it could do it for days months years. hell I fooled myself for two decades once.
- lot of time and hope
- My ImagiNATIOn
- Great Uncle George's medals
- my mother – and I regret my lack of care

Lost was the place to visit when one needed to mourn, a virtual mausoleum which swallowed up sorrows whole and left the user anonymous and perhaps, somehow, purged. It is harsher than *Griefnet*, for example, a website for mourners which provides some basic templates[8] - choose a background from stars, clouds, doves, sailboat, flowers, or paws and coarser than the slick interface of *Legacy Archives*[9]. *Lost* did something different. It is an anonymous theatre of loss, a jarring, shivering skeleton of a website offering no comfort.

Figure 3

trAce's third group website, **Home**[10] (Fig.3), itself began from loss. It originated in 2000 from a collaborative project on the subject of Home which had been planned with the New Perspectives theatre group but which encountered problems and could not be completed as intended. The **Home** web project was an attempt to salvage some of the original idea. It incorporated aspects of both the **Noon Quilt** and **Lost** – like the **Noon Quilt**, it appealed to a sense of physical and emotional belonging, but like **Lost**, entries appeared immediately on the website and went largely unmoderated, subject only to occasional checking for duplicate entries. It is interesting to note that although the site was live for four years, finally closing to new work in December 2004, it very rarely attracted offensive entries. Certainly, many entries look pre-prepared, as though they had been carefully edited before submission.

In her essay 'At Home in Cyberspace'[11] Elayne Zalis says of **Home**: 'it encourages web makers concerned with self-representation and other forms of portraiture to consider notions of home in an expanded social, historical and spatial context'. The project invited users to answer all or any of the following questions:

1. What does the word 'home' mean to you? (182 responses)

2. Please describe the home of your childhood. (102 responses)
3. Please describe the scent, taste or feel of home. (87 responses)
4. Which object most evokes home for you? (67 responses)
5. Where do you feel you 'properly belong' now? (87 responses)

In reply to 'What does the word 'home' mean to you?', Buroshiva Dasgupta in Calcutta wrote:

> home is where i can move without a mask. a place where i am not misunderstood, cared or may be even listened to. Affection is an important ingredient for home.[12]

Adelle Taylor, a homesick freshman in Lexington, Kentucky who, asked to describe the scent, taste or feel of home, wrote longingly of

> home cooked meals. Fried chicken, chicken soup, mashed potatoes, chocolate cake, and clean laundry[1].

There is a sharp difference, however, between memories of early life, and statements of where home is now. Contributors were asked: 'Where do you feel you 'properly belong' now?' The most common replies echoed those of Karen and Nick, in Nottingham and London respectively:

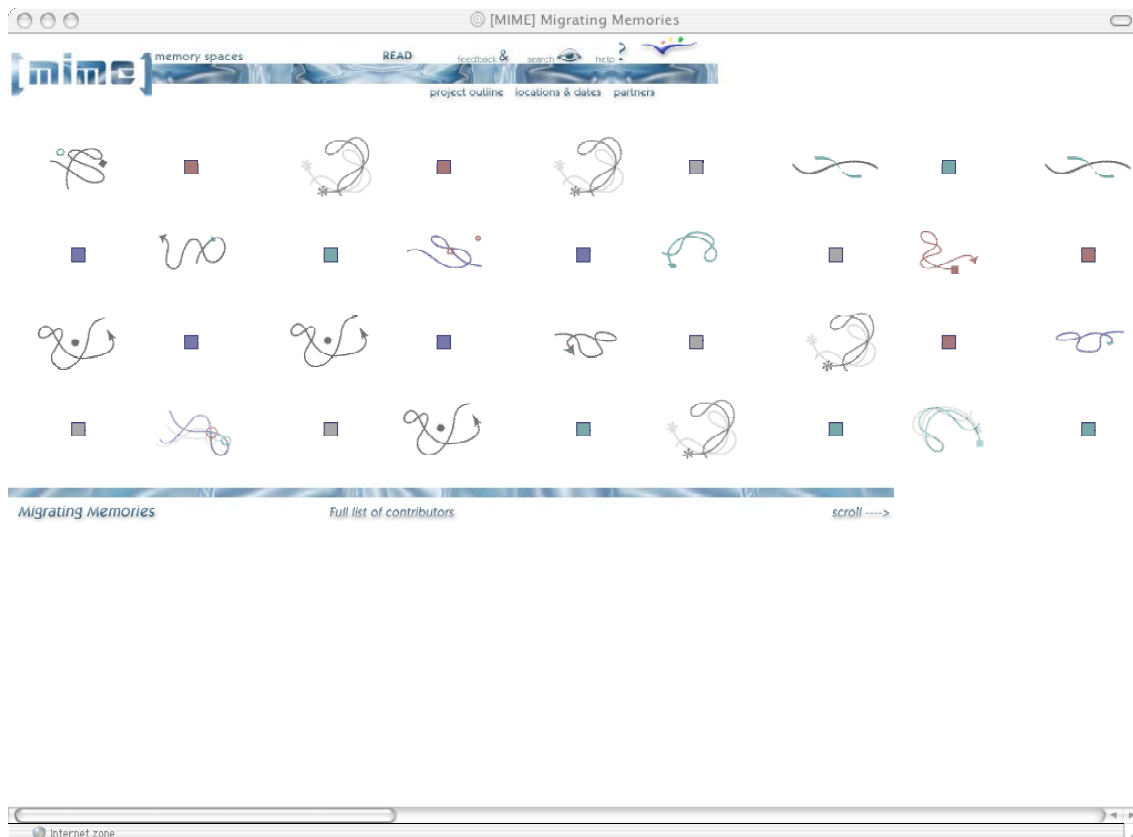> I belong in my head.[2]

> and

> Home is purely a state of mind.[3]

---

[1] http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/home/log/Home/test5.cfm?story_start=21
[2] http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/home/log/Home/test3.cfm
[3] http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/home/log/Home/test3.cfm?story_start=21

Figure 4

Home was also a powerful element in the 2001 project **Migrating Memories**[13] (Fig.4). trAce partnered with museums in Tampere, Finland, and Malmo, Sweden, to produce a website and travelling exhibition for the Culture 2000 Programme of the European Union. **Migrating Memories** gathered personal narratives from asylum seekers and refugees living in Sweden, Finland and Great Britain, and presented them in a triple translation format on the web, as well as in a curated museum exhibition of personal items on temporary loan from the participants.

Many of the contributions in **Migrating Memories** had been developed in writing workshops, and when The British Council, inspired by The Noon Quilt, commissioned two region-specific quilts, it also set up a series of workshops to produce texts for the websites. In 2004 the Council asked trAce to build and support a **Dawn Quilt**[14] for South Asia, connecting writers in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka, and in 2005 they commissioned a second, the **Road Quilt**[15] **(Fig.5)** for Central and Eastern Europe embracing Azerbaijan, Georgia, Hungary, Romania, and Russia.

Figure 5

The web-projects discussed here are very varied but they have a number of shared features. The authors wrote very personally and sometimes with great intimacy despite the fact that they knew the work would be publicly exhibited online to an international audience. Indeed, that sense of addressing the global community of cyberspace seems to be tacitly acknowledged in many of the texts.

These narratives are simple and the technologies are relatively unsophisticated, but there is a powerful sense of universality, whether they are talking about missing their homes, or losing loved ones, or following in childhood footsteps.

In the Road Quilt, Anna Laskai, a student in Budapest, writes about her personal journey, but it could just as easily be the journey we are taking together as we move through this very transitional period towards a fully-realised global digital community. She wrote:

A long time ago I started walking on this road and now I have to finish it. What's at the end? I don't know, but this road, my road, is going to take me there.[4]

[1] *http://trace.ntu.ac.uk*
[2] *Sharples, M. 1999,* How We Write*, Routledge, London. p.187*
[3] *For more on this, see my article 'Walter Ong and the problem of writing about LambdaMOO' trAce Online Writing Centre, November 2004, http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/Process/index.cfm?article=126*
[4] *http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/quilt/patches/patch_00050.htm*
[5] *http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/quilt/patches/patch_00049.htm*
[6] *http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/quilt/patches/patch_00031.htm*
[7] *http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/lost/ contains 568 entries*
[8] *http://www.griefnet.org/memcard.html*
[9] *http://www.legacyarchives.com/*
[10] *http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/home/ contains 525 entries*
[11] *Zalis, E. 'At Home in Cyberspace', in* Biography*, ed. Zuern,J. Vol.26, No.1, Winter 2003, pp.86-7.*
[12] *http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/home/log/Home/test1.cfm*
[13] *http://migratingmemories.net*
[14] *http://www.literaturequilt.org/dawnquilt/*
[15] *http://www.literaturequilt.org/roadquilt/*

[4] http://www.literaturequilt.org/roadquilt/contribution.cfm?reader=43