

Views From Above: Locative Narrative and the Landscape

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*Figure 1: Using 34 North 118 West.
Participants are triggering narratives of layers of lost history
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Abstract

Developments in locative technology, location-based narrative and the expansion of the research and work allow new hybrid narrative forms, but more importantly, allows the entire landscape to be “read” as a digitally enhanced physical landscape.

Introduction to landscape as narrativized space

Picture a suburban mini mall. It has a nail salon, a dingy store to buy wholesale cigarettes, a convenience store and a pet store. Now, picture it 15 years earlier and the supermarket is having its grand opening. Next, imagine a motel that stood for 30 years. The location is the same. It is the same spot where, in 1935, during a severe thunderstorm, an influential blues record was recorded. The mini mall stands now, but all of these other places once inhabited the same block.

If you put a record needle down on the grooves of that blues record, it will trigger the sounds of that lost night and the building long erased. Locative media and locative narrative aims to allow the place itself to trigger all of its lost incarnations and their artifacts awash in time.

The art form of locative media runs parallel with developing locative technologies (GPS, wireless, augmented reality and more integrated visualization tools). This synthesis utilizes and redefines functionality and readings

of space and land. The possibilities are wide open. With the advent of locative narrative, it is now possible to not only augment physical locations with digital information, but to allow the places to be “read”.

The cities and the landscape as a whole can now be navigated through layers of information and narrative of what is occurring and has occurred. Narrative, history, and scientific data are a fused landscape, not a digital augmentation, but a multi-layered, deep and malleable resonance of place.

Artists have long searched for ways to move art into the streets from the galleries and museums. The philosophies of these desires resonate in the current emerging field of locative narrative. Land art was a movement in the late 1960s that sought to move attention out of the gallery system and traditional art forms and into natural forms and the landscape itself. Land art addressed itself to physical locations in nature, their materials and their processes.

Locative media allows these concepts to develop a form that is out of the gallery and in the physical world. It is experientially driven and offers layers of information and a hyper-textual sense of linkage and flux. The works are developed to be experienced in the physical world with digital augmentation, limited only by what is selected in terms of location, types of data, and tone.

There are many processes, cycles, uncertainties, cross patterns and parallelisms along the landscape. Narrative written utilizing GPS and wireless is designed to be triggered on a laptop, PDA or cell phone (perhaps eventually even with spectacles) represents a “narrative archeology”, a reading of physical place as one moves through the world with story elements and sections accessed at specific locations.

My introduction into narrative and the landscape

I found years ago that I had tried so many experiments with text and form that I had hit a barrier and felt lost. There had to be something that could explode established experimental forms in new directions and yet retain the ballast of meaning and clarity in more “traditional” text and the visual. I made notes and sketches for projects with texts composed on the sides of mountains, projected on clouds by powerful lights at night and in riverbeds. These projects were to be edited by nature’s processes of growth and erasure. I wrote a book of short stories which each arose from mundane objects passed by a narrator in another story as he drove.

The locative narrative was what I had been trying to develop. I had been searching for ways to incorporate forms so experimental as to be never “finished” with an open architecture, connection to flux and uncertainty and yet a cohesiveness and tight sense of subtext found more in traditional narrative forms. This was extremely frustrating as it seemed like working with diametric opposites, yet it seemed feasible in some form. The opportunity to work on 34 north, described later in this article, brought the first epiphany in this regard. Narrative could be composed not of selected details to establish tone and sense of place, but could be of actual physical places, objects and buildings. It was as though the typewriter or computer keyboard had fused with fields, walls, streetlights; the tool set was suddenly of both the textual world and the physical world.

The next epiphany was that the places selected created a non-linearity as the person moving with the locative device would be exposed to exponential possibilities regarding which path they took, how long they explored and what combinations of individual narrative short shorts they triggered. This meant that the “story” was of the places in a certain area and that the ultimate author was the movement on a map and in the location. This was not so much about reaching the end of the narrative, but of “reading” a place and all of its lost history, unseen information and faces in time. This “Narrative Archeology” was to be locative narrative as narrative and art, but also of history, archeology, ethnography and all information of an area in the landscape.

Locative narrative constructs and form

In a sense, the ultimate end-author in locative narrative is the movement and patterns of the person navigating the space. The narrative is dictated by their choices, aesthetic bias in the physical world toward certain sections, buildings or objects to move toward and investigate and their duration and breadth of movement.

The narrative is composed in sections, but is edited by the movements of the person with the locative device. The work is edited onto physical space as non-linear and spatially configured. The texts are pulled from eras in time, from lost buildings and artifacts formed by fusing narrative with historical and scientific data. Locative narrative allows the clarity of more traditional narrative forms to be fused with experimental forms and editing structure.

The sequencing of trigger points and narrativized information creates multiple non-linear experiences and informational narratives in a space. The building of subtext can come in multiple paths. The sequence builds in references, metaphor and sense of larger contexts and emerging patterns. A person moving in a place with a cell phone or laptop activates narratives at key locations as set by the artist/author. The person's movement determines what sequence equals the work, the time spent determines the end authorship of its length. The narrative is now constructed spatially and in terms of what is and what is lost. The story space is now both the physical world and its augmentation.

Another key element is the author selecting type(s) of information in relation to the properties of each location. The tone of information and how it is experienced is vital and may be lush and exuberant of a rich unseen past, or a bleak condemnation of what has been forgotten, erased or gentrified.

This was the essence of the project called *34 North 118 West* which I wrote and developed conceptually with Jeff Knowlton and Naomi Spellman, and which may be considered to be the first locative narrative project.

34 North 118 West (2002)

The project *34 North 118 West* [1] was conceived when Jeff Knowlton contacted me to discuss the possibility of a project looking at the similarities between GPS, space, information packets, and the early railroad and city infrastructure of Los Angeles. We researched and found no similar projects.

There were earlier projects utilizing GPS, but they were not using it as spatial narrative. With Naomi Spellman, we researched the history of a 4-block area of Los Angeles around the original freight depot that brought in raw materials for the development of early Los Angeles. Patterns and shifts began to emerge showing the multiple use over time of certain sites.

The project *34 North 118 West* used a slate laptop with GPS, headphones, and an interactive map to generate a narrative (see figure 1, page 1) The map had graphic hot spots that marked narratives with trigger points set to latitude and longitude. As the participant moved, they would determine what sequence would be enabled based on how far they moved and in which patterns they traveled.

Most of the building dates from when the area was built up around the railroads and was the key hub for raw materials by rail for early Los Angeles. The artifacts experienced were not immediate, but were imagined and invisible, ghosts of what had been forgotten, shifted away from or erased.

Rich layers of history and experience seemed to emerge, begging to be made into being again and revealing the forgotten and less immediate city that had once been Los Angeles, stories came from not only specific places, but years, eras, lost layers in time.

“I would love to spend the day in the dome here at La Grande.....watch.....well.....the day....see the changes.....little thingsin the sky.....shadows...the light different coming in.....morning turned to afternoon...the light brighter.....anyway.....I'm in the kitchen.....my mind drifts a lot more as we cook the hot dinners....it's not just that it is lateits.....steamthe flames.....The drama of it all....not like some cold sandwiches and salads..... turkey on rye with mayo.....regular salad...a pile of lettuce and tomato put on a plate..... servedA cooked porterhouse steak.....the way the meats change colors as they cook...the shape changing ... the noise and flames.....it's like a train burning just after a crash when we serve itit isreally.....accidentsslow little accidents.....Like a hot ham and cheese.....the way it melts.....the neat little cheddar square..... gonemelted away.....but there it is” (1944) (truncated from longer text).

The above text triggers as the viewer/participant faces a trash-encrusted electrified fence and a numbingly barren storage facility. This is where the La Grande station once stood in all of its glory and glamor as a work of architecture and as the primary passenger station in Los Angeles. The narrator is one of many Latina women in the 1940s that worked around the railroads in Los Angeles.

The last line of this section of the triggered text is weighted as a larger metaphor beyond the station that once stood. The phrase “gone, melted away, but there it is” refers to the floating in time of what once was and now is lost. The original domed building, its beauty, the era and the memory of the wave of women like the narrator, have all melted away in time, only to be revived by our technology.

“35 years I cleared the tracks. Those men, along the rails, tired. Death by train we called it. They waited and wandered. Hoped....for the sound that comes too late. To take them from this life.... It was my job to assist.....to help.....kind words, or help clear the tracks after the impact. Such failures, My failures, Such small horrors. And it is not the most dramatic: an eye open tomato red with blood, a nose with ice covered nostril hairs that looked like a crab emerging from a shell, an ear lying by a man's feet like some dead wingless bird, a cheek punctured with teeth exposed, a wound open steaming in the snow. Those are so few, so specific, so clearly cut from men with faces I cannot help but still see. It is what never comes clear, not faces, not expressions, not the dignity of person, something that had a name. There is a sort of mutant slot machine, it comes to me at night: an odd collection, ever shifting, not bells and lemons but eyes, scars, blood, mouths, wounds, meat, an eye hanging alone gleaming wet and alien yet from some lost moment in 35 years, a nostril disconnected a failing island of memory from some dead man's face like an odd little lost cave. Those are the ones I truly failed.” (1946).

This text triggers at the edge of a large dirty lot as a remnant of old railroad tracks becomes briefly visible under layers of street asphalt, rising briefly like some metal sea snake. The tracks create a physical metaphor for this man's life of broken dark memories of unfinished faces and the narrative continues to play as the participant walks to the end of the large open lot. It is as though the physical place and the tone of the man's memory from decades ago are tonally the same dark sparse place, as though each is commenting on each other.

The man who collected the mutilated corpses from the tracks (a brutal secondary job on the railroad) feels the indignity of the incompleteness of his memory as though he has failed their lives and their sad ends by losing the details in time. The same is true of places in cities and the landscape and the incompleteness of what is known of the past, the incompleteness of what is known, the indignity of the vague.

The juxtaposition of past and present is intended to act as a commentary on the lost versions of the city and area from the early 1900s. The material selected to reference and construct narratives establishes a tone, layers of place in time, and, with the use of audio as one navigates, creates an odd feeling of being aware of two places at once.

Narrative Archaeology

A few months into the research and conceptualization process, I was walking out of the Los Angeles Downtown Library when I realized that as exciting as it was to use technology to add a layer of information to locations, this was a minimal development compared with the act of bringing into resonance what was already present but unseen.

The greater development was to instead use technology to place the artifacts of place lost over time into the present. It was akin to first using a microscope and just getting a feel for its ability to see tiny detail in what you placed on the slide and then seeing an unused switch. The switch, when clicked, suddenly allowed you to view a sense of what the slide saw looking back up at you. This is an odd analogy, but it was like that in the sense that it isn't simply about laying narrative and data as one layer of augmentation on top of the physical world, the greater importance is in allowing what it was there to "speak" of all the layers and density of information that exists in any single location.

Narrative Archaeology was an opening up of a channel between the humanities, sciences, narrative and art, all in the physical world. The applications had great potential. History could be taught in locations as it happened or in simulations in open spaces as laid out instead of in the classroom. The lost buildings, eras, people, events and information of places could be inserted into the experiential interface of walking and observing. The narratives could elucidate what textbooks held in far-flung libraries and in what was researched from old documents. This could agitate lost layers of time into being in the present in collusion or juxtaposition as selected.

I named this "Narrative Archaeology" as it is similar to digs for physical artifacts in archaeology, but it is now layers pulled from research and then triggered/found by the person walking the area with a locative device and audio. Narrative Archaeology initially focused on city centers and areas with buildings long standing through layers of events, population flux, changes in land usage and also of the places where the original buildings and older infrastructure were gone.

Narrative Archaeology [2] clearly applies to all areas of the landscape. There are shifts in time and places remaining or erased in many rural areas, suburban areas and, more importantly, information and changes in the uncharted, open and wild landscapes. The concept relates back to the philosophy of land artist Robert Smithson in regards to the need to appreciate and interpret nature in more than its obvious beauty [3], proposing a dialectic of nature that interacts with the physical contradictions inherent in natural forces as they are — nature as both sunny and stormy

Smithson is best known for the work *The Spiral Jetty*. He carved out forms in the physical landscape or, as in the jetty, formed them out of local natural materials, drawing attention to the physical beauty, uncertain shifts and erasure inherent in a location in nature and within the realm of nature's processes [4]. Nature does not proceed in a straight line, but rather it is a sprawling development. Nature is never finished

After making *34 North*, the question was how to develop a project that utilized a similarly experimental yet coherent narrative and editorial form, but made use of data from within and beneath the landscape. The project *Carrizo Parkfield Diaries* with Christina Mcphee and Sindee Nakatani arose from conversations with Christina Mcphee about concepts of trauma and the landscape. The project is composed of text and image animations that are similar to short prose, but are extremely experimental since their sequencing is generated from hourly live earthquake data. The project is about memory, trauma, shifts and slippage in both the landscape of human memory, and of the physical memory of shifts in the surface and beneath the ground after an earthquake.

Carrizo Parkfield Diaries (2005)

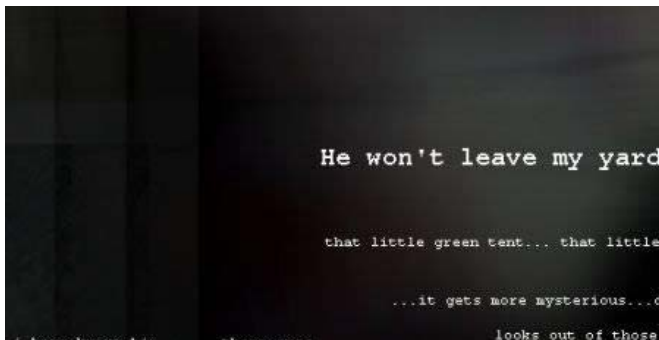


Figure 2: A still from one of the text and image animations about trauma and memory that were sequenced by live earthquake data.

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Carrizo Parkfield [5] examined the similarities between trauma and memory in the physical landscape and in the landscape of the human mind.

The project took hourly live data from sensors at a section of the San Andreas Fault and used it to determine the sequencing of text and image animations about trauma and memory at different intensities.

Human memory may be imagined as layers, architectures, points of fragility, superstructures built of moments, errors, traumas, small points of beauty within reams of pure data, ruptures below a landscape, some at great depth. There is a physical record of memory in the topology of the earth: rise in hill elevation, shift in position of landmarks, internal pressure elevated or eased, a dirt road buckled just so in a rolling motion, a wall lined with a physical document the way of memory.

“He had a scar on his finger.....a half moon.....from a knife...cutting melons as a boy.....a physical memory.....that moment heldfading in shifting and buffed dull detail.....yet also clear in action and sequence.....held like underdeveloped polaroids in the keloid of his skin.....”

In this text from *Carrizo*, the comparison is made between a traumatic physical event and its shift in the physical landscape, but to a person rather than to a landscape. The knife cutting is similar to the movement and energy dispersion of a quake and a scar in a sense is a memory, the moment forever leaving an artifact:

“Placemoment.....

A confetti of place markers”

This excerpt subtly references memory and landscape, but also mapping, artifacts and the incompleteness of a single measurement in time. Moments can be visceral, but ultimately many are ephemeral and even the most vivid memory dulls its edges in time. Place is not a singularity as it can be measured in so many ways and changes over time, it too has its ephemerality.

“He won’t leave my yard it has been days....

That little green tent that little green shape
It gets more mysterious.....disturbing
I have known him.....those eyes.....looks out of those holes
That foreign head
But ever since the quake.....
That other person wears his shirts

The first few days there were tents everywhere

But this man.....this sack of skin.....
Remains”..

After a traumatic event, there is a reordering, there are fissures and breaks, and this can be as true psychologically as in terms of in the landscape. The text refers to a break, which may result from great stress (both physical in terms of higher quake intensity and motion generated and in the mind and psyche). The tents described above have gone (other people have moved back inside to again trust the ceiling and walls of their homes to hold above) but this stranger is the result of a traumatic event touching upon larger triggers and consuming his mental landscape.

Carrizo is not a pure “locative media” project in terms of interactivity and functionality, but is an examination of the landscape and site specific data mapped and seen in its unpredictability and intensity. The result is a work ultimately authored by the wild patterns and processes of the earth itself.

Taking the concepts and functionality of projects like *Carrizo* into locative narrative will bring the layers of data unseen under the ground into resonance. The landscape can be “read” with sensor data and readings both of the surface (soil and plant growth patterns, decay and density in plant life, events, history weather data, shifts in seasons and climatology for example) and beneath (quake data, tectonic stress measurements, underground water table variation, soil temperature and moisture content shifts).

Projects like *34 north* and *Carrizo* may be cross-pollinated to fuse scientific data, research, art and narrative into readings of a wild landscape composed of physical spaces and the artifacts of their stories in time. There are many areas of resonance within the landscape (tectonic data, quake motion data, erosion patterns, underground water table variations to name a few), which portray what has been removed, re-ordered, or lost.

The “conversation” of movement through landscape

Moving through landscape is not a passive exercise like sitting in one world and reading (and actively imagining) in another; it is comparable to a conversation. The “conversation” is between the place (streets, buildings, structures, roadways, dense overgrowth, cliff faces, gully etc.), its infrastructure (sidewalks, roadways, streetlight timings, paths, dams, soil types, angle of ascent and descent in hills etc) and the movements chosen by the person walking. This dialog creates ample potential for expansion of the levels of complexity and fullness of experientially-driven locative media. The problem with projects driven by data simply triggered in locations is that the process creates a sort of bowling alley conundrum — the pins will reset and then stand again as before; the narratives and data will repeat the same selected section of information when crossed again from the same or another direction.

Movement and future applications in locative media and the landscape

I am currently studying applications of utilizing live user movement patterns as live editing tools of locative content to work with individual interactions within a place. This will enhance the sense of open-endedness and possibility in the data and location being read and interpreted by an individual and their progression related to aesthetic/directional choices. This also opens up greater possibilities of information resonating with the participant's place in the landscape, be it in a city or in the open land. Some of the variables include elevation, angle of gaze, repetition in areas of interest within a physical area, variations in speed of movement.

Each location makes certain choices unavoidable, mitigated by design, condition and controls, but it also offers many other aesthetic selections for the viewer/reader as they move past types of architecture, whether man-made or natural, (such as event residue from a sudden downpour or a car crash, etc), supplemented by perceived threat or comfort thresholds, or simply what they are individually drawn to at the time. Movement, speed, direction, repetition, are all elements of the participant's interaction with place and their aesthetic interface (their disposition edits what they choose to experience and thus sequence as they move). This creates encounters with many different works and levels of detail.

Other projects I am working on include a project that will move locative media indoors to read the layers of time and narratives of the physical materials in rooms in older buildings, and a project that will push locative media tools into a reading of several places at once as connected in an informational feedback loop. I am also developing a work with writer/artist Lisa Tao that plays with location, narrative, and the boundaries between the story world and the physical, exploring locative data intermingled with physical artifacts spilled from a fictive world.

The future of locative media lies in applications of ever-increasing variation fed by many kinds of data and generating narrative of any area where structures may be read — the city, the subterranean, and the wild itself.

References and Notes

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2. image from "Carrizo Parkfield Diaries" (text and image animation)

Author Biography

Jeremy Hight is a locative media and new media artist/writer/theorist. He collaborated on the early locative narrative project "34 north 118 west". His essay "Narrative Archaeology" <http://www.xcp.bfn.org/hight.html> is studied in several universities as a resource on locative narrative and space. He collaborated most recently on the landscape data edited project *Carrizo Parkfield Diaries*. The diaries are archived in the Whitney Museum Artport. He recently co-curated the online new media exhibition *Binary Katwalk* (binarykatwalk.net). He is working on two large-scale locative media projects that look to push into new areas both in physical space and in functionality. He currently has a project shortlisted for possible development with the European Space Agency and as a form of locative narrative utilizing the European Space Station and points above the earth. Hight is currently editing a book of essays on locative media. Hight holds Masters in Fine Arts (writing, theory, art) from the Critical Studies/Writing program at Cal Arts, and a B.A. in Creative Writing from San Francisco State University. He teaches Visual Communication and English at Los Angeles Mission College.

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