

Subversive Mobile Storytelling

Brian House

Abstract

SMS (Short Message Service) text-messaging on mobile devices can serve as a narrative medium that subverts traditional boundaries of the experience of literature. In a world of increasingly rich media, text has retained its significance on mobile devices through such emerging forms as the SMS novel, yet much of its potential remains untapped. As an interface to a computer system, SMS can serve as a medium for what Espen Aarseth has dubbed “cybertext”, in which narrative is produced through the process of interactive feedback. Additionally, the imperative poetics of text-messaging suggest its use in a contemporary form of the nontheatrical performance envisioned by Fluxus. Uniquely positioned to combine these methodologies, SMS allows the transposition of literature into the experiential domain, animating fictional text with everyday life. An original artwork, The Wrench, is presented as an example.

Technically, the Short Message Service (SMS) is embedded in the signaling mechanism of cellular networks that routes voice calls, and so in some sense is a medium that is more fundamental to the mobile phone than audio (Hillebrand 2001, 414). Originally, it was intended for asynchronous communication between technicians and is limited to messages consisting of just 160 characters. Though SMS was not envisioned as a consumer service, in 2006 43 billion messages were sent on New Year’s Eve alone (Vnunet 2008), indicating that text-messaging has become one of the dominant communication technologies of our time.

Most SMS messages make no pretense to literary grandeur. The medium’s minimalism can be dramatically suggestive, however—consider, for example, the “Leila Texts”. Due to a glitch in the network of the mobile operator Verizon, all messages addressed to the handle “Leila” were for a time mistakenly sent to a woman from Brooklyn named Leila Sales, though they may have been intended for other Leilas. Sales runs a blog in which she attempts to interpret the drama behind the messages:

Lst ngt was... weird. im sorry. pls dont tell her.
from a 914 phone number, Tuesday, March 4, 1:47 PM

This text is absolutely rife with possibilities ... I don’t think that 914 guy drunkenly made out with Leila, even though he has a girlfriend. While that could explain “Lst ngt was... weird,” as well as “pls dont tell her” (i.e. “my girlfriend”), “im sorry” wouldn’t really make sense there. Unless he drunkenly made out

with Leila AGAINST LEILA'S WILL, in which case my explanation could work. Alternate explanations, please? (Sales 2008)

Sales often responds to the messages, offering her unsolicited advice to the unsuspecting sender, despite her inevitable misreadings. Arguably, the ambiguity of the fragments suggest more than what might be said in a richer medium.

In fact, text-messaging has recently given rise to a new genre, that of the SMS novel. Popular largely in China and Japan, the text is delivered in two daily installments consisting of a message each. The *New York Times* reports that in Japan, “of last year’s 10 best-selling novels, five were originally mobile phone novels, mostly love stories written in the short sentences characteristic of text-messaging” (Onishi 2008) with averages sales exceeding 400,000. The novels are not only read, but are commonly composed, on the phone: “It’s not that they had a desire to write and that the cell phone happened to be there,’ said Chiaki Ishihara, an expert in Japanese literature at Waseda University who has studied mobile phone novels. ‘Instead, in the course of exchanging [messages], this tool called the cell phone instilled in them a desire to write” (Norrie 2007).

Nonetheless, the SMS novel largely conforms to the conventions of traditional literature, albeit in a new format. It is analogous to much of early television programming, in which audio-centric content of the type developed for radio was simply filmed as “talking heads”. There is more potential for text-messaging as an artistic medium thanks to the underlying system for automated delivery. Instead of a dumb mechanism for periodically sending out a message, a system that responds to participants’ input allows for a dynamic, nonlinear narrative structure.

Such a system can be described as a form of “cybertext”: “[In traditional literature] the performance of the reader takes place all in his head, while the user of cybertext also performs in an extranoematic sense” (Aarseth 1997, 1). Espen Aarseth draws the term from cybernetics, Norbert Wiener’s study of dynamic systems involving a feedback loop (in this case between the text and its reader). In cybernetic terms, the text adjusts its output according to feedback from the reader. There is creative effort embodied in the physical action that feedback comprises. Further, the navigation of a cybertext involves the determination of a single textual experience from many possibilities:

...[it] is an object of verbal communication that is not simply one fixed sequence of letters, words, and sentences but one in which the words or sequence of words differ from reading to reading because of the shape, conventions, or mechanisms of the text. (Aarseth 1994)

As a platform for cybertext, SMS invokes prior systems for electronic writing. In particular, the “chatbot”, offers a particularly provocative example of cybertext’s ability

to connect with human psychology in a way that traditional text does not. The prototypical chatbot ELIZA, created in 1966 by Joseph Weizenbaum, was intended as a parody of a Rogerian psychoanalyst. ELIZA asked users questions in a faux-psychological analysis via a text-only teletype. Though obviously artificial, the character was nonetheless easily anthropomorphized. According to Janet Murray, “Weizenbaum entered his office one day to find his assistant bowed before the teletype, broken down in tears. A transcript of an interaction with ELIZA was on the printout. ‘I’ve just had a breakthrough with my analyst,’ the secretary explained” (Monfort 2002). This is what is known as the “ELIZA effect”: “attributing greater intelligence or intentionality to a machine than it possesses” (Murray 1997, 224). Though not ostensibly literary, ELIZA shows how a user is able, and even subconsciously inclined, to develop a narrative through first-person interaction.

However, SMS is more complex than a platform for chatting, as the mobile phone is always situated in a particular physical environment. To consider the potential spatial dynamics of cybertext suggests a comparison to “interactive fiction”, a genre that emerged from the text-adventure games of the early 80s, in which an “interactor” types out his actions in response to textual descriptions of a fictional world. The introduction to *Zork* (1979), the prototypical interactive-fiction work, has become a part of our cultural heritage: “You are standing in an open field west of a white house with a boarded front door.” This author’s memory of the scene is absolutely sensual: the peeling whitewash of the weary structure, the soft sound of high grass in the breeze—a mental construction that is at once foreboding and irresistible. *Zork*’s blunt prose writ in monochrome on an Apple IIe—being addressed directly, and in text, transports the reader/player intact into *Zork*’s world. Should “I” go inside the house? What will I find? To reveal one of countless narratives, at each step the reader/player must type commands such as “Go north”, “Eat the food on the table”, or “Fight the grue”. Interactive fiction author Graham Nelson writes that,

...in an interactive medium, the beliefs and abilities of the protagonist are more than simply a painted backcloth, because the player participates in them. These special abilities might be called the ‘magic’ in the game’s model world, in the broadest sense. (Nelson 2001, 379)

Calling on the reader to act as protagonist lends poetic power to interactive fiction. Furthermore, interactive fiction is explicitly spatial. Navigating a story is a matter of moving between “rooms” and carrying “objects” between them, terms which are not purely non-corporeal—a common practice when reading interactive fiction is to draw a map (with pencil and paper) to keep track of the narrative world.

Consequently, to consider the mobile device as a cybertextual medium in this

vein invites a direct confrontation between narrative space and the real world of the participant. Guy Debord, the primary provocateur of the Situationist International movement, recalled in 1955 that,

A friend recently told me that he had just wandered through the Harz region of Germany while blindly following the directions of a map of London. This sort of game is obviously only a mediocre beginning in comparison to the complete construction of architecture and urbanism that will someday be within the power of everyone. (Debord 1955)

The Situationists hoped to subvert the de facto modes of experiencing place imposed by the psychological conditions of society. Their theory of “psychogeography”, by Debord’s definition, is “the study of specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals” (Debord 1955). Addressing the representation of space, it challenges the omnipotent perspective of the map, in which all features are reduced to categorical functions. Instead, psychogeography proposes the creation of alternative maps which represent the unique possibilities and impressions that compose the transient realities of any place.

This appropriation and reimagining of an individual’s environment resonates with other conceptual art paradigms that emerged in the 1960s—happenings, installations, and performance art. According to new media theorist Lev Manovich, these practices made art explicitly participatory in a way that prefigured the emergence of interactive computer art decades later (Manovich 2001, 56). Presciently, in “Nontheatrical Performance” (1976), Allan Kaprow writes:

My hunch about art is that a field that has changed in appearance as fast as it has must also have changed in meaning and function, perhaps to the extent that its role is qualitative (offering a way of perceiving things) rather than quantitative (producing physical objects or specific actions). (Kaprow 1993, 177)

Many of the pieces by Kaprow and the Fluxus artists were instructions for “nontheatrical performances”—they subverted traditional conventions by refusing to distinguish between performers and the audience. Kaprow’s “happenings”, George Brecht’s “scores”, and Yoko Ono’s poems are all conceptual exercises that impose non-habitual constraints on the participant.

Arrange to observe a sign indicating direction of travel.

Travel in the indicated direction.

Travel in another direction.

(Brecht 1961)

George Brecht's score is phrased in imperatives—it is not descriptive. Rather, it offers permission for the reader to perform (or imagine) the actions and draw her own conclusions. The frame of the artwork—as established by his prescription of an activity—makes use of what is available to the participant. Unlike the relative rigidity of cybertexts such as interactive fiction, Kaprow discusses “a never-ending play of changing conditions between the relatively fixed or ‘scored’ parts of my work and the ‘unexpected’ or undetermined parts” (Kaprow 1993, 11-12). Such investigations by the avant-garde explicitly elicited the emergent possibilities of social and spatial interaction in a way that anticipates the possibilities of text-messaging.

Elements of Fluxes scores are readily apparent in an SMS-based work created by Tim Etchells in 2001. Mistaken by many people for an advertising campaign, a series of flyers were distributed in London with the message “Do you want to Surrender Control?” accompanied by instructions to send the message “SURRENDER” to a phone number. The participant would then receive a series of text messages over a period of five days. As Etchells explains:

Surrender Control is somewhere between a game and a set of dares. The instructions that people will receive vary enormously—some are orders to think about particular topics, others are invitations to look at the world in a particular way, other instructions are for actions, demands that people behave in particular ways or that they carry out particular tasks. (Locke 2003)

As the experience progresses, the messages escalate in intensity, from thought experiments (“Remember last night”), to provocative actions (“Write the word SORRY on your hands. Leave it there until it fades”), to direct social engagement (“Dial a number different from that of a friend. If someone answers, try to keep them talking”). Etchells is primarily interested in the intimacy of the of medium:

... messages go direct to the phone of an individual, direct to a ‘place’ which is normally occupied by that person’s friends, family or lovers. To create an art work for this context is an invitation, one could say, to whisper in the ears of strangers as they go about their daily business. *Surrender Control* tries to explore and push the boundaries of what is possible or even permissible in this context. (Locke 2003)

Surrender Control is a seminal example of how powerful the minimal intervention of a text message can be. However, Etchell’s framework purposefully does not allow participants to respond to the messages, preferring instead that they choose to act or not act in the reality of their lives. This in no way detracts from the piece, but it does not make full use of text-messaging’s potential as cybertext. It is creative experience for the participants, but the frame does not adapt to their actions.

Knifeandfork’s *The Wrench* (2007) attempts to synthesize some of the responsive

strategies of chatbots and interactive fiction with conceptual concerns that echo those of the twentieth century avant-garde. The piece recasts Primo Levi's 1978 novel, *The Monkey's Wrench*, as a text-message exchange between a participant and the protagonist, Tino Faussonne, an itinerant steelworker. In Levi's original, Tino tells a series of stories that reflect a deeply contingent and physical relationship to the world. These themes, together with a quirky use of language and a first-person narrative, make Levi's character well-suited to the immediacy of text-messaging. In *The Wrench*, a modern-day Tino does not narrate his past experiences—rather, he engages the participant in a series of dialogues intended to convey the same themes as the book. These include everyday interventions where Tino needs help from the participant to navigate an unfamiliar city, asks participants to listen to the sounds of machines audible at that given moment, or waxes poetic about the nature of the labor that produced our impossibly intricate electronic devices.

As a result, *The Wrench* is not an SMS novel with pre-determined messages. Instead, it employs an open-source software package developed by the artists, TXTML (<http://txtml.org>), to instantiate Tino as an artificially intelligent agent. Tino's dialogue is constructed in a way that is influenced by chatbots such as ELIZA—however, his progression through the space of potential narratives more closely mirrors the design of interactive fiction. Just as the interactor moves through the dungeons of Zork, charting one of many possible paths, in *The Wrench*, the participant, through responses over SMS, draws Tino into a particular series of conversations. In addition, Tino's messages draw on material dynamically generated from Internet content (via RSS feeds) which enables him to comment and respond to events in real time and in the real world, such as the weather or the outcome of last night's Yankees game. A flexible timing system is used so that Tino sends messages appropriate to the time of day, whether he is initiating the exchange or is responding to a spontaneous message from the participant.

Like ELIZA, Tino is not necessarily meant to be convincingly human, but he is intended cultivate a human relationship with the participant. Unlike other SMS systems, the messages of *The Wrench* are in the voice of an identified character, Tino, and are sent from a standard phone number to which participants can send responses just as they would to ordinary friends. By asking participants about their own activities and philosophies, the piece inserts Levi's themes into the participant's everyday reality. For example:

TINO: just dropped off theresa, killing time. do you have much down time in your day?

PAUL: sometimes, depends if im working or not. im a freelancer.

TINO: me too, i like to be my own boss. i decide when to work and when to stop.

PAUL: damn right. that's the only way to go. (Knifeandfork)

After opening a book or starting a movie, the fiction of the experience is contained within the bounds of the media. *The Wrench*, however, disrespects this barrier. In the words of a participant:

Tino forces me to reflect on my life and on life in general. His timing is unexpected, so in order to respond to him in a timely manner I have to interrupt the minutiae of my day and think about the questions he's asking. (Knifeandfork)

Inspired by *Surrender Control*, *The Wrench* is designed to take advantage of the fact that text-messaging as a medium is situated in the lives of its users. What happens beyond the interface of the phone is not extra-diegetic, but the subject of the story itself.

Aarseth insists that the pleasure of cybertext is a result of executing the logic provided by the author in order to form a unique narrative:

In electronic narrative the procedural author is like a choreographer who supplies the rhythms, the context, and the set of steps that will be performed. The interactor, whether as navigator, protagonist, explorer, or builder, makes use of this repertoire of possible steps and rhythms to improvise a particular dance among the many, many possible dances the author has enabled ... (Murray 1997, 152)

This is a clear example of Manovich's notion of how, with emerging media, the production of narrative has changed. With traditional storytelling,

...the database of choices from which narrative is constructed (the paradigm) is implicit; while the actual narrative (the syntagm) is explicit. New media reverse this relationship. Database (the paradigm) is given material existence, while narrative (the syntagm) is dematerialised. (Manovich 2001, 231)

But what does it mean for a cybertext to be experienced via a mobile device? Such a narrative specifies neither a syntagm nor a complete paradigm—though the possible texts of the messages might be constrained, the relationship of each message to the conditions of the real world in which it is received are not. Consequently, text-messaging blurs the boundary between a hermetic narrative space and the unpredictable logics of the real world. Employing strategies that echo nontheatrical performance, new forms of literature can therefore elicit the specific creativity of the human consciousness as it interacts with the environment, temporarily re-organizing how reality might be experienced.

Janet Murray writes, "Participatory narrative ... raises several related problems: How can we enter the fictional world without disrupting it? How can we be sure that imaginary actions will not have real results?" (Murray 1997, 103). With an SMS cybertext in the real world, we cannot. There is actual physical danger in mobility, and

there is no guarantee of a hermetic space—the syntagm might extend beyond both the prefigured narrative and the participants' habitual experience of the world. Yet it is possible that by specifically framing everyday experience in a way that invites the same creative agency exercised by the reader of cybertext, a poetic transformation of the mundane may occur. As the Situationist Raoul Vaneigm puts it:

The laboratory of individual creativity transmutes the basest metals of daily life into gold through a revolutionary alchemy ... The new artists of the future, constructors of situations to be lived, will undoubtedly have immediacy as their most succinct—though also their most radical—demand.
(Vaneigm 2001)

The subtle insistence of the text message and its imaginative potential is a step in that subversive direction.

References

- Aarseth, Espen. 1997. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Aarseth, Espen. 1994. "Nonlinearity and Literary Theory", in *Hyper/Text/Theory*, ed. George P. Landow. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Brecht, George. 1961. *Direction*.
- Debord, Guy. 1955. "Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography," trans. Ken Knabb, *Les Lèvres Nues* 6.
- Hillebrand, Friedhelm, ed. 2001. *GSM and UMTS: The Creation of Global Mobile Communication*. Hoboken: Wiley.
- Kaprow, Allan. 1993. "Nontheatrical Performance", in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kaprow Allan. 1993. "Notes on the creation of a Total Art", in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Knifeandfork. "The Wrench". Accessed March 20, 2008, <http://knifeandfork.org/thewrench>
- Locke, Matt. 2003. "Tim Etchells—Surrender Control". *TEST*, July 14.
- Manovich, Lev. 2001. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Montfort Nick. 2002. "Cybertext Killed the Hypertext Star". *Electronic Book Review* 11. Accessed March 20, 2008, <http://www.electronicbookreview.com/ebr11/11mon/index.html>
- Murray, Janet. 1997. *Hamlet on the Holodeck*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Nelson, Graham. 2001. *The INFORM Designer's Manual*. St. Charles: The Interactive Fiction Library.
- Norrie, Justin. 2007. "In Japan, cellular storytelling is all the rage". *The Sydney Morning Herald*, December 3.
- Onishi, Norimitsu. 2008. "Mobile phone novels ring up big sales, but critics fear for Japanese literature". *New York Times*, January 23.
- Sales, Leila. 2008. "Lst ngt was..." *The Leila Texts*. Accessed March 20, 2008, <http://theleilatexts.blogspot.com/2008/03/lst-ngt-was.html>
- Vaneigm, Raoul. 2001. *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. London: Rebel Press.
- Vnunet. 2008. "SMS Messaging Surges over the Holiday". Accessed March 20, 2008, <http://www.vnunet.com/vnunet/news/2206783/sms-messaging-surges-holiday>