JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Memoradic narrative in *The Shoebox*

by Janet Marles

The Shoebox[1] [open endnotes in new window] is a biographical story that would commonly be made as a documentary film. However, I am exploring the potential for the online platform to reveal this narrative in a way that reflects its content.

> •When a WWI veteran, who has been blinded in one eye on the battlefields of France, drives his car into a tram, he is killed. He leaves behind a wife and three daughters. It is 1937. Tragically, three years later the girls' mother also dies from a mysterious illness. The girls, Gwendoline 17, Marjory 14 and Heather 10 are put under the guardianship of their father's brother, Uncle Jock, a stock and station agent who lives in Kaniva, north-western Victoria, Australia.

> •A silence descends over the family as the old ones feel it is best not to upset the girls by talking about their unfortunate situation. Uncle Jock insists the girls are not to be separated. Yet it is WWII and accommodation of any sort is very scarce. So they are boarded in a succession of houses hundreds of kilometres away in Geelong.

> •For Heather, the youngest, it is a dozen homes in eleven years. With only scraps of information and two small photographs she ponders her origins and the cause of her mother's death for over sixty years until unexpectedly, at the age of seventy-two, she is handed a shoebox containing documents that fill in some of the pieces of her story.

The story of *The Shoebox* is one of memory; fragments of memory treasured from a past of loss and absence, as well as suppositions created in the place of no memories. Drawing on work by Michelle Citron (1999) and Annette Kuhn (1995) in investigating memory and image, this documentary unpacks the complex role of memory when it exists in a void. The biography positions memory as the most fragile of histories and asks: In a life of trauma and absence do childhood memories remain vivid into old age? What visible evidence do we need to make and maintain memories? Are documents of an objective,

dry and fiscal nature, such as those found in the shoebox, more reliable than subjective memoirs or oral histories?

The Shoebox' protagonist Heather lives a life with gaps and missing information. What she does know of her own past and the lives of her parents is often only a portion of the circumstances. And, as the contents of the shoebox reveal, some of her knowledge, beliefs and memories are mistaken or only partially correct. Mirroring the fragmentation of Heather's memory, the non-linear sections of the interactive biography enable the user/viewer to navigate to small pieces of content contained in each scene. These fragments of memory and history are styled as flashbacks using a variety of media forms that best reflect the process of memory—single freeze frame, sepia video and still images, and sequences of stills.

The contents of the shoebox become the primary sources for many of the fragments of media that build up the story. They are documents *circa* 1920 to 1950 including payment details and arrangements for the girls' board and their parent's last Will and Testaments. Some of the items in the shoebox are ordinary documents—used chequebooks, old account books, old letters, receipts—the type of items we discard daily. Yet with the passage of time combined with the context of a lost history, this everyday detritus is given the new status of sacred artefacts for Heather. As Margaret Gibson (2008 : 47-79) explains in her book on memory and mourning,

> "For the bereaved objects can transpose into quasi-subjects, moving into that now vacant bereft place."

This biography also gives indications of how Australian society has shifted since the 1930s and 1940s and how notions of the domestic and the feminine have changed over this time. What were the typical roles for rural woman and how did this impact on a family with three girls? What choices were made for Heather as an orphaned girl of ten years of age?

With the discovery of the shoebox, Heather began a quest to uncover more of her family history and to meet relatives long lost to her. The trip to the Wimmera in 2002 when Heather received the shoebox was the beginning of these journeys that have taken her to the Victorian State archives, historical societies, cemeteries, the Australian War Memorial archives and the WWI battlefields of France and Belgium. I have accompanied Heather on many of these trips and have recorded her conversations and reactions as she uncovers the fragments of her history.

The Shoebox and interactive architecture

The interactive architecture of the documentary is structured for users so as to reveal fragments of content through their random choices and actions. As the user uncovers story clips (audio, still images, video segments) a thumbnail image representing the visited clip falls into its own unique place in a timeline at the bottom of the screen. After three such interactions the timeline fills-up with the remaining thumbnail images and the user can view the story as a linear documentary narrative with a "traditional" scripted

beginning, middle and end.

This technique advances the work pioneered by Michelle Citron and Debra Beattie, both of whom present fragments of linear documentary narrative accessed from inside an interactive digital architecture. Beattie's story is built from the user viewing separate QTVR®[2] panoramic scenes in *The Wrong Crowd* (2003). In contrast, Citron positions her media fragments in *Mixed Greens* (2004) along a timeline.

Both Citron and Beattie use interactivity, non-linear narrative and "traditional" narrative techniques to tell an autobiographical memory story. With *The Shoebox* I am adding to their body of work by creating a consolidated continuous linear narrative obtained through the random non-linear interactive choices of the user/viewer. This conflation of structural forms also mimics the way we recall personal events.

The means by which we remember has been described by neuroscientists as a process whereby fragments of memory are stored throughout the brain, depending on what kind of memory they are. When we recall something, our brain accesses these stored fragments and places them together into a recollected memory in a manner very similar to the way we dream (Engel 1999:5). These recalled memory fragments—musings, factual, experiential, episodic—are combined together to make up the story of our lives, the story of who we are.

With this structure I am exploring the conflation of non-linear and linear narratives within the digital documentary form. I am also investigating creating an interactive architecture that mirrors the content of this documentary memory story. *Memoradic narrative* is the process of revealing the story to the user/viewer in a way that mimics the nature of autobiographical memory recall. In a recollection process, fragments of memory are brought together to form a linear story for relating an event or experience.

The Shoebox begins with a pre-loader[3] thumbnail image of a soldier in WWI uniform. This is a studio photograph of Heather's father Donald McDonald taken sometime in 1915 at the Broadmeadows military training camp in Melbourne, Australia. Once loaded, an introductory 30-second video outlining the theme of the story plays. It begins with a pixelated background, a mosaic grid of muted earthy colours—green, grey, red, and brown over which the letters of the title "The Shoebox" appear animated as if written by hand. Following the title is a montage of old photographs—a family group, young children, and sepia video re-enactments—as the words *PLACE*, *FAMILY*, and *BELONGING* dart across the pixelated, colored background.

One sepia photograph shows Heather as a two-year-old sitting on the fender of a car; another is Heather in a sand pit taken approximately one year later. The other photographs in *Introduction Movie* are of Heather and her two sisters playing dress up in the yard or standing together for the photographer. All the photographs are taken in rural outdoor settings *circa* 1930s.

The sepia video re-enactments show from right to left, (in order of appearance) the exterior of a house where items of clothing are being thrown from one of the windows onto the path outside, a man tossing a coin, and a pan from right to left inside a

bedroom—all *circa* 1930. The photographs, video clips, and words appear haphazardly on the screen. After a momentary glimpse they are gone. The last montage image leaves the single word *ABSENCE* slowly fading into the background in the middle of the frame.

Once *ABSENCE* is completely dissolved, the background pixels gradually come into focus to reveal a scanned image of the corner of the shoebox lid. Just visible on the top of the shoebox lid are the hand written letters *DN & JAS McD*.[4] Beginning as a tiny spec from the centre of this background image, a full-view image of the shoebox lid spins towards to viewer, followed by six full-frame still photographs of a woman's hands sorting through the shoebox of documents.

The audio track is a simple slice of looped piano music and a voice-over stating:

- This is a story about family, about place, about a sense of belonging and a need to know.
- It is about growing up as a girl in 1930s rural Australia, about breaking out on your own and travelling full circle to find answers to questions over sixty years old.
- It is a story about a shoebox left in a shed for half a century and how it coincidently is given to the youngest child of a tragedy, answering some of the questions that she has pondered over and over for the majority of her life.

This introduction video sequence finishes with a three-quarter view of the shoebox lid. The wording on the shoebox lid reads:

> Perry's—Stafford—Brand
> Shoes for Men
> Quality In Every Pair
> Half Sizes.

This image remains static until the user clicks it, at which point the image changes to a wider shot of the same shoebox lid, the central viewing screen dimensions widen, and six small image icons emanate, as if from inside the shoebox image, and come to rest in a line above the central viewing frame. From left to right these image icons are—Bill's Gully Hall, Wimmera Landscape, The Shed, *Abdullah Park*, Lounge Room, WWI Soldier. Positioned under the central viewing frame a line graphic of ten small rectangles appears labeled "Timeline."

Again the images and the computational space remain static until the user initiates an action. Two of the image icons above the central viewing frame are displayed in full colour and as the user/viewer rolls their cursor across either of these two icons a *tween* [5] effect is stimulated which makes the icon increase in size indicating it is an active link within the interactive space.

These two "active" icons are "Shed" and "Lounge Room." The four other image icons are greyed out, indicating they are not active links, and I shall explain these later in this article. Clicking either the "Shed" or "Lounge Room" icon changes the central viewing frame image of the shoebox lid to a 360-degree panoramic scene of the image icon clicked. A text field appears in the left hand bottom corner under the central viewing frame indicating which panorama is currently in the central frame—'Shed" or "Lounge

Room."

At this point the user/viewer can move around the selected 360-degree panoramic space by either, dragging their mouse through the panoramic image, resting their cursor at either end of the central viewing frame, or using the directional arrows that have appeared in the centre under the central viewing frame. As the user/viewer moves around the 360-degree panoramic scene yellow boxes of various sizes appear around objects in the space—a television screen, a framed picture, a toolbox, cupboard drawers—to name a few. If the user/viewer ceases panning and the panoramic image remains static these yellow boxes, indicating hotspot links, randomly blink on and off suggesting they should/could be interactive.

When the user/viewer clicks a yellow hotspot square the central viewing frame darkens and the selected embedded clip of media plays in a central position over the background of the panorama. Thin sections of the darkened panorama remain visible on each side of the embedded media clip. While the embedded media clip plays the user/viewer can use the control bar, positioned at the base of each clip (visible only when their cursor is inside the borders of the embedded media clip) to stop, pause, re-play, or toggle backward or forwards through the clip.

When the user/viewer clicks the close button located at the top right hand corner of the embedded media clip the central viewing screen returns to the current panoramic scene and a thumbnail image of the embedded clip that has just played appears in the timeline. Each embedded media clip has its unique place in the timeline. There are ten embedded media clips—five in each of the two active panoramas.

The user/viewer may now choose another embedded clip from the current panorama or select the other active panorama image icon from above the central viewing frame. Navigation and selection at this point is entirely at the user/viewer's discretion. Only after the user/viewer has selected and closed three embedded media clips will the timeline fill with all ten thumbnail images and an active text link appears under the timeline "Click here to play full video.'

At this point the user/viewer can continue exploring via their interactive choices to the embedded media clips within the active panoramas or they can sit back and watch the linear video by choosing "Click here to play full video." This video titled *The Shoebox Movie* is an eight-minute documentary with voice-over narration inter-cut with extracts from Heather's interviews. A longer version of the piano loop music track used in the *Introduction Movie* plays for the duration of this movie. Similarly the background is the pixelated image of the close-up shoebox corner from the *Introduction Movie*. As *The Shoebox Movie* plays black and white, and colour still images, and video segments appear and dissolve or animate across the central viewing screen to correspond with the content spoken in the voice track.

At anytime during the playback of this linear video the user/viewer can pause, toggle backwards or forwards, stop, or exit from *The Shoebox Movie*. Once this movie has been closed the user/viewer can return to navigating through the active panoramas and embedded clips and/or replay *The Shoebox Movie*.

Memory structure

The aim of the interactive architecture in *The Shoebox* is for the user/viewer to obtain the linear, sequential, temporal narrative of *The Shoebox Movie* through their non-linear, interactive actions of accessing the media clips embedded within each 360-degree panoramic scene. Thereby conflating linear and non-linear narrative forms within the same story space. It is also designed to mirror the memory process.

As the protagonist, Heather, uncovers her history, her memory is confirmed, challenged, or enhanced and the fragments of her story, the story of her life, build into a comprehensive narrative. As Heather returns to her childhood memories over and over,[6] these fragments, and other memory fragments triggered by information contained in the shoebox, plus the new pieces of information she has gained in her quest to know and understand more, come together to fill-in the story of her life and re-shape her sense of self.

Researchers such as Engel (1999:4), and Freed (1997:1) have found that memory is an amalgamation of activities that utilize a number of sites and cognitive processes in the brain, and these processes are much more complicated, more fragmented, and more subjective than we are inclined to presume. Memory is a reconstructive procedure or a method of putting together stored memory fragments from a number of sites in the brain rather than the reproduction of a linear sequence of events stored in one part of the brain. Autobiographical memory is a process of piecing together these *small portions* to construct a type of narrative by which the rememberer communicates experiences.

So autobiographical memory has been shown to be a highly reconstructive and subjective process, which is open to a number of modifications. With this in mind McNally claims the following:

> "…Even when we garble the details about the past, we often get the essence right. Memory for the gist of many experiences is retained with essential fidelity, and this is especially true for events having personal, emotional significance. The paradox of memory lies in its 'fragile power.' (Schacter cited in McNally 2003:39). Although subject to distortion, memory usually serves us well. It provides the core of personal identity and the foundation of cognition."

Or to put it another way our autobiographical memory is often "surprisingly accurate" (Engel 1999:3; McNally 2003:39).

Whilst we tend to think of the process of memory as being similar to recording and playing back a scene in the same way a video camera operates it is in fact more akin to the processes of capture, storage and retrieval that a hypermedia platform such as *The Shoebox* employs (McNally 2003:28). In her article explaining her concept of "possibility space" in digital media works Katherine Hayles (2005:3) describes databases as dependent on their ability to "collect and organize data as well as transmit, search and retrieve it."

Memoradic narrative

I have worked with this resemblance of human memory recall and computer data retrieval in the architectural design of *The Shoebox* where fragments (stored in different areas of the database) accessed randomly by the user within the project space combine to make a memory story, a linear story. This linear story is Heather's story which, she tells in a remarkably similar way regardless of her audience. I have called this "memoradic narrative."

The term "memoradic narrative" could be used to describe Michelle Citron's digital media CD-Rom *Mixed Greens* (2004). *Mixed Greens* opens with an animated sequence finishing with a set of still graphic images of salad items arranged in neat rows. As the user rolls over each salad icon a word-category appears: Mystery, Time, Place and so on. Clicking on an icon, a corresponding fragment of linear video is placed on a timeline at the bottom of the frame. Up to a maximum of eight icons can be chosen and each new selection butts up against the previous one on the timeline. The timeline can then be played as one continuous linear sequence of video fragments.

Citron's interactive architecture for *Mixed Greens* is similar to the retrieval and collation of memory fragments used during the process of communicating a memory story. Engel (1999:6) explains the memory process as:

> "One creates the memory at the moment one needs it, rather than merely pulling out an intact item, image or story. This suggests that each time we say or imagine something from our past we are putting it together from bits and pieces that may have, until now, been stored separately."

In the case of *The Shoebox* the linear narrative of *The Shoebox Movie* is a fixed story line, rather than a flexible story line as it is in *Mixed Greens*. As each embedded media clip is accessed in *The Shoebox* by the user/viewer its corresponding thumbnail image appears in its designated space on the timeline. This approach fits more neatly with the nature of Heather's memory recall whereby Heather tells and retells her story in a similar way, irrespective of her audience, through the process of memory rehearsal. Engel (1999:8) explains this process of repetition, even if done silently to one's self, as cementing the memory, allowing it to remain strong and vivid into old age.

> "The more often that particular memory is invoked, the more solid and strong that neural pathway becomes" (Engel 1999:5).

The next phase

The current interactive prototype design of *The Shoebox* has been a vehicle to explore the technique of memoradic narrative and has been built with an eye on a further extension to the project. Four panoramic scenes will be added to the current two—these are the greyed out image icons above the central viewing frame—Bill's Gully, Wimmera Landscape, *Abdullah Park*, and WWI Battlefields. Each corresponds to a 360-degree panoramic scene which represents a locality and time period from Heather's story. All

four additional scenes will be embedded with five pieces of media—artifacts and flashbacks—that reveal small portions of the narrative through video, voice-over, and montage sequences. Consequently, the timeline will be extended to hold thirty thumbnail mages.

The choice of 360-degree panoramic scenes follows a tradition in Australian cinema for stories set inside expansive landscapes. The wide vistas and open skies of the Wimmera, an area best known for growing wheat, display an ageless beauty as well as a sense of remoteness and isolation. Contrasting this are the interiors, which are tight, restrictive and unyielding. These are the domestic, feminine zones of lounge room, bathroom and kitchen. The male domains are exterior landscapes; wheat fields, battlefields, horse yards.

Even the "Shed" an interior panorama that crosses the divide of time from 1950 to 2002 holds the girls' records tight—safe, but forgotten. Uncle Jock places the shoebox here in the early 1950's and then returns to his external world. His grandson Grahame McDonald happens to rediscover it over half a century later.

The non-linear nature of the digital medium enables the complex and disconnected nature of this narrative to be accentuated and enhanced as the user navigates through a fragmented story in a disjointed way. Additionally the digital medium enables a design structure to be built for the current working prototype that allows additional scenes and media to be added as they becomes available. This flexibility of production is unknown in "traditional" documentary filmmaking.

Conclusion

Site specific or online, non-linear interactivity performs well when the content is abstract and ephemeral, or when a series of rewards for the user are incorporated into the design as in popular computer game-play. However, when narrative is added and the producer wants the user to gain not only an experience of interactive-play but also the content of a story then the question of how to conflate these forms becomes important.

The critical question for documentary makers is how to incorporate new digital technologies, with their potential for innovative narrative structures, and still make a factual story understandable to the audience. Working digitally allows the "conventional" documentary narrative form to shift from temporal to spatial, from horizontal to vertical, from sequential to concurrent. Digitality also provides interactivity. With interactivity comes a potentially spontaneous, engaged and active audience able to choose how they receive the content. Yet, documentaries need to convey critical pieces of their narrative for their story to be comprehensible to their audience.

As Negroponte (1995:84) phrased it over a decade ago

> "being digital will change the nature of mass media from a process of pushing bits at people to one of allowing people (or their computers) to pull at them. This is a radical change…."

With traditional modes of media the audience leans back and is a witness or observer to

the unfolding events, whilst with interactive modes the audience leans forward and is a participant in the pace and revelation of the story (Pesce 2004).

The first computer artists began experimenting with their machines ability to provide feedback and mostly created abstract works. As computers advanced, digital art evolved in unison. The speed of modern computers and the complexity of interaction between computer and users has enabled an unprecedented audience engagement with the art works. As Edmonds says,

> "the opportunities for including audience participation have been increased by the advent of digital technology" (2006:xxiv).

However, interaction for its own sake can become tiring for the user and much research has gone into the design of interfaces to make them more appealing (Brown 2006:6).

To incorporate the changes brought by the digital revolution and to make productions both flexible and understandable to audiences, a conflation of non-linear and linear narrative in digital documentary may be necessary. In fact, both digital artists and commentators are acknowledging a combination of non-linear interactivity and linear narrative in digital media is more understandable to users (Dovey 2002:143, Wand 2002:167, Gibson 2004:1).

Today, digital media practitioners as well as their audiences want more from interactivity than lights turning on and off as the participant walks through a gallery space. Since time immemorial humans have wanted campfire stories and even in the age of digital interaction, they still do. This is particularly true when the content of the interactive digital media is factual, such as a documentary where we are engaging with a true story, about real people and real events in real locations, that have a logical sequence and narrative.

With my interactive digital documentary prototype *The Shoebox,* I have engaged with these issues of non-linear narrative, linear narrative and interactivity. In *The Shoebox* the fragmentation of memory plays a large part in the protagonist's story and mirroring this fragmentation the non-linear sections enable the user/viewer to navigate to small pieces of content inside the practical project. This interaction in turn creates another story space, a linear story that translates the fragments of this biographical tale into a narrative the user/viewer can sit back and absorb.

I have termed this method *memoradic narrative* whereby the act of accessing the story content mirrors the process of memory encoding, storage, and retrieval. Memory recall seems to be the retrieval of a linear sequence of an event that took place sometime in the rememberer's past—however researchers have shown that memory is in fact a reconstruction of fragments remembered, added to, and qualified by the rememberer over time. The reception conditions of the memory may also modify the recall.

Fragments of story/memory accessed in *The Shoebox* fall into their unique positions on the timeline. Once three fragments have entered the timeline the timeline itself becomes active and can be played as a linear narrative. If the timeline became active after a single interaction the user/viewer would be able to move directly to the linear mode of viewing.

By delaying this option I am ensuring the user/viewer engages interactively with the project for at least three non-linear explorations. Gibson (2005:1) in his discussion of interactive digital media productions calls this technique "the magic of three," whereby one or two interactions seem too short, and more than three appears too long. Further Gibson claims, even numbered interactions leads to symmetry whereas odd numbered interactions tend towards openness—hence "the magic of three."

In its present form, *The Shoebox* is exhibited as an online documentary. This choice was one of simplicity. By using a web-based platform I could manage the project through to completion without having to apply for additional funding or patronage from external producers or distributors. The digital platform also provides the flexibility for new data and media to be added into the current project structure as it becomes available.

Additionally, the interactive architecture created for this prototype can be easily adapted for use as an exposition mode for museums, art galleries, libraries, cultural centres or similar exhibition spaces. A number of such institutions are beginning to explore digital stories as an exhibition component of their curatorship. Two excellent Australian examples are the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) in Melbourne with its "Memory Grid" exhibition space and the State Library of Queensland's recent *Q150 Digital Stories* project.

The "Memory Grid" is described by ACMI as:

> "a showcase for emerging talent and alternative voices in the mediums of short film, animation, documentary, TV, video, multimedia and single screen interactive design."

Artists, filmmakers, multimedia practitioners and members of the public are encouraged to submit their stories, which are exhibited on-site in the purpose built "Memory Grid" section of the ACMI gallery.

In 2009, as part of the sesquicentennial celebrations for the state of Queensland, the State Library created an innovative "Digital Stories" project and exhibition. Historians, librarians, teachers, indigenous leaders, government officials and the public were invited to submit their stories to the Library's web site. Over seventy stories have been uploaded. The State Library of Queensland describes the *Q150 Digital Stories* project as:

> "part of the Queensland libraries exhibition "Queensland Stories" which tells stories of people, places, past present. The exhibition … illustrates the state's evolution, diversity and innovation since it became an independent state from NSW in 1859.
>
> You can see the albums in the 'Heritage Collection Reading Room,' at the State Library, or in the new virtual exhibition 'Becoming Queensland' on the State Library of Queensland website. It can (also) be searched on the library's digital catalogue."

As the revolution in digital media evolves, some documentary makers are responding to its challenges and developments with vigour. New technologies have enabled new forms

of documentary to emerge on new platforms. These changes have produced creative outcomes as diverse as the challenges for documentary producers and their audiences. With *The Shoebox* I have intervened in the discourse by engaging with the creative process surrounding these challenges and potentialities with an approach that bridges the new and the old paradigms of documentary production and exhibition.

Notes

1. http://www.memoradicnarrative.com/doco.html
compatible with Flash Player 9+, Mozilla Firefox, and Internet Explorer. [return to text]

2. QuickTime® Virtual Reality

3. In multimedia a pre-loader is a small image and/or animated graphic that displays on the user's screen while the primary media, a much larger file, downloads onto the user's computer.

4. The initials "DN & JAS McD" on the shoebox lid were written by Heather's guardian Uncle Jock and refer to Heather's father Donald Neil and her uncle James McDonald. Both brothers served with the AIF in WWI and both died aged in their forties in 1937, coincidently just eight weeks apart.

5. In multimedia tweening is the term used to describe the animated motion created between two static clip states.

6. In memory research this process of repetition over time is known as rehearsal (Engel 1999:8).

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