Narrating the Sociality of the Database

A Digital Hermeneutic Reading of *The Atlas Group Archive* and *haikU*

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I investigate the database characteristics of electronic literature that makes them into social forms. Database structures are both fragmented and relational, displaying hypertext characteristics. I approach *The Atlas Group Archive* [15] and *haikU* [24], two works of electronic literature, as examples of material and conceptual databases in order to explore the database function so saturated in our daily life. Both works highlight a database aesthetics [19], although the ways they do so are polar opposites. I analyze the works within the framework of digital hermeneutics [18], continuously considering the relationship between text and context, between parts and whole.

I demonstrate how *AGA* is an explicit database, supposedly showing a 'complete' archive, whereas *haikU* is an implicit database that hides the corpus of sentences. I show the sociality of the databases, thematizing both the human process behind database formation as a whole, as well as how the individual elements influence the perception of the overall database. Finally, I take my findings to a broader perspective and consider what *AGA* and *haikU* can teach us about the materiality, conceptuality, and sociality of the omnipresent structure of the database.

CCS CONCEPTS

• Information systems – Web Interfaces • Applied Computing – Arts and humanities – Media Arts • Human-centered computing – Hypertext/hypermedia and Web-based interaction • Networks – Network structure • General and reference – General literature

KEYWORDS

Database Narratives; Databases; Digital Humanities; Digital Hermeneutics; Electronic Literature

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1 Introduction

Many of our information structures include some form of database structure, from physical archives to Wikipedia, from games to digital humanities projects. These structures each have their own materiality that allows them to function as comprehensible forms of information. Although often implicit, databases are generally a key component in hypertext infrastructures [1]. The database, both as a reality and as a concept, is especially significant in the digital information age, and has been scrutinized by media arts parallel to the development of the computational/digital humanities [8]. Although many works of electronic literature use databases in some form, "not all new media objects are *explicitly* databases" [12]. Creative databases can be regarded as "collage hypertext", following Mark Bernstein's description that hypertexts "may establish connection by placing one item near another. This is *collage*, and once more we find that meaning is made between items: the juxtaposition of items can create, express, and quantify meanings" [2]. Hypertext has been examined in the connections that are formed between nodes in different manners, from Stuart Moulthroup's discussion of the mapping facility of *afternoon, a story* as "not only an aid to navigation but a tool for reshaping the text" [13] to the algorithmic criticism approach using digraphs and matrices by Eugenia-Maria Kontopoulou et al. [11]. Mariusz Pisarski, on the other hand, calls for a "poetics of a hypertext node" that examines "the conditions in which a single textual unit operates" [14]. In approaching creative databases from the perspective of digital hermeneutics [18], I assimilate the tradition of literary analysis with the scrutiny of digital scholarship. The goal of this paper is therefore twofold: to get insight into the functioning of creative databases as literary and artistic objects as well as to understand the role of the database in a wider context informed by the artistic interrogation of the database form. After an introduction to digital hermeneutics, I analyze Walid Raad's *The Atlas Group Archive* (1989–2004) [15] and *haikU* (2002) [24]. Although vastly different types of electronic literature, both works conform to as well as subvert characteristics and values of traditional genres: the testimonial archive and haiku respectively. I consider their foregrounding of the database format as a means to expose the cultural significance of material and conceptual databases. I pay special attention to the sociality modeled in both works.

2 Digital Hermeneutics

The methodology of hermeneutics describes and prescribes the process of interpretation of texts in which every part of the texts informs the understanding of the whole and the whole text informs the understanding of each part. Originating from the interpretation of biblical texts, prominent hermeneutic thinkers such as Friedrich Sleiermacher and Hans-Georg Gadamer are foundational in many comparative literature programmes. Hermeneutics has been criticized for its lack of addressing power structures in interpreting texts. Following Luce Iragaray, Lisa Watrous asserts that hermeneutics is "limited to a simple uncovering of a taken-for-granted tradition. Understanding must also include an opening for the reconstruction of the relational – an ethical call" [22]. Lorraine Code, however, especially values Gadamer from a feminist perspective because of his "engaged, situated, dialogic, and historically conscious" [5] hermeneutics. I consider the strength of hermeneutics that it considers the process of interpretation to be an active process. Gadamer not only sees the oscillation between part and whole, but also between text and context: our "fore-meanings" [6], the backgrounds and expectations that the reader projects onto a text, influence our navigation and interpretation as well as the lessons readers take from the text. Gadamer sees hermeneutic interpretation, then, as an opportunity for the reader to examine the origin and validity their "fore-meanings". This approach makes an updated model of the hermeneutic circle suited for reading digital texts. Tom van Nuenen and Inge van de Ven's digital hermeneutics integrates humanistic methods of interpretation with the technical aspects of digital humanities methods: "Digital hermeneutics in our conceptualization describes a circular structure that vacillates between the big data ('N=all') perspective of the whole, and a close reading of the part, or the sample" [18]. I apply this method to the interpretation of database texts.

The absence of linear progression in reading databases disrupts as well as enhances the function of the hermeneutic circle. Although different writing and reading practices have been used throughout history, the hermeneutic circle generally presupposes a finite text with a beginning, middle and end, to be read linearly in its totality. When considering databases as texts, the notable absence of these characteristics allows for an emphasis on the act of interpretation in databases. Individual entries are read with the knowledge that it is one text in a larger database, and the vision of the entire database is influenced by reading individual texts. Looking for works, browsing lists, and clicking hyperlinks in online databases makes for a non-sequential reading experience, which overlaps with hypertext fiction and other genres of electronic literature. Although the objective of a database generally is to learn rather than enjoy the aesthetic and literary experience, interaction with the database constructs narratives and imaginaries. The database's affordances set up the potential for narrative and the readers actualize this potential through the process of interpretation, whose "fore-meanings" include a familiarity with databases in daily life. Reading creative databases through the digital hermeneutic lens uncovers a dialogue between part and whole as well as between text and context, which then prompts questions of what the concept of the database entails, how this influences engagement with a creative database, and how this engagement alters the concept.

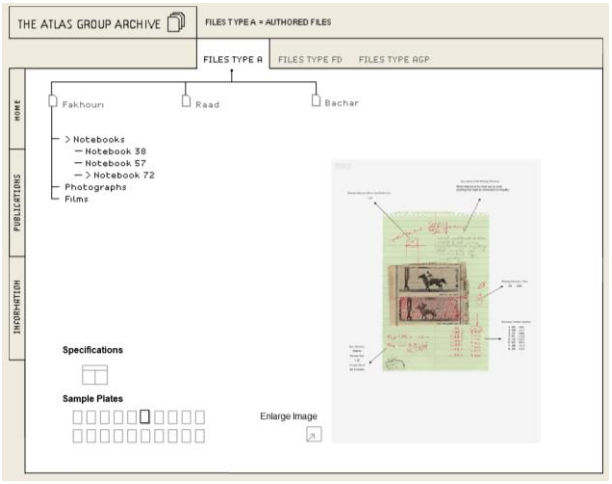

Figure 1: Screenshot of *AGA* webpage

3 The Atlas Group Archive

The Atlas Group Archive (*AGA*) is a multimedial, fictional 'archive' created by Walid Raad, which supposedly encompasses donated testimonies on the war in Lebanon (1975–1990). In this case, the fictionality of the archive creates an archive where no real archive exists. The work is often discussed as an instance of cultural memory about the Lebanese Civil War [21][23]. This is a productive approach, but one that generally glosses over the exact processes with which *AGA* achieves this through an interrogation of the digital nature of the archive or database. Due to limited space, I will consider the database in relation to its ordering structure and two individual 'testimonies'.

The work is set up as what would now be considered an old-fashioned digital database. The testimonies are archived on the website theatlasgroup.org, which differentiates between three types of files: A ("Authored Files"), FD ("Found Files"), and AGP ("Atlas Group Productions"). This ordering system models the concept of the database as a place for logical ordering of information. The reader can navigate the different files and position each media node and connection as database format allows for an inclusion of the network in the work itself. The mapping out of the network of nodes, as is practiced in hypertext research [13][11], is then partly included in the work itself (see fig. 1). This explicit structure is not a trivial aspect, but rather a key narrative method. Although Raad himself created all the fictional testimonies, he orders them as though the testimonies come from different places. The obscurity of using these file types and abbreviations highlights this common database convention. The deliberate aesthetics of ordering the testimonies as a database and having readers navigate the work as such prompts connotations of truth-value and completion, which follows Pisarski's assertion that "non-fictional hypertext tends to avoid discursive relations forming above a single unit of text. The nodes are not written as parts of larger […], instead they tend to be self contained [sic] and autonomous" [14].

At the same time, the individual elements of the database constantly deconstruct this connotation. Supposed photographic evidence of the impact of bullets on buildings is obscured by the

color-coded dots on the images (fig. 2), accompanied with the preface:

> The colors were also faithful to the distinct code devised by manufacturers in different countries to mark their cartridges and shells. [...] It took me 25 years to realize that my notebooks had all along catalogued the 23 countries that had armed and sold ammunitions to the various militias and armies fighting the Lebanese wars, including the U.S., U.K., Saudi Arabia, Israel, France, Switzerland, and China. [15]

In this manner, the work models a quantitative approach to knowledge while, at the same time, unsettling this knowledge by not actually showing the impact on buildings. As Norman Klein points out: "data, through media, must turn into a form of erasure, not blood-curdling realism. The photograph and the map – as data – hide as much as they reveal" [9]. Herein lies the difference between data and database. The ordering and connections of the database mediates which aspects of the data are hidden, revealed and created. Raad thematizes this process as follows: the black-and-white photographs of the building are covered with colored dots, which cover the whole area of bullet impact. This media filter makes it impossible to verify if there were indeed bullet holes, let alone which color the bullet tips were.

Raad also plays into the politics of access on the Internet in another element in *AGA* called "Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)", located in file type A → Bachar (fig. 1). In Europe and the US, the Lebanese Civil War was known primarily to the extent in which it affected the West [21]. The Bachar Tapes, however, tell the story of the fictional Souheil Bachar, a Lebanese hostage who shared a cell with five Western hostages, mimicking a testimonial document. The video document starts with the message:

> In 1991, Souheil Bachar collaborated with the Atlas Group to produce 53 videotapes about his ten-year captivity in Lebanon. Tapes #17 and #31 are the only two tapes Bachar makes available for screening outside of Lebanon. In tapes #17 and #31 Bachar focuses on his three-month captivity with 5 American men in 1985. [15]

The website engages with the notion of supposed global availability of information on the Internet. It is unlikely that there are actually 51 videotapes created which are only shown in Lebanon[1], yet it is nearly impossible for readers outside of Lebanon to verify this. Either way, the reader is made acutely aware of the fact that different information can be made available in different countries and that information is selected based on the national audience.

The individual elements and their connection deconstruct the connotations of truth-value and completion. Together, *AGA* demonstrates the double engagement of using the database format to tell a critical narrative about the Lebanese Civil War, which cannot be separated from its exploration of the medium itself through its use of data, data collection, and data dissemination.

Figure 2: Screenshot of *AGA* webpage

4 haikU

Unlike *AGA*, Nanette Wylde's *haikU* does not have what one would characterize as an explicit database aesthetics. Like many works of electronic literature, however, it functions by the virtue of both the actual database behind the work as well as the implied database in the readers' experience. Readers see a computer-generated haiku when they go to the website, and a new haiku is generated each time the reader refreshes the page, following the haiku format of 3 lines of poetry, respectively 5, 7, and 5 syllables long. This means that there needs to be a database of 5-syllable and 7-syllable sentences to generate all these poems. Additionally, readers know by reading the paratext that the work is generated and that there is an evolving corpus of sentences to which they can contribute. This means that they read the work not simply as a collection of haikus, but with the knowledge that these haikus are generated. Although overlapping, this distinction between visible database structures and implied database structures in the readers' experience is important. While *AGA* makes the database format explicit and supposedly lays out the whole database for the reader, *haikU* does not. While *haikU* has been described as a "poetic database" [17], the database itself is obscured as readers only get to see random outcomes of the haikus that are generated when they visit the website. Combinatory poetics has received academic traction by scholars such as Scott Rettberg, who argues that computer-generated work "enables authors and writers to exploit these techniques in the production of text machines that materialize the idea of potential literature" [16]. From the perspective of database aesthetics, *haikU*, like many computer-generated works, highlights randomness and therefore an absence of explicit taxonomy in its database. The work, then, also reflects N. Katherine Hayles' related concept of "possibility space". Hayles uses the term not just for computer-generated works in general, but specifically for a "narrative/database configuration" [7]. Each line can potentially be connected to every other line, with only the syllable

[1] The website is completely in English and Raad has expressed discomfort regarding exhibiting his work in Lebanon itself (Raad "Scratching" n.p.)

number to separate the sentences. There is, then, a continuous lack of completion and truth-value that we expect in other database formats.

When I enter the page, the following poem appears: "Green hills everywhere / flowers are swaying in the wind / remembrance, longing" (fig. 3). Apart from the evident error in the second line, which counts 8 syllables rather than the 7-syllable line that the haiku genre requests, this poem functions well. While we know that the generation is random, any reader can connect the green hills to the swaying flowers, and it is no great leap to understand how this image can be a fond memory of days gone by. At the same time, the main pleasure of reading the poem as a totality comes from the knowledge of the database format that randomly picked the sentences and it happened to combine so perfectly. This reflects the interpretation process of the hermeneutic circle: an individual reading is influenced by the totality of the work, and the imagination of the totality of the work (the database to which we do not have access) is mediated by the individual readings.

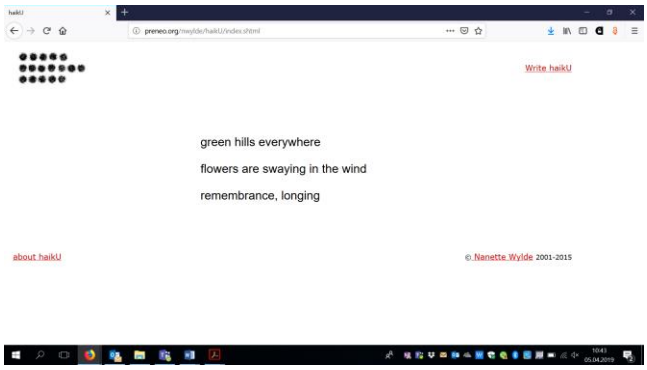

Figure 3: Screenshot of haikU webpage

5 The Sociality of the Database

Victoria Vesna states that "databases and archives serve as ready-made commentaries on our contemporary social and political lives" [19] in her edited volume *Database Aesthetics.* Although *AGA* and *haikU* take different approaches and purposes to using the database structure, they both do so in ways that interrogate the concept and materiality of the database itself. This leads to social and political commentary on databases as an omnipresence in contemporary daily life. Databases are generally defined in technical terms, yet the condition of sociality is a key element in both works. *AGA* includes a fake collective, the Atlas Group, and builds on the illusion of donated testimonies. This tactic models the idea of collectivity behind archives and databases, which is also incorporated in the structure of the work as the files are organized by their attribution to imaginary people and organizations, both named and anonymous. At the same time, readers do not get to see the process of collection in *AGA*, which is obscured behind the finished, 'complete' product. *haikU*, on the other hand, has a seemingly very open collection process. In addition to reading haikus, readers are invited to contribute to the corpus by submitting sentences. There is no reason to believe this is not the case. However, unlike *AGA*, readers do not get a 'complete' overview, but rather snippets of the database. Assuming that the submitted sentences are actually published, we can say then that the actual sociality of the database is visible in this work. In *AGA*, on the other hand, the actual readers of the work do not leave a mark. This is reflected in the works' titles, as "The Atlas Group" – being a (fictional) collective – does not include the readers whereas the typographical pun in "haikU" can be read as a nod to the participatory element of the work. In each work, the database both displays and hides its sociality in different parts of the work and creation and consumption process.

The database structure, in a larger context of digital humanities, is reliant on sociality and the collective. This reliance is present but not often acknowledged in a significant number of database projects. In addition to issues of transparency, access, and objectivity in data-driven digital humanities projects [3], this erasure of labor is now being criticized from the perspective of intersectional feminism:

> The digital humanities require people who are makers, but also people who are *connectors*, and superiority should not be ascribed to the former at the expense of the latter, despite a gendered and privilege-inflected urge to do so. [4]

When analyzing *AGA* and *haikU* as interrogations of the database format, sociality is a key aspect of how a database can function and be modeled. This sociality is continuously related to labor. In *AGA*, sociality comes in the form of implied labor, because part of the narrative around this fictional archive is that the testimonies had to come from certain people, and then collected and organized by others. This big-scale project contrasts *haikU*, in which the labor comes in little contributions from real people who are invited and thus expected to write lines to participate in the work and its sociality. This openness to readers also comes with Wylde's technological structure as well as the choice of whether or not the contributions should be moderated. These forms of implied, expected, and invited labor are present in the technological and cultural ways of engaging with academic databases. Acknowledging, highlighting, and thematizing this labor instead of hiding it resonates Adeline Koh's assertion that "if you want to save the humanities departments, champion the new wave of digital humanities: one which has humanistic questions at its core" [10]. My readings of *AGA* and *haikU* as creative databases bring their artistic examinations of the sociality of the database to the center.

6 Concluding Remarks

Throughout the short analyses of *AGA* and *haikU*, I have given double readings of each work, combining analyses of the database systems with individual fragments of the works. In doing so, I have taken a non-computational approach to show the different modes of reading necessary to interpret creative works that function as databases. My analyses demonstrate, on a small scale, the potential of considering creative databases as both literary mediatexts and artistic models of the functioning of databases. This includes a consideration of the materiality of different databases, including their technological affordances for interpretation and the conceptuality of this structure to collect and display data. Readers' concepts of the database through encountering them in numerous materialities allows for the understanding of narrative and thematic

uses of databases in creative projects. This, in turn, allows for a reflection on the database format and its omnipresence in daily and academic life. Databases are used extensively to apply quantitative methods to literary texts and bibliographic data, yet these methods are generally ill-equipped to analyze the database structures themselves. Creative databases such as *AGA* and *haikU* resist classic quantitative methods yet ask the reader to be, in a sense, both a close and distant reader in understanding the database system as an integral part of the interpretation process. This highlights that database structures are both paramount and taken for granted.

Hypertext fiction and database narratives can formally be regarded as largely overlapping terms. After all, most hypertext works use a form of database structure and most database narratives will use some form of nonlinear connection between works. The difference is not only a matter of foregrounding either database or hypertext characteristics, but also a methodological one on the analytic side. By analyzing these works from the perspective of the database, I uncover how elements of organization, overview, and linking, which are also evident in hypertext creation [20], are integral to our way of thinking about databases.

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