
*School of Creative Media, RMIT, Melbourne, Australia, RMIT Publishing, 2004*

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Moments of Coalescence - Family History and New Technologies of Remembrance

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Abstract

The fixity of the photo album and the diary or chronicle, both print-based memory machines, have obscured just how fragile and momentary our family histories really are. When you start to explore a family's history you find that there are moments of clarity brought about by recollection that are always temporary and are constantly displaced by new pieces of data. My grandfather was a somewhat vague but fairly fixed character in my mind until about six years ago when a woman rang my father and announced that she was his half sister. This new information profoundly reshaped my understanding of who he was.

And then the more I looked into the past, the less certain it seemed. The name Gye, which I'd always believed was French, turned out to be Chinese - an anglicised version of Ah Gye. I started to see the family as a kind of memory machine whose operations were similar to the computer - moments of coalescence alternating with dissolution as new data reshapes our understanding of who we are. This opened up possibilities for thinking about how we might preserve our family history in electronic media in a way that more closely reflects its dynamic nature.

This paper will examine the ways in which Halflives attempts to reflect on the construction of our identities through family remembrance in an online environment. Part genealogy and part theoretical speculation, the site is multidisciplinary and draws on Derrida's theory of hauntology, Barthes' reflections on photography and a range of family documents and photographs in order to explore new ways of understanding the past.
Introduction

Media technologies are intimately tied to the ways in which we preserve our cultural heritage. Media as memory and memory as a mediation of past events shape what has been called elsewhere our ‘personal cultural memory’ (van Dijck, 2004). Personal cultural memories are significant not only in terms of the ways in which individuals construct a sense of personal identity through autobiographical story forms (Kuhn, 1995). They contribute to our culture’s collective remembrance of the past and hence to our sense of collective identity as a culture. As José van Dijck argues, “Personal collections of mediated contents can be regarded as cultural acts and products of remembering, in which individuals engage to make sense of their lives in relation to others and to their cultural context, situating themselves in place and time” (van Dijck, 2004: 262, italics in original). As media technologies evolve, we are given access to new ways to record and disseminate our past. However, these technologies are not mere repositories for the recollection of past events. They actively shape what it means to remember that past. Using my family history site Halflives as an example, this paper will aim to demonstrate the ways in which personal cultural memories are shaped by new technologies of media such as hypertext while arguing that all memories are in fact mediated memories.

Memory and media

The past is not simply there in memory, but it must be articulated to become memory. The fissure that opens up between experiencing an event and remembering it in representation is unavoidable. Rather than remembering or ignoring it, this split should be understood as a powerful stimulant for cultural and artistic creativity. (Huyssen, 1995: 2)

The relationship between media and memory has always been complex. Media technologies provide us with ways of recording, representing and recalling past events while memory is often described in terms that reflect its mediated character. Freud, for example, saw memory as a kind of palimpsest where traces of former memories underwrote the surface of our consciousness (Tofts & McKeich, 1997: 60) However, this straightforward description of their interrelationship is often clouded by distinctions that are still maintained in many analyses between ‘authentic’ memory and ‘artificial’ memory. Since Plato’s Phaedrus, where Plato (in writing) bemoaned writing’s capacity to corrupt pure or human memory, many analyses of the relationship between media and memory have assumed a dichotomy between the two. Even Marshall McLuhan, who embraced technological change as a positive force, positioned media as extensions of the sensory perceptions of man and hence as an artificial prosthesis for human memory. However, as many others
have argued before me and I will argue here, memory is always entirely mediated, whether by writing or any other media technology (van Dijck, 2004; Tofts, 1997; Ulmer, 1994). As a result, and as Greg Ulmer has persuasively argued, “changes in the equipment of memory involve changes in people and institutions as well” and so the question of where memories reside and memory work is done becomes central to our understanding of media technologies as well as our own relation to our mediated memories (Ulmer cited in Tofts, 1997: 72).

**Media technologies and family history**

Rather than representing the past, media like television and, more recently, computers are devices that enable or produce particular memories...With the recent explosion of electronic and digital devices, there are increasingly more sites and tools for creating memories than ever before. (van Dijck, 2004)

Throughout the past 150 years, we have had a rapidly increasing number of means by which we can document and record every facet of life. The means of aural and visual capture have increased exponentially since the invention of photography in the 19th century. The expansion of our access to increasingly domesticated media technologies such as sound and video recording has wrought significant changes on the ways in which we, as individuals, preserve our personal cultural memories. Where once an individual or family's memories were restricted to limited numbers of photographs and documents, now we can acquire vast repositories of mediated memories to send into the future.

Interestingly, this increase in our ability to record and disseminate our personal cultural memories through material inscriptions has corresponded with an increased interest in the past and the repository of material inscriptions bequeathed to us by our ancestors. Family history and genealogical research have experienced an unprecedented increase in popularity in the last 30 years. An internet search on "family history" in Australia returns an astonishing 90,400 hits. "Genealogy" returns over 143,000 hits. Expanding these searches to worldwide searches returns 2,390,000 and 17,000,000 hits, respectively. Most analysts claim that family history and genealogical research are second only in popularity online to pornography.

As well as renewing our interest in the past, new media technologies enable us to reconsider the ways in which that past is created and recreated in the present. That is, they provide new models for memory. Traditional genealogy, for example, relies heavily on the rhetorical strategies of printing technologies, such as indexes and charts, and a belief in the value of
'objective facts'. "It's lists of dates and names, of births, deaths and marriages arranged in chronological sequence convey an air of exactitude, completeness and inevitability" (Davison, 2000: 83). The cultural stability that the material inscriptions of printing technologies engender is perfectly suitable to a process of memorialisation that sees the family as a believable reservoir of stable values. Traditional genealogical practices could be said to correspond to what Mackenzie Wark has referred to as 'suburban thinking':

If there is a characteristic of the suburban approach to forming knowledge out of information, it is, broadly speaking, an emphasis on rationalism. By this I mean a bias towards pre-formed categories into which new information is to be slotted, rather than a bias towards creating categories out of the new and unexpected patterns imminent in new information itself. Rationalism, understood in this broad sense, is a common feature of suburban thinking. It is what creates the suburban tendency to resist new information when it doesn't fit the assumed order of the world. (Wark quoted in Lucy, 2001, p.141)

Putting aside the connotations inscribed in the word 'suburban', Wark's observation of the ways in which rationalism shapes knowledge formation corresponds to the rather rigid methodologies of traditional genealogists and family historians and the emphasis that they place on facts and figures, often suppressing in the process versions of the past that refuse to conform to the modes of verification and documentation on which they rely. Traditional family histories are not only produced out of and within the material inscriptions of a particular media technology, print, but they produce a way of remembering the past that is shaped by this very technology - rational, objective and autonomous.

Because it is unalterable, the past is seen as consolingly secure. It is 'something solid in a shifting world', says one genealogist. 'The past is fixed', declares another who questions 'the prevailing myth that truth and value are relative'. (Davison, 2000: 83)

New media technologies such as hypertext, on the other hand, allow for a more dispersed and decentralised rhetorical mode of inscription. As Darren Tofts has argued, information networks distribute, rather than store memories, readily bringing to mind "the processes of différance and dissemination, illogic, ambiguity and surprise. Since information is accessed, rather than retrieved, the network imposes an alternative form of logic to that of orality
and print literacy, functioning 'by means of pattern formation, pattern recognition, pattern generation'". Presumably, then, networked hypertextual family histories would produce ways of viewing the past that would profoundly differ from the linear, 'factual' accounts of traditional genealogists.

**Halflives, hypertext and family history**

The *Halflives* project is a collection of family archive material (images and documents), family stories and memories, theoretical speculations and personal narratives. As well as documenting my engagement with my family’s genealogy, the site attempts to explore the very question of how new media technologies such as networked hypertext might transform personal cultural memory in the form of family history. Despite the remarkable popularity of the internet in genealogical research, as noted above, the use of the internet and hypertext by genealogists has largely been confined to instruction and archiving. That is, the web is viewed as a large repository for materials that might otherwise be, and for all intents and purposes remains, printed material. There are large numbers of sites which are essentially 'How to do Family History' handbooks and an equally large number of sites that allow users to navigate existing family trees and government documentation such as births, deaths and marriages, shipping records and the like. This is hardly surprising given the popular public perception of the internet as a kind of vast library of information rather than as a site for the creation of new and interesting cultural forms.

*Halflives*, on the other hand, is an attempt to engage with networked hypertext on its own terms. There is no order to the materials contained within it and their collection was brought about through a process of 'conduction' rather than 'deduction' - that is, the links are intuitively driven rather than being the end result of a process of reasoning. This is not a piece of argumentative writing where the reader deals with a product or end result of a reasoning process. As Greg Ulmer argues,

"..in hypermedia the process replaces the product - the user works directly with the topics, having access to all the commonplaces stored there, as if encountering what Benjamin called the composer's card-box, that which is treated in the essay as 'pre-writing'...In hypermedia the composer constructs an information environment, and the user chooses the path or line through the place provided." (Ulmer, 1994, p.37)

There are multiple entry points in the site and the information is loosely categorised into three main threads - Family, Memory/History and
Hauntology. Each of these threads are colour coded throughout the material however the material overlaps and resists categorisation.

Much of the genealogical material conforms to the usual strictures of traditional genealogy. There are charts detailing the births, deaths and marriages of a multitude of relatives back to my great, great grandparents, both transported convicts. There are letters and court documents that verify individual family members existence and experience in the world. However, I was far more interested in the unverifiable, speculative stories that circulated throughout my family. These conflicting, fragmented stories seemed to say more about my family and my own identity to me than the excavation of some dry tale of patrilineal descent ever could.

Consequently, and unlike traditional family history, there is no attempt to force the material into a coherent narrative. There are multiple versions of the same story in the site, told from the point of view of different family member. Verification gives way to speculation and fabrication. The material responds to the conditions of its environment "detailing not one idealised and authorised version of a family's 'life' but a multiplicity of complex and ever changing dynamic relationships, constantly assembling and reassembling over time and capable of endless updating." (McCauley, website, accessed 13/07/04) No version of the past is privileged over any other - there is no family line. This is no doubt an idea that would disturb the genealogist quoted above who wants to view the past as fixed and the notions of value and truth unquestionable. The authoritative 'reading' of history that traditional genealogy desires serves to undermine and inhibit other possible readings and reinforces the rationality and, hence universality, of the historical experience. Hypertext has the potential to unravel this desire. In doing so, it will transform what it means to remember the past so that "memory... may become less a process of recalling than a topological skill, the ability to locate and identify pieces of culture that identify the place of self in relation to others" (van Dijck, 2004).

The mediation of memory... is as much a creation as it is a re-creation; in a postmodern, technological culture, memory and media are intertwined beyond distinction. (van Dijck, 2004)

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About Author

Lisa Gye is a lecturer in Media and Communications at Swinburne University of Technology. She recently completed postgraduate research at the AIM (Animation and Interactive Multimedia) Centre at RMIT. Halflives [http://halflives.adc.rmit.edu.au/], the product of that research, is currently touring Australia as part of the Elastic exhibition produced by the CCP. Lisa’s scholarly interests include critical theory and new media, media arts, media production, alternative media practices and authoring for new media. She is currently co-editing (with Darren Tofts) an ebook titled Illogic of Sense: The Gregory L. Ulmer Remix for Alt-X Press. Lisa is a facilitator for Fibreculture, a network of critical thinkers, Australia-wide, engaged with new media / internet theory and practice. She is also the webdesigner for the Fibreculture website [http://www.fibreculture.org/] and the Fibreculture Journal.