

# **The Digital Dialectic**

## Part I

# The Real and the Ideal

In the long history of philosophy, the oldest dialectical pairing is likely to be the real and the ideal. If the real has been categorized as something that exists independent of the vicissitudes of sensory experience, and the ideal as that which exists in the mind as a perfect model, then what are we to make of a decade during which the phrase “virtual reality” (VR) went from technical arcanum to journalistic cliché? The new medium of VR developed in science and engineering laboratories removed from the decades of intense debates in the humanities over how to describe, much less claim to know, the real. The theory wars of poststructuralism, deconstruction, and postmodernism were often arguments about language and the way we use it to represent reality. The essays in this section engage with these battles, in that they are intimately concerned with the language we are developing to describe new media, but they do not restrict themselves to a discourse about discourse. There are questions posed about language here, but they are questions regarding the tools needed to analyze objects, systems, and media, rather than another recycling of attacks on the real.

This is not to say that a generation’s battering of the real bolstered the ideal. Though much has been made of the relationship between the archetypes floating outside of Plato’s cave and the computer’s virtual spaces and immaterial objects, the ideal has also been rocked by digital technologies. If idealism is seen as fundamentally spiritual—with the ideal standing somehow outside and beyond the realm of the material—then the materialistic rationalism that leads to the development of digital technologies would seem to undermine our confidence in *an* ideal, much less *the* ideal.

My essay, “Unfinished Business,” introduces the ideal of the digital and the real of its production: digital movies, CD-ROMs, hypertexts, Web sites, and intelligent architectures. In an astonishingly short period of time, the computer has colonized cultural production; a machine that was designed to crunch numbers has come to crunch everything from printing to music to photography to the cinema. But in so doing, the computer has followed the law of unintended consequences: the box that came to be seen as the conclusive media machine has made conclusions themselves more difficult to reach. The open structure of so many electronic environments not only allows for constant incremental changes but demands them. The three sections of the essay—“Unfinished Spaces,” “Unfinished Stories,” and “Unfinished Time”—sketch an open-ended aesthetic for digital media, an aesthetic that accepts the limitations, and perhaps naïveté, of inherited concepts of “finishing” a work.

At first glance, philosopher Michael Heim’s contribution seems, if not conclusive, at least complete. As the author of groundbreaking works on word-processing and virtual reality, and as a developer of Web-based distance learning environments and Internet services, Heim is well equipped to explicate “The Cyberspace Dialectic.” His essay offers the most fully fleshed assessment of the dialectical method that he seeks to rescue from the brute application of “DIAMAT” (the Soviet acronym for dialectical materialism). Liberated from totalitarianism, the dialectic becomes for Heim a tool to ferret out irony and cut through hype. He is bemused when the fans of the Unabomber, the antitechnology terrorist, post their thoughts on the World

Wide Web. In this unintended humor, there is a reflection of the dialectical struggle between two camps: naïve realists and networked idealists.

The naïve realists are those who would ground the essence of humanity outside the realm of the technological, refusing to concede that technologies manifest human creativity. The networked idealists are those who would brush aside any concern with the debilitating qualities of new technologies and media, the blithe futurists who echo *Candide*'s mantra that this is the best of all possible worlds—and that the digital will only add to its bounties. Heim offers up “virtual realism” as a synthetic position that brings together the innate criticality of naïve realism and the zeal of networked idealism. His virtual realism is itself “an existential process of criticism, practice, and conscious communication.”

One way that the process of criticism remains dynamic is by responding to pressures from without. Carol Gigliotti's “The Ethical Life of the Digital Aesthetic” offers a different assessment of how to deploy the digital dialectic and to what ends. If Heim's strategy is to steer between absolutisms to develop a grounded method of technological analysis (what he calls “technal-ysis”), then Gigliotti hopes that dialectical reasoning will strengthen efforts to “undertake a form of moral imagination” with regard to the digital era's cultural production, economic organization, and political structures.

Gigliotti has worked as an artist, a curator, and a theorist, and has been actively crafting art education strategies to draw upon new media systems. In all facets, she attends to ethical questions, no matter how they might be communicated, embodied, or disembodied. Here, she moves from the ever-

inflammatory (and hence always popular) issue of pornography and the Internet to the challenges presented the art world by the World Wide Web, from the rhetoric of digital revolution to the politics of access. Throughout this free-ranging investigation, Gigliotti stresses a holistic continuum: not the real versus the ideal, but rather a worldview that can consider both from that all-important ethical vantage point.

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# Unfinished Business

*Peter Lunenfeld*

## Unfinished Introduction

The business of the computer is always unfinished. In fact, “unfinished” defines the aesthetic of digital media. The great cybernetic anthropologist Gregory Bateson speaks of the metalogue—a conversation in which the form of the discussion embodies the subject being discussed: a metalogue about the nature of passion is impassioned. The metalogue offers a means to engage with language without resorting to a metalanguage.<sup>1</sup> While what follows does not uphold the form of the metalogue, it does follow in its spirit: it is an unfinished and unfinishable essay about the electronic times and places in which we live.

Consider the taint of failure that inhabits the word “unfinished.” In the Renaissance, *The Battle of Angbiari* was never more than the full-scale cartoon for the mural left unfinished when Leonardo abandoned the Florentine commission to return to Milan in 1506. We know it today only from the drawings of later artists like Peter Paul Rubens (1605). “Unfinish” also encompasses the unrealized. The Age of Reason un-reasonably offers us the most famous monument of unbuilt architecture in Etienne-Louis Boullée’s Memorial for Isaac Newton (1784). Boullée’s paper architecture of “majestic nobility” was so imbued with pictorial lyricism that its function was inspiration rather than habitation.<sup>2</sup> In the photomechanical age, Orson Welles incarnates Hollywood’s unfinished business with scripts, plays, films, books, and other projects never begun, left incomplete, or wrested away from him at the crucial moment.<sup>3</sup>

Not just failure, but death, encircles unfinish. A composer dies “before his time” and we are left with Franz Schubert’s “Unfinished Symphony.” Walter Benjamin, in despair over Europe’s impending immolation and his own situation, commits suicide on the border between Vichy France and neutral Spain; we struggle to jury-rig simulations of his great Arcades Project from notes and archives.<sup>4</sup> AIDS leaves us wondering where artist Keith Haring, novelist Paul Monette, and critic Craig Owens were heading next.

I have raised music, art, architecture, literature, film, criticism, yet not a single word about the computer. That may well be because at this very moment, the computer is swallowing—with stealth or bombast, it matters not which—all of these disparate endeavors. Cybernetics is the alchemy of our age: the computer is the universal solvent into which all difference of media dissolves into a pulsing stream of bits and bytes. It is a curious thing that a calculating machine we forced to become a typewriter only a decade

and a half ago now combines the creation, distribution, and spectatorial functions of a vast variety of other media within one box—albeit tied into a network. But this is the present state of affairs, and things are likely to become more complicated before they become less so.

So how can it be that the computer will compel us not only to confront our fears of unfinished business but also to embrace an aesthetic of “unfinished”? First off, we would be remiss to ignore those aspects of unfinished that can be sexy. Would James Dean and Marilyn Monroe have the same thanatopic appeal if they had grown old in an age of Twelve-Step redemption? The unfinished work or person allows us to read our own desires into a not yet fully formed object—opening up more space for pleasure and identification than any “complete” work or person can ever offer.

But this sexiness is not the specific pleasure of unfinished that the computer offers. Nor do I mean to conjure up the half-baked, the incomplete, or the anarchic, as did the Surrealists. To celebrate the unfinished in this era of digital ubiquity is to laud process rather than goal—to open up a third thing that is not a resolution, but rather a state of suspension. To get to that unresolved third thing—that thing in abeyance—we need first to acknowledge the central effects the computer has had on art and culture. A coherent conceptual vocabulary is an invaluable tool as we deal with a staggering amount of “newness”: platforms, tools, softwares, and delivery systems that rapidly develop, proliferate, obsolesce, and are replaced. As hypertext visionary Ted Nelson has hyperbolized, “Everything changes every six weeks now.”<sup>5</sup>

The question becomes how to categorize such a fast-moving set of objects and concepts. My own thinking involves generating operating paradigms—or threads, as I prefer—with which to make meaning. The three threads I weave here are story, space, and time. These threads are obviously broad enough to cover just about anything, but they also tie in specifically to the notion of unfinished.

### **Unfinished Spaces**

Perhaps no other aspect of the new technologies has opened such a wide-ranging set of investigations as the advent of virtual environments and on-line matrices, with their recalibrations of physicality and seemingly boundless realms. It is obviously important to discuss how we explore these realms, but this is a different sort of exploration than the far-flung sort offered by Marco Polo, Christopher Columbus, and Sally Ride. Instead, con-



sider the meander. It involves the pursuit of less grandiose dreams; it is the exploration that goes on almost in spite of itself. The meander is a distracted form of motion. It is the recataloging of the local environment we perform when we walk around, the reenvisioning of our domestic geography that occurs as we pass through the streets and alleys of our neighborhoods. Yet this is an urban model of exploration, and we are supposed to be living in a posturban age. So where does the wanderer venture? I am not the first to observe that he goes inward, into on-line realms, spreading out through the World Wide Web.

Take the case of Justin Hall, who at twenty years old served as an exemplar of the distracted electronic explorer. Starting in January 1994 (fairly early in the World Wide Web boom), he began publishing a personal Web page called “Links from the Underground” that offered a mix of Web site reviews, tutorials, articles, and autobiographical content. His site, essentially a map of his wanderings and a collection of his intertextualized ruminations, received at its height an astonishing quarter-million raw hits a day. Some might explain this by pointing out that Justin Hall had one of the earliest extensive listings of pornographic sites, but that would be to ignore the fact that we long have expected our explorers to come back with stories about sex. Justin Hall, as well as many more like him—including, of course, Jerry Yang and David Filo of Yahoo (Yet Another Officious Oracle) fame<sup>6</sup>—are spread across the globe, but all are found on the Web (often indexing each other’s indexes). Yet, as they develop new habits of “unfinished,” and innovative modes of exploration, it becomes interesting to seek out precedents for their activities.<sup>7</sup>

I am thinking of the midcentury, avant-garde movement known as the Situationist International, SI for short. Best known for its critique of the society of the spectacle, and for inspiring the student revolt in France in May 1968, the SI offers a remarkably sophisticated theorization of urbanism, a new vocabulary to describe and engage with the city as an open-ended place of play and investigation. The SI was interested in constructing “psycho-geographies” of urban environments—creating mental correspondences for physical locales—going through a city block by block, neighborhood by neighborhood, building a revolutionary sense of mutable space and creative engagement. One of its techniques was termed the “*dérive*,” which translates roughly as a “drifting.” It is “a technique of transient passage through varied ambiances.”<sup>8</sup> I would propose that if we were to strip the *dérive* from

its original context, it describes precisely what people like Justin Hall were and are doing on the Web. They are practicing a “digital *dérive*,” a *dérive* not through what my students now refer to as “realworld,” but rather a *dérive* through that technopsychological environment of the matrix/Web/cyberspace.

As Hall and others like him surf through computer-generated image worlds, creating their hot lists and recording their observations, they are surfing through two-dimensional HTML documents, though—following Ted Nelson’s six-week rule—they will soon be meandering through 3D virtual environments. When this becomes commonplace, the digital *dérive* will engender a psychogeography less of space than of the “consensual hallucination” William Gibson prefigured in *Neuromancer*. The digital *dérive* is ever in a state of unfinish, because there are always more links to create, more sites springing up every day, and even that which has been cataloged will be redesigned by the time you return to it.

The Web as it is presently constituted is essentially a collection of two-dimensional data spaces with a limited visual palette. We have to anticipate that those few prototypes of three-and-more-dimensional virtual spaces will eventually proliferate and coalesce into what Marcos Novak so elegantly refers to as the liquid architecture of cyberspace.<sup>9</sup> Where will the aesthetic of unfinish lead us in these yet to be designed realms?

Before answering that, I want to step back and examine the impact that the computer is having on our very conception of what constitutes architecture. At the Vienna Architecture Conference in 1992, Coop Himmelblau remarked that “General interest in tangible, three dimensional architectural creations is steadily decreasing. . . . Virtual space is becoming the sphere of activity for the life of the mind.”<sup>10</sup> Their statement, published under the apocalyptic title “The End of Architecture,” is symptomatic of architecture’s movement into the dis-incorporated realm of display and simulation. This transformation leads to an interesting inversion of a number of architectural prejudices.<sup>11</sup>

One of the curious aspects of contemporary architectural practice has indeed been that since the general slowdown of building in this country dating at least back to the 1970s, and intensifying during the recent economic downturn, certain outposts of the architectural profession have turned increasingly to a paper, rather than a brick and mortar, practice. The visionary Boullée, whom I mentioned earlier, becomes a new avatar.

Bernard Tschumi, dean of the School of Architecture at Columbia University, has seen a good number of his designs reified as standing buildings, but his renown rests at least as much on his theoretical work and sketches, plans, and unfinished paper projects. He responded to a series of critiques, the most pointed in the *New York Times*, by defending his and his program's attention to theoretical discourse, and the prevalence of paper architects on his faculty. He maintains that theory and practice have never been more fruitfully engaged, and argues "that what is unprecedented in certain architectural work over the past decade is the use of theory to develop concepts that inform the actual making of buildings as well as to examine concepts excluded from the domain of architecture by its inherited and prospective dualities of form and use."<sup>12</sup>

I would argue that virtual space blurs the distinction between form and use. As paper architecture becomes virtualized, it adopts the fluid states of liquid architecture. Perhaps we will have to recalibrate our concept of the digital *dérive*, taking it even farther from its Parisian origin, and move with it to an electronic Atlantis where merpeople can float as well as meander, opening up new vectors of exploration.

That liquid architecture and the digital *dérive* should adopt an aesthetic of unfinish is to be expected, but what of the computer's effect on built environments? As video walls, LCD panels, video projections, and large-scale computer graphic displays become greater and greater parts of our lived environments, we enter a new era of architecture, one in which the design of our lived spaces reflects and incorporates the electronic information and imaging technologies that are ever more central to our lives. Oddly enough, the lessons taught by these dematerialized imagescapes may end up having a beneficent effect on the hardscapes of built spaces. Stewart Brand offers some insights into this question in *How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They're Built*. He writes that in popular usage, the term "'architecture' always means 'unchanging deep structure.'" Yet his book is an impassioned plea to remember that "a 'building' is always building and rebuilding."<sup>13</sup> The central thesis of *How Buildings Learn* is that finishing is never finished. Brand identifies as a major problem the way that contemporary architecture is judged just once—at the moment just before the client takes possession, before it makes the ineffable shift from volumetric sculpture to inhabited space.

The computer industry could never function this way. Software is never finished, and early users of a new product always expect difficulties, followed



Unfinish: A grain silo in Akron becomes . . .

The Quaker Square Hilton.  
Photos by Bruce Ford, City of Akron.

by upgrades.<sup>14</sup> We can anticipate that the mix of liquid and built architecture will offer a similar process of refinement and give-and-take between designers—be they programmers, architects, or both—and the users who will dwell in these hybrid imagescapes and hardscapes.

So back to where we were. If we are to establish the creative potential of unfinish in the era of liquid architecture, we must defend computer-generated environments as being and offering a more fully spatialized experience than those offered by the image commodities on television. That is, we must defend the digital *dérive* as more than channel surfing. To do so, we will have to build these cyberspaces to ensure that what we give up sensually in the *dérive* of the *quartier, sestiere, borough*—that is, smell, atmosphere, and light—can be compensated for by the release from the constraints of physical movement. Vivian Sobchack speaks of the dialectic between carnal phenomenology on the one hand and arbitrary semiotic systems on the other—that is to say, the differences between the way we find and situate ourselves in realworld and the ever unfinished signscape that fills our media environments with simulations, morphing, and Net surfing.<sup>15</sup> One way we find our way through is by telling stories of where we have been.

## Unfinished Stories

I have a word to tell you/a story to recount to you . . . /Come and I will reveal it.

This is an invitation. It speaks of the seductive power of narrative.

All right, then, so tell us a story then.

This is a command. It speaks of the demands of those who have surrendered to narrative's seductions.

These two quotations, which are on one level so close, are divided by over thirty-four centuries and a technological shift that is almost unimaginable. The first is from a poetic celebration of the god Baal composed in ancient Canaan and inscribed in cuneiform on clay tablets.<sup>16</sup> The second is an excerpt from Stuart Moulthrop's *Victory Garden*, a hypertext fiction created to be read on a computer.<sup>17</sup>

Human beings are hardwired into the storytelling process—whether they are the ones spinning the tales or those listening to them. As mentioned

earlier, one of the links between the Age of Exploration and the era of the digital *dérive* is the propensity of those who venture out to return with stories of what they have seen. The difference between the eras is reflected in the way these stories are structured.

One of the most often noted qualities of hypertext is the way it offers a never-ending variety of ways through material. Hyperfictions encourage play and challenge our received critical vocabulary. Is a reader reading, or is a user using? The revolutionary qualities of an active engagement with open-ended narratives—whether as reader or user—have been well covered by others, most notably George Landow. I do not want to restate the well-rehearsed analyses of hyperfictions as instantiations of Roland Barthes’s “writerly” textuality, wherein the reader does not encounter a work with a preconstituted meaning, but rather (re)writes the text through the process of reading.

I am concerned, instead, with situating open-ended hypernarratives in a broader context of unfinish. Just as the text has multiplied its own paths toward an internal form of unfinish, so the boundaries between the text and the context have begun to dissolve in the aforementioned universal solvent of the digital. Technology and popular culture propel us toward a state of unfinish in which the story is never over, and the limits of what constitutes the story proper are never to be as clear again.

French literary theorist Gérard Genette refers to the “paratext”: the materials and discourses that surround the narrative object.<sup>18</sup> Genette generated his theories from a study of literature and considers the paratext in terms of the publishing industry: cover design, book packaging, publicity materials, and so on. I would say, however, that the transformation of the publishing industry in the past two decades—the melding of publishers with moviemakers, television producers, and comic book companies, and the development of media conglomerates like Time Warner, Disney/ABC, and Sony—has bloated the paratext to such a point that it is impossible to distinguish between it and the text. Digital forms are even more prone to this, for who is to say where packaging begins and ends in a medium in which everything is composed of the same streams of data—regardless of whether the information is textual, visual, aural, static, or dynamic?<sup>19</sup> In addition, the backstory—the information about how a narrative object comes into being—is fast becoming almost as important as that object itself. For a vast percentage of new media titles, backstories are probably more interesting, in fact, than the narratives themselves.

As the rigid demarcations between formerly discrete texts become fluid liminal zones, and then simply markers within an ever-shifting nodal system of narrative information, the Aristotelian story arc, with its beginning, middle, and end, becomes something else again. Look at the cross-, trans-, inter-, para-, et cetera textualities that developed around the Sony Corporation's media "property" of Johnny Mnemonic—or, rather, the blurring boundaries between a number of Johnny Mnemonics. This proliferation of paratextuality was occasioned by the 1995 release of *Johnny Mnemonic*, a film directed by the artist Robert Longo. At <[www.mnemonic.sony.com](http://www.mnemonic.sony.com)>, Sony marketed all of its Johnnys in one virtual place:

Way back in the 1980s, award-winning author William Gibson laid the foundation for the cyberpunk genre with fast-paced technothriller stories like *Johnny Mnemonic* and *Neuromancer*. Today, Sony presents Johnny Mnemonic in a variety of media: hence, we witness the arrival of *Johnny Mnemonic*, the movie starring Keanu Reeves . . . *Johnny Mnemonic*, the movie soundtrack . . . *Johnny Mnemonic*, the award-winning CD-ROM game from Sony Imagesoft (available for PC Windows and Mac) [not starring Reeves]; a plethora of assorted Johnny Mnemonic merchandise (T-shirts, caps, mugs); and, because it's the hip communication medium of the '90s, the *Johnny Mnemonic net.bunt*, a scavenger hunt on the Internet offering over \$20,000 in prizes.<sup>20</sup>

To round it all out, there was a cover story in *Wired* that promised to return us to William Gibson for his take on "the making of" the movie.<sup>21</sup> Welcome to the digital revolution, brought to you by Sony. The result of such dubious corporate synergy is the blending of the text and the paratext, the pumping out of undifferentiated and unfinished product into the electronically interlinked mediasphere. Final closure of narrative can not occur in such an environment because there is an economic imperative to develop narrative brands: product that can be sold and resold. This is the justification for sequels, and not only for those narratives that are designed for sequels—as *Johnny Mnemonic* so obviously was—but even for the expansion of formerly closed narratives into unfinished ones. For that, see the recent trend in book publishing to unfinish *Gone with the Wind*, *Casablanca*, and even *The Wind in the Willows*.<sup>22</sup>

In the present moment, then, narratives are developed to be unfinished, or unfinishable. And if anything, narrative itself is being phased out in favor of character. Thus, the hope was that Johnny Mnemonic would take off as a



Going on-line in the film version of *Johnny Mnemonic*.

character, and that a never-ending series of narrativized and seminarrativized products could then be developed around him (the film flopped, however, stopping the process in its tracks). It is this phenomenon that accounts for the contemporary moment's inundation in comic book figures. A character like Batman is a narrative franchise. His story is always unfinished because one can never be certain that the narrative stream will not be invigorated by new tributaries in the years to come. The entire American comic book industry serves as a model of the perpetually suspended narrative: different artists, different writers, even different companies take the same characters, constantly reusing them, putting them into new yet similar narratives, and never closing them—for these creators are always working on someone else's product.<sup>23</sup>

This is the fate of the creative professional working for the postmodern image factory. What of other, more exploratory projects? Take David Blair's *Waxweb* as a work or, better yet, set of works, that makes the aesthetic of unfinished its own. Blair created the first important desktop video science fiction film in 1991, a curious hybrid called *Wax, or the Discovery of Television Amongst the Bees*. This dreamlike eighty-five-minute narrative blended video, computer graphics, and cinema. Since its release, there has been much





The CD-ROM game *Johnny Mnemonic*.  
© Sony Imagesoft.

The *Johnny Mnemonic net.hunt*.

discussion of the film's remarkable visual style and looping narrative about Jacob Hive-maker, the nuclear testing sites in Almagordo, New Mexico, and how the bees guard the souls of the dead inside the moon.

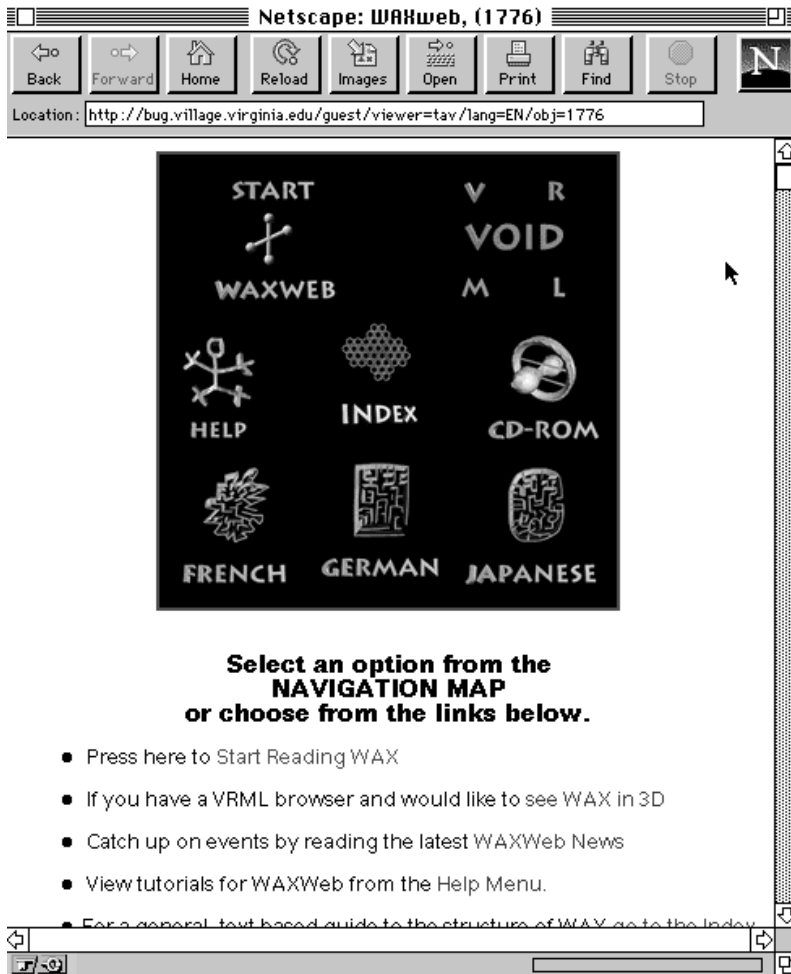
Blair delivered *Wax* through a variety of channels, taking advantage of this era of proliferating networks. He blew up the video into a film print to show in theaters, sold cassettes by mail, and was the first artist to digitize and distribute a feature-length project on the Net. From there he went on to develop *Waxweb*, an interactive, intercommunicative feature film on the World Wide Web.

The original digital video is joined by 3,000 Web pages connected by 2,500 hyperlinks; 5,000 color stills; soundtracks in English, French, Japanese, and German; and more than 250 VRML-format 3D scenes, each in turn composed of thousands of hyperlinked parts.<sup>24</sup> All of this functions as a visualized MUD or, better yet, a MOO. In his book *The Virtual Community*, Howard Rheingold offers some definitions: "MUD stands for Multi-User Dungeons—imaginary worlds in computer databases where people use words and programming languages to improvise melodramas, build worlds and all the objects in them, solve puzzles, invent amusements and tools, compete for prestige and power, gain wisdom."<sup>25</sup> MOOs are object-oriented MUDs, and whereas MUDs generally follow fixed gaming rules, MOOs are more open. Users can reconfigure the spaces of MOOs, creating new rooms, and make many more modifications—down to the level of coding. As Blair puts it, "MOOs are network-based tools for computer supported collaborative work (and play), which allow realtime intercommunication in a multi-room virtual space, as well as the sharing of network information resources."<sup>26</sup>

*Waxweb* has created a community of users, hybrid reader/writers participating in an ever-changing, and thus never finished, process of reception, creation, and broadcast. It offers a chance to participate in a process, not to reach a goal. The multiplatform *Johnny Mnemonic* text/paratext is not a process but a product—undifferentiated and blurred, to be sure, but a product all the same. *Waxweb* offers a very different vision of how narrative can function in an age of unfinished.

### Unfinished Time

The "Unfinished Introduction" to this essay proposes that the third thread to be followed is time. But, to be honest, I am not finished with narrative.



The opening screen of WaxWeb.  
Courtesy of David Blair.

In fact, I cannot think about time without thinking about narrative. I am not the only one. Curator, author, and new media publisher Michael Nash notes: “The impulse to ‘narratize’ experience is endemic to the structure of consciousness and takes root from our mortality. Every heart has a fixed number of beats, and that absolute rhythm propels the story of our lives from one perception to another, linking units of meaning in a finitude so that all roads lead to where we are.”<sup>27</sup>

I want to explore the linkage between narrative and time, and to look at how the shift in narrative toward an aesthetic of unfinish affects our sense of time, even our sense of death. Novelist Don DeLillo makes the connection explicit: “There is a tendency of plots to move towards death . . . the idea of death is built into the nature of every plot. A narrative plot is no less than a conspiracy of armed men. The tighter the plot of the story, the more likely it will come to death.”<sup>28</sup> The question then becomes, Will loosening the plot—as the aesthetic of unfinish implies—affect this trajectory toward mortality?

Italian critic Carlo Levi offers this spin on the relationship between time, narrative, and mortality: “If every straight line is the shortest distance between two fated and inevitable points, digressions will lengthen it; and if these digressions become so complex, so tortuous, so rapid as to hide their own tracks, who knows—perhaps death may not find us, perhaps time will lose its way, and perhaps we ourselves can remain concealed in our shifting hiding places.”<sup>29</sup>

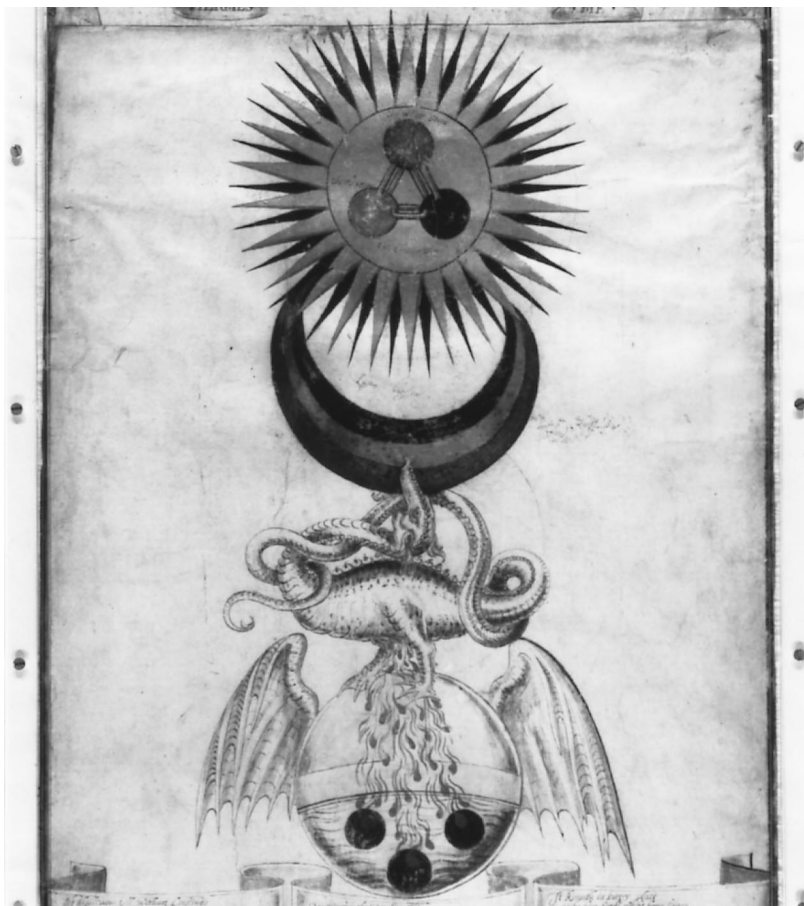
It is this utopian dream that urges me to overcome my fears of unfinished business. So what will we have in an era of unfinished MOOs and ever-expanding narratives of communication? Will the final conflict be forever forestalled? Will we exist within a world of Scheherazades, always stretching out our stories for that one extra night of life? Technology does not develop independent of the rest of society, and is in fact inextricably bound up with its social context. And I have been watching with a certain fascination how the notion of unfinished time has been adopted by some of the farther reaches of digital communities.

The Incident: An International Symposium to Examine Art, Technology and Phenomena brings together artists and theorists interested in new media technology, and researchers and enthusiasts in areas such as UFOs, parapsychology, drugs, and dreams and other psychic and paratechnological explorations of human consciousness.<sup>30</sup> Regardless of one’s feelings about

any of these phenomena—and I am completely skeptical of all paranormal claims—a convergence like *The Incident* is wonderfully appropriate to the present millennial moment. I’ve long seen the UFO obsession as a projection of our dreams of the divine, its politics concerned with seizing the revealed wisdom of the higher powers from the government. Enough of Einstein has trickled down that space travel and time avoidance (if not full stabs at immortality) have become fully intertwined. The hopes that religion offers for life eternal have been augmented by the promises of digital technology—promises to make even the human spirit a part of the digital’s unfinished time.

Marshall McLuhan once noted that “Today in the electric age we feel as free to invent nonlinear logics as we do to make non-Euclidean geometries,”<sup>31</sup> and I would add to this, free to invent nonlinear illogics. Look at the peculiar philosophies of Southern California’s Extropians. This group, founded by Tom Morrow and Max More (then a graduate student in philosophy at the University of Southern California), is technopositive, with an unswerving belief in the ameliorability of all human problems.<sup>32</sup> More and his group follow a program based on a concept they call extropy—the opposite of entropy—a refusal to accept the running down of the universe. One of their central beliefs is that eventually we will develop core memory technologies so sophisticated that we will be able to upload (their more positive and upbeat version of download) our consciousness into the ethereal realm of pure information, leaving our bodies behind and slipping from the clutches of death.

This is not far from the claims of alchemy, and if, as noted earlier, we take cybernetics to be the alchemical science of our age, it is worth exploring alchemy further. The Western variety of this protoscience has a twofold nature, one outward, or exoteric, the other hidden, or esoteric.<sup>33</sup> The exoteric nature of alchemy concerned finding the Philosopher’s Stone that could transmute base metals into gold. The esoteric aspect of alchemy concerned the transformation of men’s souls, stripping the impurities from them and enabling them to live far beyond their natural life spans. Alchemy, then, promises the unfinished life, and if it is an impossible promise, it is no less a productive one, for it forbids us to rule out anything—any idea, any movement, any space, any story. If this is truly to be an essay about unfinished, how can I end it? Impossible, but I choose to rest here.



Alchemical symbolism from the Ripley Scroll.  
Courtesy of the Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery.

