

Distilling the Elements of “Networked Narratives” with Digital Alchemy

1 Introduction: The Backdrop to “Networked Narratives”

In fall 2017, Michiko Kakutani of the *New York Times* quoted U.S. President Barack Obama as he reflected on his “Secret to Surviving the White House Years: Books”: “At a time,” Obama says, “when so much of our politics is trying to manage this clash of cultures brought about by globalization and technology and migration, the role of stories to unify—as opposed to divide, to engage rather than to marginalize—is more important than ever.”¹ Obama realizes that storytelling stands as a bridge that might span usual divides. He knows that the art of stories holds truths that remain “under the surface of what we argue about every day.” However, in many ways, today’s polarized online environment stands in direct contrast to this vision of empathy via stories that connect us. Digital networks have let people increasingly retreat to their own silos (talking only to like-minded people who amplify their certainties and biases).

The morning after the American presidential election of 2016, the words of American biochemist and writer Isaac Asimov captured my concern: “There is a cult of ignorance in the United States, and there always has been. The strain of anti-intellectualism has been a constant thread winding its way through our political and cultural life, nurtured by the false notion that democracy means that ‘my ignorance is just as good as your knowledge.’”² In the dawning of a new political reality and regime, educators have been forced to grapple with the effect of divisive digital networks and media disruption in classrooms and in everyday lives. In many ways, today’s media culture is a culture where the nuanced realities and complexities of entire lives are reduced to fragmentary glimpses or soundbites. Social media seem to precipitate a kind of violence of self-assertion: a barrage of forcible framing of our identity for presentation and idealization. A notion of self-branding and the will to amplification is often understood as the primary currency of life online. But the affordances of the network can also be much more than a proverbial soapbox to shout from. How can we metamorphose from media consumers to media producers while embracing the digital mediascape in the context of learning, growth, community, and creativity?

Whatever pedagogical pathways we might take towards such a transformation, exercising our creative imagination must play a role in getting us there. Our collective creative capacity in this cultural context of new digital tools and networks is an important consideration. Imagination is our own, personal, infinite playground (De Koven). And it is, by its very universality, a shared capacity. The developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky has suggested that “the creative activity of the imagination depends directly on the richness and variety of a person’s previous experiences because this experience provides the material from which the products of fantasy are constructed. The richer a person’s experience, the richer the material his (or her) imagination has access to” (qtd. in Zamora, “The Importance of Imagination”). Our collective playground in which to imagine has become an increasingly vast and daunting place. The world is indeed at our fingertips. Networked knowledge and combinatorial creativity should be a cornerstone resource for nurturing our growing capacity to imagine together. In order for us to truly create and contribute to the world, we must be able to connect countless dots, to cross-pollinate ideas from a wealth of influences. We must be able to surf in the vast grab bag of different stories, and we must combine and recombine these pieces to build new castles. At this critical juncture in our cultural and political history, we should never underestimate the power of fiction to lead the way in our real lives. Make no mistake, stories are not just child’s play. Stories give us starch up our spine, they point us to how we might do better, they give hope, they help us survive.

As a literature and writing professor with a strong commitment to the notion of digital citizenship, I have felt the urgency to face the negative effects of the digital mediascape head on, while opening up more nuanced (and empowered) conversations about what is possible when contributing and participating in digital networks. In the spring 2017, I co-designed and co-taught a course entitled “Networked Narratives”³ (better known as #NetNarr). This article is a case study and reflective synthesis of “Networked Narratives”—an innovative pedagogical experiment in teaching digital literacies, digital writing, and electronic narrative in the age of amplification and post-truth politics.

2 What is “Networked Narratives,” also known as #NetNarr?

Instructional web designer and Professor Alan Levine⁴ and I partnered to devise an open emergent community of storytellers in spring 2017. We embraced the notion of “digital alchemy” as we thoughtfully mixed together “elements” of media and storytelling. “Networked Narratives” is a networked “collaboratory” in digital storytelling, world-building and co-learning. The community has distributed its digital artifacts on many digital platforms on the open web.

Diverse global participants in the open “Networked Narratives” course (#NetNarr) inhabit personas, share and remix digital media, and explore the role of multiple identities in networked spaces. Taking a cue from the age of alchemy (often thought of as closeted pseudoscientists concocting formulas to make gold from common substances), #NetNarr is an open online collaboration seeking narrative transformations while co-building a “mirrorworld” inspired by current #netprov design conversations. “Networked Narratives” includes “virtual field trips,” live video visits with international artists and scholars to explore the latest in digital storytelling, electronic literature, fan fiction, #netprov, and game-based narratives. #Netnarr participants developed creative skills via our “Daily Digital Alchemy” challenges and other media assignments, plus networked discussions via *Twitter* chats and the web annotation tool hypothes.is. With an eye towards the challenges of cultural translation and the constraints of narrative expectation bound to a local cultural lens, we consider the growth (and politics) of networks in an international context.



Fig. 1. Our first #NetNarr

In a face-to-face context, this was a full class of undergraduate and graduate students at Kean University in NJ, USA who were taking this course for credit.⁵ But #netnarr has also been an open online transnational network. This means that there were many participants with no formal institutional affiliation to Kean University (i.e. they were not taking the college course for academic credit). Still, these open participants were very much a part of the daily unfolding of the #netnarr experience, and they were just as critical to the development and coherence of the #netnarr community.

In short, #NetNarr is many things: it is a hashtag, a course, a community, and an open experiment in “digital alchemy.” It has also been an experiment in designing for narrative emergence with teaching itself as a narrative-based experience. I will share an account of our unique storytelling community as I

consider the intersection of co-learning, networks, civic imagination, pedagogy, and digital writing/making. In addition, I will reflect on the role that “co-imagining” and ARG practices (alternative reality games) might play in addressing real world challenges.

3 #NetNarr: Designing for Emergence

It is a surprising and often counterintuitive truth that good learning design must anticipate the unforeseen. When it comes to designing a dynamic learning environment, a professor should leave ample room in the course plan for what they cannot quite predict, with an eye towards responsive improvisation (Zamora, “Networked Narrative: Designing for Emergence”). Said another way, the instructor cannot (and should not) know every outcome before they attempt to set a course for authentic learning. I have always made student agency, student choice, and student instinct a listening/actionable priority. But this step towards emergent learning as a course design principle is not an easy one. We have heard quite a bit about the limits of the “sage on the stage” approach and the dawning of new affordances in teaching with the “guide on the side” model. But it is risky for an educator to take on a true co-learning stance. It goes without saying that a changing relationship to authority and hierarchy in the classroom is no small feat. It can certainly induce anxiety for all involved—the teacher must relinquish familiar control, the student must claim learning on terms that are not prescribed by anyone else. Unlearning traditional learning frameworks is not easy for all involved. It is a radical shift setting everyone a bit adrift on an unknown course. For there are always established ways of doing things that prescribe the kind of road you *must* or *should* embark on. Specific destinations are identified. God forbid the college class that does not have a clearly mapped out syllabus, and firmly asserted SLOs (student learning outcomes). Amidst this stricture, learning itself has often become a traffic-ridden highway of the well-trodden path. But what if all our learning pathways could be less discernible, and we allowed ourselves to “follow our noses” to where the magic seemed to manifest? What if learning environments were founded on the intuitive, and were more like “desire pathways” rather than traffic-ridden prescriptions (Bowles)? You could let your instinct determine your next act of creation, your next discovery, your next act of love. In education, to choose to veer “off-course” in designing a class is not for the faint of heart. It can be dangerous (Zamora, “Returning from #Argance”).

But, this kind of paradigmatic sea change may also be a timely and much needed shift. It is the leveling effect when designing a co-learning environment that lends itself to preparing new learners to cope with the boundless and

ubiquitous connectivity that technology has made possible. Anyone can claim a voice or develop a platform on the social web. Who do we choose to listen to? Who do we attempt to connect with, and for what reasons? And how do we develop trust and come to build our own unique learning networks? The current digital mediascape and the open social web can serve as the ultimate co-learning environment. But there are many pitfalls that might prevent such a growth/learning oriented online experience. With this lens, a flexible co-learning model for teaching a course on networks and digital storytelling was an intuitive fit from the onset. By incorporating open networked practices into our teaching, we set out to model connected and networked learning on the internet. But how did we build out a flexible and responsive model for open learning? When Alan Levine and I co-designed “Networked Narratives,” we settled upon a notion of course “spine.”

We have been shrouded in mystery. That’s by design! But today we are releasing the Networked Narratives “spine” that defines the shape of the open course that starts the week of January 16, 2017. Typical courses will have a familiar syllabus or schedule, but as you will see unfolding soon, nothing about “Networked Narratives” will be typical. The idea of a spine is that it defines the structure and framework of a structure or even our own bodies, but is also flexible.⁶

The course “spine” was a procedural framework (a loose timeline with events and shared activities), but it also left room for responsive planning depending on how the learning unfolded. While our conversations developed (both in the classroom, and also in the open web), we negotiated a body of shared work which reflected creative and collaborative responses to our community’s concerns and questions. The students who were registered for our face-to-face course were committed to be there for the entire length of “the spine,” but the same activities were available to all open participants as well. The interaction between open web participants⁷ and face-to-face students was rich and instructive. We pushed back against the common incorporation of live video streams from a classroom or canned lectures “by professors sitting in front of bookshelves.” Each month featured different interactivity and different modalities for our open discussions and networked events (i.e. live video studio visits, collaborative creative writing forums, live social annotation of webtext, and community *Twitter* chats). Threaded across the entire course experience were a series of media creation and story making assignments. In addition, there were regular daily doses of smaller creative challenges which we called “Daily Digital Alchemy” also known as #dda on *Twitter*. Each #netnarr week started with a blog post announcement of all #netnarr activities and assignments for the

week. The #netnarr community played with new genres of narrative (i.e. generative poetry, hypertext fiction, #netprov, etc). In this way, an online global community of artists, scholars, students, and educators emerged with the shared purpose of exploring new forms of storytelling in the digital age as they mixed and remixed multimodal media together.

4 The Course “Spine”

The typical spring semester runs from late January to early May, so we designed a flexible schedule which we considered a “course spine” for this length of time. In January, participants entered the world of Digital Alchemy. We asked all of our participants to think about the ancient practice of alchemy applied in the present with digital tools. Students began to personalize their own “digital toolboxes” with syndicated blog accounts (a.k.a. “Digital alchemy notebooks”) and social media feeds as they explored many new digital applications. The tool setup for the course was presented as a “labyrinthus” that each participant must pass through in order to be acclimated to the open online environment.

Here you stand at a starting point for “Networked Narratives.” Are you ready? While not a labyrinth per se, it has not strict walls nor a Minotaur, think of this as a guided path for setting up the first online tools you will use as part of this experience. Here you stand at a starting point for “Networked Narratives.” First, let us say at this doorway (not a gate), that we force no one to use an online tool to which they might have an objection or a concern. We will provide alternative paths for each. There are always, always multiple options in “Networked Narratives.” Are you ready to enter Labyrinthus? This may take 30 minutes to an hour to a lifetime. Most likely not the latter.⁸

By moving through a choose-your-own-adventure hypertext game with several rounds of choices, students and open participants were guided through the basics for building their own digital platforms (i.e. their own digital alchemy laboratories). They set up social media accounts, public annotation accounts, and syndicated blog accounts. In addition, we also devised a special process to address course assessment. Our in-class (credit-bearing) Kean University students were invited to co-design their own grade contract. Students were able to input some ideas regarding the terms of their own evaluation by considering what kind of effort, intensity of input, and learning outcomes might reflect each letter grade. This process certainly added some accountability to their own understanding of how they were to be evaluated.

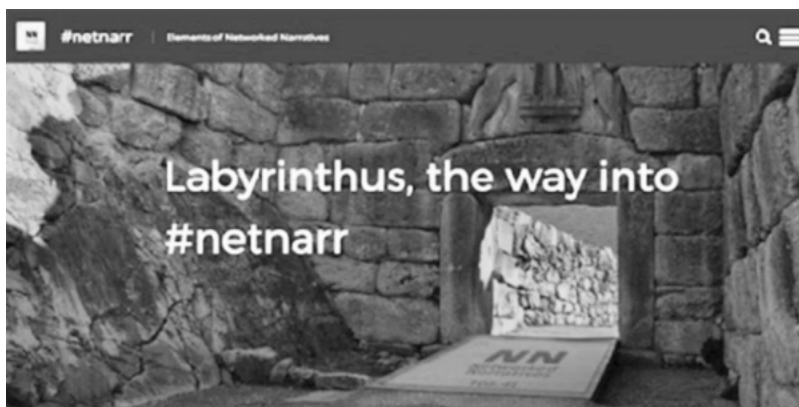


Fig. 2. Labyrinthus.

5 Studio Visits

#NetNarr produced a series of “Studio Visits” which were co-streamed at the educational consortium “Educator Innovator” in order to reach a broad community of those interested in electronic literature, digital storytelling, digital writing, and transformative, collaborative learning.⁹ During these virtual studio visits we spoke with artists, researchers and practitioners, meeting them in their own unique work spaces in order to open up conversations about new media writing in the 21st century (McIntyre, *Visiting Digital Storytellers*).

Our first stop was with Leonardo Flores, Professor of English and researcher of digital literature at University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez. Flores is also the esteemed founder of I Love E-Poetry, a daily blog and resource dedicated to short-form scholarship on born-digital poetry and poetics. #NetNarr students and a few open participants spoke with Flores about the development of Electronic Literature. As Flores put it, “[i]t’s an experimental practice at this point, it hasn’t become naturalized. But as it does, it starts to change mindsets, it starts to change how we even conceptualize the work.” Our conversation covered questions including: What is electronic literature? Where can we discover it? What narrative genres have emerged based on the affordances of new media tools? What role might transmedia storytelling play in our school environments? We introduced the Electronic Literature Collection, while we also did some on-screen e-lit “walkthroughs” in order to share the power of this kind of art with a generalist audience. We discussed E-Poetry, interactive fiction, generative poetry and *Twitter* bots. The studio visit stop with Flores was then archived in *YouTube* and our course site, and the public conversation was extended through the open web annotation tool called *hypothes.is*.



Fig. 3. Leonardo Flores studio visit.¹⁰

In our second studio visit, we checked in with educators and #Netprov artists Mark Marino and Rob Wittig to discuss some of their guiding principles and past experiments, and explore the political and pedagogical implications of this new form of participatory art. #Netprov—or “networked improvisation narrative”—is an online art form occupying the densely populated cultural space of social media. Netprov is networked improvised storytelling. Collaborative stories are playfully improvised in real time. How does networked media create new opportunities for improv, collaborative satire, and emergent storytelling? Blurring the boundaries of reality and fiction, we explored the question of what might be the inherent goals for this kind of storytelling work. By discussing the consequences of netprov as “hoax,” we grappled with the implications of trust and security in online communities. Students in the conversation also explored the nature of performativity both in real time practice, and reflection afterward. We also considered how this social form of collaborative storytelling might be used pedagogically. As Marino and Wittig shared:

Netprov is, there’s an impulse that lots and lots of people are having which is to make funny fake Twitter accounts, to fictionalize in small ways, and what we’re doing in a lot of ways is to try to bring the whole bag of tricks, or as many tricks as we know, from the grand beautiful literary tradition, and bring those tricks into these new media.¹¹

This studio visit included Wittig’s students, #NetNarr students, and open participants as well.



Fig. 4. Mark Marino studio visit.¹²

In our following studio visit we connected with Flourish Klink and Elizabeth Minkel to further explore the effect of networks on collaborative digital writing. Klink and Minkel are hosts of the “Fansplaining podcast”—a serialized conversation devoted to thinking further about participatory culture, networks, fan fiction. What is fanfiction, and what is it not? Why does fanfiction matter? And what makes it so important to the future of literature? How does fan fiction work? What does it mean to world build? How do practitioners of fan fiction engage their civic imagination? Together we explored how fan fiction (and it’s communities of practice) have redefined the role of narrative in our society. Along the way, we considered new ways to think about “authorship.” Klink and Minkel helped the growing #NetNarr community explore the central role that community and reciprocity play in fanfiction, and their possible place as a bellwether for 21st century transmedia culture.



Fig. 5. Flourish Klink and Elizabeth Minkel.¹³

In our final #NetNarr studio visit, we had the opportunity to visit the acclaimed critic and writer Howard Rheingold, as well as his designer and systems-thinker daughter Mamie Rheingold, to discuss digital citizenship and critical pedagogy, examining how new digital tools and contexts shape how educators and students think about civic participation. As Howard said, “[w]hether 20 people or 20,000 people listen to you, the important thing is agency and participation. You are not just one of the millions of people who are fed what a few people create for you. You are in some way a creator of culture. That does not always move the giant ship of state, sometimes it does.” We discussed the network effect, mindfulness in the digital age, and the role that intuition plays in creative work and the importance of paying it heed in the digital age.



Fig. 6. Howard Rheingold and Mamie Rheingold.¹⁴

6 Virtual Bus Tours: Expanding the Network

Another important #NetNarr event-series included our virtual “bus stops” that occurred throughout the month of March 2017. The #NetNarr bus stops were about networked possibilities: exploring local worlds from a distance, while reaching across divides in order to understand different kinds of learners and make new connections.

We strived to sow the seeds for more meaningful connections across vast divides. We virtually visited different locales while engaging different cultural contexts. With these engagements, we sharpened our lens on what invisible expectations we might hold about different parts of the world. In the process, we strived to tell new stories and discover new perspectives. For each virtual bus stop, we designed a networked online activity in which “host” communi-

ties from across the globe (Mexico, Vermont, Australia, Cairo) created unique digital artifacts to share with our #NetNarr network. In turn, the #NetNarr community responded and connected with questions, remixes, and further inquiry.



Fig. 7. Virtual Bus Tours.¹⁵

7 #Arganee (and Back Again)

I know that teaching is in part performance. However, it is never an act of sincere generosity unless it is also real improvisation. A teacher who is also learning must always be on their toes, must always be open for what isn't planned. In #NetNarr, our final act of collaboration was to co-create an alchemical world called #Arganee—a mirror world to #NetNarr. #Arganee was our open gamespace for role-play, our own foray into an alchemical #netprov. #Arganee was our world-building space for our own alternative alchemical digital identities. There was something aspirational about being challenged to “breathe life” into one's own digital alchemist character. Alan and I also had alternative identities in #Arganee also known as “Rebeg Maestro” and “M Prophetissima.” These two sentient beings from another world were indeed a part of ourselves, special corners of our own imagination, but a more depthful understanding of their significance did not really arise until we let them live a little in/on the open web (Zamora, “Networked Narratives: Designing for Emergence”).



Fig. 8. NetNarrArganee.

Initially, we were wary of them, not trusting their hacking-meddling ways. They seemed to disrupt the #NetNarr community, trolling our conversations and hacking and remixing our planning video chats. But eventually we realized their mission was more than simple disruption. Rebeg and M opened up a portal to learning that felt more vital and free. In other words, role-play and collective world-building transformed what we were learning about digital storytelling together. The magic of our collective imagination really started to pave new pathways to discovery, invention, and consideration of what it means to be a digital citizen. The mirror world of #Arganee was born with this new crop of digital alchemists at the center of our growing community. Social media served as a platform for our exploration of novel perspectives, linguistic innovation, and new style and stance. A playful kind of schizophrenia-scape seemed to emerge. Our #NetNarr participants were getting to know their own (self-created) #Arganee alchemists. And *Twitter* really worked as an open space for creative imaginings in conversation. It certainly became the key locale for the convergence of different digital identities—both real and imagined.¹⁶

Since #NetNarr's first iteration came to a close in spring 2017, I have been grateful for the trust, and for the unique contributions of each and every human (and #arganee alchemist friend) who played with us along the way. As I marvel at the twisting road of our special journey, I realize just how chuck full the conversations have been. The “Networked Narratives” *YouTube* channel is certainly worth revisiting, if just to catch a glimpse of the places we have been. Imagine if we could actually aspire to build our very lives with a bit of magic, mirroring the alchemical #NetNarr serendipity we experienced togeth-

er? It would certainly require leaving room for the unknown. We would have to learn to trust our own instincts more. We would have to register “connection” as a prioritized value. Playfulness would also be a top priority. And it would necessarily require plenty of room for listening and tangents. As to the future, we now have a crew of “alchemist elders” (alumni per se) to call into action in our future offerings of #NetNarr which will take the form of transnational collaboration in spring 2018.¹⁷

Notes

- 1 Cf. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/16/books/obamas-secret-to-surviving-the-white-house-years-books.html>>.
- 2 Cf. <<http://aphelis.net/cult-ignorance-isaac-asimov-1980/>>.
- 3 Cf. <<http://netnarr.arganee.world>>.
- 4 Further information on Alan Levine: <<http://cog.dog/>>.
- 5 Enrolled students took this course as an elective that contributed to their credit requirements for the BA in English or the MA in Writing Studies at Kean University.
- 6 Cf. <<http://netnarr.arganee.world/the-spine/>>.
- 7 #Netnarr open participants are those who are not affiliated with Kean University or taking the course for academic credit, yet they are active participants in the learning community via the open web.
- 8 Cf. <<http://netnarr.arganee.world/labyrinthus/>>.
- 9 Educator Innovator supports educators in re-imagining learning on the ground through the Educator Innovator Fund, a micro-investment fund supporting practitioners working with youth and communities to move their practice toward Connected Learning and community engagement. Partners include: National Writing Project, MacArthur Foundation, Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, New York Times “The Learning Network,” Smithsonian Center for Learning and Digital Access, Creative Commons or Mozilla Webmaker.
- 10 #NetNarr studio visit with Leonardo Flores about electronic literature: <<http://netnarr.arganee.world/studio-visits/leonardo-flores/>>.
- 11 Cf. <<http://educatorinnovator.org/visiting-digital-storytellers-with-the-alchemists-at-networked-narratives/>>.
- 12 #NetNarr studio visit with Mark Marino and Rob Wittig about #netprov: <<http://netnarr.arganee.world/studio-visits/mark-marino-rob-wittig/>>.

- 13 #NetNarr studio visit with Flourish Klink and Elizabeth Minkel about fan fiction: <<http://netnarr.arganee.world/studio-visits/flourish-klint-elizabeth-minkel/>>.
- 14 NetNarr studio visit with Howard Rheingold and Mamie Rheingold about digital citizenship: <<http://netnarr.arganee.world/studio-visits/howard-rheingold-mamie-rheingold/>>.
- 15 Cf. <<http://netnarr.arganee.world/bus/plans/>>.
- 16 Cf. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pr8F3Z-EDUc>>.
- 17 Alan Levine and I will direct another iteration of #NetNarr in spring 2018, co-located institutionally at Kean University in NJ and in University of Bergen, Norway (where I will be a visiting Fulbright scholar for AY 2017–2018). We will also have an expanded group of open web participants.

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