

Lines and Criss-crossings: Hyperlinks in Australian Indigenous Narratives

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Abstract

Multimedia can be a research tool to interrogate cognitive mapping. I will draw from my experience in the making of the CD-ROM *Dream Trackers* with the Warlpiri people and an interactive DVD (*Quest in Aboriginal Land*) based on films by Indigenous film maker Wayne Barker from the Kimberley, Central Australia and Arnhem Land. Both projects aimed at exploring and enhancing the cultural foundations of the reticular way many Indigenous people in Australia map their knowledge and experience of the world in a geographical virtual web of narratives, images and performances. Non linear or reticular thinking mostly stresses the fact that there is no centrality to the whole but a multipolar view from each recomposed network within each singularity, a person, a place, a Dreaming, allowing the emergence of meanings and performances, encounters, creations as new original autonomous flows. Reticular or network thinking, I argue, is a very ancient Indigenous practice but it gains today a striking actuality thanks to the fact that our so called scientific perception of cognition, virtuality, and social performance has changed through the use of new technologies.

Since the 1980's, Indigenous people of Australia have extended their local tools of expression to global networks: exhibitions, festivals, press, radio, documentaries, short dramas, feature films, Websites (Langton 2001). Many deplore the abuses of the art market which, despite the stunning success of Aboriginal paintings, still seems to benefit economically the distributors more than the artists whose lifestyle is often subject to the miserable conditions of the fourth world. In the era of information technology, one key to the survival of Indigenous cultures is to find ways to control the circulation and the staging of the products of their creativity on old and new media as well as their history and current affairs. In relation to such an Indigenous empowerment, the responsibility of anthropologists and other researchers is critical. Restitution of our research involves not just the return of data collected but a 're-interpretation' of this data in such a way that it can be used for learning, transmission, and also pleasure through aesthetics or entertainment, or even spiritual fulfilment, in a critical and ethical process.

The issue of an ethical approach to pleasure does not imply a religious or moral order but a constant re-evaluation of how each image or re-presentation of any contemporary culture (Indigenous, musical, professional, digital, etc.) impacts on social justice, equity, tolerance and freedom (Trend 2001). I will present here two attempts of anthropological restitution developed with Aboriginal peoples for a mixed audience. The first is a CD-ROM focused on one Central Australian community and the second is an interactive DVD film, juxtaposing four regions of Australia. I developed both projects to explore and enhance the cultural foundations of the reticular way many Indigenous people in Australia map their knowledge and

experience of the world in a geographical virtual web of narratives, images and performances. I will conclude on issues relating to multiplayer online serious games.

Thinking in networks

When I first lived among Desert Aborigines at Lajamanu, I was struck by the strange confluence between their traditional way of thinking and the development of artificial intelligence: this interface of ideas made me title a 1983 article 'Tribes of the Cybernetic Dream' (Autrement). Aboriginal people's perception of memory as a virtual space-time and the way they project knowledge on a geographical network, both physical and imaginary, was beginning to echo with the network and hyperlink programs of the first computers still in their infancy in those days. The application of reticular thinking has universally expanded through the development of the Internet. It is probably not a coincidence that the contemporary art market has seized on the explosion of Aboriginal artistic forms which precisely transpose trails woven in as networks. This phenomenon illustrates a universal linkage between forms and ideas, even though the connection is not expressed by those who are seduced by such works of art. The surrounding environment allows us indeed to « look at » and « hear » cultural differences in a different way to a century ago. This is also one of the reasons for the current attraction for world musics, and especially the didjeridu, this ancestral instrument invented by Aboriginal people, and played for over a decade by thousands of fans worldwide who are building their own sites on Internet.

Aboriginal people have their own sites on the Net. They use them to promote their art, their music and dance tours, or the organisation of festivals and bush trails for adventurous tourists. They also teach in various languages and place online, files about their political and legal matters. Such a development was possible because Australia has equipped its schools with computers and is funding a certain number of Indigenous organisations to do so.

Nevertheless, many Aboriginal people still live in fourth world conditions and have no access to these services. As expressed by Indigenous people all over the world, it is essential to facilitate the usage of such means of communication. Computers seem to be able to facilitate in their own way, the circulation of cultural knowledge systems. These, to be transmitted, always relied on oral and visual performances as well as the active practice of survival in the environment. Nowadays such transmission is often threatened when new life styles dominated by writing, television and passive consumption are imposed. It is not enough to record, stock and put audio-visual data online or on digital media so that it becomes a source of information and learning about a given culture. Databases and Internet sites presuppose the construction of cognitive maps which must respect the way the different learning media in these societies relate to one another, and also the various levels of knowledge expertise, some of which must stay secret. It is possible to *a priori* link everything but to understand the links that produce a meaning in a given social and cultural logic, it is necessary to know the rules of association that constitute the philosophy, the ethics and the imperatives of survival for a particular group.

During these last decades of audiovisual expansion and quasi-instant circulations of various information, we have had a paradigm change, particularly in relation to our understanding of the functioning of memory, the relation between matter and spirit and the actual and the virtual.

Dreaming knowledge: rhythm, links and memory

I used to have a 16 mm Pathe Webbo camera - an antique today – with three turning lenses and a magazine for three- minute reels. It was mechanical so you could only shoot 30 seconds at a time and then you had to rewind the tension spring with a handle to shoot again. I did not have a problem with that because before I came to Australia I made experimental films and was only interested in recording very short sequences to produce flickering effects between the information recorded on each still frame. Subsequently I brought my films to Lajamanu in 1979. After seeing a film presenting a fast flickering between different generations of my family photographed in different places in Poland and France, some old people said: ‘Good one, that’s your family, that’s your country...’ So I filmed different Warlpiri women’s rituals in a similar style and after a month of fieldwork I sent the footage to Sydney, where Ian Dunlop generously organised for it to be processed and sent back to me. I organised a screening with the Baptist mission projector and it created an uproar: ‘Why do you make us look silly!’ said the women. The film showed women dancing at different rhythms, with superimpositions, multiple focal views of the landscape, sometimes upside down, an attempt to ‘translate’ the condensation effect of dreaming. I promised to film differently and then recorded the women’s rituals in a more conventional way.

Image speed has considerably increased in film since the 1980’s, and editing convention through the production of music clips has radically changed the audiences’ cognitive relationship to film everywhere in the world. Video clips, for instance, use flickering effects to suggest different layers of subjectivity and to deconstruct space and time in imaginary levels.

Nevertheless, beyond the convention of the tempo of film rhythm remains a question: what is the “rationale” for this rhythm and the legitimacy to connect two images?

For the Warlpiri, rhythm conveys as much valuable information as speech or dance movement. It is culturally meaningful: one cannot just “play” with it. Similarly, connections produce meaning so you cannot edit two images together randomly. This was my first lesson of the complexity of an Indigenous system of knowledge which conveys a whole field of meanings and codes that are not only culturally relevant but that teach us about the effect of rhythm (produced by a linear repetition) and connections (organised in crisscrossing trails). Such Indigenous tempo codes and cultural hermeneutics are not just useful for interpreting dance or guiding well being, they are also keys to memory and survival.

For example, tracks give you both space and time information. If the footprint of an animal is a day old you will need to evaluate if it’s worth tracking, but if the print is fresh you have the choice of taking your time or moving on to get it fast before it hides. Conception and experience of time and space in the desert is relative almost in a non-Euclidian way. For example, a pathway linking three waterholes spread over 100 kilometres is relatively longer than another 100-kilometre pathway crossing a country with no waterholes. This relativity comes from the speed you need to travel at in order to survive. You need to go fast to reach the next waterhole before being too thirsty but you can slow down to stop if there is water on the way.

So when desert Aboriginal people sing a pathway known for its lack of water, they can sing it “fast forward” in a ritual setting, as one way of learning how to survive in that land. People continued to perform that kind of interpretation and knowledge transmission through ritual, even when they were located in government-run reserves. They continued to travel using rituals, reproducing an audio, visual and mental representation of the landscape. Thanks to these kinds of performances, embedded in a procedural and kinaesthetic memory, the desert people. Once moved back to their land to settle outstations, were able to find their way.

In that sense survival knowledge is not encyclopaedic but reticular. Data that we record from peoples’ experiences are snapshots seen through the eye of the person who describes it. It can never be a general description of a society, even if the society is holistic, because the holistic approach – accessing the whole from any part - is always related to singular places. It is like having hundreds of different eyeglasses that you change according to where you stand. Seeing the reality from this point of view is going to be different from another one, but you need these two, or three, or many “points of view” to make alliances, to perform a ritual, to regenerate the society. This reticular thinking, which evokes the *Rhizome* of Deleuze and Guattari, is also experienced in navigation on the World Wide Web when users chat, meet, create and link up their sites. Reticular thinking seems to articulate the Aboriginal logic of myth, kinship and land ownership even when it is woven through other structures and topologies (Benterrack & al 1984, Glowczewski and Guattari 1987, Rose 1992, Rumsey 2002, Glowczewski 2004). Thousands of stories and songlines stage separate entities (a Dreaming, an ancestor, a group, a person, an animal, a plant) but they criss-cross one another and the meeting points produce singularities. They can be sacred places, encounters with conflict or alliance and the emergence of new meanings. They can be new manifestations like a spirit child being born into a child or a new song or painting being dreamt for that place. Non linear or reticular thinking mostly stresses the fact that there is no centrality to the whole but a multipolar view from each recomposed network within each singularity, for example, a person, a place, a Dreaming, allowing the emergence of meanings and performances, encounters, creations as new original autonomous flows.

Returning data: story lines and linking sites

When back in Lajamanu in 1984, I opted for a still camera and an analogue tape recorder. Out of this data, 500 slides and 3 hours of sound in Warlpiri were selected for a digital project of “restitution” that I developed ten years later. Restitution, for an anthropologist, is not exactly the same as repatriation. When people practice their ceremonies, their dances, their songs, they don’t need them ‘back’. What they need is the knowledge attached to them, which many see as ‘stolen’ by scientists because their expression is recorded on a material medium (paper, tape, film). Anthropologists face that everywhere in the world. What are they really taking away? They are taking away the right to speak in the name of the people from whom we received the knowledge. What should be returned? Not the content as such but how it is expressed : ‘I’ve been there, I will tell you how they live, what they do, who they are.’ People we ‘study’ ask us: ‘what are you saying about us? Give it back, because we want to know the impact it has’ It is a legitimate claim for any group, any individual, but in the case of Indigenous people this claim is a political tool for empowerment.

To return my research to the Warlpiri, I decided in 1995 to design a multimedia tool linking images of rituals and landscape, photos of acrylic paintings, sound recordings of myths and songs. The original structure was developed in HTML, but later we converted it to Macromedia. The idea was to constitute a sort of “mind map”, what I call a cognitive map that would give an insight into how elements of knowledge connect with each other in the learning process of the Warlpiri themselves. **My conviction was that to understand the way meaningful connections work for the Warlpiri the best way was to invite the users to link different forms of data in the way the Warlpiri do, that is : each image, dance and song is related with specific places (sacred sites), story lines (myths) and geographical trails (which connect the sacred sites through stories and songlines of ancestral totemic travellers): hyperlinks – as a technological virtual tool - could ideally suggest how to criss-cross story-lines and layers of meaning.**

I drew a schematic map with 50 toponyms and superimposed fourteen ways of linking some of these sites according to Dreaming stories I had recorded. Thus 14 Dreaming lines would show but never at the same time. This virtual map – made of 14 layers of connections - became the interactive gateway to some 14 hours of audiovisual data. The user can click on any of the sites or lines to enter into the relevant constellation of Dreamings and explore them from the point of view of hundreds of proposed hyperlinks, some opening as small windows and others taking you on new pathways.

The map is an invisible web as the criss-crossings between the lines do not show simultaneously. The links are only discovered when the narrative of a story line which indicates links to other pathways is unfolded. In other words, each line is autonomous and each crossing or hyperlink requires the users’ interaction. The *Dream trackers* CD-Rom includes a short morphing, a photo of a sacred hill, Kurlungalinpa in the Tanami Desert, turns into a Dreaming painting of that place – by Warlpiri artist Margaret Nungarrayi Martin. –The painting is showing the same place as a network of lines connecting that sacred site to five other places of the same songline, Ngarrka or “Initiated Men”. The Warlpiri artist and other custodians of other Dreamings loved the idea that the animation conveyed the “same” identity and power of transformation of one image into another. They were pleased because it was the right painting for the right place. A morphing with a painting of another place would not have worked. The multimedia reticular script writing has allowed me first to test with the elders (who do not read and write) whether the audiovisual links I had designed were appropriate and then to invite the users themselves to link the elements gathered through their exploration.

To respect the Warlpiri system of meaningful connections, every Warlpiri word leads to other Warlpiri concepts, every painting links to songs and stories, every artist links to other artists of the same Dreaming, and certain places link to other places. When the user travels on one story line and arrives at a site where the heroes of one Dreaming line meet heroes of another Dreaming line, they can change the pathway by clicking on the name of the place.

Multimedia allows the experience of reticular travelling as a learning process. Many things can be connected, but it should be done in such a way that every time the cultural reason for that connection is learned. Songs, dances, stories and paintings all relate to places, so the *Yapa* or *Dream trackers* CD-ROM became a Warlpiri mind map inviting us - as well as the young people in the Lajamanu school - to explore some of these connections. We also had to develop a device to be able to hide images showing the recently deceased and to make it adaptable over time. As

pointed out by Warlpiri artist Jimmy Jampijinpa Robertson: “*The Yapa CD-ROM brings everybody to the mind*” (Glowczewski 2001).

Yapa, meaning Aboriginal, Indigenous people in Warlpiri (as opposed to *kardiya* “non Indigenous”) was the working title of this multimedia restitution process. Unesco Publishing – after signing a partnership of distribution and intellectual copyright with the Lajamanu Art Centre, Warnayaka, asked for a more descriptive title. I chose *Dream Trackers* because tracking is really the core of most Aboriginal philosophy. A place marked by a track does not mean that the track is just a metaphor, it is an access to the whole, a key to investigate past, present and future actions. A track is like the *imprint for a prototype, from that track you can reconstitute the performance*. The track is not just a fixed moment in time, it is the trace left by something that is moving, dancing, or walking, - an essential dynamism in Aboriginal culture. Often the interpretation of Aboriginal art is limited because it is reduced to the semiotic view of the signs, the content, and the form. It misses what is most important: the trace as the proof of the passage of something else, somewhere else. The virtual world of mythology and ritual is established in such traces. The proof of that physical track relates to all the narratives you can build out of it, which express the real relations of people to the land.

Learning through playing with an interactive fiction

To try to reach further to the narrative flavour of Aboriginal story-telling and its multidimensional potential for multiple connections, I wanted to construct an interactive DVD, a film drama whose full display would require the viewer to play a series of games connected to different episodes. Each of these drama segments was to invite the user to explore an Aboriginal community from a different region of Australia in terms of landscape, art, culture and language, colonial history and the current situation. I spent weeks drawing various mind maps to test the contents and links appropriate for the narrative of the film. The first draft was very complex, designed like a road movie crisscrossing all of Australia with built-in variations taking the user of the DVD to different places and events in the story line. The story was constructed like a network of virtual connections which would actualise themselves according to the way the player would play a game. For instance if the userscored well in relation to the survival quest involving recognition of animals, plants, seasons, mapping, they would be invited to explore the desert. But if the score was better in relation to the museum quest, involving identification of local art, cultural artefacts, history of urban art, the user would be invited to explore another region. If you succeeded in identifying different forms of dancing, singing and language, you were invited to go to Arnhem Land, and so on. There were also different options offered according to the choice of gender as a player. As these various options were taking into account the user performance and learning process through games, they would require the writing of a complex series of dramas in such a way so that the different localised episodes could be edited in a different order without losing the continuity of the stories and their relevant meaning.

The Aboriginal Dreaming songlines can be experienced in any given performance with similar adaptation to context. For example, segments of stories are omitted when a person dies, sometimes the same episode is repeated in two different places or more, and at other times the order of action is reversed, like a loop, even though

there often is a chronology and an evolution in the characters who are the heroes of the songline: Snake or Wallaby ancestors, Rain or Plum People. The question was how to represent both human and Dreamings agents? The use of Animation (animation?) can unfold stories based on today's reality but also on some aspects of the Dreaming world. Animation can integrate such elements in the learning process of a game, for instance, the help of totemic animals or the dealing with spiritual forces manifested through wind, fire and rain,. But producing such a project was (and still is) incredibly expensive, especially if a team of Aboriginal people experts of the different domains (art, music, dance, survival, kinship,) was to be involved on location.

I thought at the time, that filming with actors might be a better option than an animated film. We formed a small team contributing voluntarily to the project over three years. We selected five regions – Western Desert, Eastern Arnhem Land, Gariwerd Park in Victoria, the City of Perth in WA, and Laura in Cape York and five topics: art, festivals, culture centres, family history, bush survival. My husband, Aboriginal film maker and singer composer, Wayne Jowandi Barker, wrote a one-hour drama script in 2000 that inter-twined the five regions and the topicsⁱⁱ. The film was conceived as five episodes of ten minutes each which required the viewer to achieve a task so to be able to continue to view the story. This option seemed the easiest for the user as it allowed understanding of the complexities of Aboriginal history and the cultural and personal dilemma by following one story line. We went to Arnhem Land with a small digital camera and brought back statements from a Yolngu family from Bawaka that made us modify the story line so to emphasise spiritual presence as an agency animating the characters (Barker & Glowczewski 2002).A further five educational game proposals were written as interactive tools connecting the film storyline. The involvement of the user in these games aimed at helping the main two actors of the drama to learn how to identify art, dance, music and cultural issues, family history archives and language groups, landscapes and their resources. The first game designed by Laurent Dousset (2000-05), anthropologist and webmaster with a long experience of the Western desert people and kinship analysis, consisted in learning how to search family history archives to identify a given language group and kinship system. The second game to be developed by John Stanton, Director of the Berndt Museum of Anthropology in Perth, invited the player to organise an Aboriginal exhibition either by choosing from a series of topics or by focusing on one of the five regions and their people. The third game, created by Jessica de Largy Healy (2004), who was then working with the Aboriginal Brambuk Cultural Centre of the Gariwerd National Park, explored the different functions of a culture centre, from a simple safe-keeping place to a big Heritage and tourist precinct. The fourth game proposed by Fred Viesner, who did fieldwork with the Anangu people for his doctorate, was to introduce the user to some Indigenous systems of knowledge in relation to bush survival: tracking for hunting, identifying edible or medicine plants, facing drought but also dealing with current economy related to mining, protection of places, management of outstations or art centres. Rosita Henry (2000), an anthropologist who has studied the Laura dance festival process for over twenty years, suggested a virtual tour of different types of cultural festivals for the last game introducing the viewer to ethical protocols to be respected by performers and audiences.

I approached Australian and French funding agencies – in film, multimedia, science and culture in vain: that “interactive DVD thing” we wanted to collectively create was neither a film, nor a game nor a database, so there was no funding corresponding to its requirements.

A small grant was eventually released by my institution in Paris, the CNRS (National Centre for Scientific Research) and the Musée du Quai Branly, to do a one-hour demo to showcase an interactive cultural film project. As we could not afford to shoot a new film we used footage previously recorded by Wayne Jowandi Barker, for other projects. Together we edited a ten minute film organised in 16 sections simulating long journey across four regions of Australia – Dampier Peninsula, Kimberley Plateaux, Tanami Desert and North-East Arnhem Land - stressing the relation between different landscapes, the relevant art, dance and singing. I designed a new interactive script allowing the viewer to select at any time an interactive map from which other short films could be screened with Aboriginal testimonies in relation to four themes: art, story-telling, survival and dance. This 50-minute demo called *Quest in Aboriginal Land* was awarded and presented in many places, but lack of further funding prevented the completion of the original project. ⁱⁱⁱ

Curiously, even though the DVD medium has taken over the video market, there are very few interactive documentaries available on DVD. Only big production and TV channels can afford to pay the costs of such digital productions including the copyright payments for distribution. This financial limitation is very damaging to the future of visual anthropology and ethnographic films because interactive DVD is the perfect format for documentation and analysis. It allows one to include on the same medium different edited versions, different lengths, with or without a sound track, a comment, a subtitle in one or several languages, including thousands of pages of written files, photo displays, and even Internet links for further information or updates. Furthermore, it can offer cultural teaching based on simulation games to construct small events and evolving contexts based on archaeology, mythology, history or contemporary life.

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ⁱⁱ A young woman from Perth searches for the family of her mother, who was taken away as a victim of the Stolen Generation. She meets a Yolngu dancer from Arnhem Land at the Gariwerd culture centre: the two young people follow a different quest but they both travel through Australia and meet again in other places: a Museum in Perth, the Garma festival in his home country, and the Balgo desert community where the young woman finds her family.

ⁱⁱⁱ Awarded as 'Best illustration of science for a wide audience' at the Festival of Researcher Film (Nancy 2003), displayed in a loop on two huge floating screens as part of the Aboriginal art exhibition *Rêves Arc-en-Ciel* at the National Museum of Natural History (Lyon, 2004), presented at the International Union of Anthropologists Conference in Florence, 2003, at the American Anthropologist Association Conference in Chicago, 2003, the World Cultural Forum, Japan, 2005, at the Semaine du Cinéma d'Océanie, CNRS, Paris 2005.