

## THE MULTI-TEMPORAL EXPERIENCE OF PLATE SPINNING

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### ABSTRACT :

Increasingly our experience of the internet is transforming from a diet of digital books and choice making from grey embossed buttons, to a dynamic experience of multiple times and spaces as we open more browser windows and a paper based culture begins to embrace network technologies. As we inhabit so many web pages simultaneously, 'smarter' sites are beginning to tell us that we are not alone in cyberspace.

Beyond the chat sites where we direct our communication, network software is beginning to extract information about ourselves and distribute it to others as we are online. Software such as Meta-Spy (<http://www.meta-spy.com>) and Raindance (<http://caii-a-star.net/speed/raindance>) both acknowledge the presence of others in a passive manner. As a new culture emerges away from the domination of the broadcast model adopted from traditional media, our awareness of the community around us grows as our vista on cyberspace takes on a new seat that offers an ability to see further and see more. A position where social navigation can once again be observed as though the internet was becoming an inhabited environment beyond the one to one relationship we have with our desktop monitor.

In highlighting the value of this emerging point of view the author presents his paper alongside the performance of a 'plate spinner', as a model for the potential of this technology and the multi-temporal nature of our experience of it. In observing the skilled performance of a 'classic' circus act, and reflecting upon the audience's consciousness of multiple times that each embody a beginning and end, the author draws our attention to our faith in multiple narratives and the possibility for a transformation of the western understanding of the teleological frameworks that underpin so many of our cultural processes and artefacts.

**Keywords:** *Temporality, Network, Meta-Spy, Community, Social Navigation*

## **Introduction**

This paper explores the idea that as we increasingly use interactive network technologies, and as they increasingly affect our lives, we are forced to modify a particular understanding of the world. The author is particularly interested in the affects of the technology on our temporal consciousness and uses this paper to explore how we can reveal this through the metaphor of plate spinning; the traditional circus act.

## **Identifying the Community of the Internet**

By referencing an emerging range of new web technologies such as MetaSpy (<http://www.meta-spy.com>) and Raindance (<http://caii-star.net/speed/raindance>) we can begin to acknowledge a landscape of the internet that is increasingly making us more and more aware of the community of the internet. A community that was previously hidden from us as we explored the web on our own and was only ever revealed to us through email and chat. For the first time we are beginning to 'see' our fellow surfers as website's hold histories of visitors, are affected by others and are even reorganized by visitors.

MetaSpy was introduced as part of the fallout of the development of the popular MetaCrawler search engine. Very simply it provides visitors to its web site the opportunity to observe what other people are submitting at that very moment to the WebCrawler search interface. A simple idea that compresses all of the surveillance and voyeuristic potential that the 'network' always promised, but never delivered. To watch ten entries appear every ten seconds is like a side ways glance across the activity that we are all so engrossed in, revealing so many people, all with the same desire to suck from the web what they can, few ever noticing the simultaneity and community within the process.

Raindance is primarily a data visualization tool that illustrates how many people are visiting sites on a server. In this way Raindance simply enables a virtual community of viewers to become more aware of itself by picturing the current activities of the whole system. If cyberspace was like real space, when we arrived in a particular street or homepage we would be able to base our decisions on where to go within that space according to the visible traffic of other visitors. Some spaces like bars maybe very busy whilst others like specialist shops maybe quite quiet.

The next generation of web tools and software will undoubtedly make much that was invisible of the internet visible as we shift from television's broadcast model to a flatter network model that is appropriate to the technology and nature of the medium. This process of finding out that we are not alone when we visit websites and that the 30 million people online are really there, transforms a model we have for actuality. As a result of this it is possible to suggest that in finding others, we find different times and spaces. Times and spaces across the planet that do not fit our understanding and do not run at the same speed as ourselves. Indeed whilst we struggle or succeed to utilize this our previously mono-temporal consciousness that was defined by our interactions with so few and so locally, will be and is being dramatically split. This split may become a fracture as we struggle to hang on to the structure of narratives that allow us to define our roles and activities in the world, or it may become a conscious redefinition of our time as we share resources with places that are running at different times.

## **The Multi-Temporal Experience of Record Spinning**

This multi-temporal consciousness is manifested in the performance of a plate spinner, that will accompany the presentation of this paper as a means of exemplifying the multiple time/spaces that we are increasingly being forced to read. In this case the audience will be caught between the narratives of a single plate to a large number within the plate spinners

performance, or to the author's delivery of the paper, or if possible all of them. It is in this complexity within the moment of making sense of multiple narratives that we can feel the a loss of total perception of the situation, that is increasingly happening to us as 'we reach at a distance,[and] feel at a distance' (Virilio<sup>73</sup>).

In an attempt to find further reference to describe the impact of this state, the author presents the work of Janek Schaefer<sup>74</sup>, a contemporary composer and musician who explores audio pieces through modified technologies. Schaefer's work recognises the technical vocabulary of making, transposing and amplifying sound through its various technologies, in particular the record deck, and rebuilds and recombines it's component parts to modify the structure of made sounds.

Schaefer's 'Tri-phonic Turntable' (Fig 1.); described as 'a three tone arm, two direction, multi-level, micro vari-speed vinyl manipulator' is the first of two pieces referenced that explicitly explore some of these ideas. The re-construction of a traditional record deck simply enables a musician to apply three needles to one record simultaneously and amplify their sound. The resultant audio is described as 'emotive soundscapes [that] inhabit the architecture of the mind's eye.' Which the author interprets as a reference to the multi-temporal experience of environments that we usually filter so readily to sift out the stronger narrative for our own orientation. Schaefer's 'Tri-phonic Turntable' constructs an environment that is too complex to sift, forcing us to submit to the three narratives working simultaneously.



Fig 1. The Tri-phonic Turntable

Shaefer's second piece is presented to provide a further space of reflection upon our desire to find and follow the most significant narrative is entitled Shifted Centre Vinyl (Fig 2.). A vinyl record in which 'the spiral groove is repositioned off centre on the vinyl surface to invoke a very pronounced fluctuating wow sound as the tone arm sweeps from side to side on the turntable'. The intervention into the traditional printing process of vinyl generates an opportunity to stand outside of a predictive narrative and provides us not with a single track of sound that we may follow, but a simultaneous slice through multiple tracks as if they coexist within one sound.

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<sup>73</sup> Speed and Information: Cyberspace Alarm! *Le Monde Diplomatique*, August 1995.

<sup>74</sup> Janek Schaeffer can be reached through <http://www.audioh.com>

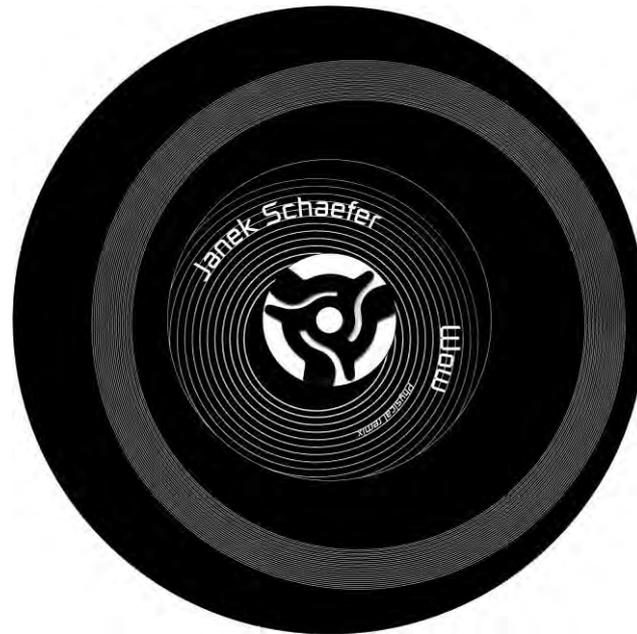


Fig 2. Shifted Centre Vinyl

Schaeffer's work whilst occupying a critical space within its own field enables us to find evidence of a cultural practice that is/was defined by single temporal speed – the single groove in the record, but that is now moving in search of multi-temporal explorations of its own media.

### **Multi-Temporal Fallout**

In the search for further evidence outside of research but in actuality for our struggle with new technologies and strategies that force us to manage more and more time spaces, the author also looks to where the apparent 'fallout' of the effect may be found.

In England over the last decade we have become used to the concept of 'road rage', largely through a media that has focussed very closely on these extraordinary manifestations of frustration that turn to violence as an individual struggles to control themselves in intense traffic situations. The author suggests that whilst much of this can be explained due to a post-capitalist environment where consumers are cultured to defend their individuality and their 'right' to control situations, another reading in context with the breaking down of mono-temporalities is useful. The author proposes that 'road rage' is a symptom of the transition between a society that interprets life in one time - *pace*, and one that fails to recognise the complexity of multiple times – *running at many paces*. Becoming angry or outraged at a situation that is not running at your pace, may be the struggle between reading from mono-temporal perspective and the difficulty in ourselves comprehending a multi-temporal reality.

The idea of a reality that largely follows one narrative is of course at the centre of many of societies beliefs. Established in the teleologies of Western religion's grand narratives that are reinforced through much of the socializing of your average citizen of the West, provide us with a process for filtering actuality into realities of narrative – major or minor to enable us to fit them within a grander scheme within which we are content. Consequently our reluctance and indeed the inability of ourselves to identify spaces which are constructed from multiple temporalities, the author sees as a significant problem for the present and future.

The author suggests that this struggle can be identified in many local Government's keenness to suppress activities that don't run at the speed of a constructed space. Skateboarding is such a practice and one that increasingly changes the space/time of place through its alternative speed, acrobatics and use of architecture. The author introduces Ian Borden's recent text upon 'Skateboarding and Henri Lefebvre: Experiencing Architecture and the City'<sup>75</sup> and in particular its reference to the 'Spatial Censorship' that occurs within the city, as skateboarders are 'increasingly repressed and legislated against, not by national or federal laws but by a series of local reactions aimed at suppressing that which is different (and misunderstood).' The author identifies this 'misunderstanding' as the struggle between a desire to hang on to a mono-temporal space whilst the pressure to recognize multiple temporalities becomes greater. Indeed understanding that car parks, handrails, seating and even out of use swimming pools can have alternative functions is indicative of a society that struggles with multiple use.

### **Closure**

By presenting the paper simultaneously as a plate spinner demonstrates their skills it is hoped that the complexity of a multi-temporal conscious moment is exemplified to the audience, and indeed reading this paper outside of that context is only mildly effective. However although the concept may be an unusual way of contextualising much new activity the author hopes to hint toward a future awareness that we may need to pay attention to as space slows and times increase as our vista on the media landscape broadens through cyberspace.

Of course we've been talking about multi-tasking for a long time and we are well aware of the complexity of daily activity in the workplace or at home, but somehow there was always a central belief system that there was only one narrative. But as we see more and learn of more narratives synchronously and asynchronously a multiple models of time are inevitable. Last year British television demanded its audience to suspend a number of 'real life' narratives in different time zones; from *Castaway* that documented a year of a community set-up on a small island off Scotland through bi-monthly programmes, to the very immediate *Big Brother* game show that allowed us to observe ten people live on the internet. Indeed around the same time as *Big Brother* caught the public's imagination, the Mike Figgis film 'Timecode' was released, a film shot from four camera perspectives and simultaneously presented in a 2 by 2 matrix, that all play at the same time describing the plot from four different perspectives. A simple idea that forces the audience to follow a narrative through different perspectives, choosing of course to view only one of the cameras view point at a time, whilst missing out on the other three. Multi-temporality embraced and exploited in a similar way to Schaeffer's audio interventions.

In closing the author will remind the reader/audience of the nature of the multi-temporal presentation and the value in the metaphor of the plate-spinner as an entertainment medium that agitates our adherence to mono-temporality into a fascination of the complexity of the multiple.

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<sup>75</sup> Published in the proceedings of *Habitus: A Sense of Place* conference, Curtin University, Perth, Australia September 2000.