

# JOURNEYS IN TRAVEL – AN INFINITE DIGITAL DATABASE FILM PROJECT

**Christin Bolewski**

This is a report on a practice-based research project that investigates contemporary modes of non-linear and recombinant digital storytelling based on algorithmic computer-controlled systems. The video installation 'Journeys in Travel' is a story of travel and investigates relationships between travelogue, cinematic essay and digital database narrative.

Decades after its original promotion, the development of nonlinear narratives remains still an intractable topic, because there is often a gap between artists' radicalizing innovation and audiences' quite different expectations. The database video installation *Journeys in Travel* aims to establish its own unique setting amongst the multiple approaches towards nonlinear narratives by addressing this issue. Lev Manovich suggests that "one of the challenges in creating database films is to come up with narratives that have a structural relationship to database aesthetics." [1]

"Journeys in Travel" suggests that:

1. The episodic structure of cinematic essay is a suitable adoption for database aesthetics, which can be called accordingly a "database essay."
2. It is also important to consider film rhythm and the viewers' cognitive and emotional engagement in the narrative construction. Watching a film can be an absorbing emotional experience, but how can this be achieved in database film?

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## "DATABASE ESSAY"

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Cinematic essay is an experimental film form characterized by a collage of associative and subjective reflections on a set theme intertwining different streams of episodic narratives in a mixed genre of narrative, documentary and experimental filmmaking. It emphasizes theme over plot and the discovery of narrative through a flexible, reflexive and self-critical approach.

Paul Arthur writes in *Essay Questions*: "Essays are distinctly process-oriented: they are rhetorical journeys in which neither an exact route nor final destination are completely spelled out. The essay assumes that what it tells us, and the order in which it is communicated could have taken an entirely different route, that it is one of several possible versions of the same concept." [2]

Likewise, the travelogue is an open, episodic narrative; it often brings together scenes without regard for plot or narrative progression. Travel itself can be understood as the reading of an audio-visual narrative, a sequence of images and sounds of unfolding events, captured while we are moving through time and space.

Hence both cinematic essay and travelogue emerge at closer examination as suitable forms to be connected with database narrative. The viewers' expectations are directed towards a film genre that does not offer cause-and-effect structure of classical Hollywood cinema or the problem-solution approach of Griersonian documentary. They are attuned towards a complex episodic narrative, which affords intellectual engagement by following a discursive argument.

*Journeys in Travel* is a temporary, open-ended arrangement, which sets in motion a seemingly endless chain of references to related topics: Travel, foreign places, tourism, ethnography, movement, pace, rhythm and the relationship of film (structure), narrative and travel. The Open Source Software *Pure Data* (PD), a real-time music and multimedia environment mainly used to create live-algorithmic musical improvisation and (interactive) music composition, controls here an infinite audiovisual narrative.

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## DATABASE FILM AND FILM RHYTHM

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What makes a film finally successful in moving the spectator is film rhythm; how everything comes together and puts the viewer into a ride and flow through different emotional stages. Film rhythm is an essential feature of film, but very complex to analyze, since it is achieved through the final balance of all elements of a film. One rare example of recent research in film rhythm drawing onto cognitive and neuroscience is Karen Pearlman's *Cutting Rhythms: Shaping the Film Edit*.

"The functions of rhythm are to create cycles of tension and release and to synchronize the spectator's physical, emotional, and cognitive fluctuations with the rhythms of the film. By modulation of somatic tension and release, rhythm impacts on the spectators as a generative aspect of their acceptance and comprehension of a film." [3] Later Pearlman continues: "It doesn't matter if the film is a thriller or a romance, narrative or abstract or a film, which might rely on a more directly visual, aural, or kinesthetic mode of tension and release; the editor works with the "life of the object visibly recorded in the frame" to determine the timing, pacing, and trajectory phrasing of its movement, and spectators' bodies respond to this rhythm." [4]

But how can this response be achieved in a database film, where a custom software edits movies in real time by choosing elements from the database using a set of rules given by the author?

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## NARRATIVE STRUCTURE OF "JOURNEYS IN TRAVEL"

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One of the major challenges of *Journeys in Travel* is to set the computer algorithm in such a way as to create a stimulating intellectual and emotionally challenging experience for the viewer without causing boredom or frustration. The algorithm shall keep a balance between well-directed narrative and randomness, and also adjust rhythm and pace to the condition of the human perception so that the timing of the narrative units and the frequency of alternations stimulate the attentive and emotional potential of the viewer.

*Journeys in Travel* suggests using "micro" and "macro" narrative structures. "Micro structure" refers here to the structure of pre-edited narrative sequences, which offer different perceptive qualities, and "macro structure" to the computer algorithm, which alternates these pre-edited clips into a stimulating audiovisual flow. The term "macro narrative" structure is – in this case – derived from "macro-aleatoric" chance-based music composition. Aleatoric music composition supports structure but also variation within structure, it is determined by elements of chance or unpredictability. "Macro-aleatoric" is a principle in European composition of the 1960s, which uses a "modular structure of musical units that can be combined using a set of rules given by the composer." [5]

Within the “micro structure” of the separate narrative units traditional methods of film montage such as continuity editing are applied to create miniature narrative structures and subplots, for example, a documentary observation, an anecdotal travel report, a philosophical quote, or an experimental audiovisual stream, which can then be flexibly arranged in the “macro structure.” Therefore each narrative unit within the database provides a type of conclusion and rhythmic structure that can be read against the content of the following or previous units. The computer algorithm controls the pacing and timing within the “macro structure”. Pacing and timing within the individual sequences is set through the prior editing process of the separate sequences and typical narrative devices such as commentary voices and musical leitmotifs establish reoccurring subplots and themes to support the episodic and rhythmic structure of the ongoing narrative.

The experimental mixed genre form of cinematic essay allows the creation of narrative, documentary and experimental film sequences of different aesthetic, intellectual and emotional capacity. Each sequence is then classified into one of five different genre categories, which are organized within the structure of PD as five separate video and sound players. These players alternate according to a pre-programmed script to generate a rhythmic flow of associative narrative chains with an alternation of different perceptive qualities and varying intellectual, visual and auditory stimulus for the viewer. The five narrative groups offer:

1. Philosophical and sociological reflections for the intellectual stimulation of the viewer. These clips are aligned by audio commentary providing a discursive argument.
2. Intertitles, which interrupt the cinematic flow and provide additional text information and intellectual stimulation.
3. Visual travel narrations and observations. These clips frequently use a camera in motion gliding through foreign landscapes creating an effect similar to early “phantom rides” and are often aligned by an anecdotic commentary and musical leitmotifs.
4. Experimental clips with experimental manipulation of image and sound, which are often accompanied by musical leitmotifs. These clips provide a high visual and auditory stimulus for the viewer.
5. Documentary observations with slow paced or static camera, which provide the opportunity for the viewer to observe people, places and action more independently by avoiding additional commentary and interpretation.

#### **References and Notes:**

1. *Lev Manovich and Andreas Kratky, Soft Cinema: Navigating the Database (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 22.*
2. *Paul Arthur, “Essay Questions,” Film Comment 39 (2003): 58-62.*
3. *Karen Pearlman, Cutting Rhythms: Shaping the Film Edit (Burlington, MA:Focal Press, 2009), 67.*
4. *Ibid., 67.*
5. *Holger Schulze, Das aleatorische Spiel. Erkundung und Anwendung der nichtintentionalen Werkgenese im 20. Jahrhundert (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2000), 27.*