

AN INITIAL THESIS PROPOSAL
and other stories

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INITIAL THESIS STATEMENT WHICH IS SUBJECT TO CHANGE AND WHICH USES THE DUBIOUS TERM ‘INTERACTIVE NARRATIVE’

And so here it is: I am interested in exploring Interactive Narrative. Specifically, I’m interested in the use of video, physical space and sound to create an all-encompassing experience for the perceiver¹. More specifically, I’m interested in the translation of emotion through media and the strengths/weaknesses of discrete media in affecting people’s perceptions and experiences. Even more specifically, I’m interested in the difference between sadness and depression and how these emotions/feelings/moods/modes of consciousness are communicated and experienced.

HOW DID I GET HERE? WHAT’S MY EXPERIENCE? WHY DO BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE?, ETC.

The first thing to start with here is probably that in the late Summer/Fall of 2009 I read David Foster Wallace’s² 1996 novel *Infinite Jest*. The book took me about three months to finish, in between assigned readings for DMI classes and dog-eared *New Yorker* articles. It’s 1079 pages long. The reason I start by mentioning this is that it had the most profound effect on me that any artwork/aesthetic experience has ever had. It’s a hard book to get through; apart from its sheer length, the book goes into graphic detail about a lot of difficult subject matter, ranging from abuses of all kinds (substance, child, animal, sexual) to depression, to addictions of all kinds, and the complex relationship between Americans and popular entertainment. The staggering thing about the book is how DFW manages to put the reader in the place of the book’s characters in a very experiential and real way. One isn’t simply reading about a character and picturing that person in a space, one is experiencing *what it would be like* to be that character. This effect is achieved by DFW’s ability to write effectively in what could be called “brain voice”, I.E. the language is very close to how one’s thoughts flow. This is different from a Joycean or O’Connorian stream of consciousness in that, well, it’s a little more easily understood/intelligible, but also in that the majority of

¹ Throughout this document, I’m going to be using this term in place of the perhaps more ubiquitous “viewer” or the eerily utilitarian term “user”, the reason being that I’d like to imagine that someone interacting with or experiencing the kind of work that I’m proposing to do would be doing more than simply looking at something (aka *viewing*), and at this point the notion of someone *using* a piece of interactive multimedia installation space has evacuation-y/scatological implications that I don’t even want to begin to approach. *Perceiver* evokes the idea of someone “becoming aware of directly through any of the senses” or “becoming aware of in one’s mind; achieve the understanding of”, according to my *American Heritage Dictionary*. I like the way that sounds and find it to be nicely in line with some of the conceptual stuff I’ve been working out and will describe in more detail later in this document.

² (from here on in: DFW)

Infinite Jest is written in the third person. To be able to effectively create a realistic experiential narrative from the distance of the third person voice, rather than by using first person narration (which puts the reader, if not directly in the character/narrator's head, then at least in a one on one dialogue with the character/narrator) is a pretty amazing feat. I'm interested in creating this kind of an experience for a perceiver, or at least exploring how it might be accomplished by using whatever medium best conveys the kind of emotion that I am attempting to convey. So, for example, in *Infinite Jest*, DFW uses text, specifically third person narration in a "brain voice", to convey sadness and depression and desperation. Is that the best way to convey such emotions? Or is it possible through other media, such as video, imagery, sound and texture?

SOMEWHAT RAMBLY BUT RELATED COROLLARY/INTERPOLATION TO THE ABOVE

I've always been fascinated/terrified by addiction. So much so that as a child I was paranoid about becoming addicted to something and losing myself in something exterior to my own brain/thought control. You know, as an eight year old. Subsequently, I've never done illegal drugs or really smoked cigarettes or done anything that is generally perceived as being addictive. This, I'd imagine (or feel like I would be told if I ever underwent any kind of psychoanalysis), comes from a fear of losing control of the self. One of the issues that DFW wrote extensively about is the notion that there is really a huge gamut of things to which people become addicted; drugs, television, video games, sex. And not necessarily addicted in the "strung-out junkie"-sense (though that counts, too), but so involved and "inside" something that while one is in it, the outside is thought to be inaccessible or imperceptible. Think of the stories of people playing *World of Warcraft* and leaving their kids somewhere or forgetting to feed their babies. I mean...that could be a description of someone on a meth-binge. So, I'm curious as to what causes people to choose what they choose to give themselves over to and what in these experiences keeps them enthralled/addicted. With drugs, it could be feeling better. With video games or television, it could be escapism. This relates to the above-mentioned notion of the "all-encompassing", of the possibility of creating an experience so rich and involved and dense that is entirely absorbing. But, you know, in a good way...not in a "totally mess up your life" way.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT AND WHAT IN THE HELL DOES THIS HAVE TO DO WITH ANYTHING AND WHY AM I PURSUING IT IN THE DMI PROGRAM?

I've thought a lot about the kind of work and concepts which I find interesting and how it all fits into the general schema of the DMI world. At times, other students have seemed to be confused by my work or my interests. This sort of bothered me until I realized that we are in a *communication design* program, and that what I'm most interested in is the communication of complex conceptual ideas in whatever medium/combination of media is best suited to express these ideas. So, exploring how sadness and/or depression can be expressed in dif-

ferent media can be viewed as both an artsy/poetic exploration and a communication design problem. I'm interested in studying the effects of particular expressions of media and using systematic and logical thought to structure an experience that conveys emotion. The process of the synthesis of an idea into a visual, sonic, or cross-media expression is the very crux of what we do as communication designers.

STATE OF THE ART

Due to the immersive nature of the work that I'm proposing to do, I think it makes the most sense to talk about work that has been done that I've actually experienced in person and can thus speak about it in a somewhat more authoritarian tone. I've seen plenty of YouTube clips of different kinds of work, but feel that I can't speak to its physical feel or effectiveness in engendering emotional response without having experienced it in person.

The most detailed, involved, totally awesome and, yes, all-encompassing physical aesthetic experience I've ever had was an art installation called *Hello Meth Lab in the Sun* (see Figure 1.1), by Jonah Freeman, Justin Lowe, and Alexandre Singh. It was installed at a gallery called Ballroom Marfa in Marfa, Texas, and happened to open while my wife and I were there getting married, in April 2008. The piece was a multi-room enclave built in what is normally a typical "white walls and concrete floor" gallery space. The piece filled the entire gallery, so that when one entered the gallery, rather than, say, first entering the gallery/museum and subsequently moving into a room with a sign on the door that says *Installation* or *Untitled by Marina Abramovic*, one is instantly, with no warning or explanation, inside the piece, which, in this case, means you're standing in a dingy motel lobby in the 1970s. The piece continues in a series of rooms built/conceived/created with a staggering attention to detail, all tangentially based on the culture of methamphetamine production and consumption, such as: a completely burned-out kitchen, a human-size terrarium filled with cacti; a blinding-white fluorescent-lit room displaying cat-litter busts; an attic crawl space wallpapered with porn and outfitted with an old TV; a pristine formal gallery space, with plush red carpeting and white wainscoting, displaying a series of black and white photographs of men and women, dressed in 1920s-*Shining*-esque dinner wear, holding crystals in front of their faces as though playing an occult parlor game. And on and on, with all of the rooms filled with nuanced placement of drug and hippie paraphernalia. I left the exhibition with the feeling that I had experienced something profound and *otherworldly*.

The work of Matthew Barney³, especially his film series *The Cremaster Cycle* (see Figure 1.2), is another influence on the sort of work I could see myself doing in the next year and beyond. Barney creates visual narratives that are simultaneously cinematic and sculptural. *The Cremaster Cycle* is basically a large-scale, five film narrative about sexual differentiation and the mythic nature of masculinity. Yes, it's pretentious. But, there's no mistaking a Matthew Barney world, and this is due to his ability to create a visual language through symbolism, performance, set and costume design, soundtrack and video editing. One might not necessarily have any idea what exactly is going on in a Barney film, but one has a sense that *there's something going on*, and that *it might be possible* to uncover it. Perceiving a Barney film is sort of like watching a gorgeously shot foreign language film without subtitles and without knowing the language being spoken. It's this sort of underlying order, or discernible sense of order, that fascinates me. Another thing about Barney's work is that it's not simply filmmaking; he exhibits the sculpture and costumes and sets from his films, usually in conjunction with his films, so a perceiver is able to sort of be in the film themselves, or at least experience parts of it in the physical realm. I'm not saying I'd like to create a sculpture-heavy, esoteric filmed narrative, but the crossing over of physicality and physical space from the filmed frame to the sensual realm is something that I'd like to explore.

SOME PROJECTS THAT I'VE DONE THAT ARE QUASI-RELATED TO THIS REALM/SPHERE/SUBJECT OF THINKING

I've always done a lot of different kinds of work. I've recorded music, written short stories, made music videos and short films. So I envision using all of these discrete communication forms together to create a cohesive or semi-cohesive whole. Some examples might include:

FEAR THE POLICE

This is a music video I directed for a friend of mine, in The Year 2001. We spent a weekend driving around with a video camera and stealing shots and crafting the story as we went. The universe in which the video takes place is surreal; people wear jumpsuits and policemen dress like MBTA officers. It might be somewhat slight, but it's distinct. I like working quickly like this and improvising due to unchangeable circumstances. This an important thing to remember going forward with my process/thesis.

³ I actually have the phone numbers to both Mr. Barney's Brooklyn studio and his someplace-majestic-on-the-Hudson-home phone stored in my own personal cell phone, both of which (the phone numbers) were acquired in a way I don't care to disclose other than to say that it involved a private bathroom, an address book and some furious scribbling. I have yet to try either of the numbers.

WE'RE IN PARIS

This is a short story I wrote a few years ago, which was published in the journal *Paradigm*. It's basically an exploration of a mood via text, which is something I continue to explore in my work. It's supposed to be sad. Here's an extremely short excerpt:

She turns off the TV. She kicks off her slippers and pulls her feet up onto the couch under the blanket. She lets the quiet of the space settle in. The only sound she can hear is the radiator behind the couch. She looks up at the ceiling. She thinks this is how you get older. You sit by the phone on a Sunday and wait for it to get dark outside.

YOU GET OLDER YOU START TO FORGET THINGS

A collection of music recordings made between 2007 and 2009 that is basically about what the title says it's about; getting older and forgetting things. But rather than being about forgetting, say, something at the grocery store, it's more about forgetting about people in one's life. And about looking for a purpose in one's day to day, week to week, month to month, year-to-year existence. Or about forgetting about the purpose.

SOME PROJECTS THAT I AM DOING/COULD DO THAT MIGHT BE RELATED TO THIS REALM/SPHERE/SUBJECT OF THINKING

SYNTHESIZING DON GATELY'S CONSCIOUSNESS

This is a project I'm currently working on in *Design Studio 2*. Our assignment was to pick a short story from Alan Lightman's *Einstein's Dreams*⁴ and create a narrative experience based on whichever particular time concept is on display in our selected story. Here's what I wrote about it in week one of the project:

In Alan Lightman's *Einstein's Dreams*, the narrator speaks of a world in which "time is a circle, bending back on itself. The world repeats itself, precisely, endlessly." The people in this world are unaware that such a circle exists. Later, the narrator states, "Some few people in every town, in their dreams, are vaguely aware that all has occurred in the past. These are the people with

⁴ A slim volume containing a series of short stories based on Albert Einstein's *Theory of Relativity*, which is an enjoyably quick and kind of fun read and which I have mistakenly referred to, more than once (appropriately or not) as *Lightman's Dreams*.

unhappy lives, and they sense that their misjudgments and wrong deeds and bad luck have all taken place in the previous loop of time.”

In David Foster Wallace’s 1996 novel *Infinite Jest*, the character Don Gately, through a series of unfortunate and spoiler-rific (for anyone who might be interested in reading the book) events, finds himself hospitalized and bed-ridden. In a series of flashbacks, flash-forwards, hallucinations, and, yes, dreams, we learn about Gately’s past life, his absurdly difficult childhood in Beverly, Massachusetts, his descent into drug abuse and his life as a habit-induced career burglar. In this world, he is one of Lightman’s unhappy people, reliving his misjudgments and wrong deeds whilst in extreme pain, refusing painkillers in a steadfast and, at times, heroic gesture to maintain sobriety.

And so my idea is to create an experience synthesizing what it would be like to be Don Gately, in a near-coma, reliving essential and quasi-essential episodes and words and sounds and imagery from his life, his life being perceived as cyclical and oblique and on a loop. I envision this experience to be of the installation sort, in a small, cube-like room in which the imagery is projected onto the ceiling and side walls and the viewer would lie down on his/her back (on the padded, cushy carpet/floor) and gaze up at the media. The sound would be in surround (obviously). The physical pain experienced by the viewer would be theoretically minimal.

The content for this synthesis would involve text, image, and sound (coincidentally, every first year DMI student’s three favorite media). Selected text will come from the original source (the DFW novel). Imagery and sound will be generated and acquired by myself and a group of compadres. Each medium would present Gately’s story in a fairly direct way. However, the way in which the media is presented would be such that only at specific times would the viewer be able to comprehend that he/she is perceiving the same story in discrete forms. Thus, the viewer becomes one of Lightman’s unaware cyclical perceivers.

Six weeks in, I’ve stayed pretty true to my initial idea. I’ve done a lot of work with text and typography: I’ve identified three classifications of the source text and the visual language that drives the way each are displayed and created animations in *AfterEffects* based on these classifications. And I’ve filmed some video components which are based on the films of one of *IJ*’s avant-garde filmmaker characters (who visits Gately as a wraith in the hospital) and which will be projected at a smaller, rounded-edge-to-simulate-16mm-film scale on top of the ty-

pography. I am going to attempt to create a sort of tent-like enclosure made from translucent shower curtain liners and project from multiple directions to create an immersive perceiving space.

Within the context of this project, I've tried to extract and express emotional content and deduce which media might best express that emotional content in the most direct way. This project, more than any singular thing I've worked on thus far, is the most in line with the direction I see my thesis going. I hope to set up a working iteration of the installation and film a perceiver-experience simulation video in time for final reviews. I imagine I'll be working on the project additionally throughout the summer.

FIGURANTS

In *Design for Motion and Sound*, our assignment was to create a story. "Story first!" was the rallying cry/opening salvo of the instructors in the second half of the semester. So, we were to present a story to the class and then develop a participatory narrative based on that story. Story first!

I found this somewhat surprisingly very hard to do; I had the idea of of filming a space and a series of interactions and then allowing the perceiver to create their own narrative via their choices in navigating the filmed spaces. I had a very specific look in mind; I imagined shooting the footage at my high school, the current buildings of which were built in the 50's and have very long corridors and basically exude loneliness. And I imagined people moving wordlessly in and out of these spaces in a surreal way, figurants in a sort of lonely memory.

I went to my high school on a Sunday and filmed the spaces and had some people (myself included) dressed in semi-formal clothes move in and around the shots. I then edited the footage to create discrete video clips which could be navigated as looped DVD menus. E.G. One sees a video of a room with a door. If one clicks on the door, one is presented with what's inside that door. If one sees and clicks on a staircase, one is presented with what is up or down those stairs. And so on.

This idea of creating navigable space via video intrigues me. As is the looping of video and the idea that one sees/perceives different things the more one looks at or watches something. I'm taking something called *Video Sculpture* in the Fall in an effort to pursue this direction.

I have a rough build of the DVD now, and will continue to fine-tune it in the coming weeks, as well as deciding on the sound design, or lack thereof in the piece.

TWIN PEAKS

The 1990 David Lynch-conceived television show *Twin Peaks* (see Figure 1.3) is, in and of itself, its own world. After watching the series in its entirety for the first time last year, I sort of became enamored with the idea of creating an environment based on the mythology on the show.

During one of my initial visits to MassArt, after milling around the Graduate Programs office for a while, I began wandering the building, looking for a rest room. I ended up passing a gymnasium. The room was vacant and lit in the somewhat ominous way large vacant spaces tend to be lit. It has subsequently occurred to me that this room/facility would be an ideal place to exhibit in/build inside/transform into a *Twin Peaks*-inspired environmental experiment. I foresee a lot of strobe lights, trees, projected video, and scary men in denim jackets with wild long hair. Conceptually, the series is sort of about the buried evil in people, and translating that into interactive media seems, to me, to be particularly engaging. Logistical/financial issues would probably be the biggest factor in determining whether or not something like this would be feasible to pursue.

TBD SHORT STORY(IES)

This summer I'd like to do some fiction writing. Specifically, I'd like to write some short fiction with an eye toward possibly using it as a content-base for my all-encompassing environment idea. I've realized recently that a lot of my project ideas are based on either someone else's ideas or content. So, I'd like to do some good old fashioned content generation this summer, and see what I can come up with. I tend to write pretty quickly, so I'd like to try to amass a fair amount of stuff. DFW (here we go again...) said that when he set out to write *II*, the only specific idea he had in mind was that he wanted to write something sad. I think that might be a good initial direction for me.

RECORDING WITH STEREO SOUL FUTURE

At some point in the hopefully near future, my band and I will head into a recording studio and attempt to document some of the music that we've been working on since we not so much reformed as came out of dormancy in Fall 2009. The important thing here is deciding not only *what* to record but *how much*. We have well over a traditional album's worth of material, but don't exactly collectively have a ton of cheddar⁵ lying around to fund endless

⁵ Forgive the lingo/slang; this just seemed appropriate.

sessions. And there's the argument that no one listens to albums these days⁶. So the process of whittling down what we have to a selection of material that functions as a cohesive work is basically what lies ahead. This is (perhaps tenuously) pertinent to my thesis because it involves the parsing of aural content into an emotional output. I would argue that the reason we are hemming and hawing and generally spending a lot of time thinking about what we might do is that we want our music to be perceived in the way we want it to be perceived, and a great deal of musical perception is fundamentally emotional. Thus I'm looking at this whole process as a sort of emotional design project. Or at least trying to.

STUFF THAT BASICALLY WOULD HELP A LOT EVEN IF I PROBABLY WON'T EVER FEEL LIKE DOING IT

Additional research into what is currently being done in this sort of interaction design would be beneficial. I'd like to see a lot more work in person, because, as I mentioned above, I think it's the only way to accurately perceive this kind of work. Yes, the ability to code something on a prototype level would be a nice skill to have. So, *Actionscript* and *Processing* et. al. should and will be explored this summer.

I think the question of "How can Dynamic Media make this a richer experience?" is a good one to ask. Thus far in my work in the program, I haven't really been able to answer that question adequately. And I feel like a lot of the dynamic media insertions that I've personally experienced are kind of clunky. The added content/algorithm stuff should function as if it's a part of the concept/design, rather than patched on in a "Yes-but-check-this-out-you-can-get-live-traffic-xml-feeds-on-your-toothbrush" kind of way. I don't think that really any of the projects I've worked on up until now are really screaming out for any kind of embedded content or algorithm-based scenario that are sort of what one thinks of when one hears the phrase "dynamic media". But I do understand what DM can bring and am interested in figuring out how to incorporate it into my work gracefully.

POSSIBLE RESOURCES: SOME REAL, SOME REACHES, SOME IMAGINED

While living in Los Angeles during my wife's graduate studies, I met the artist Doug Aitken. He taught a sort of video art class that Sarah (my wife) took at SCI_ARC, where she was getting her M_ARCH degree. Anyway, Sarah ended up working at his studio for a period and I met Doug a few times. This is probably making something out of perhaps nothing, but we got along pretty well. He was always really friendly and seemed to be interested/intrigued

⁶One that I happen to personally disagree with, since I, well, still listen to albums.

in what I was up to. Also: he's a successful, working artist. And he happens to know a hell of a lot of people (his interview book *Broken Screen* is pretty much a who's who of artists/film-makers doing compelling narrative work). So, it would be great to get in contact with him, if only to exchange emails about ideas and so forth. Or AN email. It's a bit of a long shot; the dude's hard to get in touch with. And he's busy. Like: getting projects-ready-for-the-Venice-Bienalle-kind of busy. But I have his contact info, so I figure I'll give it a shot, because he could be a great potential resource.

As far as the sort of prospective emotional component to my proposal, I'd imagine it would be beneficial to speak with someone who knows about these kinds of things. I recently went to a gallery opening at the Boston Graduate School of Psychoanalysis, which was curated by Gunta Kaza and Mara Wagner. Having had some familiarity with Mara (she sort of TA'd Fall 2009's *Design as Experience* class), I'd imagine she'd be a great person to talk to about the exact kinds of emotional response issues I'd like to investigate, since she has an interest in/knowledge of art/visual language.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Infinite Jest by David Foster Wallace. It might be possible that I've said enough about this book already.

A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again by David Foster Wallace. A book of essays on assorted subjects. Of particular interest is *David Lynch Keeps His Head*, which is a fascinating take on themes in Lynch's work.

The Cremaster Cycle by Matthew Barney. A stunning visual tome on the film/art series, with thousands of images and words showing process, inspiration and documentation.

Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees by Lawrence Weschler. A sort of biography/fly on the wall take on the artist Robert Irwin.

Point Omega by Don DeLillo. The latest slim novella from one of my favorite writers, which includes passages about an installation piece called *24 Hour Psycho*, which slows down the frame-rate of the Hitchcock classic so that it takes 24 hours to play in its entirety.

Broken Screen by Doug Aitken. A collection of interviews with people from Matthew Barney to Olafur Elliasson, to Werner Herzog to Ed Ruscha, in which each talks about narrative and how the term applies or doesn't apply to their respective work.

Hello Meth Lab in the Sun by Jonah Freeman, Justin Lowe and Alexandre Singh. A monograph book documenting the exhibition.



Figure 1.1
Hello Meth Lab in the Sun

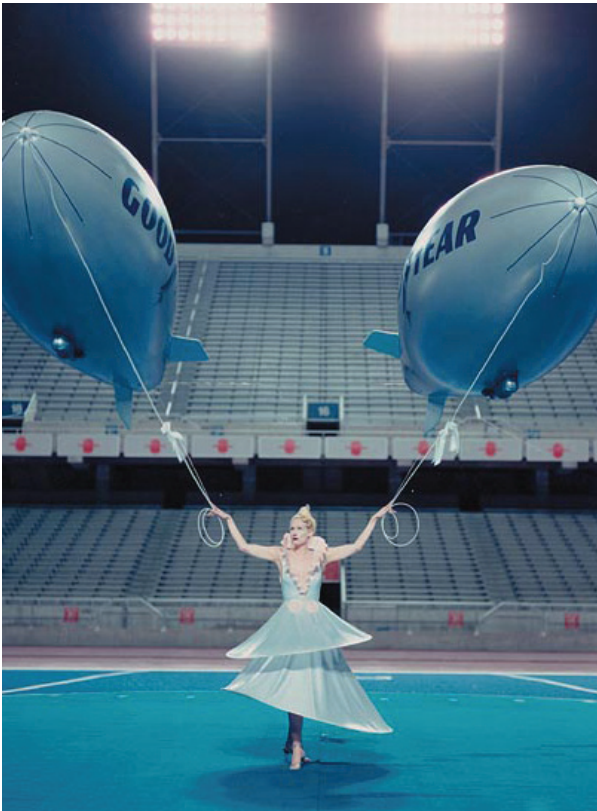


Figure 1.2
The Cremaster Cycle



Figure 1.3
Twin Peaks