

participating in the past:

Recording Lives in Digital Environments

PAUL LONGLEY ARTHUR

— INTRODUCTION

The profile of oral history research has grown dramatically over the past two decades. One of the reasons for this is that there has been a diversification of modes of public access and delivery. The increasing use of digital media means that oral histories are now reaching far greater audiences, and these histories are being presented in more direct, more stimulating and richer ways than have before been possible. In fact, the digital revolution is rapidly transforming history as a genre and set of practices, and oral history is a key player in this process.¹ Because oral histories lend themselves to digital forms of delivery much more readily than conventional, text-only, representations of history, oral history has come to be a central focus for digital history researchers. While it is clear that historical representation is undergoing changes as a result of the new challenges and opportunities presented by the digital environment, as yet it is less clear what the implications are for history as a discipline and as a set of practices.

This essay begins to address some of these issues by focusing on oral history projects and drawing upon specific examples to provide a basis for reflecting on how the digital domain is enabling a remarkable transformation in this field of history, not only in terms of its practices, but also in terms of its reception and its power. I suggest that the new digital media are liberating oral history (once only available in the form of audio tapes or text transcriptions and accessible only to specialists or persistent enthusiasts) by bringing it into the everyday world where it can be *heard*, questioned, freely interpreted and freely shared. Most importantly, in what amounts to an unprecedented democratisation of history, the digital media

have begun to release history from the controlling hand of the single authorial point of view and have made everyone a potential contributor to an ongoing process of shaping and reshaping history. At the heart of this digitally driven shift is a change in the role and status of the individual *story* and, alongside it, of the personal *things* (photos, mementos, fragments, ephemera), the little things, that make up a life. This is, one could say, a multiple shift across many facets: from objective narrative to subjective story, from big to small, from wholeness to fragmentariness, from the printed word to voice and image, from linearity to rupture, and all this implies—a shift from closure to openness.² This is not to say that historians have not valued these facets as much in the past. There were simply not the means, nor the *space*, in the predigital world to accommodate and organise the wealth of material that can now be stored so easily and accessed instantly from almost anywhere on the planet. However welcome and positive this development may be, there are many new skills to learn and practical and technical issues to confront and manage. In addition, the digital environment brings its own constraints and dangers.

The following discussion will touch on matters such as the provision of funding for oral history research, the problems of maintaining and updating digital histories, and the special demands of interdisciplinary collaboration in Australia, especially between historians (as content providers) and multimedia designers and producers. I will present research-in-progress reports on two major Australian oral history projects in order to illustrate some of the changes that digitalisation is bringing about and, in the process, to raise questions about their significance and impact on the field of historical representation. Central to the two projects being presented here is the production of multimedia works designed to maximise public access to oral history material. Both of these projects are oral history research projects with an emphasis on documenting the everyday, often forgotten or overlooked, lives of people in well-established communities that have a shared history.

The first project, 'Voices From the West End: The Fremantle Living Histories Project', is focused on the historic seaport of Fremantle in Western Australia. Fremantle is the traditional entry point to Australia, and one of the most intact nineteenth-century seaports in the world. The second project, 'East Perth Power Station and the Electrification of Western Australia: Interpretation of an Historic Site', has set out to collect and interpret oral histories of former workers at one of the most significant power stations in Australia, currently under redevelopment for public use. In both of these projects the challenge is to harness the oral histories available in existing local archives and through the oral interview processes, and to utilise and interpret them in a meaningful way to create multimedia works that will showcase the results for the public. The discussion of these projects here deals with practical issues including collaboration, design, user interface, navigation, narrative frameworks and public access. My aim is to use the practical aspects, which have as yet had very little direct attention

in publications relating to historical studies, to begin to cast light on the broader theoretical issues relating to the production and distribution of history.

— ORAL HISTORY, MULTIMEDIA AND NEW NARRATIVE FRAMEWORKS

In the past, oral histories have had to face two major barriers that have led to the marginalisation of oral records in the production of historical materials. The first barrier is that of transcription from voice to printed text and the second the physical barrier of storage, with its related issues of preservation and cataloguing. Digital media have the capacity to remove both of these barriers. The use of new modes of delivery has also resulted in greater interdisciplinary collaboration.³ In turn, this is enhancing the study and appreciation of oral history. However, in embracing the new technologies and trying to harness them for history, it is worth keeping in mind that oral histories are not necessarily more 'true' than printed versions and that memory itself is an organising and framing activity. Digital technologies do not somehow give us the capacity to capture reality as it was lived or experienced. What they can allow is more direct access to more varied sets of memories, perceptions and stories, and freer movement among them (but by no means truly free), than ever before possible. How far will these developments take us? Jean Baudrillard, writing a decade ago, sounded a chilling note of warning:

Memory is a dangerous function. It retrospectively gives meaning to that which did not have any. It retrospectively cancels out the internal illusoriness of events, which was theirs originally. But if events retained their original, enigmatic form, their ambiguous, terrifying form, there would doubtless no longer be any history.⁴

What oral histories do provide are unique opportunities for historical storytelling, allowing alternative voices to be heard and accepted histories to be challenged. Such texts are not transparent in their meaning and they cannot convey an unproblematic authentic version of individual pasts.⁵ In fact, oral history is, as Portelli has argued, a cluster of genres, complex in its construction and meanings.⁶ Utilising multimedia to communicate oral histories to broader audiences adds further genres to this mix. New media forms are allowing audio, visual and textual material to be captured, preserved and accessed in new ways, making for increasingly interactive, immersive user engagement. But what are the benefits of these technical innovations for the field of oral history research? There are many. Firstly, oral history is becoming more readily accessible and more appealing to audiences by being made available on-site in the form of installations and online via the internet. Secondly, the ability to showcase the results of oral history projects in a widely accessible format means that the processes and results of oral history collection are becoming increasingly relevant and meaningful for the communities involved. This means that oral history projects can

become powerful agents of community building as well as of cultural preservation. Because they provide an opening for new input, they can become catalysts for reflection and memory, leading to stronger community identity and pride.⁷ Thirdly, multimedia works, when they are well designed, can create an exciting new kind of narrative framework and context for oral history material. This is something that has been difficult to achieve outside museum settings in the past.

Digital oral history projects tend to be highly interdisciplinary. They involve researchers with expertise in oral history methods; they also typically involve experts in museum studies, multimedia production, documentary film making, heritage and tourism, archiving and preservation. One of the great strengths of oral history within the new digital environment is its capacity to inspire collaborative work across so many disciplines. There are, of course, pitfalls to interdisciplinary research. People from different discipline 'territories' have different priorities, different goals, different understandings and even different professional languages. It is essential to be aware of the practical, social and territorial issues involved in bringing teams together to make oral history material available in diverse and experimental ways to the public.

There are new demands on the public too. Among these is the issue of the cultural change that is required for people to feel comfortable with the technological apparatus (however simple) required to 'enter' digital domains. While accessibility is improving with breathtaking speed, there is nevertheless a primary barrier to overcome and that is the user's need to handle some kind of *vehicle* of delivery. When we consider for how many centuries the primary vehicle for history has been the book, it is clear that this requires a massive adjustment, comparable to the change required when the printed word began to take over from oral transmission.

There is a shortage of published research in the hybrid field where oral history meets multimedia production. This is largely because it is difficult to pin down or define works that combine film, still images and text as oral histories. Excellent guides such as Stephen E. Everett's *Oral History: Techniques and Procedures* and Willa Baum's *Transcribing and Editing Oral History* were produced before widespread public access to the internet and to digital media production.⁸ More recent books, such as *The Oral History Manual*, continue to focus on reinforcing professional standards for oral history method and practice.⁹ The second editions of Donald Ritchie's *Doing Oral History* and Valerie Yow's *Recording Oral History* both include new sections on how to utilise the internet and on the general impact of digital media on recording and preserving oral histories.¹⁰ Chapters in the second edition of the encyclopaedic *Oral History Reader* gesture towards greater discussion of future permutations of oral history using digital media and moving images.¹¹ These books stop short of investigating how the narration of oral history in new digital forms of delivery is actually changing the

reception of the oral material itself. Nevertheless, these studies show just how complex and extensive the discussion is becoming as digital media production exerts a growing influence on ever more disciplines. In fact, much of the most relevant critical discussion is coming from researchers working in the fields of digital media research and production. A related series of publications in the digital media and design theory field has considered how to best represent subjective experience using new media forms.¹²

There are methodological, theoretical and conceptual issues that need to be taken into account when designing multimedia works to showcase oral history research. These range from considering the benefits and drawbacks of using various modes of delivery and forms of presentation, addressing issues of archiving and preservation of data, through to being aware of ethical concerns and designing interpretative strategies. Oral history relies on memory and personal testimony. Even though memory can be fragmentary, involving the piecing together of personal pasts, multimedia works cannot be too fragmentary. They must have coherence, a story and the capacity to present individual voices in an accessible format.¹³

The inspiration for both the oral history projects discussed as case studies below was Brogan Bunt's (University of Wollongong) 2001 experimental work entitled *Halfeti—Only Fish Shall Visit*. Bunt created this navigable, map-based multimedia work as an experiment in how photographs and video segments could be linked to form an enduring historical record of the ancient Turkish town of Halfeti in the months leading up to its flooding for a major dam project. This documentary is created from very large sets of nodal photographs and video segments. Each image or video segment connects logically (typically spatially) to others, simulating the 'texture of actuality'.¹⁴ The user controls the textual experience by deciding how to navigate through the documentary using a map interface. To progress through the work, the user clicks on entry points marked on the map. The map is accessible at any time—it is only one mouse click away. What unfolds for the user is a moving historical record of a streetscape populated by a traditional Turkish community. The user clicks through sequences of still images that link together to provide a full view of the physical space. Symbols appear that indicate directions that can be followed by the user. Sometimes they are difficult to find, and many routes are dead ends. There is no interface that shows where all the paths are on the map—just the entry points marked on the map interface. The work is structured around oral history segments that the user must literally discover in the way that a player searches for secret codes and aids in a computer game. Here the cartographic navigation structure gives the photographs the context they need to effectively act as an historical record rather than a photographic archive. The oral history segments offer reflections, in the voice of the people of Halfeti, on the future of their lives in the 'new' Halfeti, a purpose built town nearby. There is also a 'history' segment, which provides background to the digital project and also to the plight of the people of the town. This tells us that Halfeti is a town

that was largely submerged when a new dam was built in the valley it had occupied for centuries. The aspect of this work that impressed me the most is the way in which, as a user, it is possible to take in the history of this beautiful town from many different perspectives. Not only physical perspectives, but the perspectives of representative people in the community.

In the same genre, but more cinematic in its presentation of oral history material, is the DVD multimedia work, *The Dawn at My Back: Memoir of a Black Texas Upbringing, An Interactive Cultural History* (2003). The work was created by Carroll Parrot Blue, Kristy H. A. Kang and the Labyrinth Project as a tribute to Carroll Parrot Blue's mother and grandmother. The DVD was produced at the Annenberg Center for Communication at the University of Southern California, which is known for its experimental interactive narrative works. This DVD encourages the user to investigate and hear oral history material relating to one woman's life through its many stages. The user enters the work through a 'quilt' interface, the many patches of which lead into different parts of the one person's life. There is also a simple text-based menu that leads differently to oral history segments. I mention these two projects because they are outstanding examples of how oral histories can be brought to life in new ways through being framed in a larger historical context using advanced multimedia design and production.

— CASE STUDY 1: VOICES FROM THE WEST END: THE FREMANTLE LIVING HISTORIES PROJECT

Fremantle was first surveyed in 1831, two years after the founding of the Swan River Colony. Today it is one of Australia's most historically significant port cities. Known as the gateway to Australia, the city is now recognised by many as the world's best preserved example of a nineteenth century colonial port city. Fremantle is also an exceptionally diverse multicultural community. 'Voices From the West End: The Fremantle Living Histories Project' is a pioneering collaborative research project that focuses on the multifaceted history of the West End Conservation Area, Fremantle's central heritage district. The aim of the project is to assemble and interweave the multiple and varied voices of the people of the port city, past and present, so as to produce an historical mosaic reflecting its evolution from the time of settlement until the present day. This highly original project will produce histories in two formats: in publications that are designed to reach a wide scholarly audience; and in a digital interactive documentary form. The interactive documentary genre enables oral histories to be recorded and presented to the public using the very latest interactive media technology.

'Voices From the West End' project description (2000)

In 2001 I was part of a group of university researchers led by historian Geoffrey Bolton (Murdoch University) who saw the need for a major history project that would document

changes in the Fremantle community that had taken place over the past twenty years. Preliminary research showed that much of the existing material available at the Fremantle local studies library was from the 1970s and was focused on the Italian and Portuguese communities, which continue to have a strong presence through their links with the fishing industry. Very little material was available recording the community's response to the evolution of Fremantle from a sleepy fishing community in the early 1980s to a vibrant shopping, fashion and tourist precinct in the time that has passed since the winning of the America's Cup yacht race in Fremantle waters in 1983. Much of the historic West End was restored and renovated in the lead up to the defence of the cup in 1987.¹⁵ Over the twenty years that have passed since that famous race, the city has continued to evolve. It is now a smart, modern, proud city and yet it retains its character as a large working port and as a community based around the traditional values of a small town.

The 'Voices From the West End' project was funded and began in 2004. The main outcomes of the project will be the production of a professional quality multimedia work based on contemporary oral history video material and also incorporating archival photographic records of Fremantle and its people, and an edited book tracing historical themes back to British settlement in 1829. The multimedia work is being designed to give users a 'virtual tour' of the West End Conservation Area and of its past as told by people in the Fremantle community today. The finished product is intended to be a work of creative historical collage rather than of conventional linear historical documentation. It will be easily accessible via a project website.

The project has eight community partners, ranging from large institutions such as the City of Fremantle (local government), Fremantle Ports, the Western Australian Maritime Museum, through to local societies (The Fremantle Society and The Fremantle History Society), and church or charity organisations (the Archdiocese of Perth, Basilica of St Patrick Fremantle and Fremantle Wesley Parish Mission). Major funding was provided by the Australian Research Council Linkage Grants scheme.

The original project concept was that the multimedia work and book would be framed around these broad themes: Trade and the Port; Migration and Communities; Maritime History; Tourism; Fishing Industry; Religion and Belief; Built Heritage and Streetscapes; and Festivals and Food. The project aims to reflect the diversity of Fremantle's people today and the myriad ways in which they have maintained, but also continue to transform, their intersecting cultural traditions and identities. It also seeks to capture and evoke the colour and history of Fremantle's many annual festivals (including the Fremantle Festival, the Fremantle Heritage Festival, the Sardine Festival and the Blessing of the Fleet) as well as that of the cosmopolitan Fremantle Markets (established in 1898).

The user will 'enter' the multimedia work through a map interface and choose where to explore the West End Conservation Area by following an array of narrative paths. The work will most likely take one of three forms. A user will be able to navigate pathways through the material either thematically (following narrative threads that narrate a sequence of events that constitute one particular kind of history, such as religious, economic, political), chronologically (by selecting points along a time line), or spatially (using the entry screen map interface). Other options are also being considered, including a Web 2.0-based social networking function. The basic concept is that the user must be free to explore at will without being forced to return to 'start' pages that channel them in one particular direction. Along the way, they will be able to choose to view interspersed video segments in which oral histories and reflections on Fremantle today in the context of its past will be related by a broad range of people in the local community. By choosing their own routes through this material, the user will participate in a process of active narrative construction rather than simply following a predetermined sequential trajectory. The collection of digital video segments will form an invaluable archive of Fremantle past and present.

In planning the design of this oral history multimedia work there have been a number of factors that have needed consideration:

1. The project set out to showcase oral history research in a form that was suitable for and accessible to a local community. However, to simply present the oral history segments without a carefully considered context would be to run the risk of overemphasising the scope of the oral histories. The project brief stipulated that the oral histories must form a mosaic of the experiences of people in the community over time, and that the presentation of those oral histories needed to reflect that mosaic form. None of the personal histories was likely to produce a coherent narrative of the larger (collective) history of the city of Fremantle. For the multimedia work the necessary context will be created by achieving a balance between macro and micro histories, sketching the history of Fremantle since its settlement in 1829 and interspersing the oral history segments to illustrate the selected themes that emerged.
2. A major challenge has been to ensure that the multimedia work reflects the interests of the community organisations that have funded the project. Specifically, the multimedia installation needed to be suitable for tourism and public relations purposes. Fremantle is a multicultural city with many community groups and local businesses contributing to its social diversity. The selection of oral history material needs to reflect the diversity of the local business community, covering the many trades and especially the activities around the historic port. At the same time, it is important that the multimedia work should not be a highly scripted, crafted work. It was primarily conceived as a creative, experimental

work, which investigated the new possibilities offered by multimedia in the presentation of oral histories.

3. The project has tried different ways of engaging the local community in the research process, some with more success than others. The identification of potential interviewees involved local advertising, radio segments calling for expressions of interest, and word of mouth of locals in the close knit community of Fremantle. Initially a website was set up to allow for interaction to take place between the project group and the wider local community. The website enabled community input into the project in the early phases, especially following the newspaper and radio advertising.

— **CASE STUDY 2: EAST PERTH POWER STATION AND THE ELECTRIFICATION OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA: INTERPRETATION OF A HISTORIC SITE**

Over the past century electricity has transformed people's lives. This project investigates the history of electrification in Australia through an interpretation of the historic site of East Perth power station, Australia's first centralised power station and now Western Australia's most significant redevelopment site. The interconnection of electricity's technologies with human lives is the focus of this research. It will result in scholarly outputs in print and digital form and provide thematic and narrative materials for best-practice historic heritage interpretation. The research is supported by industry partners including stakeholders in the East Perth power station site, community and government organisations, and researchers from four universities. The project will enable widely inclusive community participation, through an oral history program, in the redevelopment process. It will produce a website/digital history structured around the project themes and capturing the colour and history of the site. The digital product will be a work of creative historical collage comprising oral histories, digital video segments, photographs and other archival material. It will be easily accessible by diverse audiences, from local school children to international tourists or potential investors.

'East Perth Power Station' project description (2005)

The East Perth Power Station is an iconic structure in inner-city Perth, Western Australia. It is particularly significant in the history of electricity generation as it was Australia's first centralised power station on its completion in 1917. East Perth is the only power station in Australia, and possibly the world, to embody the history of technological change in power generation from the pioneering days before World War I through to the beginning of modern generation in the 1960s.¹⁶

In 2003 I joined oral historian Lenore Layman (Murdoch University) and a team of ten academic researchers from three universities to apply for funding for a major project focused

on recording and presenting the memories of former workers at the East Perth Power Station. The East Perth Power Station project has ten community project partners, including the East Perth Redevelopment Authority, Western Power, Engineers Australia, Town of Vincent, the State Library of Western Australia, Unions Western Australia, the National Trust of Australia, the State Records Office of Western Australia, and the East Perth Football Club. As in the previous example, the major funding was provided through the Australian Research Council Linkage Grants scheme. This project meets an immediate social need for effective historic heritage interpretation of Perth's most significant current cultural heritage redevelopment site. The vision was that high quality public interpretation of the site, and development of other materials for educational purposes, require high quality archival, library, oral and field research to underpin them. The argument put forward was that a fully researched and broadly inclusive public interpretation of the site would enhance the site's social capital through the engagement of local people and would also enhance its value to the tourist market. The results of the research will enable Western Australians to explore and understand the various ways in which their lives and histories are connected to the East Perth Power Station site as well as the significance of the history of electricity generation more generally. A public program will assist citizens' understanding of electricity's importance to society and provoke thought on energy supply and energy dependence.

This project began in 2006. An oral history coordinator was employed and the interviewing process is well advanced. Interviewees have been identified through partner organisations—Unions Western Australia, Engineers Australia and the National Trust of Australia. The oral history component of the project is using the services of volunteers for a portion of the interviewing. Some of these volunteer interviewers are being trained through the project and supported in their tasks of interviewing and learning research techniques. In this way the project is providing members of the community with new skills. Material collected during the project—oral interviews, ephemera, documents, photographs—will be preserved and made publicly available (with the agreement of the owners). The oral history archive will enrich the local studies collection at the Town of Vincent Library, the State Library of Western Australia (J.S. Battye Library) oral history collection and Engineers Australia's lending library collection. These collections are utilised not only by research scholars but also by diverse members of the general public interested in exploring their own past and/or that of their family, ethnic or community group, or profession.

The challenge presented by this project has been to find a way of harnessing the power of the oral interviews with the former workers at the East Perth Station in a way that reanimates this iconic architectural landmark for a broad public audience, both on-site and online. The buildings are currently in the process of being restored and the physical site is being designed for multiple public uses.

The key outcome will be a multimedia work representing the individual and collective memories of former workers at the power station site. The multimedia resource needs to make the material generated by the project available to the wider community, for educational and other purposes. The aim is to create a navigable database where the oral history segments are interlinked in ways that draw the user into a memory 'space' that would not be possible to construct using traditional media. The vision is that a collective 'memory bank' be created to adequately preserve and celebrate the human heritage of the workers of the power station. The memories of the people who animated that grand place of power generation will be lost to the present day visitor unless they can be harnessed and communicated in such a way as to inspire visitors to imagine their way back into the reality of the past.

The project team is currently at the design stage of the project. These issues in particular must be addressed:

1. Unlike most histories, memories do not follow neat patterns determined by datelines and logical evolution. Different people's individual memories often contradict one another and yet together they ultimately produce what comes to be recognised as collective memory. Workers at the East Perth Power Station will have very different memories of working life at the site. A major challenge in this project is how to represent and preserve contradictory memories. Ultimately this will require finding a balance—creating a mix—between positive and negative memories of events and places.
2. Memories will tend to fall into particular thematic areas. However, the risk in dividing the memories in a predetermined manner is that the very quality of memory will be distorted by the sense of order placed on those memories. One vision for this work is that a structure will be created so that the special, sometimes anarchic and illogical quality of memory can be recognised and responded to by the user. Not only do the connections between thematic areas need to be made fluid (so that it is possible to cross between thematic areas without backtracking to entry points), but there must be an element of surprise present—something that captures the way in which memories can be fleeting, fragmentary and partial. However, we are fully aware of the paradox of selecting and manipulating material in order to make it appear fresh and direct.
3. As a key form of public interpretation at the East Perth Power Station, the multimedia work must be an accessible resource that can serve as a coherent human record of this important heritage site. It is essential to strike a balance in the multimedia work between speech segments, transcribed text and contextual information about the site. The initial vision was that the multimedia work would be installed on touch screen kiosks, in much the same way as in the *Voices From the West End* project. However, as planning has become more advanced, we have begun to think that remote or mobile forms of delivery

would be more appropriate. The selected physical interface for public access to the multimedia work will influence the design choices made. It is likely that there will ultimately be two formats for this multimedia work:

- (i) A website structured around a map interface with nodes that perform the same spatial narrative function as the locations at the site itself. The user could explore the map by entering different physical areas of the power station site. They would be able to drill down through layers of memories associated with the different eras of the power station's operation. Physical objects and areas could then link with memories associated with particularly significant themes—such as workers' unionism or simply lunchtime recreation—which characterise the many facets of everyday life at the power station site. Again, the challenge will be to intersperse oral interview segments recorded by former workers within a structure that also provides access to basic information about the layout of the site.
- (ii) A hand-held device format that responds to physical objects at the East Perth Power Station site itself using either GPS locations or local network points on-site. The range of oral history segments available for navigation on the device could auto-adjust in subtle ways to reflect the focus of attention at each site, allowing for overlaps while moving between areas of the site. In this way it would be possible to effectively juxtapose the very different experiences of everyday work in adjacent areas of the power station. It is most likely that the initial version of the work will be designed as a website and that a handheld format will be designed with future funding once the ultimate public usage of the site is confirmed.

— CONCLUSION

This essay contributes to current debates on the recording and presentation of oral history material by showing that multimedia has the potential to provide exciting new tools, contexts and frameworks for this fundamentally important form of historical storytelling. It offers an outline of two large scale Australian work-in-progress multimedia projects which seek to communicate oral histories to the public in new ways. The aim in both cases is to create an accessible structure that provides a context for a large selection of oral history segments and allows them to be navigated in multiple ways. In both of these projects a clear distinction is made between the process of oral interviewing, the archiving of that material in traditional formats and repositories, and its presentation using multimedia. The projects seek to bring out the richness of the oral histories by making them accessible to a wider public through innovative, custom-designed modes of delivery.

These and similar projects are providing a focus for critical reflection on oral history methodology, preservation and presentation. Narrative framing remains a central requirement

for the public presentation of oral history material, even, and especially, when experimenting with interactive digital narrative forms. These forms are celebrated for their non-linearity and potential for free-form and random linking of content. And yet, to be effective for oral history material there must be a very clear conception of what a multimedia work is designed to achieve. If a clear vision is not in place, it is likely that the final product will be guided more by the interests and expertise of multimedia producers than of the historians concerned with the way in which the content is communicated.

Some of the key issues confronting the projects relate to striking a balance between macro and micro approaches to content, and also between emphases that reflect the sometimes competing wishes of partner or community interest groups. These, of course, are questions that haunt the production of history in any medium but, interestingly, some solutions can be found in the technology itself. The user, as the *audience*, can determine the depth and range and mix of stories simply by choosing some and not others and pursuing some pathways further than others. The beauty of the technology is that it also allows for further segments to be inserted in the future and so the historical record never has the once-and-for-all 'finished' quality of a book or film. The Web 2.0 environment, with its potential for social networking and public input into the creation of historical digital resources, is opening up the possibility of new forms of collaborative authorship based on community input. In social networking spaces such as YouTube and MySpace this is already resulting in new collaborative storytelling forms. At the beginning of this essay I touched on the democratisation of oral history through digital media—the way that the fragmentary memories and opinions of individual people can be easily captured, shared and valued. The Web 2.0 environment is likely to be the most significant opportunity offered to history thus far by the new technologies, though it is as yet underutilised and little understood by historians. This vision of historical authorship in the near future contrasts with traditional digital history resource projects, which are typically focused on making historical data available through searchable but relatively static and secure online databases. As broadband access and speed effectively breaks down the distinction between fixed media such as DVDs and online resources, and as social networking media evolve and are applied more widely, there will be the potential for oral history to engage even more productively with the public and to hugely expand its audiences.

While Baudrillard was referring specifically to *writing* when he wrote the following words more than a decade ago, his message is highly relevant to this discussion of oral histories in that it highlights the extraordinary explosion of technological inventiveness that has occurred since that time and anticipates the infinitely greater capacity to accommodate fragmentariness and non-linearity—across all kinds of representation and expression—that is the hallmark of the contemporary digital world:

Fragmentary writing is, ultimately, democratic writing. Each fragment enjoys equal distinction. The most banal one finds its exceptional reader. Each in its turn has its hour of glory.¹⁷

PAUL LONGLEY ARTHUR is a research fellow at the Australia Research Institute, Curtin University of Technology, and an adjunct fellow of the Research School of Humanities, Australian National University. His research examines the impact of new technologies and media in the humanities, especially in the fields of digital history, digital biography and in the emerging area of e-research. He has also published on colonial history and identity in Australia and the Pacific, the literature of European exploration and discovery, and the evolution of cartography. <p.arthur@curtin.edu.au>

1. Michael Frisch refers to this change in terms of the emergence of a 'post-documentary sensibility' and comments that the 'new digital tools and the rich landscapes of practice they define may become powerful resources ... to open new dimensions for understanding and engagement through the broadly inclusive sharing and interrogation of memory', Michael Frisch, 'Oral History and the Digital Revolution: Towards a Post-Documentary Sensibility', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, second edn, Routledge, London and New York, 2006, p. 8.
2. This constitutes a belated shift to postmodern and postcolonial principles, facilitated by the new technologies.
3. See Frisch, p. 5.
Jean Baudrillard, *Fragments, Cool Memories III, 1990-1995*, trans. Emily Agar, Verso, London and New York, 1997, p. 30.
4. For wide-ranging discussions on this set of issues, see: Marie-Noelle Bourguet, Lucette Valensi and Nathan Watchel (eds), *Between Memory and History*, Harwood, Chur, Switzerland, 1990; Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson (eds), *The Myths We Live By*, Routledge, London and New York, 1990; Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 1992; Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton (eds), *Memory and History in Twentieth-Century Australia*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1994; and Barry Godfrey and Jane Richardson, 'In Deep Water: The Ethical Use of Transcribed Oral Material', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, no. 23, 2001, pp. 74-9.
5. Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, Wisconsin, 1997.
6. Kateryna Longley, Stories for Sustainability, keynote address at the Western Australian Government Sustainability Forum, Alexander Library, Perth, Western Australia, 3 December 2002.
7. Stephen Everett, *Oral History: Techniques and Procedures*, Center of Military History, United States Army, Washington DC, 1992; Willa Baum, *Transcribing and Editing Oral History*, AltaMira Press, American Association for State and Local History Book Series, New York, 1995.
8. Barbara Sommer and Mary Kay, *The Oral History Manual*, AltaMira Press, American Association for State and Local History Book Series, New York, 2003.
9. Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*, second edn, Oxford University Press, New York, 2003; Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, second edn, AltaMira Press, American Association for State and Local History Book Series, New York, 2005.
10. Perks and Thomson.
11. For a historical overview of the evolving discussion around subjectivity and narrative in digital environments, see this series of representative books and articles published over the past two decades: Brenda Laurel, *Computers as Theater*, Addison Wesley, London, 1991; M. Benedikt (ed.), *Cyberspace: First steps*, MIT

- Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1992; S. Johnson, *Emergence*, Penguin, London, 1992; Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1995; Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1997; Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Free Press, New York, 1997; N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*, University of Chicago Press Chicago, Chicago, 1999; and Noah and Pat Harrigan Wardrip-Fruin (eds), *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2004.
12. Paul Longley Arthur, 'Reflecting on Current Issues in the Database History Field', *Southern Review: Communications, Politics and Culture*, RMIT Publishing, vol. 38, no. 1, 2005, p. 8.
 13. Brogan Bunt, *New Media Documentary*, paper presented at the CAMEO conference, University of Canberra, April 2002.
 14. Michael C. Hall and John H. Selwood, 'Event Tourism and the Creation of a Postindustrial Portscape: The Case of Fremantle and the 1987 America's Cup', in S.J. Craig-Smith and M. Fagence (eds), *Recreation and Tourism as a Catalyst for Urban Waterfront Development: An International Survey*, Praeger, Westport, Connecticut, 1995, pp. 105–14.
 15. G.F. Anderson, *50 Years of Electricity Supply: The Story of Sydney's Electrical Undertaking*, Sydney County Council, Sydney, NSW, 1955; J.C. Archer, 'A Brief History of the Development of East Perth Power Station', UWA Engineering Department, Institution of Engineers, Australia, WA Division, West Perth, 1982.
 16. Baudrillard, p. 8.