

Susan Delagrangre interviewed by Madeleine Sorapure

Part 1

Madeleine Sorapure

So how was your webtext, innovative in the historical or material or technological context in which it was created?

Susan Delagrangre

It's hard to think about the webtext as having an historical content since it's relatively recent. It's . . . although that is relatively [laughter] It's been maybe four or five years now. Already there are probably ways in which it's difficult to view for some people because it's a Flash piece and, depending on what you have available, you may not be able to watch it. Historically in terms of webtexts, I think . . . or the webtexts that we're talking about here that were [unintelligible] *Kairos* . . . it probably relates in many ways back to Anne Wysocki's "A Bookling Monument", which was a self-contained piece created in Macromedia Director. And it was quite an influence on me in thinking about what I might be able to do. I had never thought about being able to do those kinds of things until I saw Anne's work. So the early webtexts had an influence on me in that sense. Materially? Perhaps the same thing. I used the tools that I had available to me and I remember using Macromedia Director years ago at the time that Anne was composing hers. I used the tools available to me that would enable me to do the kinds of things that I wanted to have things move on the screen, because for me that was the most significant element of forward, moving forward web design.

Madeleine Sorapure

So when you say "thing moving on the screen," are you, you're talking about the small videos that are part of the, that are on each of the pages?

Susan Delagrangre

Right. It was something that I had actually taped on my screen when I was composing for a long time - "But it has to move." I was thinking about the way text moved on or off the screen, where the videos were, how they moved in relationship to one another, because it seemed to me that visual design wasn't just about still images, that it was about moving images, and different parts of what you saw on the screen talking to different parts of your brain.

Madeleine Sorapure

And those videos, you made those all yourself?

Susan Delagrangre

Yes.

Madeleine Sorapure

Not in Flash though necessarily.

Susan Delagrang

I learned Actionscript in Flash. Well, a lot of the material I was working with already existed, but turning them into those moving images I did for the vast majority of them. You know, creating movies out of still images and so on.

Madeleine Sorapure

Well, I admire you for sticking with Actionscript when it switched over to Actionscript 3, which was such a radical difference from the earlier version of it and that point, I kind of, you know, Flash became a little much for me. Did you learn Actionscript 3 just for this project?

Susan Delagrang

Yes I did.

Madeleine Sorapure

Wow, impressive.

Susan Delagrang

But lots of fun!

Madeleine Sorapure

Yeah, lots of fun, lots of fun! So maybe that leads into my second question, which is "How to you see your webtext as having influenced the trajectory of the field.

Susan Delagrang

Influencing the trajectory of the field . . . I . . . From the responses I got to it from lots of people, I think it stood as example of what kinds of things could be done, and could be done from scratch by learning Flash, by learning Actionscript 3. I think also it has influenced people to not be afraid to try to make beautiful texts, rather than thinking that the rhetoric of the design should be more clinical. So in one sense that has to do with the trajectory of the kinds of things that we're now seeing being submitted to *Kairos*, which is very exciting. But maybe it's all about the tools. Maybe as the tools get better and you can do more what-you-see-is-what-you-get editing that can give you these kinds of effects, it's just becoming more possible for people to do it.

Madeleine Sorapure

I think that's true, but I think it's also it's about the inspiration. I mean, you mentioned earlier Anne Wysocki as kind of an inspiration for your webtext, and I think, you know, back then – okay, it was only five years ago – but still, back then, there was a couple of paths that people were thinking about when they were creating webtexts, and you know there's this kind of efficiency of use, and clear navigation and all this, you know, everything has to be as user-friendly as possible. And then on the other side, was well, you know, let's make this more of an experience you know with some beauty and like you said, make the design lovely,

not just efficient. And so I think the fact that your inspiration came from Anne, that kind of came into play in how you thought about design and how you wanted to construct the site, the webtext.

Susan Delagrance

Certainly that's true, and I do think mine was influential in the same way. Although there was pushback. The fact that I did not want to explain the visual arguments that I was making that were separate from the textual arguments that people were reading on the screen. It's the same kind of pushback that people often have just for visual rhetoric compared to textual rhetoric . . . that it's ambiguous. And [unintelligible] the fact that text is also ambiguous. If we say a word like "Freedom," you know, what could be more ambiguous than that in the parlance of all the people who use the word? But, I think, that even though for making each of those little pieces [*Somebody's knocking on my door*] . . . [*So what were we talking about?*] Oh, that ambiguity I think is built into any text. And even though I had a particular thing in mind when I was making each of them, if someone else interprets it differently, or sees it differently, or places it differently within the argument or their own context of their own knowledges and work, that's fine. Even in a scholarly work, that's fine that there be ambiguity.

Madeleine Sorapure

And I think it's not, I think one of the reasons for letting that exist, you know, having the images moving, and then, along side the text, and that kind of ambiguity, is also for the experience of the reader. And I think, at that point anyway, you get to thinking about the trajectory of webtexts up to then, really the experience of the reader, the user, was really, I think, navigation, and clicking links, and so on. And I think you had a broader sense of what kind of experience you wanted to give readers.

Susan Delagrance

Right. I have been influenced by Nathan Shedroff's *Experience Design* – the book and the idea – although I think, I think that there are other kinds of experiences. I love navigating your "Between Modes" because it's, it's visually integrated navigation in a way that just a plain link or a labeled image would not be.

Madeleine Sorapure

And that's, I think that's another key thing, and kind of a question that I have for you, I guess, it's not really a question, more of a comment, just the idea of design as meaningful, and I think that a really crucial way to think, or crucial element of webtext to think about the meaningfulness of design. But then also in your *Inventio* piece you talked about the design as influencing the meaning, and how in your composing process, as you were thinking about the design, your argument actually shifted and changed. I thought that was so interesting.

Susan Delagrance

Right, that piece, the *Inventio* piece, was so much fun to write because it did make me, it called attention for me to the radical shift that I experienced when I realized that everything is in play when it comes to design. Of course, there are limitations. But you should always ask a question about whether a particular format, a particular size, a particular use of video clips, whatever it is that you're doing whether you are doing it the way you're doing it, or using as you're using it, because that's the way your medium is designed to bring it in, or are you using it that way in a conscious manner. Are there other ways that you can "do" besides the default? I love thinking about that.

Madeleine Sorapure

Maybe that's a characteristic of a lot of of the best webtexts is that they find new ways to think about design and integrate design into the meaning of the text or into the point that the text is trying to make.

Part 2

Madeleine Sorapure

Another question I was wondering about you know, the whole idea of the *Wunderkammer* as an object to think with, and as a kind of analogy for invention and arrangement, or invention via arrangement. You propose this as one of the key points of your webtext, and I'm just wondering what you think of that now? I mean, how does the *Wunderkammer*, like does it still hold, do you think? That it's an analogy that helps us understand how people are designing in new media? Or are there new, other, better objects to think with and I guess I'm also asking about this whole idea of Wonder. You know, you began your text by talking about Wonder, and do we still have that same kind of Wonder when we're encountering digital texts and when we're trying to compose digital texts?

Susan Delagrang

Well, I think we should have that same kind of Wonder. It's a . . . for me, that space between knowing and non-knowing is really fruitful, and I try to preserve it for as long as I can. I try not to automatically associate an image with an idea, particularly when we're talking about images that have been appropriated for, to be associated with particular meanings. One of the things that I'm interested in working on now has to do with the degradation of beauty as an acceptable . . . an acceptable idea, I guess. We criticize the beautiful, and worry about looking at things, so the only way we find ourselves then looking through them theoretically is critically, and talking about what's wrong with showing a picture of a beautiful woman, or of something that seems to "only" be beautiful. And that's a bad thing. We need to look away. So now what I'm working on, rather than thinking about just re-arranging images that already exist, which is what I've worked on, I've not done much manipulation of images and changing of images – I don't use remix for example, a lot. But the idea of finding a way, working with students, to take something and see it as beautiful, and

therefore as something worth preserving rather than something worth criticizing as a way to work toward social justice. I think, is very exciting right now.

Madeleine Sorapure

And, you know, it's funny 'cause that's sort of how in your *Wunderkammer* piece, again, that's how you're ending by talking about your pedagogy associated with this theory. And I thought it was really interesting is that you have a kind of a final step in your pedagogy which is to actually get students to think about how to make change, how to get action out of this collecting, gathering, and arranging and the last step is "Do something." I didn't see that as part of the *Wunderkammer* approach. It seems like that was something you added, say "Okay, now we've got all this, and now - "What can this spur us to do?" and I that that was such a fantastic way to move forward with your students.

Susan Delagrang

I've always had civic engagement and social responsibility as part of my pedagogy. And, actually, I move back and forth, I think, between - when I was working, particularly later, on the larger digital project, *Technologies of Wonder* - moved back and forth between doing things in the classroom and then applying them to the way I was thinking of arrangement as an invention tool. And then back to the pedagogy. Learn from my students, learn from my theory, learn from my students, learn from my theory. It builds.

Madeleine Sorapure

I was just going to comment that I think, a lot of times, you know, you think, okay, you do digital stuff or you do the civic engagement, you know, that they don't merge so easily, because digital stuff, you think, well, somebody's just sitting in front of a computer making stuff and remixing and all that, but you have to have that, but I think they do come together nicely. Your webtext gives one really good example of that, with that Mansfield prison project, or the reform [**Delagrang**: Reformatory?] reformatory, yeah, yeah, yeah. I have another question, too. Both of your texts - the *Wunderkammer* text and the *Inventio* text are big texts - the *Wunderkammer* text especially, is a big webtext. There are a lot of pieces to it; there's two full examples that you can theorize with - *Wunderkammer* and Joseph Cornell - and then you've got the pedagogy piece; it's just a large text. I sort of wonder what your thoughts are about that as an aspect of . . . I don't know if that's changed, or not, if that's the way we're still approaching these texts, and I ask because as the *Inventio* editor - the *Inventio* texts are also all very large and complex mostly, and just I wonder what the implications are of that?

Susan Delagrang

That's an interesting question. For me, the size of my texts comes from probably a bad habit of not wanting to throw anything away or to save it for later. I think Annie Dillard said something about when you get this beautiful idea, don't save it for a better publication venue or another project. Use it! As things come to me, I just want to use them. And also . . . chunking things, instead of creating something that feels

like a chapter, but rather has multiple parts that don't necessarily have a real solid connection one to the other, is also a way that I like to build arguments and think about arguments. When I was working on my dissertation, my director Nan Johnson, would constantly write in the margins, "All pearls and no necklace." And I think that's actually what my texts are.

Madeleine Sorapure

[Laughs.]

Susan Delagrang

They're just individual chunks of things that are loosely connected.

Madeleine Sorapure

I wouldn't say so loosely, I mean, I think, that's the Wunderkammer, right, is small pieces, loosely connected. But I think they're not so loosely connected, and especially in the *Inventio* piece, you go, you hit all the major questions and you provide really beautiful answers to them, and they're all connected, because it's all a question of digital composing . . . and scholarship, digital scholarship as well. Maybe we could move on to the question or curation? What concerns to you have about the degradation of digital texts, I mean yours in particular, but maybe more generally all these Best Webtexts that we have: How are they going to stand the test of time?

Susan Delagrang

I think work like mine won't. I think that over time, I don't know how much time, the ability to "see" texts that are created in a moment in time when there was a program like Flash. It's still possible to see Anne's "Bookling Monument," but it's harder to do it that it used to be. And I imagine mine will get harder and harder to see. One option, of course, is creating a new edition of a text. But I also think that that placement in a particular time and space is important. I have to say that I do not have the obsession that some people have about the survival of their work. I know curation is important, and I know we need to preserve and find different ways for all of the magical texts that there are out there that we need to preserve – historical texts and contemporary texts too. But I don't worry that mine won't be available for people to look at later because other things will have superseded it partly because it was about and of its time.

Madeleine Sorapure

That's a good point. And what are you working on now?

Susan Delagrang

I'm working on the beauty project right now. Another thing that I'm playing with is creating small digital objects - they're like apps really – that I can use with my students to do different kinds of transformations and play around with the visual, that they can kind of create their own databases of images to work with. But that's kind of peripheral. I'm not sure whether that will lend itself to a big project. But I am

very interested now in the idea of beauty and recuperating it a little bit for use as a rhetorical and social engagement strategy.

Madeleine Sorapure

So the students would be kind of creating beauty. Is that how it would work? I mean, they would sort of take something that isn't necessarily beautiful or not but trying to render it beautiful in some way?

Susan Delagrang

That's one possibility, and an example that I've used is the wonderful . . . I'm forgetting the photographer's name [Gordon Parks], but there's an amazing photograph that is reminiscent of Grant Wood's *American Gothic*, but it's an image of a black woman who's a cleaner at a government building. And she's standing straight, broom/mop in one hand, American flag behind her, columns behind her, and there's such a majesty and dignity to that photograph that it can turn people from thinking about poverty and the things that go along with it, not as just a problem that maybe other people will solve, or that's just the government's job, or whatever, into something where you yourself have the impulse to want to preserve that kind of dignity for everybody. So that's . . . it's in its early stages, obviously.

Madeleine Sorapure

That's very interesting. And then the earlier project that you describe, is that where you said you're doing these little apps where students can create a database of their own images and so on. That almost sounds like it's a kind of follow-up on the *Wunderkammer* idea, or just Cornell's work with gathering and then selecting and arranging. Is there that element to it?

Part 3

Susan Delagrang

Certainly! There are lots of parallels to doing it in bits and pieces. In the *Wunderkammer* piece, I had a tile game that we adapted so that students could put different images into it and see if combinations emerged that they hadn't thought of before – things like that. But I don't know whether it's something that is transportable right now, whether it scales in a way that it could be used outside my own somewhat odd classes.

Madeleine Sorapure

I love that tile game. I thought that was really cool part of the piece. I played around with it a little bit. Yeah, and so, if you can put your own images in there and kind of come up with your own juxtaposition.

Susan Delagrang

Sure!

Madeleine Sorapure

That's very cool. So still in Flash, or are you using other tools now, or . . . ?

Susan Delagrang

That was in Flash. And what I've been playing around with most recently is Javascript, but I'm not exactly happy with it yet so, again, I'm playing around with the tools I'm trying to make, with what I'm trying to make and then the tools I'm trying to use to make it. Well, that's what I love about little digital pieces – you can come to them, you can move far enough along that you know what the next step is, and come back to it. Instead of juggling lots of things at a time.

Madeleine Sorapure

Are there other questions that you talked about with Keith that maybe we could follow up on that would be, what if you're looking for continuities and so on?

Susan Delagrang

We talked the specificity of his piece and how it was so much a snapshot of the time with its huge instructions on how to navigate the site that we don't need to do any more. Or we might need to do, you know, we might have viewers who would need that kind of thing, but we don't do it any more. Which I think . . . The fact that we feel that we don't need to provide directions on how to work it is part of the exploration of experience piece that I think is pretty critical to discovering something new. So in that sense, not providing instructions can be frustrating for someone who doesn't know how to use something, but can be ultimately hugely beneficial. Because if we were worried about how to allow readers to, or viewers to, experience the text in a multi-navigational way, I think that's the only thing we can do. There have to be places where people are confused or aren't quite sure where they've, where they are or where they've come from.

Madeleine Sorapure

Yeah, that makes sense. I mean, I think the idea's to find a happy medium, you know, where you're generating a little bit of curiosity, yeah, generating a little curiosity on the part of the readers and allowing them to navigate the text or kind of asking them to make choices as they navigate that text and at the same making it, you know, not so frustrating. I think it's interesting because that's probably, that changes over the years because, like you were saying, we expect a greater facility with these kinds of things from our readers.

Susan Delagrang

Great! And people are being very brave in the kinds of things they're . . . Recently there was an article called "Satellite Lamps" in *Kairos*, and the experiments that they were doing with GPS and the rhetorical, and functional, and other kinds of conclusions that they came to that could be applied to many different things are just fascinating. But who would have thought of that kind of thing as being a work of scholarship five years ago, ten years ago? Wonderful things to come!

Madeleine Sorapure

I agree. And, you know, one thing that's kind of interesting I think, a lot of times it seems like video is a big thing now, you know asking students to make videos, and scholarly videos, and so on, and I think there's – I mean, I like video as well as the next person - but there's a kind of loss of what your webtext and other ones create, which is more of an experience where the user's involved in making choices, and navigating, and getting a little bit confused.

Madeleine Sorapure

Well, some kind of interactive video might be kind of interesting. I don't know what that would be, but, yeah, where you could stop it and start it and – I mean, obviously you could start it and stop it – but do things other than that, you know, would be kind of interesting.

Susan Delagrang

Right. Yeah, that's true. I'd also like to see kind of open texts, whether they're webtexts or whatever, that allow people to contribute and maybe even more than just commentary. And you can do that, you can have people comment on it, or . . . a text that was built while people were commenting on it, the authors reacted to those things, and, author reacted, and included that in the work. That would be fun for *Kairos* to set up.

Madeleine Sorapure

It'd be fun. And I think the challenge is just, you know, these are still pieces of scholarship and they have to be closed at a certain point, you know, so I think that's probably a challenge for the editors to figure out how to make that, how to make something like that work.

Susan Delagrang

It could be something that was open for 30 days just to get a feel of that kind of collaborative, collaborative sense of building something together.

Madeleine Sorapure

What is probably interesting thinking about the best webtext, too, like about how many of them have been individually authored and how many collaboratively authored.

Susan Delagrang Collaboration has always been central to our work, but you're right that there are more probably that are group-authored proportionally than one might find in other places.

Madeleine Sorapure

True, there are more *Kairos* webtexts generally that are group-authored, but I wonder if there are more *Kairos* Best Webtexts. I'm just looking at the list right now and it looks like in the beginning, there are, well, they're mostly single-authored, and then starting pretty recently . . . 200[6] yeah, so I would say it's a mix. I guess, to do

the kind of thing you did, I mean, you know, you could easily have three or four or five people working on that piece, again, with one of these kind of big webtexts that covers a lot of ground and does a lot with different tools, you can see why it would be advantageous to have a lot of people working on it.

Susan Delagrang

I think one of the things that gets in the way of people working with webtexts or visual projects is their sense that they don't, or the actual fact that they don't know how to do the design. They may have an excellent idea of what it is that they want, but they can't execute it. And there are also people who can execute, but not well, so that the piece feels more amateur because it's the best that the authors could do. And I'm a big proponent of those kinds of collaborations where a person that works with design alongside the author is a co-author. I think that that's important. Although it depends on the amount to which that happens. And it has to happen, of course, together; I don't think that anybody could create the content of a webtext and then hand it off to someone to design it. The way what I did, because I could do both parts, they were intertwined in a way that they couldn't be pulled apart from what it was that was being communicated by the design and by the words. So I'm interested in more collaborative work like that happening, so that we don't have to have all the expertise in one person. I don't know why people worry about that kind of collaboration as somehow not the same as the collaborations that we do otherwise, because it's always bringing people with different skillsets to a project.

Madeleine Sorapure

Right, but there has to be a deep understanding that the design is meaningful, and that it's part of the content of the piece and not just something added on after the fact.

Madeleine Sorapure

Well, great, Susan! Okay, hang on, let me turn off the recording . . .