MULTIVOCALITY AND THE VIRTUAL INTERPRETIVE ENVIRONMENT

SARA L. GONZALEZ

The proliferation of dialogue in recent decades concerning museum representations has resulted in a widespread awareness throughout anthropology and archaeology regarding the power of representations. This awareness has been followed by the desire to make the interpretive process and its results more flexible and inclusive of multiple audiences. Specifically, Internet and web-authoring tools have been touted for their ability to create dynamic and multivocal interpretive environments, which highlight the process of interpretation. The Kashaya Pomo Interpretive Trail Project presents a unique opportunity to explore the benefits and difficulties involved in the incorporation of a web-based interpretive component to the proposed interpretive program.

In the recent past, archaeologists such as McManamon (1994) argued that the core message of archaeological outreach should consist of teaching the public about the values of preserving the archaeological record. Zimmerman and others have countered that this message serves the interests of archaeologists, but does not relate—or rather resonate—strongly with the publics we most often reach out to: students, teachers, enthusiasts, tourists, and descendant communities (Zimmerman et al. 1994; Holtorf 2000). Combined with debates in museology regarding making interpretations of cultural heritage more democratic and inclusive of our multiple and diverse publics, the very frameworks and messages constructed through interpretive programs are called into question (Stone and Planel 1999; Merriman and Poovaya-Smith 1996). The result of these debates is the current focus in archaeology and museology upon portraying the past as a constructed and diverse phenomenon (Stone and Planel 1999; Witcomb 2003). Indeed, with its holistic approach, the Fort Ross Archaeological Project (FRAP) and the current Kashaya Pomo Interpretive Trail Project seek to present the past of Fort Ross, California as multiply known and experienced. The current trail proposal will lead people physically and mentally away from the imposing stockade and allow visitors to consider Ross's multi-ethnic heritage through a series of on-site interpretive panels and an accompanying brochure.

Unfortunately, the degree to which any interpretive trail can convey its messages is constrained by the medium of trail signposts: they are costly and non-durable, and the format restricts extensive interpretation. Developing a digital website as an extension of the current interpretive program at the park both overcomes the limitations imposed by the physical trail and presents a unique tool with which to construct multi-vocal interpretations. Digital interpretive environments offer the advantage of accessibility, interactivity, and reflexivity between multiple audiences—real and virtual. They can create forums for communication that enable audiences to partake in the process of interpretation while also promoting the exchange of information across traditional boundaries. Likewise, the multi-layered and fluid structure of the Internet and World Wide Web supply fitting metaphors for the kinds of layered and fluid interpretations possible with hypermedia and multimedia applications (Lock 2003). In all, what is said to be achieved is a multiplicity of pasts held together by the narratives created through the interaction between audiences and that of the information presented in a website's multiple contexts.

Of course, numerous detractions exist. Access to these technologies, while growing, is still limited and is split along the same socio-economic boundaries that the Internet and Web are touted as eliminating. Similarly, there is disagreement concerning the degree to which people are actually able to freely interact and engage with materials presented in these formats (Hodder 1999). Some critics even dismiss multimedia and hypermedia as little more than crass forms of "edutainment" with little teaching value or place in museum contexts. Indeed, the pros and cons of these technologies as teaching aides have yet to be systematically examined, and issues of access must clearly be addressed before embarking on any digital project (Hodder 1999; Wolle and Tringham 2000).

However, these critiques should not be used to deflect from the positive applications of these technologies in education or in interpretive environments (Macdonald 1992; Witcomb 2003). Given their accessibility and increasing use in educational,

Sara L. Gonzalez, Department of Anthropology, University of California Berkeley, 232 Kroeber Hall, Berkeley, CA 94720-3710

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museological, and archaeological situations, creating a digital interpretive environment for the Kashaya Pomo Interpretive Trail at Fort Ross is both feasible and beneficial on several fronts.

The isolated nature of the State Historic Park itself poses a difficult situation: the impact of the trail upon people's perception of Ross is limited by the ability to visit and physically walk the trail. The creation of a website enables the project to disseminate information on a much larger scale than would ever be possible through traditional media such as trail signage or pamphlets. A website effectively opens up the trail's possible audience to the local, national and even global scale, creating increased awareness of the park as well as the Kashaya Pomo's connection to this region, past and present. Not only will greater numbers of people, therefore, visit the park and its trail virtually, putting them into greater contact with its heritage, but the website will provide an alternative point of access for disabled and disadvantaged audiences.

In order to combat issues of "in-access", that is the inability to access the website because of its digital format, several design strategies will be employed to mitigate low download speeds or browser incompatibility. For our needs, we will create both an enhanced site using *Flash*, a ubiquitous animation/website design program, and a basic site developed in *Dreamweaver*, an extremely accessible program that constructs html web pages. Launching both an enhanced and a basic edition of a website is a perfect way for website designers to ensure maximum levels of accessibility without sacrificing design, seamless animation, use of interactive graphics or, of course, a contemporary and appealing aesthetic. Potential in-access problems can also be combated by distributing the website as a contained CD version so that those without Internet access can still brose through the website and use it as a teaching aide in classroom or other community settings.

Access, however, is only a minor aspect of the benefits of a digital trail. The problem we face when constructing the physical trail is how to realistically construct a multi-vocal past at Ross through a series of interpretive panels. More to the point, how can we make this general message palatable to the public? Audiences, in fact, may not want to hear about ambiguity or complexity, but about facts and givens. One of the best ways to capture the attention of an audience, while still maintaining our core message, is to not force-feed them a programmatic view of heritage (Stone 1994). Rather we should create a design structure that is influenced by the goals of multi-vocality and reflexivity.

Making interactivity a primary goal of design is consequently a necessary strategy. An explanation about the nature of websites and hypermedia is first needed in order to understand what interactivity is. Simply put, hypermedia refers to any kind of linked electronic document. A website is thus a collection of electronic pages that are digitally linked to one another. Interactivity refers to the degree to which any one page in the digital document or website can be accessed from all other pages in the documents. The more links that are created between individual pages, the greater the number of possible paths that exist within the entire document. Essentially, by providing more interconnections between individual pages, a designer can control the degree to which the user must interact with the information provided and choose his/her own path through the documents. The degree of interactivity forces a user not simply to rely upon the narratives told through a simple linear reading of the document, but requires them to choose their path through the document and by so doing create an individualized context within which they process the information contained therein. It is this feature of the format—that it requires users to interact with information, process the contexts in which they access it, and construct their own perspective from their individualized reading of the document—that allows for multi-vocality.

Multi-vocality is not just limited to the user, but is also fostered through the multi-layered characteristic of hypermedia. Because a designer chooses all available paths through the linked document, she/he creates narrative strands in the ways in which pages and topics are linked to one another. One can either choose to present the website in a linear fashion, forcing people to follow a single path, or create non-linear design structures that open up the number of possible paths to follow (see Figure 1). Non-linear design also allows for the layering of information and narrative strands so that a user need not view of all of the pages of a document to get from start to finish, but can choose how deep to dig into specific topics. This provides for websites that are not limited in space or time to the kinds of information and/or interpretations they wish to present. In fact, the ability to layer information provides a useful tool for targeting the needs of multiple audiences whether they be children, teens, adults, students, or teachers.

An obvious benefit of the layered and unrestricted format of a digital environment is the capacity to incorporate multiple lines of evidence within a single space. Textual panels and even brochures are limited in the kinds, format, and amount of evidence they can provide. The benefit of a website is simply that all lines of evidence—textual, documentary, video, audio,

graphic, photographic, etc.—can be incorporated into a cohesive design structure. FRAP's focus on a holistic approach to archaeology can easily be extended to a website, as its multi-media format enables the creation of interpretations grounded in multiple lines of evidence. The unique format also presents a powerful tool by which the critical combination of multiple media can be used itself to convey interpretations. Multi-layering is itself a potential narrative device and relates well to another issue—that of presenting oral traditions and history in archaeological interpretations. The presentation of oral traditions in archaeological contexts often serves as simple confirmation of archaeological facts, and their use in this manner results in their co-optation by a scientific tradition. However, if we layer pages not only according to depth of information, but also in terms of diverging ways of knowing about the past, we can present oral traditions as independent and distinct traditions of knowing, valuable in their own right. Doing this contributes to an interpretive environment that does not just present interpretation or information, but illustrates how various pieces of evidence are used to construct knowledge about the past.

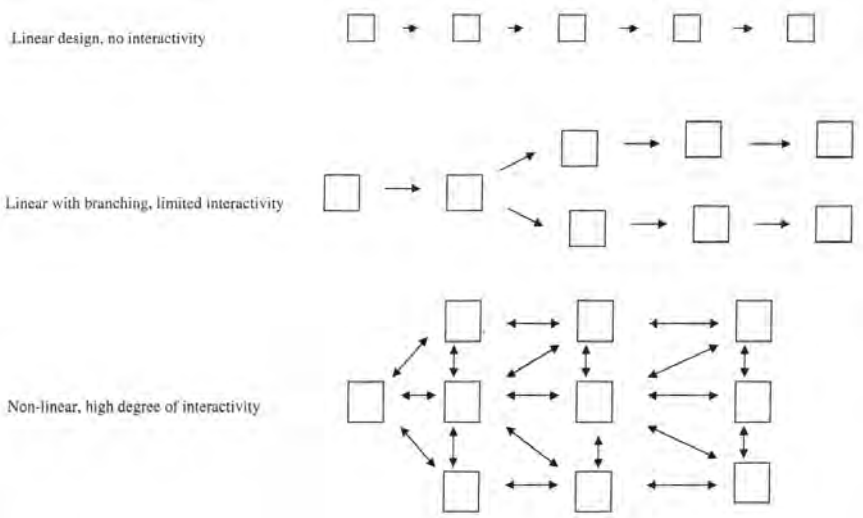
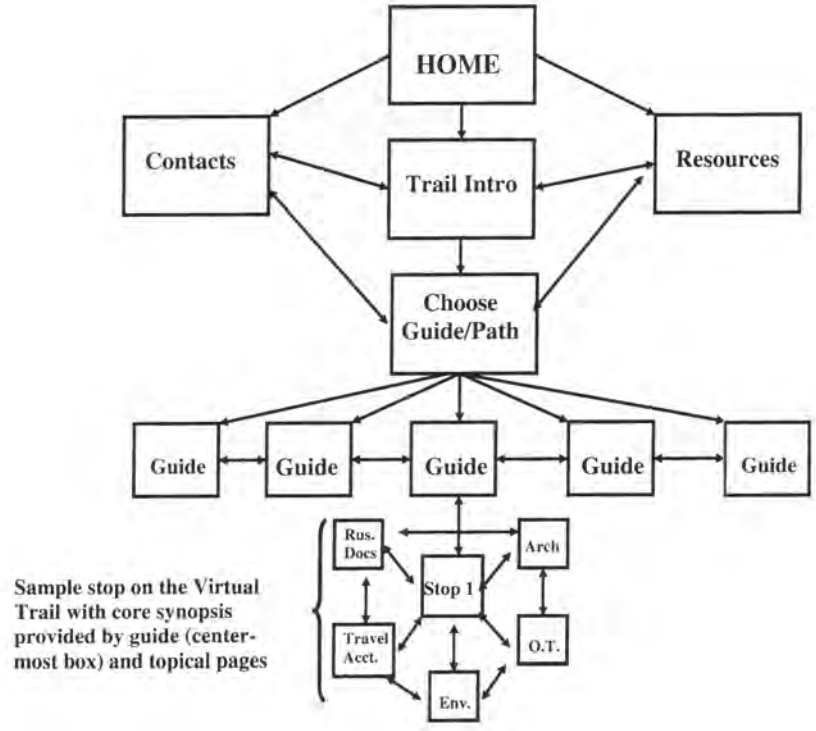


Figure 1: Linear and non-linear website design.

Figure 2: Proposed structure for Kashaya Pomo Interpretive Trail website.



Taking advantage of the opportunities digital technologies offer for interpretive environments hinges upon putting these ideas into action. The website I envision for the project is best summarized by Figure 2, a blueprint of the site's structure and the accessibility between pages. In the homepage, a general overview is accompanied by three paths: the Virtual Trail, Contacts, and Resources. The Contacts pages give information concerning the website's creators and contacts for FRAP, while the resources section offers researchers' own curriculum vitae/ publications, bibliographic references, web links, and a glossary, and should eventually contain a teachers' resources section. My goal is to make the Virtual Trail component a digital companion to the physical trail, offering layered interpretations for each of the stops on the physical trail. I envision using QTVR (Quick Time Virtual Reality), a popular tool used to create 360□ panoramas that in essence create a 3D environment in which the viewer is able to change the photograph's perspective. This interactive technology will be used as a navigational tool so that the viewer can, at all times,

control his/her view of the landscape and move around and between trail stops at will. This ability to freely navigate the landscape is extended to the navigation of information. The design of the website should ensure that trail stops and all information are easily accessible, though access must remain as an option to the visitor and not mandatory. Going back to the presentation of multiple lines of evidence and multiple perspectives, the use of specialized guides for the trail enables us to present diverging narratives at each of the trail's stops.

Upon entering the Virtual Trail, the visitor chooses a guide; each of these guides will offer his or her own personal expertise with the region's history, archaeology, and environment. At each stop the guides give a synopsis of the site, itself influenced by the guide's own perspective, and hence conveys the project's broad interpretive themes: culture contact, indigenous perspectives/heritage, Russian colonialism, and environmental history. The use of real people such as Kent Lightfoot (co-director of FRAP), Otis Parrish (co-director of FRAP, Kashaya Pomo), Dan Murley (former Park Ranger), an otter and a historic Native Alaskan personalizes the above-mentioned themes and connects the trail stops and heritage to real people's connections to the region or its history. In addition to individual synopses of the trail stops, the guides will also offer visitors the chance to dig deeper into the following topics: archaeology, Russian documents, travel accounts, oral traditions, and environment, thereby allowing them to learn more in-depth information on these selected resources. Again, at any point the user can choose to change trail guides (and hence perspective), dig deeper, or escape a trail stop or the trail altogether.

Rather than being constrained to one core interpretive theme, the use of the guides and secondary information pages as such permits us to communicate a wide range of narratives on Ross's heritage. Unification of these narratives comes through the use of a metaphor for the site: Journeys. The use of a metaphor in designing a site leads to a unified feel to the site, as it supplies the relevant context of the pages and establishes a resource that can be drawn on in conceptualizing and designing the website's overall look, texture, and textual interpretations. The design of this website is still in its infancy and will continue to transform as the groundwork for the site is established through further research and collaboration between the Kashaya Pomo Interpretive Trail Projects, California State Parks, and the Kashaya Pomo.

Building a website is an excellent technique to reach out to wider audiences and to engage people with multi-layered and multi-vocal interpretations otherwise unfeasible in a physical trail environment. As archaeologists attempt to grapple with issues of accountability, education, and outreach, utilization of digital interpretive environments may represent one of the most fruitful endeavors for realizing these ethical and moral requirements. Given the potential benefits, the small-scale of the Kashaya Pomo Interpretive Trail Project, and our current capabilities, developing a digital version of the trail presents us with an exciting opportunity to expand the interpretive environment at Fort Ross State Historic Park.

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