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Distant Trails: A Multimedia Biography of E. Dee Miller

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DISTANT TRAILS:
A MULTIMEDIA BIOGRAPHY OF E. DEE MILLER

by

Marty Ewer

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of the requirements for the degree of

DEPARTMENT HONORS

in

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Introduction

My project is to author a multimedia presentation of my grandfather's biography. To undertake such a project as this requires a certain awareness of the task. Even as I sat down the first time to contemplate what I was trying to accomplish, I began to realize the implications of the overall project. I'm not just speaking of the research and labor required to put it all together but something that must precede that.

In the movie Jurassic Park, the character Dr. Malcolm argues, "Your scientists were so preoccupied with whether or not they could [give new life to dinosaurs] that they didn't stop to think if they *should*."

I found myself facing a similar philosophical question: Should I attempt this project? In essence, is it appropriate to re-author my grandfather's story? I have come to terms with this by realizing that my project is not a replacement of my grandfather's history but my rendition of it. Therefore, I must answer, "Yes, I should do this to preserve his work and author my own." As I continually consider the compositional implications of this kind of media translation, I still ask myself, "Is a multimedia version of my grandfather's memoirs something I really want to create?" The technological and authorship problems that arise when re-authoring a work in such a manner as this are many.

Not only are these questions many, but they are also very difficult to answer. Even after beginning this project, I simply cannot answer all of these questions. I still have the questions listed here and so many more that I hope time will answer. This paper is a short discussion of these questions and the associated difficulties I have in answering them.

Conception

To conceive of an honors project, I had to find a problem and consider how I could solve

it. The materials depicting my grandfather's life history were scattered about my family: my uncle had his journals, one of my aunts had his photo album and 8 mm films, another aunt had his music collection, and my mother had some of his slides. There was my problem—limited accessibility to my grandfather's biography. Anyone interested in his folklore and history would have to travel the breadth of the county to gather all the pieces together. My solution was to synthesize the materials into a multimedia presentation that would allow easier access to his story. This solution became my purpose for creating the CD presentation. Multimedia seemed the best candidate, as I had text, graphics, audio, and video I wanted to incorporate into one medium.

Purpose and Audience

The question arose in my head: How does my purpose with this task differ from the original purpose of these journals? It is important for me to remember that my purpose is only a modification of my grandfather's. My purpose is to make his history more accessible. The results of these purposes are the same: to allow my grandfather's memory to survive.

With my purpose clear to me, my audience became another problem. Who is my audience? How does my audience differ from the audience for which my grandfather wrote the journals? My immediate answer was my family. I was going to create an archive of materials to detail my grandfather's history. In that respect, our audiences were the same. Talking with Dr. Roush one morning, however, it became clear that I should broaden my vision of the CD. She mentioned that perhaps historical researchers may want to have access to this regional history. With that in mind I had to worry about two more things: the presentation would have to be more professional, and the details in the history might need to be clarified and more comprehensive. Presenting the CD in class and before the English Honors Committee also provided me additional audience. Recording the first video, I found myself trying to make it come off "slick." I

have since determined that this does not serve my grandfather's memory well. I need to find a style that is professional and yet respectful of my grandfather. That style has yet to be found.

Well, maybe it would more correct to say that I have an idea of the style in my head, but thus far have not been able to realize it. I want the videos to illustrate the journals—a video documentary. I want them to have the flavor of the old west or at least of this area's past. To accomplish this, I need to do more research at the Fife Collection and Special Collections to secure more photographic material. I also need appropriate music for the period. What I have recorded currently is not, in my opinion, “western” enough. Another audio problem I then need to solve is the narration. My mother talked me into recording the first narration. However, I believe I need someone with a more powerful and older-sounding voice.

Questions of Authorship

With a project such as this, many troubling questions of authorship arise. How transparent can and should I remain? By that, I am referring to my presence in the material. Do I add my own voice to the narrative? Or do I try to avoid that? In the first video, I wrote my own script *based* on the first three pages of Journal 1. By not following his words verbatim, am I introducing too much of myself? This is a very difficult question when authoring a biography.

Concerning voice, whose point of view do I used for the CD? First person, third person? To date, I have only seriously considered first person—a sort of autobiographical style. Maybe I need to expand this. During my defense, Dr. Roush thought perhaps weaving in narration of other family members to the autobiographical dialog would serve a three-fold purpose: first, it would allow me to retain most of the original wording; second, it would allow me to add in other points of view; and third, it would relieve me of some responsibility for accuracy.

Accuracy. That is something I need to define. When I began this senior thesis, I wondered

whether or not my interpretation of my grandfather's story would be accurate? By that, what did I mean? I started out thinking of accuracy in terms of the actual events. However, there is no recorded version of actual events. Every record in my possession is someone's version of the events. Therefore, I cannot possibly mean that. My main concern is what my grandfather would think of the presentation. So, by accuracy, I mean achieving a narration that would please him. I know this is not a very concrete manner of measuring—for now it is only a guess.

Questions of Medium Translation

This brings up an interesting question of authorship in this medium: Will my blending of source materials in a manner never intended distort the story's meaning? Even to attempt simple preservation changes the original. This type of presentation allows readers to simultaneously view pictures, video, and text and listen to audio. This can be a benefit of multimedia, as this presenting of material in parallel is simply not possible with the traditional types of media with which I am working. However, by combining resources, another story is created. This is a story that intentionally or accidentally fills in the spaces of the on-the-surface story. This phenomenon can be a pitfall with multimedia. It is something peculiar to the marriage of different media and something to be concerned about. For me, I want to be as careful as possible to not inadvertently tell a story that just isn't there.

How to remain true to my source? This is an exciting and terrifying question. Exciting in the sense that it gives me something to struggle with. Terrifying because this is real to me. This is my grandfather's memory, and I want to do it service. As my grandfather is dead, my source is not the critic of my project: my family is. My only hope is to interview family members and compare notes to aim for something my grandfather would like. In the end, I should remember that nothing is absolute. Something is always lost in a translation. My grandfather would

understand that.

How transparent can and should this technology remain? And how do I control the effects the new technology will have on the archives? Another pair of very difficult questions. (I suppose that is the exercise with this project: to struggle with these types of questions.) I have tried to keep things simple--nothing flashy. I have tried to use common elements: the movie metaphor splash screen, the sky background, straight forward organization and navigation, and simple music. I feel the background image of the sky ablaze with orange contributes well to the theme of looking back in time, as I always get a feeling of distance, serenity, and timelessness when I look at that photo.

My hope is that the reader would forget they are using a computer. At first, this seemed an almost impossible task, but even as I was authoring the interface, I would sometimes get caught up in the presentation and forget my place. So I think I'm on the right track with the visuals anyway. As I said before, the video production has been another story.

I believe this technology is now advanced enough that to not exploit it for your own purpose is to not really understand either your intent or the technology. As the major part of the CD is to someday be the video section, I think it's my lack of realization of the desired video style that is holding me up. When I achieve a style that suits the material and remains transparent, I believe the multimedia technology will serve my needs very well.

A final word about the translation to multimedia: In a conversation with Dr. Grant-Davie, we talked of experiences with history as they relate to the senses: touch, smell, sight, sound, and even taste. The multimedia experience is very different from the sharp edges and acrid smell of the fragile 8 mm film, the clicking of the projector, the texture of the cloth-like black paper in the photo albums, and reading my grandfather's handwriting. In terms of touch, smell, and taste, the

multimedia experience is sterile. Only in sight and sound can it hope to surpass the source. Does moving this to a multimedia platform make sense in terms of a full sensory input experience? Maybe not. But it does organize the materials and make the history more accessible. That was my initial intent. This project may then serve as an index to a disarray of sources. If a reader wishes, they can always search out the original sources. Then having access to both the CD and the originals will allow them to experience a full spectrum of sensations.

A Final Concern

What to call the blasted thing? This is something I struggled with for months. I wanted a title that would call to mind many things at once yet remain short and simple. I wanted a title that would summarize his life (or at least his memoirs). His story is one of almost a wandering vagabond. He worked here; he worked there. In between, he would travel about to find work. Since he often worked as a farmhand and had to travel great distances by trail to herd sheep and cattle or gather wood, the word "trail" seemed fitting. The word "trail" also evokes the thought of the path of life. The term "distant" refers to distance in both space and time. This helps the reader to understand that the story is far removed from their world in both senses. *Distant Trails* seems like a good title to me. Others like it because it reminds them of "Happy trails to you, Until we meet again . . ." This is kind of silly, but not altogether bad, as it is a cowboy song, and my grandfather was a cowboy.

Now What?

I am experiencing a lack of vision and a lack of resources with this project. I wanted to create these multimedia videos, but I am without the style and graphics that I feel I need. Even the first video contains many seconds of black screen--I didn't want put things in the video simply to have something in there. This project is too important to me. I need more research time. That may be

my downfall in the end with this: I am perhaps proceeding too earnestly and carefully. Even as I write this, I realize I need input from other, more objective sources.