Remaking Locations, Based on Fictions, Questions and Swaps

This paper reflects on three projects within a body of work, research and teaching, created between 2009 and 2013, that focuses on mobile digital communication and collaboration, situated in geographic locations. The projects are presented here as experiments in various permutations of the pairing of mobile communications with urban sites to heighten associative experiences and strengthen public engagement.

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These mobile communication experiments each draw from a consideration of Michel de Certeau's description of strategies, tactics and "making do" in the urban environment.[1] To operate tactically, each project possesses a unique combinatory model of content and participation. The first delivers content in the form of a multiple-location-based fictional story and asks for participation through movement across the city; the second solicits content in the form of provocative questions about the community, asking for participation at distinct physical intervention sites in the city; the third deals in two types of content, one, crowd-sourced sounds, evokes an understanding of the scale of the gathered community and draws participants to the second, more literal content in the form of barters in which the community participates via a collaboration with an existing local creative online bartering platform.

What I suggest through the presentation of these three projects is that an anticipatory alternative digital-spatial model has emerged through the body of this work. These projects exist in a transition period (in an urban United States model) between an early adoption period of mobile technology use and the impending period of near total ubiquitous use of location-based smartphones and devices. They are thus able to take advantage of this period as a productive ground for experimentation with the more abstract possibilities that these technologies might suggest as alternative trajectories. In particular these projects test the potential strength of coordinating physical cues, markers or material assemblies with digital data to make visible the availability of latent information, stories or experiences in a given location. This is a mutually dependent model that produces a sum that is stronger than its constituent parts to encourage urban social activity.

At stake in each project is a differing form of participatory urbanism found in the place based use of communication technologies. In order to explore the shifting forms of participation, each project employs a unique framework of design

thinking. The projects each require an invented structure for combining or repurposing individual tools, platforms and places. There is overlap amongst these invented structures as each project addresses a particular community, a physical location and a communication technology to encourage playful open engagement.

URBAN "INSTALLATION" EXPERIMENT: SIBYLLINE TXT

The Sibylline TXT is a text message based urban installation run in Spring 2009 in Downtown Syracuse, NY. The project dispersed an original fictional story situated in the same urban area as the installation. The story was written in sixty (60) separate text messages and dispersed among twenty-six (26) urban cultural sites, over a thirty (30) day period. The project is named for the Cumaean Sibyl at the Oracle of Cumae, seen in Virgil's Aeneid.[2] The Sibyl inhabits a cave with one hundred openings, and reveals her prophesies on a series of oak leaves within the cave. When a wind blows the oak leaves are scattered, thus re-sequencing the prophesy and creating potential through reinterpretation and misinterpretation. In a similar fashion, this urban texting installation project collides fact and fiction in an interwoven network of real movement and fantastic engagement across the city. These modern oracular nodes of narrative grafted onto physical spaces compelled the public to explore the city while collecting the pieces of the story in varying orders.

The project's context, a postindustrial city in Central New York State, necessitated an approach to technology that would be accessible to the citizens and already widely used. While a smartphone app might have been an ideal delivery system and would have allowed a more seamless interface for a location based model, it would have excluded a majority of the city where the project was operating.[3] Instead, we had to look to a more ubiquitous form of mobile communication, the text message, and towards models of mobile marketing services which might be coopted for the installations' purposes. The text message was not just a convenient and widely used communication type but also provided an important framework and formwork to test the possibility of sending and receiving more deeply communicative and artful content.

The mobile marketing service Cellit was chosen to run the project via a shortcode and keyword system for accessing story threads and an easily accessible database. Threads of the story were manually input daily and assigned to various locations. It is perhaps most curious that the simplicity of the technology used and the somewhat crude exchange of shortcodes and keywords was appropriately abstract to support the mutable lyrical experience encouraged in the project. The success in this case results perhaps from the emphasis on output from the designer's end. In this case the participants' main role was to traverse the city to collect pieces of the story and to assemble them into an associative experience.

The project engages the public in associations and assemblies by tapping into latent imaginations, encouraging dreaming and inserting moments of whimsy into the everyday. Each piece of the project attempts to capture interest and collect momentum feeding into large scale a-temporal action within the city. In order to do this, the Sibylline TXT operates for the participants as a form of "making do," by using the fictional story to release them from the constraints of the existing city. Similar to the "North African living in Paris or Roubaix," that de Certeau describes, the participant superimposes the two locations and

> [c]reates for himself a space in which he can find ways of using the constraining order of the place or of the language. Without leaving the place

where he has no choice but to live and which lays down its law for him, he establishes within it a degree of plurality and creativity. By an art of being in between, he draws unexpected results from his situation.[4]

In order to engage in this "in between" the participant must have knowledge of the alternative tactics, i.e. of the story, operating at multiple urban sites. In the Sibylline TXT, this knowledge was created through a media campaign early on and reinforced by small graphics placed at each site, with shortcode keywords changed over the thirty days. Perhaps owing to the scale and temperament of the city and the novelty of the project, we received media attention from local television, radio, print and online news outlets. This reinforces the notion that this model's success is helped by the transition stage of technology adoption in which it operates in 2009 in this particular site.

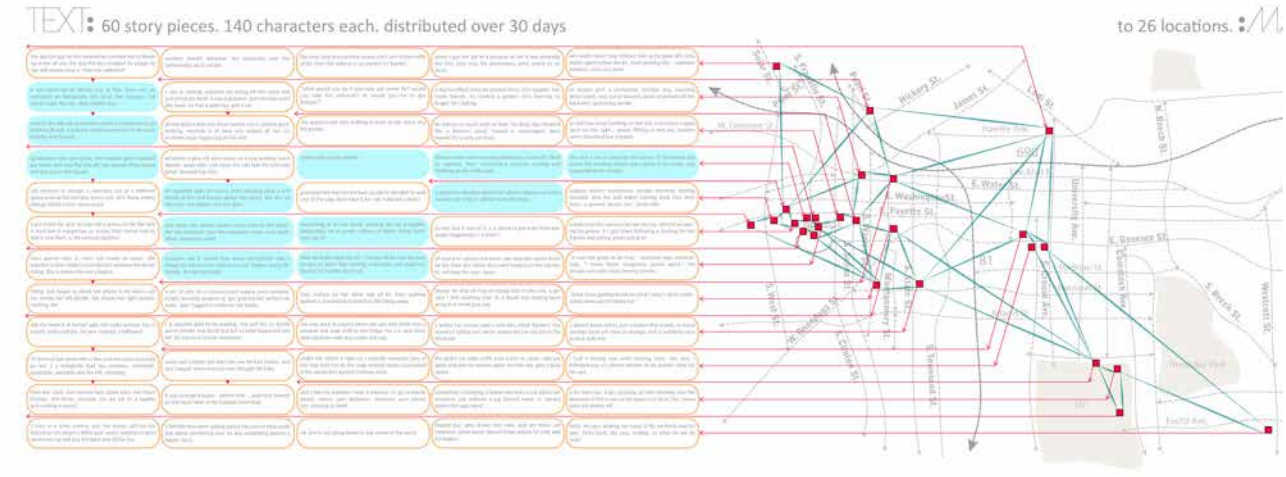

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Figure 1: Overview visualization of story pieces and their distribution across the downtown map. credit: author.

PEDAGOGICAL EXPERIMENTS: SPATIAL CONTXTS

Following the independent work of the Sibylline TXT installation project, I initiated and ran a course at the Syracuse University School of Architecture in 2010 and 2011 that asked students to work with community partners to design their own mobile communication based urban installations. The "Spatial ConTXTs" course sequence was funded by an an Imagining America Grant, meant to support courses pairing scholarly work with community engagement. Because of the timeframe of the academic semester, these courses focus on the production of installation work that engages mobile communication technologies in quick and clever ways. The resulting student installations, What If…Syracuse and SyrAsks, both claim that a public can be gathered and encouraged to inhabit the city through urban "conversations." These conversations were facilitated through the dispersal of physical installations within the city that acted as collectors and markers of the discourse.

For What If…, students created images for vacant storefronts in the city and worked with property owners to install them. These vacant storefront sites ask citizens to send texts speculating on the possibilities for the city, both real and whimsical.

For SyrAsks, students created sculptural pieces fastened to existing infrastructure to pose questions throughout the city and worked with approvals from the Public Art Commission.The questions were created through our partner workshops with 7th and 8th graders in the Say Yes to Education program in one of the

city's schools and were answered by the city through text message. Both projects culminated in final large scale projection events that invited all contributors (via return text message) to read the city's responses, furthering the recursive nature of the work. The What If… team threw an open community party at a local art house, projecting answers and suggestive imagery, choreographed to music; while the SyrAsks team projected a live show of the city's responses onto the side of I.M. Pei's Everson Museum in the downtown for several nights, through a collaboration with the Urban Video Project.

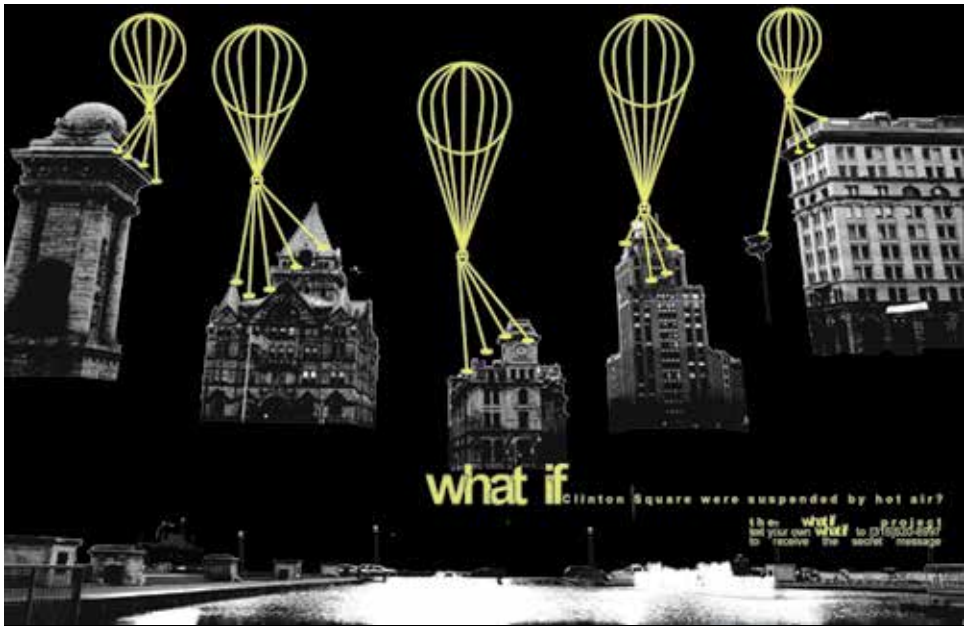

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Figure 2: Student mockup of one of the vacant storefront images. credit: ARC 500 SP'10 course at Syracuse University.

Each of the Spatial ConTXTs installations involve distributed material installations to solicit mobile communication input and a single community event space to deliver the resultant output. In this way the projects differ from the Sibylline TXT in their relationship to technology. Whereas the Sibylline TXT relies on the misuse of a direct marketing strategy to deliver unique pieces of content to a distributed network, What if… and SyrAsks rely on a particular combination of distributed communication (incoming text messages) and centralized communication (the large scale projection of images at an event).

At a technical level, whereas the Sibylline TXT repurposed a mobile marketing service for an output based project, the students' installations, with their focus on solicited input, needed a more flexible model for organized collection and response. The conditions of the city, however, still necessitated the use of SMS as the primary technology.[5] The Spatial ConTXTs work used Twilio, a cloud communications company generally used to communicate with customers, which supplied separate phone numbers for each location and provided a web service API model to organize incoming answers and release outgoing messages.

PROFESSIONAL COMPETITION INSTALLATION PROPOSAL: WHITE NOISE (OR THE BUZZ)

The third project in this series of work is my firm's finalist project in 2013 MoMA and MoMA PS1 Young Architects Program, which challenges five finalists to design a summer installation providing, shade, seating and a water element for the summer music series and other visitors. White Noise is an interactive sound environment (a

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collaboration with Arup Acoustics) embedded in a playful series of figural abstractions clad with white synthetic turf and designed to provide shaded seating. The sound is sourced via telephone from visitors and passersby, and the tactile turf invites visitors to participate through touch. Embedded sensors allow participants to turn on the sound and alter the input into varying levels of clear whispers.

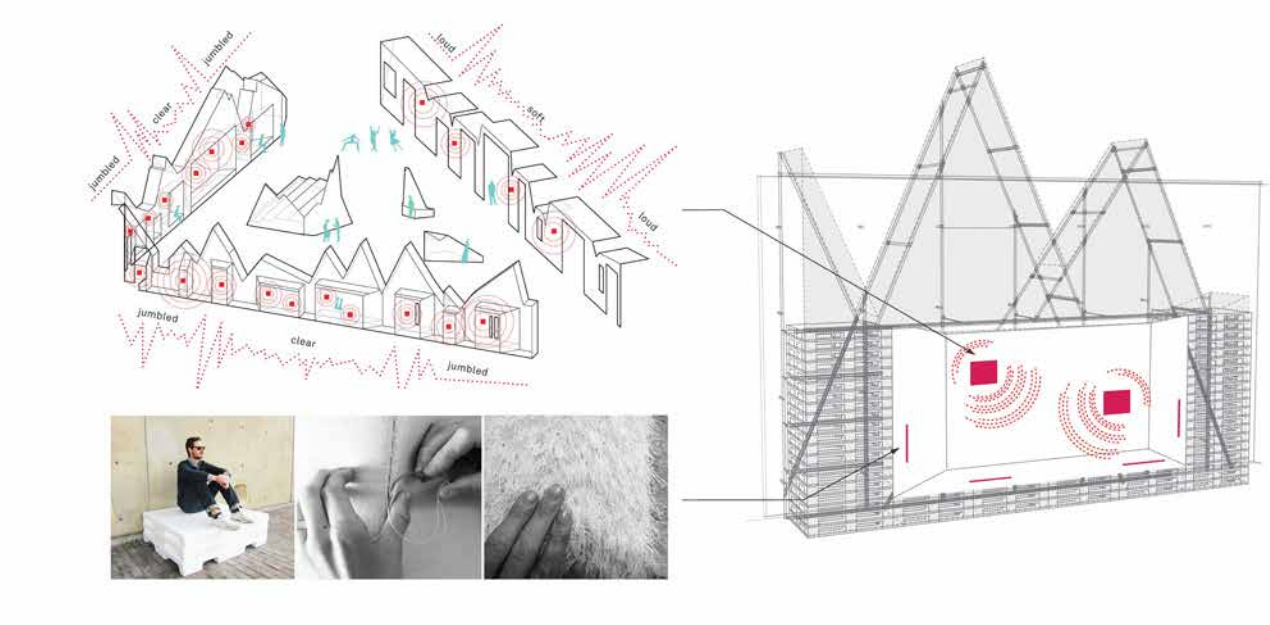
The project's white set pieces blur both depth and scale, creating an environment in which visitors feel like objects and subjects simultaneously, as though they are inhabiting a drawing or paper model. The project employs both community-based and material-based approaches to sustainability, the former of which draws attention and connections between the ambient interactive sound environment and an existing online community.

The community approach exposes local peer resources through interaction and translates the labor involved in building into ongoing bartered exchanges. Using OurGoods.org, community members provide labor to construct the project in exchange for either materials when it is disassembled or services from the design team. Interactions continue on OurGoods.org, a creative bartering community, through programming and installation graphics.

The earlier texting experiments in the Sibylline TXT and Spatial ConTXTs inform the White Noise proposal. While the earlier projects test issues of participation, scaling, atemporality and superimposition across an urban field, White Noise collapses these issues onto a central interactive space and event. The tactile surface and set-like forms coordinate people, resources, and exchanges in situ and then expand these exchanges to a future transaction beyond the time and walls of the installation.

In this third model, with a more determinate, bounded, urban site and a more defined participant audience, the modes and methods of proposed technology use continue to employ tactics of appropriation and repurposing, but in a more complex relationship. This complexity and the demographic make-up invite the use of smartphones in this setting.[6] The sensors and software design proposed to control the sound installation were created by the consulting engineers, and

Figure 3: SyrAsks projection event. credit: student Joann Lee in ARC 500 SP'11 course at Syracuse University.



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rely on the sound input of participants via smartphone. Light physical and ambient engagement focuses the participants' attention and is then used to suggest further engagement. In this format, the smartphone becomes key as the way a participant might next explore the possibilities of local creative community bartering by signing up for OurGoods.org. In the first level of engagement, White Noise maintains the "in between" nature of the Sibylline TXT by creating an "other" state within the strategic space of the institution. In the second level of engagement the model shifts slightly to invite a separate strategic model, housed in an online space, and grafts this experience tactically to the existing strategic Iinstitutional space. It is in this moment that this body of work suggests a third model between de Certeau's concept of the strategy and the tactic. By creating a coexistence between the geographical space of the institutional installation and the online space of the bartering community, White Noise posits that a doubling occurs in which one strategy is able to invade the other strategy, allowing the participant to tactically navigate not "in between" but in both, simultaneously. In the case of this project, the simultaneity becomes possible when the design-project is able to incorporate existing online social-media platforms rather than attempt to invent alongside them. Our work as architects in this example project is able to access two distinct communities (one physical, one digital) through the design work and to begin to use each to create a third type of urban space. If we extend the notion of repurposing to piggybacking, then this may serve as a potent model in future projects.

PARTICIPATION AND DATA USE

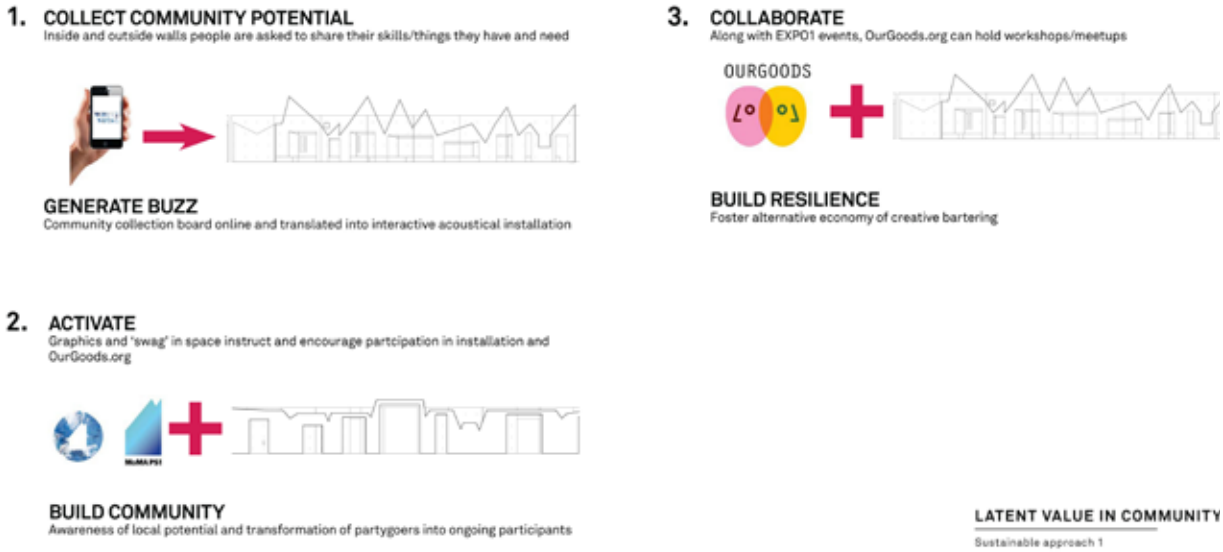
Put simply, the projects presented here, in order of discussion, can be reduced to three types of experience through participation: the first type invites the participation of the individual across the city in a mutable superimposed narrative; the second encourages participation through collective urban imagining from individuals at communal locations; and the third heightens participation by connecting ambient environment to an ongoing online community.

Figure 4: Demonstration of individual set pieces with embedded sensors and suggestion of changes to ambient environment based on participant use. credit: French 2D (author + partner).

Data collection in each of these participatory models operates differently. Data collection for the Sibylline TXT was immediate and changed the distribution of

story pieces in mid project. The project had 87 unique participants. As numbers were reviewed, certain sites were more popular than others, as a result we could alter distribution of story pieces to encourage exploration in other sites to pursue more story threads. Additionally, this was a form of crowd sourced mapping, and urban design work could easily use this kind of research to discover and increase spaces of interest in the city.

In the case of the Spatial ConTXTs pedagogical model, the data collection included community opinions, feelings, and musings. This is of great value to students at the beginning stages of urban and architectural design thinking. The models they created were grounded in the urban context as the initial prompt for their questioning. There were 162 participants in this project and student insights about the city were much stronger once these participants' texts were read and processed.



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Data Collection in the proposed White Noise is twofold. Sound input collection would serve as a trace of participant engagement (itself a form of situated research) while the possibilities for the trace of future exchanges on OurGoods.org would be particular to this site's own research and understanding of the possibilities of paring events and sites with their online community. Typically 5,000 people attend the Saturday PS1 Warm-Up Party events and there are thousands of summer visitors over four months. The design proposal anticipates that even with a modest fraction of participation, large data collection becomes possible in the more controlled event model suggested here.

SITUATION AND PROJECTION

Of importance to these three projects is the notion that forays into mobile communication technologies need not displace architectural interest to an "outside" mode, but instead reinforce and expand the possibilities for spaces of intervention. Each project reintroduces the specialized knowledge of spatial thinking in the urban context and suggests possible alternative and more nuanced approaches to integrated technologies. In fact the projects work most fluidly when they assemble existing technologies in a productive model of bricolage to repurpose and create new forms of design.[7]

Figure 5: Explanatory diagram of sound and exchange input and output. credit:French 2D (author + partner).

In dealing with fiction, fantasy and exchange, the projects are all assembled from multiple media. At times the same information is transposed from one medium to the next, and at other times each medium contains a differing or competing narrative. In Narrative Across Media, Marie-Laure Ryan describes three positions relative to the viability of various media to translate narrative. The first states that "Narrative is an exclusively verbal phenomenon;" the second that "The study of narrative across media is only feasible if one can transfer the parameters of verbal narration to other media;" and the third that,

> [n]arrative is a medium-independent phenomenon, and, though no medium is better suited than language to make explicit the logical structure of narrative, it is possible to study narrative in its nonverbal manifestation~ without applying the communicative model of verbal narration.[8]

If, as the majority of the essays in the Ryan's publication argue, the third position is correct, then each of the projects presented herein can be understood as presenting and provoking multiple narratives both through their more literal text as well as (and as equally) through the material organizations of the urban context, the physical installation and the ephemeral environment. This orientation reveals a number of tools and materials to the architectural and urban designer that expand the purview of her profession and extents of her agency.

ENDNOTES

1. See Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life (Berkely: University of California Press, 1984) for a discussion of "making do," 29-42.
2. P. Virgili Maronis, Trans. Robert Fitzgerald The Aeneid. (New York: Vintage Classics Edition, 1990.
3. Each project necessitates a discussion of access, demographics and use relative to the larger geography and individual participant use. See Pew report - http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2009/12-Wireless-Internet-Use.aspx April 2009 survey about accessing internet on handheld http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2009/12-Wireless-Internet-Use/4-Internet-access-on-the-handheld/1-Overview.aspx and 2010 report that only 7% of Americans used location based tech http://gigaom.com/2010/11/04/will-location-based-services-ever-go-mainstream/.
4. Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life (Berkely: University of California Press, 1984) for a discussion of "making do," 30.
5. For marginal increases in relevant demographic smartphone use see Pew numbers 2010-2011 regarding income and smartphone ownership http://www.pewinternet.org/~/media/Files/Reports/2011/PIP_Smartphones.pdf and see Syracuse median income 2011 http://www.city-data.com/city/Syracuse-New-York.html . For research regarding the popular use of texting in relevant Syracuse demographics in 2010 see http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Cell-Phones-and-American-Adults.aspx.
6. For increased use of smartphones in relevant demographics see Pew numbers about 2012 smartphone use http://pewinternet.org/Commentary/2012/February/Pew-Internet-Mobile.aspx.
7. See Claude Lévi-Strauss, The Savage Mind (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1966).
8. See Marie-Laure Ryan, Introduction to Narrative Across Media: The Languages of Storytelling (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2004): 15.