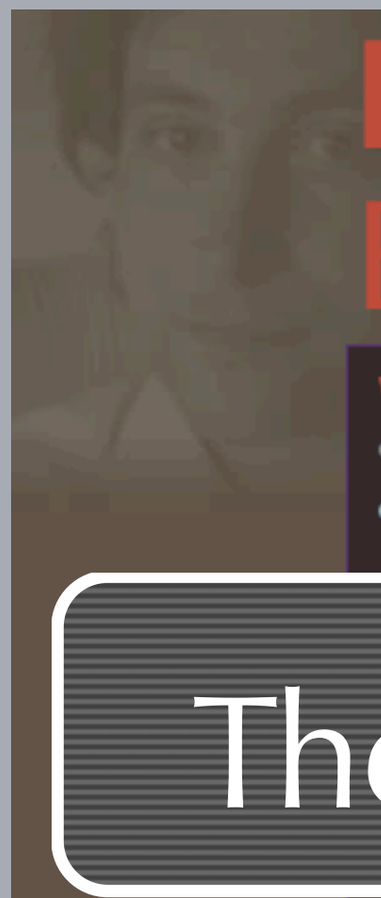


The Social Physics of Weblogs

Mark Bernstein
Eastgate Systems

Social Physics

PEOPLE	infinite variety	infinite complexity
NETWORKS	the link ecology	emergent phenomena
SOCIETY	political transformation	dynamic & ubiquitous

Social Physics

history	statistics	ethnography
criticism	simulation	economics
literary theory	psychology	design & engineering

Eastgate

fine hypertext and hypertext tools
since 1982

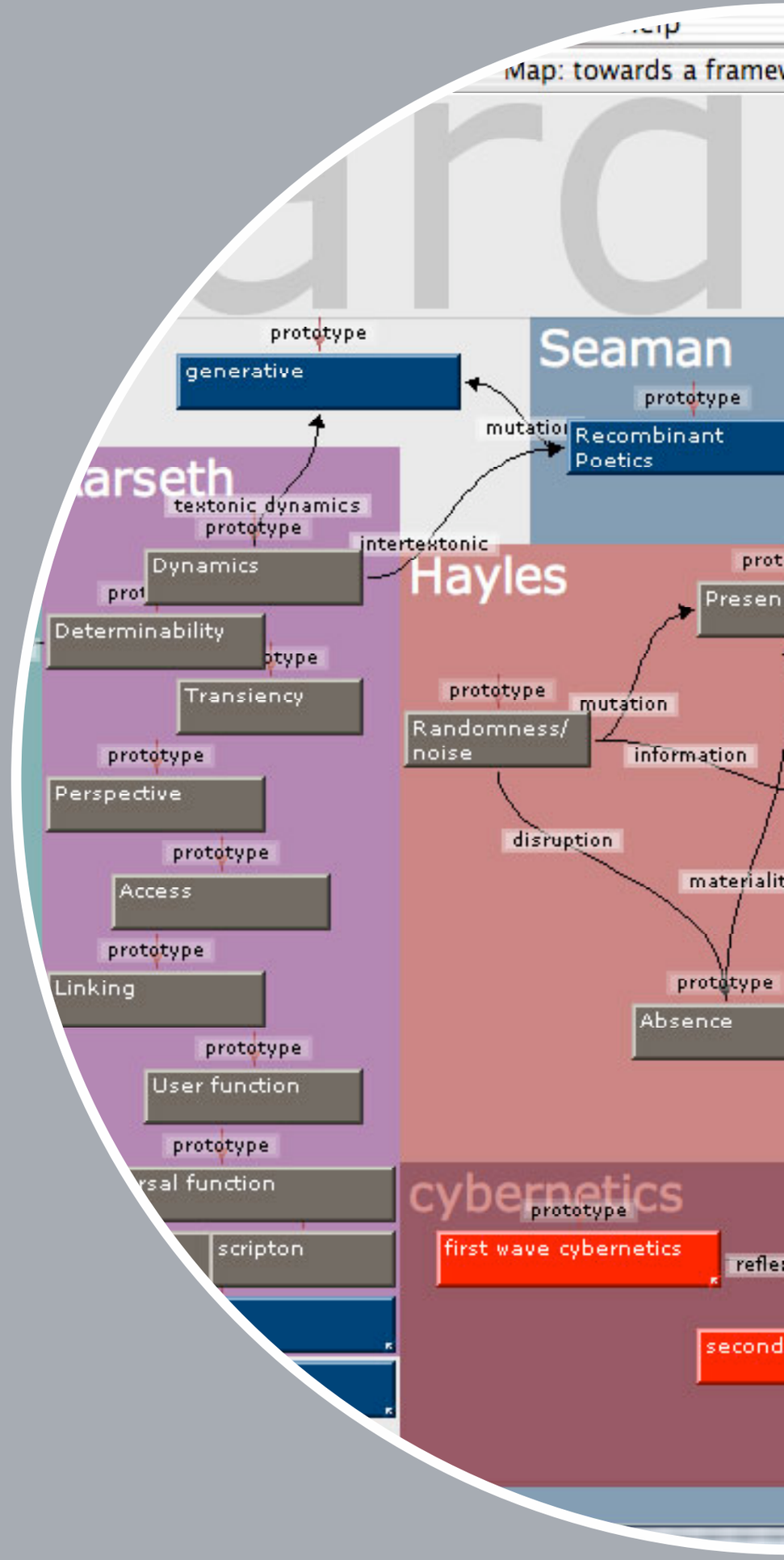
research, funded by customers
not governments

Tinderbox

Making, analyzing, and sharing notes

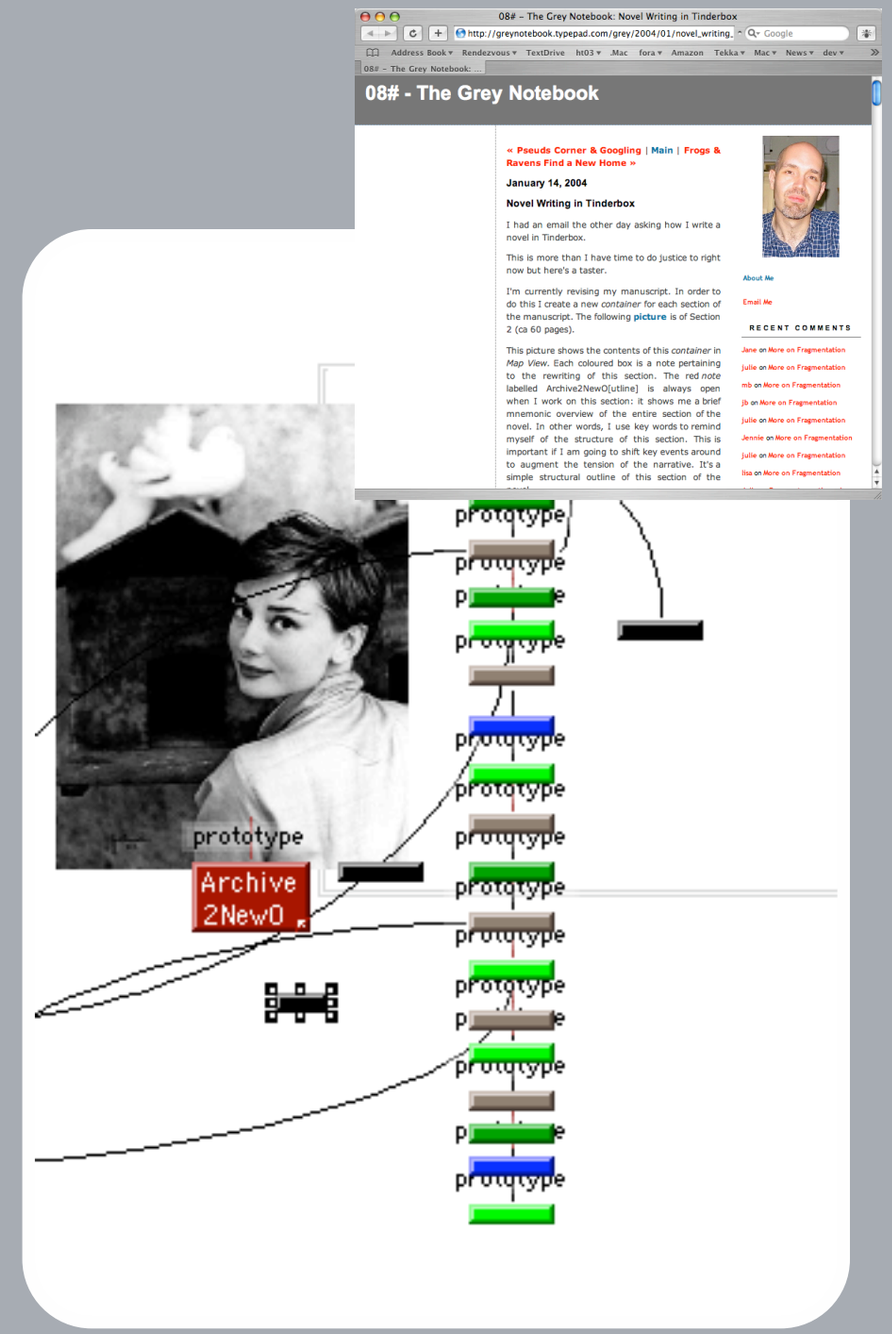
Sharing through weblogs

small components
+ big ideas
= complex pages, sites



What Weblogs Want

- To share information:
  per aspera ad astra
- Readers: the new soapbox and union hall
- Money: *there is nothing outside the economy*
- Friends: sharing with people we care about



Jon Buscal, Tinderbox workspace for a new novel, and weblog snapshot, http://greynotebook.typepad.com/

Writing for Mother

- It's fine to write a weblog that only a few people read.

- Is your mother the only person who reads your weblog? *It's good to keep in touch with your mother!*

- The natural audience for many important ideas is small.

Ten Tips

www.aListApart.com/stories/writeliving/

Write for a reason

Write often

Write tight

Make good friends

Find good enemies

Let the story unfold

Stand up, speak out

Be sexy

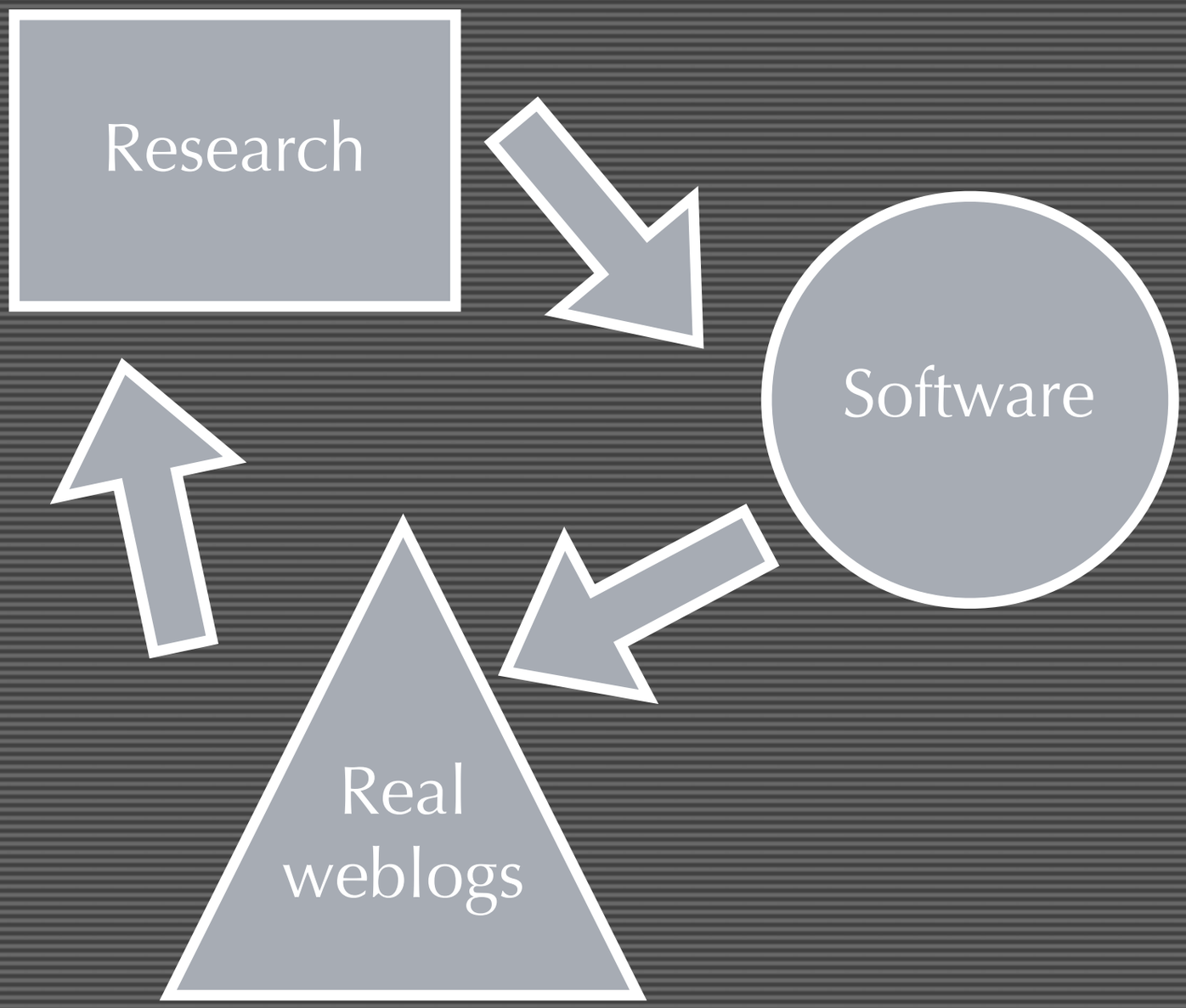
Use your archives

Relax!

Research!

- Thus far, much weblog research has been trying to convince the academy that weblogs matter.

- Why not conduct research that matters to weblogs?


Research
Software
Real
weblogs

Software

Research can matter

- Small vendors
- Lots of weblog writers (and growth)
- Young and flexible code

- Ask the right questions
- Use appropriate methods
- Get the right answer

It doesn't matter whether it gets your name in the newspaper

bftv

Daily Writing

- Does blogging change writers?
- What changes do we observe?
- Professionals?
- Aspiring writers?
- Students?

Don’t reach for the obvious

- Take 18 students who registered for your remedial writing class
- Divide into “weblogs” and “paper“ groups
- Compare grades at the end of the year

Hawthorne Effect ensures the “right” winner • Statistical significance is unlikely • Political pressure to control for age, gender, ethnicity, cognitive style makes statistical significance even less likely • Only writing teachers care

Lots of interesting approaches

- Close reading of long-term weblogs. Has Dave Winer become a better writer? How has he changed? How about Justin Hall? Meg Hourihan? Rebecca Blood?
- How do observables (vocabulary size, range of tenses and structures, dependence on adjectives) vary between old and new weblogs?
- Are these effects stronger, or weaker, in writers with experience?
- Does update frequency change the rate of weblog abandonment?

How would this change software?

- Daily writing => habit => personal tools
- Client-side architectures: ideal for habits
- Server-side architectures: ideal for spontaneity

How would this change software?

- Daily writing amortizes learning over a long time
  - favors powerful, adaptable tools
- Spontaneous writing requires improvised tools
  - constant learning (every café is different)
  - favors simple, consistent tools

Writing Well

- Does better writing make a better weblog?

What is success?

- Not abandoned *(the writer therefore finds it successful)*
  - but what about the insane, deluded, compulsive?
- Large, growing audience (page rank)
  - hot topics, sex, blogrolls, the A-list. And what about writing for Mother? For other xenobiologists?
- Influence (elections, sales, memes)
  - post hoc, propter hoc

How would this change software?

- Today, usability is easy to measure
  - but it privileges the novice
- The more we know about the target, the better our aim
  - does graphic design matter?
  - does it help to revise?
  - does it help to have an editor?

Economics

- What do weblogs cost?
- What do weblogs earn?

Fast Food Stands
Via Biberatica, Rome

CTURE

- People believe weblogs cost very little
- Viable, ongoing weblogs cost ~ €1,000/yr.
- Major, high-visibility weblogs cost ~ €50,000/yr.
- Labor is the main cost

CONJE

- Many weblogs must earn at least €50,000/yr

but few (if any) weblogs earn this in ad revenue

Can this be right?

- Lots of people write books (40,000/yr in English alone)
- Book publishing is not a very attractive investment
- ....even though product costs (royalties) are very low
- This has been true for generations
- Why? Indirect compensation: visibility, reputation

How would this change software?

Understanding the weblog economy would lead to:

- Rational development investment
- Rational pricing
- Affordances to minimize costs
- Features to facilitate income (in expected form)

Flame Wars

- ✓ USENET
- ✓ Slashdot
- ✓ Are weblogs the next to go?

We Need Ethnography

- Aftermath and costs of flame wars
- Are wars ever avoided or settled? How?
- Comments and trackbacks: harmful?
  - Invite people to say intolerable things in your space
  - Encourage haste, discourage reflection
  - Or is this an illusion?

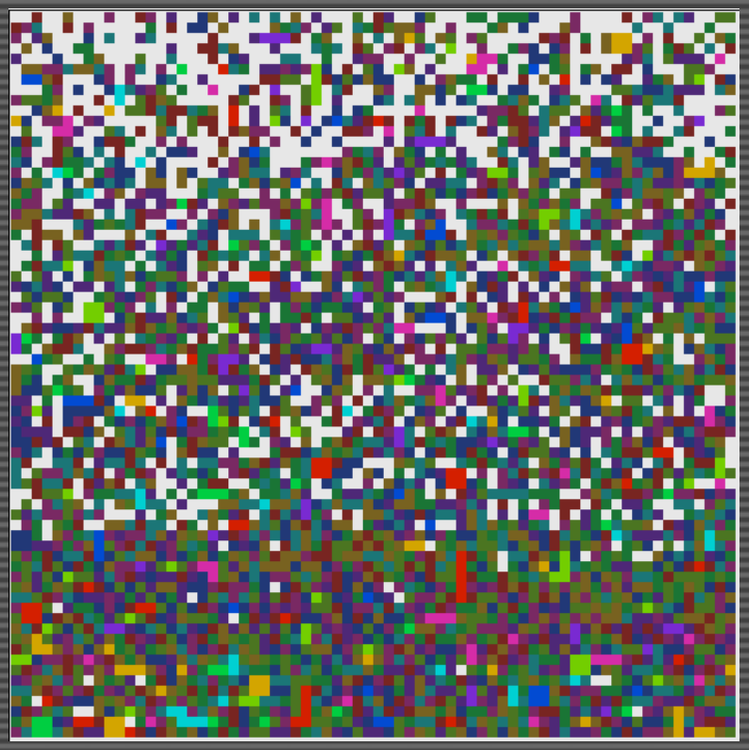
How would this change software?

- Drop comments and trackbacks?
- Social engineering: rules for civility
- Action/reaction: make moderation acceptable and feasible
- Spatial rhetorics: get rid of threads, separate spaces

Blogrolls

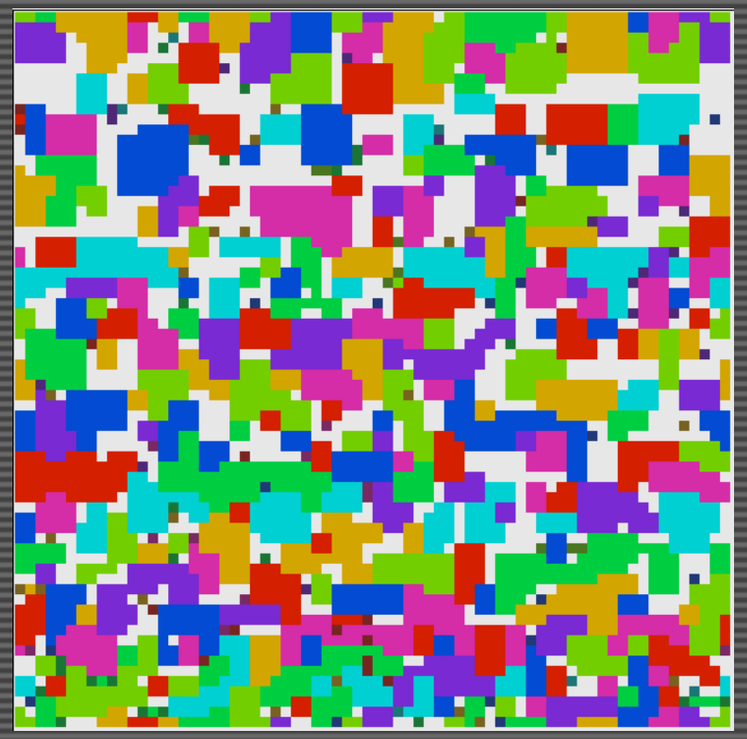
- Making friends
- Building networks
- Sharing flow

ALife Simulations



2 days

2 weeks



2 months

Each color is a “topic”; neighbors are favorite sites. Weblogs move (changing their blogrolls) until they have several neighbors with a shared topic. Do we get islands (e.g. “weblogs are for right-wing politics”)? Not here...

From Community To Broadcast?

Not yet!

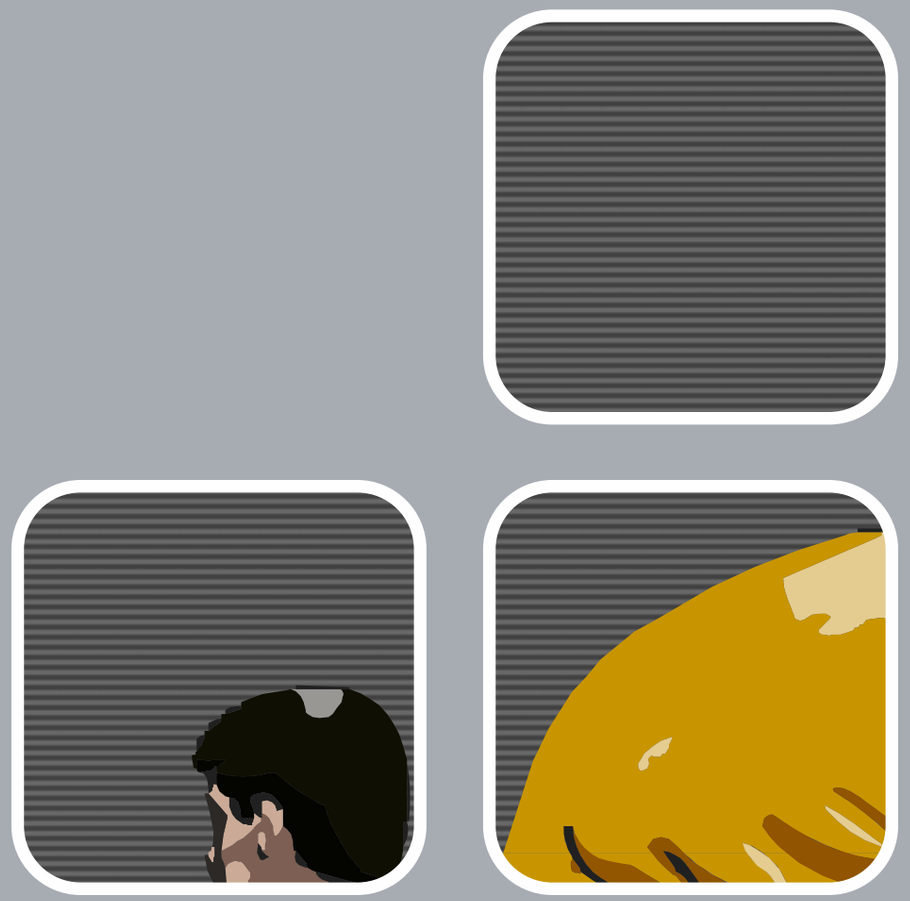
- Google generates more traffic than anyone else, but...
  - ...everyone else (combined) generates more than Google
- The Power Law is only vicious when the rich become so rich that they overwhelm the collective influence of the poor
- Blogrolls, advertising, and link policies determine whether the blogosphere collapses to broadcast, or not

How would this change software?

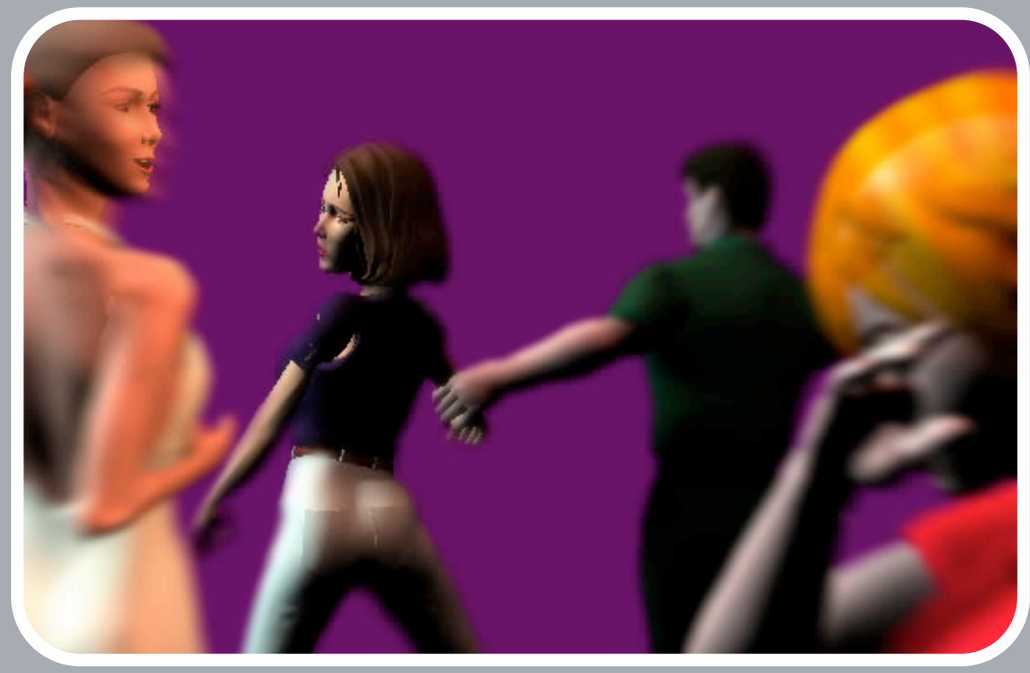
- We'd know how important link policies are
- We'd facilitate good linking (sunset policies on blogrolls)
- We'd discourage bad linking
- We'd know what to measure

Fiction and authenticity

The metaphysics of weblogs



Fictions



THE TROJAN KIDS (Card Shark and Thespis, Hypertext ‘01)

- Written as weblogs
- Labelled as fictions
- Epistolary fiction is not without precedent

Do we know? Isabel of aflightrisk.com asked me to say Hi to all of you, and to Erich Groeger at the Bank Julius Baer. But I might get in trouble if I did...

Fictions

But, of course, the way we present ourselves is a fiction

Mark
ernstein

"We don't have to worry ab
making it interesting; all we have
worry about is getting rid of the pi
-- David Mamet, *On Directing F*

styles: neoclassical | modern | nouv

gate Systems, Inc.

x.

Hypertext Kitchen |
ole | Weblog Kitchen |

ve for the Straight
winter.

Spring : Winter
Spring : Winter
Spring : Winter
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e | technocrit | food |
n Tips | epigrams |

ox

xt Theory

en Tips For Writing The Living Web
(Italian | Czech)

Tom and Bequi: The web journal that brought down the wall

eNarrative Everywhere

Patterns of Hypertext

Latest Books: Queer Eye for the Straight Guy. In The Bleak Midwinter.

A Year Ago : Fast City

In A List Apart: Writing The Living Web. (also in Italian and Czech)

Recent research papers: Collage, Composites, Construction (pdf); Car
Shark & Thespis: Exotic Tools for Hypertext Narrative (talk) (pdf);
Storyspace I (pdf)

24 Jun 2004

Smoothie Metaphysics

Dylan Kinnett has two blogs. The official blog describes hi
work at Eastgate. The unofficial blog describes his work a
Eastgate. Are the two blogs identical? *Of course not.* Are
they fictions?

I've also received email from people who disagree with me
on the subject of *a flight risk*. I wrote that "I'm not sure
she's real, precisely, in the sense that you and I are real",
and several (unreal) people sent email asserting that they
weren't real. Well, really, what can you say?

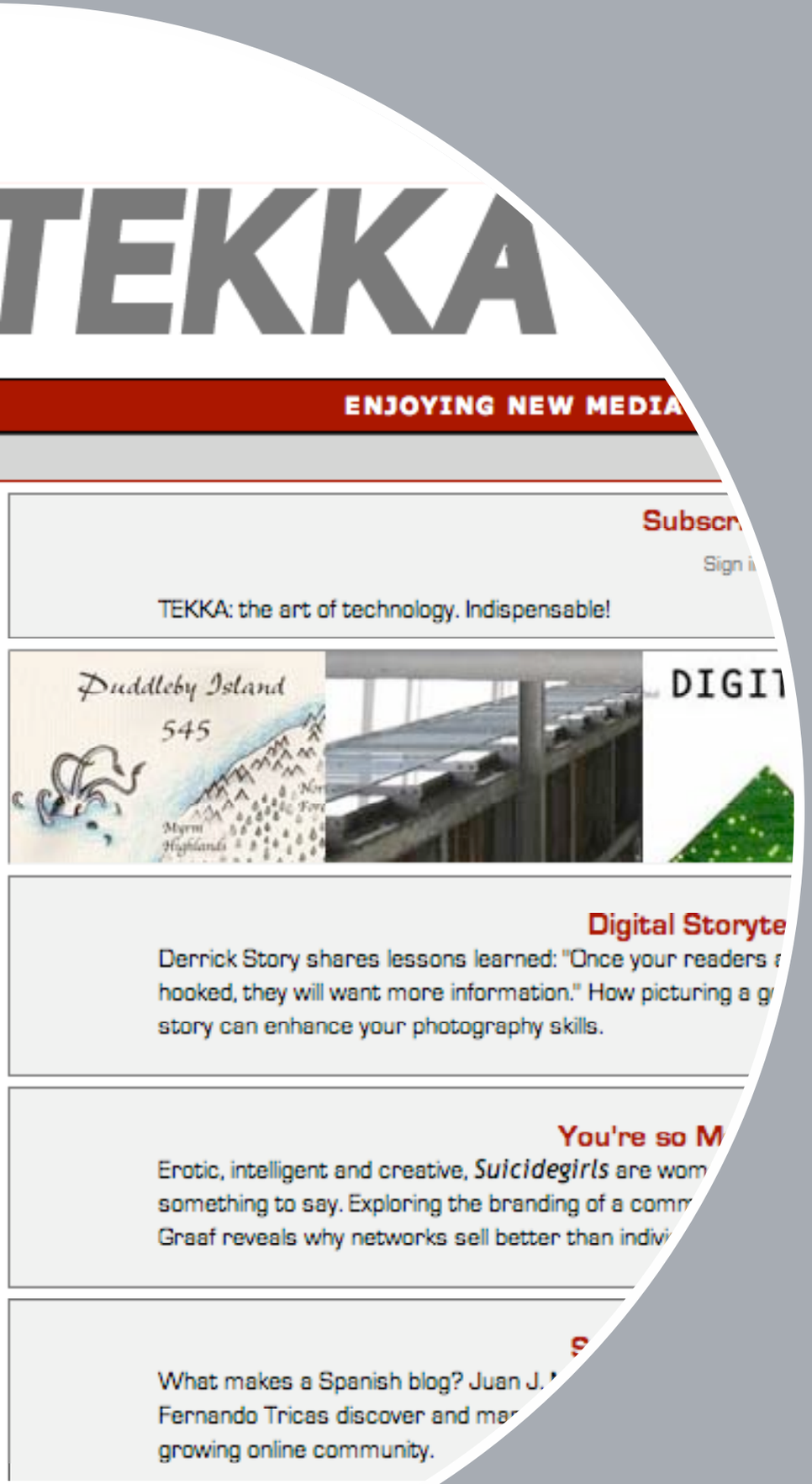
24 Jun 2004

Fictions

Suppose you decide to embark on a voyage,because (among other things) it will be interesting on your weblog and you'll get great pictures?

THERE IS NO NARRATIVE HERE

Suppose you decide to start a love affair, because (among other things) it will be interesting on your weblog and you'll get great pictures?



TEKKALogue

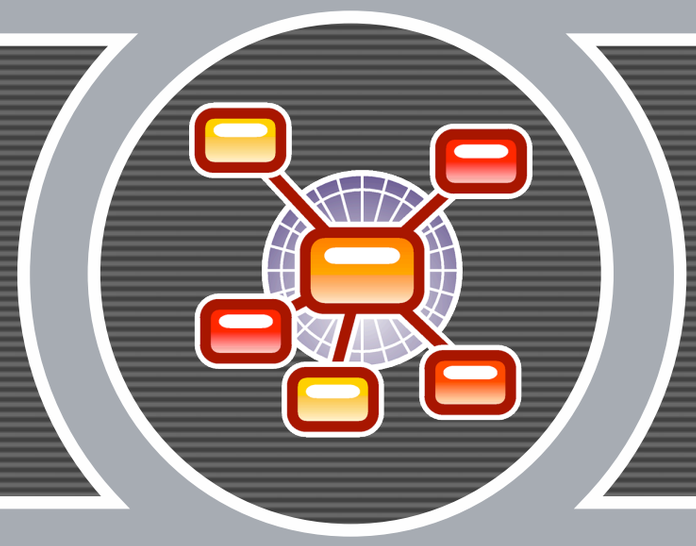
- A news site for our new media magazine.
- News comes from correspondents.
- News appears in the voice of fictional, interesting characters.
- More fun. No flames.

New entries unfold forward; archives unfold backward. How do we manage fiction that will be seen in two directions?

FICTION

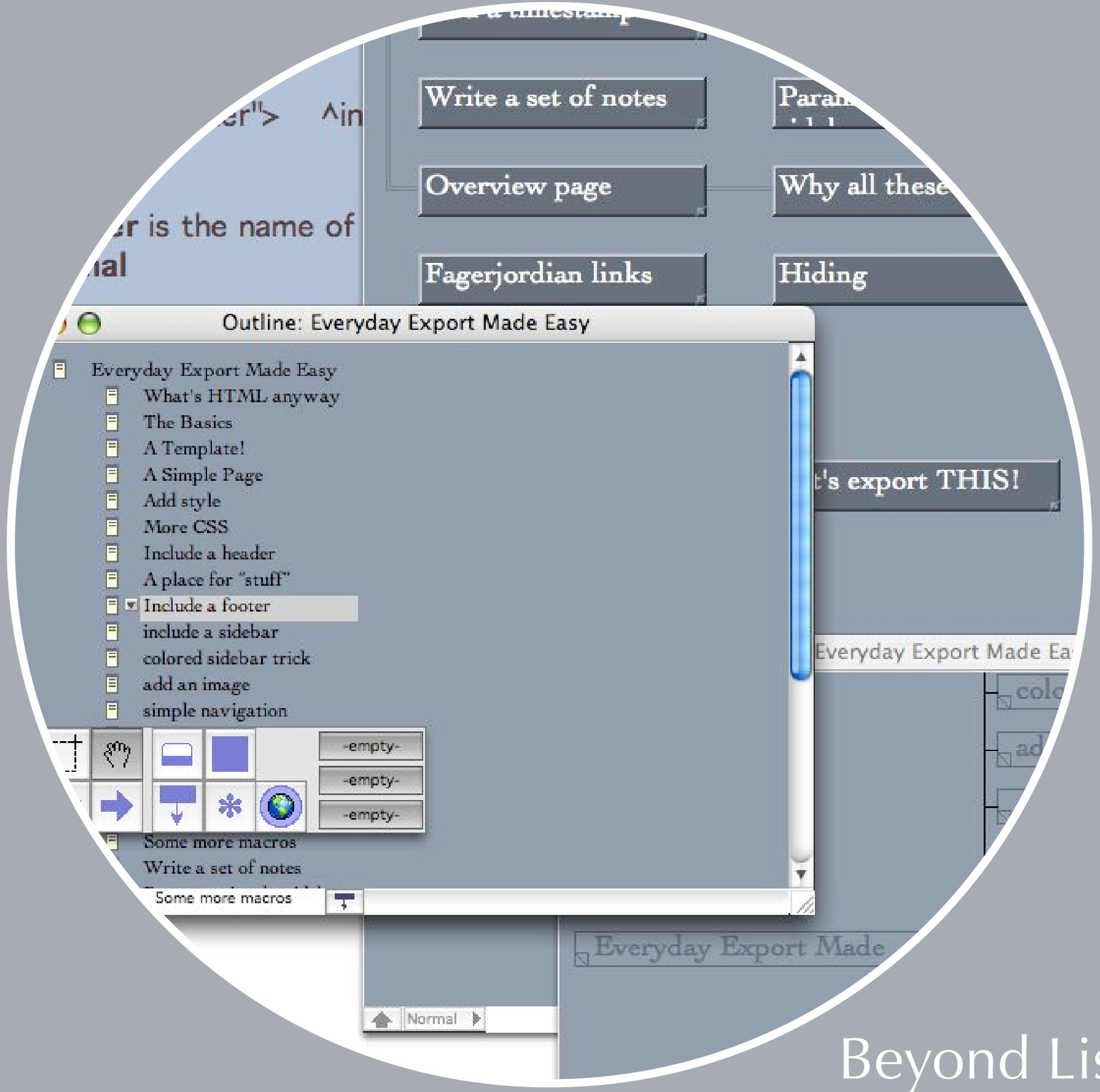
- We need to think this through
- It's not going to be simple

Patterns of Hypertext



Fagerjordian weblogs

Learning to use our archives

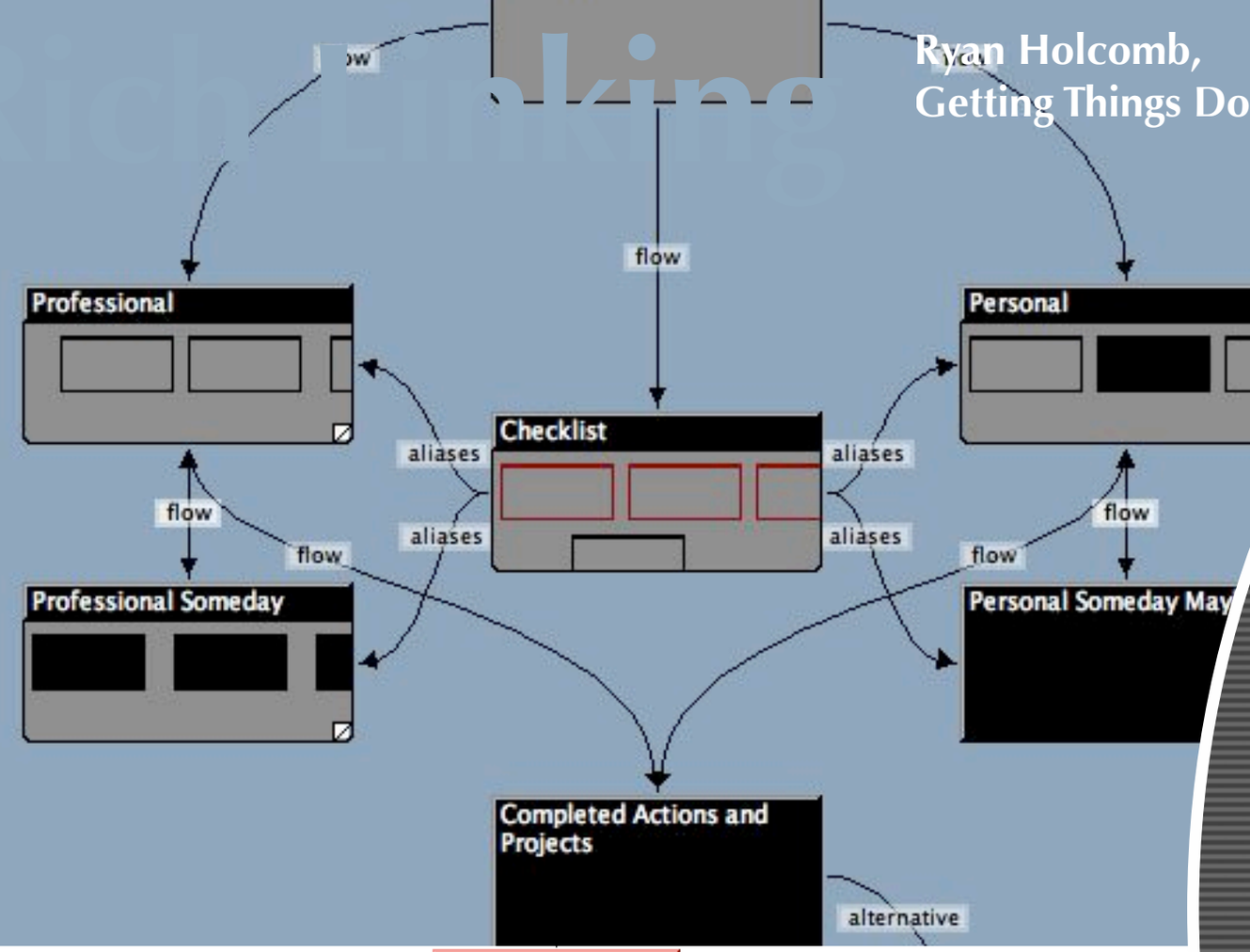


Smart Container

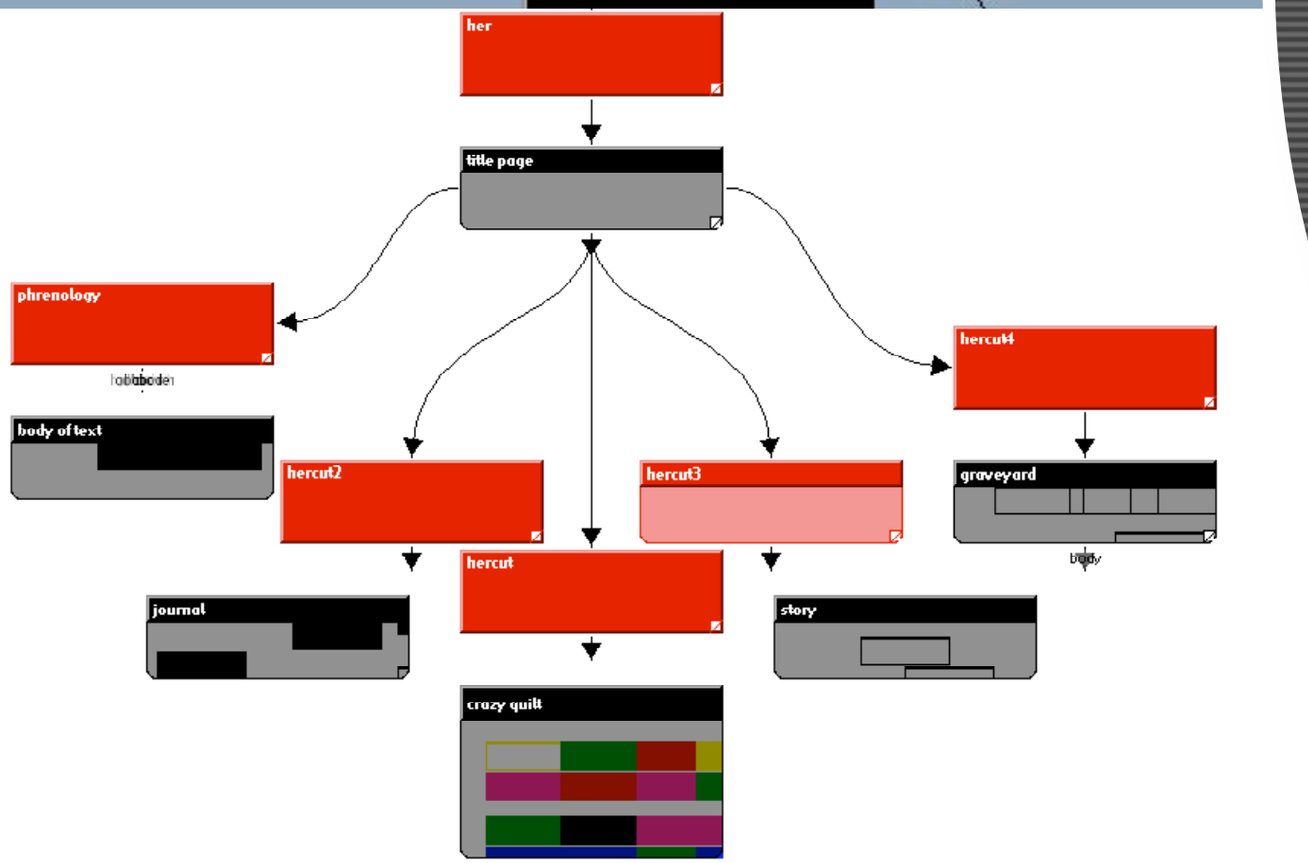
Agent

Syndication

Beyond Lists and Categories



Ryan Holcomb,
Getting Things Done Workbook



Shelley Jackson, Patchwork Girl

- The richer our categories, the more useful our archives will become.
- The more specific and intelligent our internal links, the more useful our archives will stay.
- Agents: categories plus automatic assignment.

Seven Topics

1. What is the impact of daily writing?
2. What is the impact of writing well?
3. What are the economics of weblogs?
4. How can we control flames and trolls?
5. How do blogrolls and link policies shape the blogosphere?
6. What is fiction? How shall we approach it?
7. How shall we gain value from archives?

Thanks!

- Tinderbox: http://www.eastgate.com/Tinderbox/
- Eastgate — Serious Hypertext: http://www.eastgate.com/
- My weblog: http://www.markBernstein.org
- TEKKA Enjoying New Media • Software Aesthetics

  http://www.tekka.net/