Learning Trails

By Leo Shaw

As a kid, I used to watch my brother play a multiplayer computer game called Escape Velocity. He would start off as the captain of a lowly space shuttle, slowly exploring the galaxy by scooting between star systems and trading space trinkets. The best part of the whole experience was EV's interstellar trip planner. In this future from the early days of the Internet, you could only make a space-time jump by carefully plotting out each "hyperlink" in your route across the galactic map.

Escape Velocity popped back into my head one day in the Catskills this summer while I was hiking up Slide Mountain with a friend. As we made our way toward the summit, we encountered a handful of different boundaries and trail systems. The round plastic trail blazes recalled the color-coded circles marking friendly or hostile planets: the yellow Phoenicia-East Branch Trail led us to the blue Curtis-Ormsbee Trail, and finally to the red Wittenberg-Slide-Cornell trail, which we followed up and over the three peaks of our hike. We had granite scrambles for our asteroid fields and yellow wildflowers for alien life forms.

There was something comforting in the intuitive structure of our walk in the woods, and in the more distant map of a fantasy universe. The round trail markers and interstellar dots suggested a continuous process of self-orientation that feels impossible in the context of permanently scrolling feeds, overflowing inboxes, and ignored texts. I came off the mountain wondering what rituals I might use to appraise the information flowing constantly inward from the world around me – not in order to label or categorize, but simply to get my bearings.

How should I reflect on the tweets that actually teach me something? How do people make connections between books they read months apart? What does it look like to externalize one's learning for the purpose of maintaining both momentum and sanity? Until we achieve a more humane information ecology, it will require intentional strategies to replace the consumption

of content with behavior that feels like learning. To borrow Studs Terkel's phrasing, we need to shape our information diet into "a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying."

Most trails are not planned, but formed gradually through the habits of individuals and groups. So it goes with modes of learning on the web.

Tom Critchlow wrote a post on his blog this summer about blogchains, an idea that Venkatesh Rao coined[2] to describe his writing on Ribbonfarm. The concept labels his habit of gradually developing a line of thinking through a series of short, sequential blog posts. In Venkatesh's case this is a way of bringing fuzzy concepts, like "domestic cozy,"[2] into focus. It may start off in one direction and then meander in another. It may even have multiple authors. It is a technique of loosely crystallizing a train of thought – solid enough to get one's head around, but ephemeral enough to leave open many possible directions of travel.

Tom has been organizing some of his writing into blogchains, too. These have even crossed from one person's blog to another, in an echo of the webrings that populated an earlier internet. I like this idea partly because it's not a new tool or feature. It's simply an invitation to view your ideas in a certain way. It's a frame that imposes structure in one sense so that you can preserve openness in another.

If a blogchain is a loose trail of ideas expressed, a reading list can be the inverse. An Are.na channel can be a kind of multimedia reading list or "playlist for ideas,"[3] which reflects what someone is synthesizing from the contents. But you don't have to use Are.na to get this effect. Édouard Urcades describes[4] the process more generally as building "reading networks."

> While texts often build and maintain an internal and pre-set collection of references … it's a far more personal practice to form one's own links in an inter-textual manner. I'd like to think that building your own reading networks can foster a method of building personal abstractions, building personal relevance to any given topic, and improving the methods by which you consume others' ideas and structures.

I especially like how Édouard's writing rhymes with the way Octavia Butler once described[5] her reading style:

> "I generally have four or five books open around the house–I live alone; I can do this–and they are not books on the same subject.

They don't relate to each other in any particular way, and the ideas they present bounce off one another. And I like this effect. I also listen to audio-books, and I'll go out for my morning walk with tapes from two very different audio-books, and let those ideas bounce off each other, simmer, reproduce in some odd way, so that I come up with ideas that I might not have come up with if I had simply stuck to one book until I was done with it and then gone and picked up another. So, I guess, in that way, I'm using a kind of primitive hypertext."

Though Butler invokes the logic of networked computing, she describes an approach that works across and apart from specific media. She is less concerned with the structure of information than she is with navigating it in a way that is both improvisational and directed. Just like in Escape Velocity, it takes a certain combination of intention, orientation, and pacing to learn in a hypertextual way.

Put another way, we might say that a trail is different from a map. Maps can be instrumentalized in systematic ways, as when a platform creates and manipulates a social graph using algorithms. But a trail is traveled on the ground, in real time, and constrained by the spontaneity of movement. This unfolding-over-time is what I like best about the idea of a trail: the imminence of thought taking concrete shape.

In other words: "the road is made by walking." Or, as Laurel Schwulst writes[6]:

"Snails (and other gastropods like slugs) excrete slime. They make this slime to move, so that their bodies don't lose moisture to the rugged terrain beneath them. This slime is beautiful because it glimmers. It's also beautiful because it's a map of time recently spent by the snail. Where is the snail now? And where was it going in the first place?"

Another thing I like about the trail is its negotiation with possibility. When you make a trail you are charting a small path, moment by moment, through an infinitude as broad and deep as the sea of "content." You step here and not there. Even following an established trail means hewing to this original concession, which if you think about it, is a collective decision about how to spend our time.

Given the sheer volume of content that fills digital spaces, we might think about attention using metaphors of environmental stewardship: building trails, remediating damaged landscapes, prescribing burns, packing out our trash.

Jenny Odell's book *How to Do Nothing* makes a powerful argument not only for this way of thinking, but for a continuum of care that encompasses our physical "bioregions" as well as our experience of the web. The app *Flight Simulator*[7] (an "ode to airplane mode" which Laurel created with Dan Brewster) is another tool for reorienting one's self to the intentional use of both time and space. It registers a poetic behavioral trail by tracking the user's virtual position, destination, and travel time. Not unlike the snail's slime, it is a "map of time recently spent" in conversation, focused activity, or any other fulsome exercise of attention.

Craig Mod's practice of walking, and the various experiments he's published from the trail, are even more literal examples. This spring, he ran an experiment where he texted one image per day to everyone who signed up – and then published a single book[8] of their SMS responses.

Mod is committed to the idea of walking because it's such an accessible pattern of everyday life:

> By even just using the word "hike," folks drop off: Not young enough, not strong enough, not ready for the bugs. You can trick a person into hiking by calling it a walk. I've done so many times. And "walk" denotes a thing to be easily grabbed. A walk is there to be taken.

If I'm going to build more rewarding learning habits, or try to trace the thread of an idea to the exclusion of all the other noise in my head, I'd like to follow a process as simple and emergent as that. To walk and notice and think – and put the pieces together along the way.

[1]   https://www.ribbonfarm.com/2019/03/21/constructions-in-magical-thinking
[2]   https://www.ribbonfarm.com/series/domestic-cozy
[3]   https://www.are.na/block/1555253
[4]   https://urcad.es/writing/knowledge-networks
[5]   http://web.mit.edu/m-i-t/science_fiction/transcripts/butler_delany_index.html
[6]   https://thecreativeindependent.com/notes/spiral
[7]   https://flightsimulator.soft.works
[8]   https://craigmod.com/essays/sms_publishing