

Rhizomes and Non-linear Pathways:
New Approaches to Narrative in the
Competitive Hobbyist Documentary

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.....David Shaerf

Abstract

This PhD study will serve to question and explore questions and methods of narratology (more specifically narrative structure) within the construct of the documentary filmmaking process. The arguments that follow in the written section of this thesis will serve as a text that allows a synthesis between my practical work in the documentary film, *The Love for the Game* (2010), and the underlying narratological theories posited in this PhD submission.

Ultimately, this thesis' aim is to contribute to and expand upon theories of narrative structure within documentary film; a largely underdeveloped area within documentary theory. More specifically, the thesis is inspecting the genre of documentary which I am calling *competitive hobbyist* films: a group of films that has recently emerged within the documentary field of filmmaking which closely inspect niche interest groups within a competitive environment.

The documentary titled *The Love for the Game* (2010), then, will document the community that surrounds the game of Backgammon (predominantly in the United States). Both the film and supporting text will look at new approaches to documentary practice within the *competitive hobbyist* genre. More specifically, an inspection of the film's narrative structure serves to expand upon the *competitive hobbyist* genre and examine how the films within this genre are approached from a narratological perspective.

I will conclude by illustrating how my research, looking specifically at alternative narrative structures, deploying non-linear, *Rhizomatic* forms, is relevant, not only to narrative fiction films, but also very much within documentary film. Moreover, I will illustrate how these non-linear forms have affected the way documentary filmmakers may approach the genre of competitive hobbyist documentaries.

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Root Systems:

Discussions of a Rhizomatic Narrative in Documentary Filmmaking

Rationale

Project Origins

“Practice without theory is empty and theory without practice, blind” (Fair 2010)

The feature length documentary *The Love for the Game* represents a culmination of my PhD research with a focus on narratological structures in narrative-based film. It is a film that attempts to look at new approaches to narrative structure within the documentary form specifically. The film is directly linked with my previous PhD research into varying narratological structures. These narrative structures have been implemented by filmmakers creating innovative film narratives in opposition to what is broadly referred to as Classical Narrative structure. The alternative narrative structures that I had been inspecting were in opposition to discourses outlined predominantly by film historian David Bordwell (Bordwell, Staiger, Thompson 1985) and further augmented by Kristin Thompson (Thompson 1999) and later reconfirmed by Murphy (2007) and Martin-Jones (2006).

Before going into detail concerning the methodologies and decisions made within the filmmaking process, it is important to give this thesis something of a preface regarding where my research process began. Moreover, we must look at the research path and procedure that would ultimately lead to the conclusive decision that the best possible way to present my research was through practice: more specifically through a filmic narrative informed and shaped by the theoretical inquiry and methodology that had hitherto formed the basis of my doctoral research.

As already mentioned, this doctoral thesis began as an inspection of narrative-based films (that is to say, fiction films) whose narrative form deviated from what has come to be termed ‘classical’. David Bordwell, in his efforts to delineate a set of formalized rules within fiction film narration, continually refers back to two very specific terms first mentioned in his work in *Narration and the Fiction Film* (though

he still utilizes this terminology today): the *fabula* and the *syuzhet* (Bordwell 1985: p49). Though he borrows these terms from Russian formalists such as Vladimir Propp, he effectively redefines them in a cinematic context to make his point of the existence of a classical structure. He defines the *fabula* as “embody[ing] the action as a chronological, cause and effect chain of events occurring within a given duration and spatial field” (ibid: p49); in essence, according to Bordwell, the *fabula* is the story. The *syuzhet* is defined as “the actual arrangement of the *fabula* in the film” (ibid: p50).

Each and every narrative film, then, when analysed as such, contains a *fabula*, a story, and a *syuzhet*, a way in which that story is ordered. The manner in which the *fabula* and *syuzhet* function in relation to one another typifies how these newer narratological approaches differ to that of Bordwell’s model (termed ‘classical’). According to Bordwell, these two functions of story co-exist; and furthermore, they embody the very core of narrative film; the *fabula* (story) is presented through the plot construction (*syuzhet*).



Screenshot from *Memento* (2000)

Eschewing both spatial and temporal conventions of cohesion within storytelling in cinema, the particular films that formed the focus of this doctoral research had achieved critical as well as commercial success whilst simultaneously implementing counter-classical narratological methods. Films such as *Memento* (Nolan, 2000), fragment and play with conventions of filmic narrative time (a process I refer to as ‘chrono-form’), meanwhile, Altman’s ode to the icons of country music of Tennessee, *Nashville* (1975) was cited by Kolker as a critically successful film that implemented a fractured filmic space (an approach that I term ‘spatio-form’) (Kolker 1988: p355). Furthermore, within this research, there was discussion of both Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and Iñárritu’s *21 Grams* (2003) as films that, in essence, implement both a fragmented chrono-form (there is a disjoint

in the chronology of the narrative) as well as spatio-form (there is a disjuncture in the spatiality of the film).

I created and used the terms *chrono-form* and *spatio-form* in an attempt to describe the relationship between narrative time and form (chronos) as well as narrative space (spatiality) in relation to form. The essential argument behind the creation of this terminology was that intrinsically within *all* filmic narratives there is a relationship between time / space and form. With this in mind, we can say that there is both a chrono-form and a spatio-form to all narrative films, the films being analysed then, exhibit a sense of disjoint in relation to both of these factors.

David Bordwell contests the arrival of these newer narrative forms in his book *The Way Hollywood Tells It* (Bordwell 2006) by claiming that even films such as *Memento* inevitably conform to the more traditional narrative structures of the Classical. When talking of *Memento*, Bordwell defends the relevance of Classical narratives by stating that the film is “at once one of the most novel *and* most conformist films in recent years” (ibid: p78).

In *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, Bordwell states that, “The classical Hollywood film presents psychologically determined individuals who struggle to solve clear cut problems or to attain specific goals... the story ends with a decisive victory or defeat, a resolution of the problem and a clear achievement or non-achievement of the goals.” (Bordwell, Staiger, Thompson 1985: p157). If this is the essence of a ‘classical’ approach to narrative within film, my research has been concerned with films that specifically look at characters which are not necessarily ‘determined individuals’ and whose story does not specifically end in a victory or a defeat. In other words, films where specific actions within time and space are non-sequential. In short, this research takes as its starting point films that approach narrative time and narrative space in a counter-classical manner and yet, have ultimately permeated the mainstream.

While Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson presuppose in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, that the 'classical' modes of narrative and production that they are discussing feature in films only up to 1960, Bordwell is very quick to assume that "since 1960 there have been several modifications in the US film industry, but most of them have had only minor effects on the mode of production" (ibid: p368). Thompson reaffirms this position in her book *Storytelling in the New Hollywood*, arguing that the modes of storytelling outlined in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* continue through to present day (Thompson 1999: pix). Both Bordwell and Thompson essentially make the claim that although the classical era is long gone, for the most part, we still see the 'classical' modes of production used to this day.

Since 2005 there has been a notable rise in publications and collections of works by varying authors and academics that have closely inspected the alternative narrative forms discussed in this thesis, though under differing names. Admittedly, even the rigid stance of David Bordwell has been recently modified to accept burgeoning modes of narrative structure in his compendium text of recent writings, *The Poetics of Cinema* (Bordwell 2008). In both this book as well as *The Way Hollywood Tells It* (Bordwell 2006: p72) we see Bordwell penning various articles referring to a structural style rapidly becoming more popular which he refers to as 'network narratives'.

Eleftheria Thanouli refers to this new trend in cinema as 'post-classical' (Thanouli 2000: p68); a problematic term, from my own research as it is so specifically Bordwell-centric. As a result of this, all critical responses to these narrative forms are in relation to the classical model, rather than being a concept which co-exists and functions *alongside* and sometimes *within* classical frameworks.

Linda Aronson, a scriptwriting guru hailing from Australia has devoted her career to teaching fledgling scriptwriters the 'formula' to these alternative screenwriting forms. Aronson's book *Screenwriting Updated* (Aronson 2001) talks of 'tandem narratives' and 'sequential narratives'; in essence, Bordwell's Network Narratives by

another name. The irony of Aronson's formulas is that they are effectively removing any of the originality from these 'alternative' story structures by shoe-boxing them.

More recently, David Martin-Jones' 'Deleuzian' approach to newer narratological structures has connected mainstreamed 'indie' films'¹ such as *Memento* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Gondry, 2004) to notions of Deleuze's movement-image and time image combined (Martin-Jones 2006) (though more on this later).

It becomes self-evident then, that with the timeliness of the release of all of these publications with respect to my own thesis work, there is a synergy in collective academic thoughts on the matter. Clearly, given the amount of scholarly interest during the past ten years or so this is not necessarily an entirely *new* way of looking at narrative, though it has become prominent enough within the film industry as a whole that there must be a collective response from academics, screenwriters and critics.

This doctoral research had been constructing arguments that narrative films with a fragmented chrono-form and a fragmented spatio-form (and in some cases a combined fragmentation of both these concepts) fell into what was being referred to as a *Rhizomatic* narrative model. This Rhizomatic Narrative was a concept which had been formulated around the ideas disseminated in Deleuze and Guattari's, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). Using the Rhizomatic narrative as a model it is possible, then, to compare the narrative pathways of these films in question to that of the root-system nature of the rhizome.



The Rhizome

¹ The term 'indie film' has come to denote films released by subsidiary film companies, connected to bigger studios. In the case of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, for example, Focus Features was responsible for both production and distribution costs of the film. Focus Features' parent company is NBC / Universal.

Literally speaking, the rhizome is the botanical term that is used to describe horizontal, subterranean tuber-like root systems. Within Deleuze and Guattari's writing however, the rhizome functions, "describ[ing] the connections that occur between the most disparate and the most similar of objects, places, and people" (Parr 2005: p231).

When Deleuze and Guattari developed this notion of the rhizome, they were more interested in sociological systems, not specifically that of narratives (cinematic or otherwise). If we are to adapt the ideas of the rhizome to a narratological approach to cinema instead of specifically dealing with connections between *real* people and places with social and political agenda, we can begin to see how useful this term can be. This thesis posits the notion that we can use a Rhizomatic methodology when analysing filmic narratives wherein we are focusing on people and places within the cinematic frame.

To incorporate a Deleuzian framework into this research is not, however, without its problems. Deleuze has been criticised for his elitism towards mainstream cinematic fare (both American *and* European) as well as showing a very clear distaste towards American cinema in favour of European narratives (Martin-Jones 2006: p7-8). Furthermore, Deleuze's approach to cinema: his distinct division between what he refers to as Movement-Image films and Time-Image films can be broad and problematised in the case of these films that are in question. Deleuze's distinction between what he refers to as Movement-Image, (temporally cohesive editing within largely American produced films), and Time-Image (the more fragmentarily edited 'art' film coming from a more Euro-centric direction) remains ostensibly binary.

What makes these distinctions problematic, in the case of this thesis, is the nature of the films in question: they straddle the divide between Time- and Movement-Images; "deploy[ing a] non-linear model of time with a more broadly classical linear Movement-Image structure" (Martin-Jones 2006: p2). In essence, Deleuze's binary differentiations can be interpreted as distinguishing excessively between the

unbroken, linear narratives based on the continuity editing style seen in pre-World War II American cinema, German Expressionism and Soviet Montage (movement-image) and the French 'New Wave' and Italian Neo-realism cinemas that discontinued narrative temporal and spatial cohesion in favour of artistic expression (time-image). Deleuze's theories do not allow for the fusion of these two concepts of the Movement-Image and the Time-Image. Martin-Jones, himself, refers to this as "*Time-Images* 'caught in the act' of becoming *Movement-Images*" (ibid: p85).

Therefore, while this thesis paper adopts the Deleuzian terminology of 'the rhizome', this is not necessarily to say that this thesis is looking at the films discussed through the prism of the Time-Image / Movement-Image debate. The notion of the rhizome, after all, derives from an entirely separate text (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) than that of the Movement-Image and Time-Image. While it is certainly possible to analyse with *Cinema I* (Deleuze 1986) and *Cinema II* (Deleuze 1989) in mind, it is not necessarily relevant here. Much as in the case of Martin-Jones' argument, the films that were (and indeed, still are) being discussed, both within the framework of narrative fiction and documentary film, are seen to be films that are, as Martin-Jones would say, 'caught in the act'. The *fabulas* constructed in these films resemble the Rhizomatic systems which are dealt with by Deleuze as a separate issue, mutually exclusive from the ideas propagated within *Cinema I* and *Cinema II*.

The films discussed then derive functions from *both* of Deleuze's models creating, what Martin-Jones refers to as, their own hybrid genre which appeals to both "audiences who enjoy watching popular genre films and also those who prefer a more 'arty' or independent film" (Martin-Jones 2006: p3).

Rhizomatic Narratives

Let us take a moment, now, to look at Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome theory as seen in the opening chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze and Guattari 2004). This thesis employs the term *Rhizomatic narrative* as something of a portmanteau term when discussing *The Love for the Game*. This thesis is claiming the film's narratological form is exemplary in a search for new approaches to narrative structure within the *Competitive Hobbyist* documentary that will be detailed in this paper. This descriptive term 'Rhizomatic narrative', then, further branches into two separate though equal sub-branches: spatio-form and chrono-form.

In point of fact, the Rhizomatic narrative is not dissimilar in definition to the notion of the 'database' or 'modular' narrative, as described by Cameron (2006) (in the referenced journal article, Cameron postulates that these two terms are ostensibly synonymous), as a formal structure. As a means of easily defining the modular narrative, Cameron makes note that the central characteristic of this narrative model is a "fraught relationship between contingency and narrative order" (ibid: p65). Each of the branches and roots of the narrative framework essentially equating to a multiplicity of story strands within a film's narrative arc. Cameron notes, "the database narrative refers to narratives whose structure exposes or thematises the dual processes of selection and combination that lie at the heart of all stories" (ibid: p65).

With respect to the multiplicity of narrative paths within the Rhizomatic narrative, one of the key concepts which is outlined by Deleuze is the notion of the *milieu*: "[the rhizome] has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overspills" (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: p23); the Rhizomatic narrative, as with the database narrative, inspects clusters of character story. It is more interested, however, to look at this narrative system and inspect the way these story strands interconnect, intertwine, fracture and fragment within one another.

This thesis analyses these filmic narratives with the notion of the Rhizomatic web in mind: *The Love for the Game* being a demonstrative model of this narrative system. This is in direct contrast to the Bordwellian method of analysis, which typically involves a search within the narratological structure of a film to find some correlation to the classical form. Through this analysis we observe a film's *fabula* and *syuzhet* and contextualise these elements to find some sense of classical cohesion. We are interested in inspecting clusters, and intersections in ways that can enable us to understand more thoroughly notions of a narrative form that is de-centred, non-linear / non-chronological and less easily adheres to a classical narration analysis.

When we examine the Rhizomatic Narrative, we are specifically interested in films which interconnect characters and fragment diegesis through the topographies occupied by the characters within the film; this is to say the fracturing of diegetic worlds and narrative spaces wherein characters function and correlate to one another within the diegesis of a film. Typically, though not exclusively, this notion of character topography implies the city spaces; the urban (moreover as we shall see, suburban) sprawl. Unsurprisingly, cities, such as Los Angeles with their vast reaching suburban spaces, feature prominently in films of this nature, and we shall see in the case studies chosen how the city-space informs the fragmentary nature of the Rhizomatic narrative.

In the case of the narrative web within *The Love for the Game*, however, there is less of an emphasis on a contained city space as other films that may have the attributed fragmented or ruptured spatio-form. Instead, we see that the film uses the game of Backgammon, not location, as a means of connecting branches of this web.

From collecting pieces of information given to us within the collective works of Deleuze and Guattari, we can see that certain terminologies used with regards to the rhizome are more important than others from the perspective of narratology and moreover in relation to a Rhizomatic mode of narrative.

Multiplicities

This principle outlined in the introduction of *A Thousand Plateaus*, specifically with the rhizome in mind is that of *multiplicity*: a term that features prominently within much Deleuzian rhetoric (Parr 2005: p176). As Deleuze uses this term frequently in his various writings, often with differing intentions, it can be difficult to pinpoint a definition for the term. Deleuze notes (with regards to the multiplicity and the rhizome specifically),

A multiplicity has neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature (the laws of combination therefore increase in number as the multiplicity grows). (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: p9).

At its essence, a multiplicity is part of the rhizome; it is part of a complex structure functioning as an autonomous line within the rhizomatic cluster. Following on from this, it stands to reason that each of these multiplicities existing within the Rhizomatic Narrative, functions separately also. They are, however, intrinsically connected to one another through the network in which they reside; connecting to others through these points of convergence. Characters' motivations then, will dictate the flow of the multiplicities; moreover, these motivations will command how multiplicities interact.

If we are to reconstruct this notion of multiplicity so that it may function within the notion of the Rhizomatic narrative, we can see that each multiplicity acts as a narrative branch akin to a remote story strand which functions independently of others within the film's network. Each of these branches will, at times, conjoin and rupture from one another, though they are mutually exclusive. What is essential to understanding the multiplicity with relation to the Rhizomatic narrative, however, is that they may or may not be connected together within the narrative system, and furthermore, this choice is subjective to the aims of the film's author.

Deterritorialisation

Following on from this notion of multiplicity, is the notion of rupture. As with any root system there are implications with regards to breakage and fissure. Deleuze notes,

“A rhizome may be broken or shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines... every rhizome contains lines of segmentarity, according to which it is stratified, territorialized, organized, signified, attributed, etc., as well as lines of deterritorialisation down which it constantly flees.” (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: p10)

It is with this quote that we can begin to understand that breakages discussed by both Deleuze and Guattari are perhaps some of the most essential characteristics of the rhizome and thusly Rhizomatic Narratives. It is this notion of change (change of character objective, change in narrative structure, change in subject, theme or direction) that is crucial too to the Rhizomatic narrative.

Guattari and Deleuze, as seen in the above quote, use terms within *A Thousand Plateaus* such as *deterritorialisation* and *lines of flight* that, at first, can be difficult to decipher. When we begin to understand that the two authors are more interested in developing a conceptual framework that underscores how objects (items within a rhizome) connect, and less about what and how they ‘are’, a certain amount of clarity arises with regards to these terms. Furthermore, it becomes clearer as to how these terms can function when used as a means of creating a narratological framework.

What is happening, narratologically speaking, within films which employ a Rhizomatic narrative, is that there is a non-hierarchical nature to the characters within the film: there is no one single protagonist. As a result of the democratising of screen time, dividing temporality amongst a host of characters focusing on a number of differing story strands we can begin to see how there are moments of fissure: characters inadvertently compete within the narrative system.

Naturally, space is a key component in understanding these moments of fissure within the Rhizomatic narrative. In the more classical mode of fissure, a 'beat' from one story strand within a film might end, there will be a cut resulting in the viewer being taken to a new scene with new characters: the same as a film which employs a classical mode of production might make a transition from a main plot to a sub-plot with 'less important' characters. In essence, spaces and the temporality of these spaces are transformed in front of the spectator's eyes.

The second instance of fissure, which we will see time and again within all films which implement a Rhizomatic narrative is 'fissure through collective spaces': spaces which act as nodal points where any number of characters, whose story lines may or may not be specifically related, will interact. In essence, these spaces act as collision points of story arches wherein character topography is shared. This ties in closely with another Deleuzian notion, possibly one more cinematically specific: the prominently featured 'any-space-wherever' (Deleuze 1986: p109). He writes in *Cinema I*, 'any-space-wherever' is not an abstract universal, in all times, in all places. It is a perfectly singular space, which has merely lost its homogeneity... so linkages can be made in any number of ways" (ibid: p9). The latter part of this quote is essential to this thesis, demonstrating the understanding that the 'any-space-wherever' has the ability to link characters, and as a result link story stems within the Rhizomatic narrative.

The notion of deterritorialisation first arises in Deleuze and Guattari's first publication together, *Anti-Oedipus* as "a coming undone" (Deleuze, Guattari 1983: p322) and then re-manifests within the discussions of the rhizome as the cutting edge of the assemblage (Deleuze, Guattari 2004: p88). Parr's explanation for this terminology, though, is perhaps the most concise; he notes that deterritorialisation acts "as a movement producing change... [It] indicates the creative potential of an assemblage. So to deterritorialise is to free up the fixed relations that contain a body, all the while exposing it to new organisms" (Parr 2005: p67).

To contextualise this in relation to the Cinematic Rhizomatic Narrative then, deterritorialisation acts as this notion of the cut, the transition between characters: deterritorialisation not only dictates when this fracture occurs, but also more importantly *how* and *why* it occurs. Moreover, within this Rhizomatic Narrative there are these assemblages of characters.

If we are to put this concept into use with regards to filmic narrative, we must understand that the stems of the Rhizomatic narrative (the characters within the narrative functioning within temporal and spatial boundaries within a meta-structure) converge as assemblages; essentially the point of interaction between characters. As a cut occurs, as characters interconnect with one another, either within the frame or through the cut, a character stem will break, resulting in a divergence from one story thread to another.

Now, taking into consideration the body of texts that had been published both prior to as well as while the PhD was underway, we begin to see how the PhD thesis argument was being formulated: an effort to create a new approach to the way that we interpret the *fabula* and *syuzhet* of narrative films in relation to a network resembling the horizontal, tubular system referred to as a rhizome borrowing from the Deleuzian / Guattarian conceptual terminology.

The second important theoretical strand of this thesis derives from an inquiry into documentary genre. Both as a filmmaker as well as an academic, I have been looking at documentary films which will be referred to in this thesis paper as *Competitive Hobbyist* films. It is with the delineation of the codifying rules of the Competitive Hobbyist genre that this research thesis contributes to the preexisting knowledge base with regards to documentary and documentary genre.

There has been a trend in documentary film of recent years that inspects competitive niche interest groups. Critically and commercially successful documentary narratives such as *Hoop Dreams* (James, 1994) from the 1990s

heralded a new group of documentary film that would closely inspect interest groups with a competitive perspective.

The documentary *The Love for the Game* would then ultimately be an addition to this group of films and in addition would make a bid to expand and subvert narratological norms within this burgeoning sub-genre of documentary film. As a practical filmmaker focused primarily on narrative structure, it would be important to offer a practical example as well as written record of how this film would stand *in contrast* to other films within the Competitive Hobbyist genre of documentary.

Competitive Hobbyist film

Through the popularizing of documentaries arising with widespread distribution, a new genre and form arises in the documentary field that is primarily concerned with the inspection of competitive niche interest groups such as *Spellbound* (Blitz, 2002) and *Wordplay* (Creadon, 2006). For the purposes of this thesis argument we refer to this burgeoning genre of documentary as the ‘competitive hobbyist’ genre.

The Competitive Hobbyist film derives from the observational mode of representation as ascribed certain traits by Nichols (as one of the key attributes to the genre is the observation and exposé of interest groups). There is often little or no representation of the filmmaker within the frame and these films serve as something of an exposé, giving the hobbies broader and more mainstream appeal. The films that make up the body of this genre, ranging in styles and budgets, tend to analyse niche interest groups that are typically (though as we will see, not categorically) engaged in some kind of competitive activity.

Whilst this paper appears to lean towards films in which word games appear to be at the forefront such as *Word Wars* and *Spellbound*, it should be noted that there are Competitive Hobbyist films which do delve into other fascinating niche subjects: *Sprit of the Marathon* (Dunham, 2007) follows participants as they train leading up

to the 2005 Chicago Marathon. *Under the Boardwalk* (Tostado, 2010) is another example of a Competitive Hobbyist film, looking specifically at the world of competitive board games, specifically the global phenomenon Monopoly™.

Defining Characteristics

The Competitive Hobbyist genre of documentary, as being posited in this research, can be defined by a series of characteristics that, in varying ways, codify the genre. Granted, some aspects may feature more heavily or less heavily dependent on the film, though as we shall see from a series of examples, certain elements will always remain intact within each of these films.

First and foremost, as the title of the genre would suggest, the films in question are primarily concerned with documenting narratives and communities within competitive settings. What this indicates is that the film will typically culminate in a visual depiction of the competition in question. In *Monster Camp* (Hoback, 2007), a documentary that focuses on the niche competitive interest group of Live Action Role Players (LARPer, for short), the film's second half is largely based around the largest annual group competitive outing.

The tendency, within the Competitive Hobbyist film, as we shall see from the extended analyses of *Spellbound* and *Word Wars*, is to offer a series of competitors for the spectator to follow. In *The Love for the Game*, we can see there is less of an emphasis on this final competition. There is, indeed, a filmic representation of a tournament (it would be wrong to omit such an integral aspect of the competitive community) in the film, though the film is not centered around the tournament, a typical codifying feature of the Competitive Hobbyist film.

Another important characteristic of the Competitive Hobbyist sub-genre is humour. Typically these films are inspecting niche interest groups whose members could be perceived to be 'nerdy' or lacking normal social convention. This fact means that filmmakers often will use this to a humorous advantage. The competitive hobbyist films are targeted at a spectator who is not familiar with the competitive hobbies in

question and so the intense nature of the enthusiast can be jarring and often lead to humorous interactions.

In the film *Special When Lit* (Sullivan, 2009), a documentary that looks at the world of competitive Pinball tournaments, the spectator is introduced to a number of socially awkward and very intense enthusiasts. The filmmaker, Sullivan, uses this to his advantage: at first, the impulse is to laugh at these devotees as we hear them talk with fanaticism about something as trivial as Pinball, though later in the film, the spectator is lured into sympathising with them, even relating to them.

This device is used time and time again in the competitive hobbyist film. We will see it specifically in Roger Nygard's *Trekkies* (1997), a film that is closely analysed in this research paper as a precursor to the Competitive Hobbyist film.

Ultimately we will look at *The Love for the Game* to see not only how this film functions within the sub-genre of the competitive hobbyist documentary, but furthermore, how the film aims to look at newer notions of structural narratology as a means of altering the form and allowing new approaches to narrative structure to enter this genre.

In this section of the chapter, then, let us take some time to look at some of the fundamental, canonical films within the competitive hobbyist documentary form. We will look at them with a close analytical eye on narrative structure and ways in which these films function, both as a genre unto itself, though also in relation to documentaries preceding the form.

***Spellbound* (Blitz, 2002)**

The sensation of *Spellbound* may be the instigator that gave rise to the popularity of the competitive hobbyist genre of documentary. The film met with critical success as it toured the festival circuit: it won the SXSW Film Festival documentary award and was also nominated for an Academy Award in the documentary film field that same year. By no means did the film create the format of the competitive hobbyist

genre, though as a result of its widespread popularity and critical accomplishment, it certainly established a norm with this grouping of films that, for better or for worse, has been followed in the competitive hobbyist films which would follow.

Ashley, Harry, April, Angela, Ted, Neil, Emily and Nupur are among the 248 contestants in the 1999 National Spelling Bee, an event that turns out, thanks to the director Jeff Blitz's shrewd narrative sense and nimble editing, to offer enough drama, humor and unfiltered nail-biting suspense to put all the thrill-mongering screenwriters in Hollywood to shame. (Scott 2003)

As we can see with this quote taken from the film's initial review in the *New York*



Spellbound (2002) theatrical 1 sheet

Times, the film is very much concerned with creating a cohesive and compelling narrative path. Tony Scott goes as far as referring to Blitz's narrative sense as 'shrewd' in an effort to illustrate the emphasis on narratological form.

The documentary is a snapshot of the world of competitive spelling bees, an American institution dating as far back, as the film states, as the 19th century. The filmmakers follow the paths of eight contestants, four girls and four boys, on their journey to the finals of

the 1999 Scripps National Spelling Bee, an institution that has been part of American culture since 1925. The film covers content ranging from the the history, the significance as well as the national context of the spelling bee. It is the intention of the filmmaker to not only compel the spectator with a compelling narrative of this specific spelling bee, but also give some insight and back-story to all the contestants before we see them compete in the final event.

Perhaps what is most endearing to us as spectators, is to see these children, all under the age of fourteen, in their home environments preparing for the main event, which is built up to be one of the more important moments in their lives. We see a vast cultural and economical divide between all of the competitors; from the affluent

family in Connecticut, to the single mother raising a girl on a housing estate in Washington D.C., from the self made Asian-American family, who believes in the power of success, to the Latino family who had originally arrived in America illegally. The beauty of *Spellbound* is in the cross section of characters representing a wide variety of genotypes / archetypes. Ultimately, we see the participants slowly whittled down until ultimately, Nupur Lala, an Indian-American girl claims the prize of victory. The filmmaker shows us the other contestants as they are taken out of the competition, and we see that many of them are happy only to have made it as far as they did; all acting with the maturity of a professional sports person.

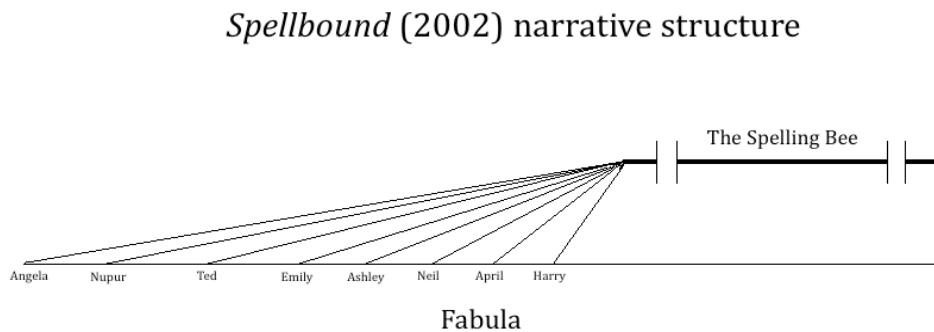
When we look at the structure of the film we see that, for the most part, the narrative path is simple. We are introduced, one by one to our main characters, each participant being given approximately an average of six minutes of screen time for exposition before we are cut away, as the spectator, to the next contestant. There is no specific protagonist to the film; instead, in a sense, we are given a set of 'horses' (so to speak), and we must make a choice as to which contestant we want to back: all eight characters are dealt with at approximately equal length and there is no tendency of the filmmaker to favour one participant over another.

If we are to examine this film in relation to Bill Nichols' Documentary Modes of Representation theorem (which will be detailed in the chapter specifically looking at documentary narrative theory), we see that, while *Spellbound* has elements of the expository mode: there specifically is no voiceover we see these participants in their natural habitat without the informing omnipresent voice guiding us. The film utilises interaction with the participants and a series of talking heads to allow the narrative to progress. The film then, takes on an element of the participatory. The main point is that it is very hard to pin down a specific mode of representation with this film within the competitive hobbyist sub-genre. There seem several moments where the representational modes overlap within the film.

The narrative form of *Spellbound*, lacking a single determined protagonist, follows a series of characters all competing for a common goal. Furthermore, it is the

intention of the filmmaker to also inform the spectator of some of the history behind the institution of the national spelling bee. Sequences are intercut with the main action of the film that deviates to discuss the history and the nature of the event.

If we were to illustrate the narrative pathway of *Spellbound*, it might look something like this:



This map oversimplifies the narrative path of the film to some extent, however, it does clearly illustrate to us how the film functions as a story and how it is able to create a rising sense of tension leading up to the final moments of the film.

Assuming that the narrative illustration operates from left to right, we are introduced to the participants one by one, starting with Angela, the migrant workers' daughter, and eventually ending with the socially awkward Harry. Throughout this opening introduction period, lasting approximately forty-six minutes, the spectator is given a brief snapshot into the participants' lives prior to the spelling bee final in 1999. The filmmaker makes the choice never to return to the characters in their home: following the introduction of each of the participants, they do not return to the screen until all have arrived at the hotel for the finals of the spelling bee competition.

Once the filmmakers situate us, as the spectator, in Washington DC for the spelling bee finals, the film's narrative carries on in a linear fashion, though with all the participants now sharing the same space. A series of unconnected branches of this system conjoin to carry on for the duration of the film time. If we look back to the

map illustrating the narrative path of the film, we can see that there are these two gaps in the fabula line from the moment the participants' stories all merge. This is representative of the two sequences in the film that deviate from the narrative, if only for a moment.

The first, having only just arrived at the hotel for the finals, the film's narrative path makes a slight deviation from the story to give the spectator an interview with the official 'pronouncer'; Alex Cameron will be one of the judges on stage during the eventual competition. The filmmaker takes time in this two-minute long interlude to



Alex Cameron - Official Pronouncer, National Spelling Bee

interview him about his experience as a spelling bee pronouncer. This seems to be a natural moment to give pause for the filmmaker. The contestants have not yet embarked upon the final task of the film, and it gives them the opportunity to shed insight and add to the information given to the spectator about spelling bees in general.

The second, and perhaps more jarring of these two interludes occurs in the climactic end of the film, moments prior to the final contestant, Nupur, spelling her final word before winning the 1999 National Spelling Bee. Director Blitz, makes the decision to literally, seconds before the dramatic finale, cut away to a sequence that delves further into both the history of the spelling bee as an American phenomenon as well as give the spectator something of a conclusion to the film by allowing the seven unsuccessful participants screen time in the final moments of the film.

This three-minute sequence is ostensibly the conclusion to the film, though there are some interesting moments within this segment of the film that must be addressed from a narratological point of view. Firstly, it seems clear that the reasoning behind the decision of having the final conclusion of the film *prior* to the actual ending of the narrative is merely a question of practicality: Blitz is hoping to

give a sense of tension and heighten the drama of the moment by withholding information from the spectator: does she do it, can she spell the word and win?

This sequence, which succeeds in concluding the film and placing spelling bees in a national context, seems out of place. Much of the information that is given to the spectator at that moment regarding the history of spelling bees seems awkwardly positioned within the film's narrative arc for the climactic moment of the film. As soon as the director has cut back to the narrative with Nupur standing alone on the podium, the film comes to a very swift conclusion. While the final moment of Nupur spelling her final word correctly does offer a point of culmination, the film ends rather abruptly and without a *dénouement*.

This film then, as an early example of the competitive hobbyist genre, exemplifies a refined, simple and often copied narrative structure. This construct, which essentially is showing a series of characters making an attempt at a common goal, has two functions: firstly, it gives the layperson spectator access to a world outside of their common knowledge. In the case of *Spellbound* this is obviously the niche interest group of spelling bee contestants. Furthermore, it gives the classical narrative construct of a rising sense of tension throughout the film: which of these children will win the race? Will any of them win the race, etc.? As we have seen, in the case of *Spellbound*, there is little information on the history of the spelling bee tradition within the film and ultimately it sacrifices this information in favour of creating a narrative (for better or for worse).

Spellbound is a very good example of the skeletal form of the competitive hobbyist film. Following the release and success of *Spellbound*, we see that more of this style replicated. *Word Wars* (Chaikin, 2004) is a good example of a similar format of narrative in film. Differing from *Spellbound*, in the case of *Word Wars*, the interest group is concerned with competitive Scrabble™. In this case of following Scrabble™ enthusiasts, the spectator is made privy to a slightly more esoteric and awkward group of participants. The film is an interesting portal into this niche interest world,

though in the end, the film follows a very similar narrative pathway to that of *Spellbound*.

The next film canonical film within the Competitive Hobbyist genre is *Wordplay* (Creadon, 2006), a film that certainly at first glance follows a very similar narrative pathway as *Spellbound*. In point of fact, the narrative structure has been abstracted, convoluted and is much more sophisticated. Let us mark it as the next step in evolutionary genealogy within the competitive hobbyist genre of documentary: One step closer towards the Rhizomatic form.

***Wordplay* (Creadon, 2006)**

As mentioned above, now we look to the 2006 film, *Wordplay* where director Patrick Creadon adds to the canon of competitive hobbyist films with his text looking deeper into the niche interest group of competitive crossword puzzle solvers.

Many similarities can be drawn between Creadon's *Wordplay* and *The Love for the Game*: most obviously, they both deal with a niche interest group and they both involve a competitive angle, hence their

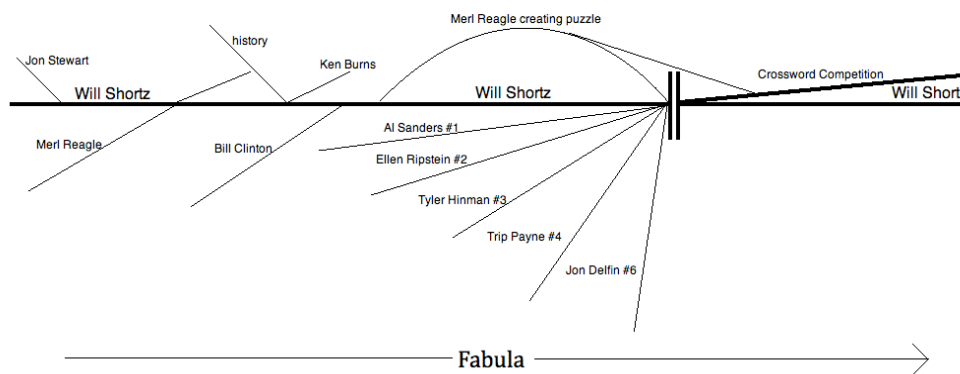


Wordplay (2006) theatrical one sheet

involvement in the competitive hobbyist genre. More specifically though, these two games are peculiar in that they have a wide reaching appeal – many people know how to play Backgammon in the same way as many people know how to do a crossword puzzle. What brings these two games together, though, is that many peoples' interest in the said games is at the very most passing: they are often games which are taken for granted.

Once again, let us take a moment to look at this film from a narratological perspective. If we were to create a map of *Wordplay* similar to the map of *Spellbound* it would look like this:

Wordplay (2006) narrative structure



Firstly we see that there is something of a fluidity to the narrative paths of *Wordplay* as opposed to the more rigid structure of *Spellbound*. The causality within *Spellbound* makes absolute cohesive sense, though ultimately the narrative path is predictable. In the case of *Spellbound*, the spectator is prepared to meet a series of characters and then ultimately see them compete at the finals as can be seen in the second half of the fabula map. *Wordplay*, conversely, informs us that there is a competition from the introductory sequence of the film before the credits, though the narrative path to get there is considerably more convoluted. Yes, there are a series of introductory sequences for participants in the final competition, though there is much more to the first part of the film than there is in the case of *Spellbound*. Unlike the simplistic narrative path of *Spellbound*, the filmmakers are concerned with giving an overall rendering to the crossword puzzle and the community that surrounds it.

The film opens by introducing the spectator to Will Shortz, the editor of the New York Times crossword puzzle and something of a guru within the puzzle world. The film immediately sets him up to be our guide into the niche interest group of the crossword fanatic. Following on from this, we are introduced to a crossword constructor, Merl Reagle. Reagle, while not the principle narrator to the piece, will function as something of a secondary narrative spine – he introduces the spectator to the concept of puzzle design and furthermore, he designs a puzzle for the film

which is ultimately published by Shortz and then completed by all of the branches within this narrative network.

The film is cut into sequences; for the sake of the argument of the Rhizomatic narrative let us refer to each of these sequences as branches or stems. Immediately what we begin to see is that none of the branches that are presented to the viewer are mutually exclusive: one carries on from another, sometimes in a fluid and unassuming way, whereas other times they intersect in a brash manner, taking the viewer by surprise. Will Shortz, then, is indeed the main artery of this narrative construct. He is the first profile to which we are introduced as a spectator. Furthermore, he is so intrinsically involved in all elements of the crossword world, that each of the branches ultimately lead back to him. He opens the film, he closes the film. We begin to see, however, within the construct of a visual map of the narrative, that the shape of the film is something of a horizontal web of intersecting lines: a the film's narrative more resembles a root system than *Spellbound* as its predecessor.

Much as is the case with *Spellbound*, the film is divided into two clear-cut halves: the second half of each film being the more linear documentation of the competitive side to the competitive hobbyist genre of documentary: the national crossword competition. The first half of *Wordplay*, however, is where the filmmakers truly extend the genre and create a more dynamic narrative path.

As is the case in *The Love for the Game*, the use of talking heads in *Wordplay* is both essential and at times, disproportionate. The nature of the subject of the film, after all, lends itself to this fact: it is a film that is documenting and creating a narrative around a solitary action that essentially involves sitting and writing. The literal cavalcade of talking heads, then, serve the purpose of helping the filmmaker give the spectator some kind of context. *Wordplay* uses the function of celebrity to this purpose. Throughout the first half of the film, a discourse on all facets of the nature of the crossword, the spectator is given the opportunity to hear opinions from the likes of Jon Stewart of Television's *The Daily Show*, President Bill Clinton, musical act

The Indigo Girls and many more. Again, all of these minor branches all lead back to the principal artery of Shortz.

As an interesting side note, and another way that there is an easy comparison between *Wordplay* and *The Love for the Game*, is the manner in which the game in question is presented. The filmmaker is faced with the challenge of finding dynamism, something of visual interest for the layperson, when the activity is, to say the very least, static. In the case of *Wordplay*, for example, the act of completing a crossword is hardly visually arresting – the image of a person filling in squares in a newspaper is not enough to sustain interest for the spectator. Creadon achieves a sense of visual dynamism by creating an animation showing the viewer *how* the puzzle solver completes the task; he is able to bring the viewer into the action in a successful manner. There is a certain fluidity to the animations, too, akin to those in Ron Howard's *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), which gives the underlying idea that the puzzle-doer is somehow a savant in his or her ability to complete crosswords so quickly.

So what we see with the evolution from *Spellbound* to *Wordplay* is an abstraction of design. Both of these films follow similar narrative constructs: there are contestants; they must compete in a final competition. Though we have also seen that, as in the case of both films, there is an interest in allowing the spectator access to the history and the culture that surrounds these events as well. *Spellbound*, really only scratches the surface when it comes to this. Little information, aside from the brief three-minute conclusion, gives the spectator any kind of opening into this world.

Conversely, *Wordplay*, certainly in the expository first half of the film, is more interested in giving the spectator a view of this world / community. Even when we first meet the participants before they have converged upon the final competition in Connecticut, they are already ingrained within this subculture of the competitive crossword – recounting stories of past tournaments, for example. The role of expert, the objective voice of reason, is given to both Shortz and Reagle who each

give an exposition as to the history of the crossword puzzle and its relationship with the *New York Times*.

We can see with *The Love for the Game* that there is a further abstraction of form from these two key examples of competitive hobbyist films. In spite of the fragmentation of spatio-form in the first half of the film, *Wordplay* is focused on a linear narrative thread, centred on the annual crossword competition. *The Love for the Game*, however, gives spectators access to the competitive arena of professional Backgammon, though there is a clear lack of emphasis on utilising the Las Vegas competition as a climactic turning point of the film. As mentioned before, each of the nodal sequences within the Rhizomatic web of *The Love for the Game* aims to be of equal importance; no one narrative path usurps the power of another – instead, all are at times connected and other times disparate.

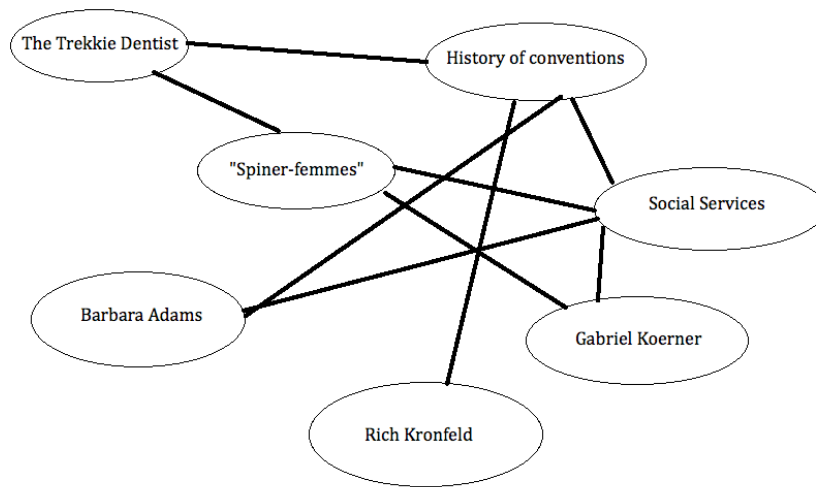
Next, let us look at *Trekkies*. The film stands as something of a precursor to the competitive hobbyist genre. The film does inspect a niche interest group, though from an entirely different perspective to the other films analysed in this paper. The reason I refer to *Trekkies* after an analysis of both *Spellbound* and *Wordplay* is this: the film, as we shall see, fabricates a much more convoluted narrative network. It imposes a series of interconnected nodes that is certainly akin to what is being posited with regards to a narrative rhizome that we see within *The Love for the Game*. What differentiates these films is that within *Trekkies* we will see that there is a definite lack of a competitive direction; for this reason it ostensibly remains outside of the competitive hobbyist genre. Looking to this film, however, we will begin to see how narratological structures can be abstracted and fractured, ultimately allowing for this notion of a Rhizomatic narrative to be utilised within a competitive hobbyist documentary form.

***Trekkies* (Nygard, 1997)**

While not specifically a film which deals with the notion of competitive hobbyists, Roger Nygard's 1997 exposé of the world of *Star Trek* fanaticism, *Trekkies*, shows us an interesting narrative structure for a film that is looking at a niche interest group: a hobbyist documentary lacking the competition, for lack of a better description.

What is most interesting to us, in the case of *Trekkies*, is not the subject matter inasmuch as we are more interested in how Nygard, as a storyteller, develops a feature length film, inspecting a group of people, yet at the same time, there is seemingly no conclusive moment to allow for a narrative arc. The filmmaker is literally offering a series of entangled arcs – all disparate though seen to be converging at times.

Unlike the other examples discussed in this chapter, creating a narrative map of *Trekkies* is a difficult task; the film is nodal. There seemingly is no strict narrative path, but rather a series of interconnected sequences that are united through a common theme as well as, at times, common characters. Instead of a cohesive narrative, the film is created as a collection of sequences, each one dealing with a different aspect of the fanaticism of the Trekkie. There are key participants within the film who act as guides for the spectator. Their screen-time is extended beyond the sound bytes of most talking heads and instead we are given an extended glimpse into their daily lives and how deeply they have been affected by *Star Trek*. Still, if we were to make something of an approximation of *Trekkies* narrative map, it would look something like this:

Trekkies (1997) Narrative Map [simplified]

As we can see from this somewhat simplified display of the nodal relationship between sections within *Trekkies*, this film differs from the previous two considerably. The main reason for this is, in point of fact, due to the lack of a formalised competition, of sorts, to add emphasis and drama to the *fabula* of the film. Instead, the *fabula* functions as an expose with a very liberal structure. There is a *syuzhet*; the film does have a comprehensible structure, though placement of the various sections is seemingly arbitrary; it would be very possible to rearrange the film's sections to a similar dramatic effect.

One of the functional aspects of the rhizome, both in botanic terms as well as within this narratological model, is this notion of a horizontally functioning root system. Unlike *Trekkies*, within *The Love for the Game*, there is a clear narratological progression; this does not necessarily imply that the film functions in a linear manner. To the contrary, the film features incongruencies on a temporal level. *The Love for the Game's* *syuzhet* allows for a clearer progression leading from one section of the film to another, rather than a seemingly disparate network of vignettes whose connection is based solely on their relation to the niche subject in question as in the case of *Trekkies*.

The film's narrative, and indeed the natural flow of the film from a viewership standpoint, operates on the basis of spectacle. With each passing sequence, the film incites a further sense of bewilderment in the viewer by finding a person who appears crazier than the last: more often than not to humorous affect. Though ultimately the message of the film is that these people whom are being profiled are no less normal than the viewer.



Denise Crosby bewildered on behalf of the spectator in *Trekkies*

The narrative of *Trekkies*, then, is a web. Denise Crosby, an ex-cast member of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (Rodenberry, 1987-94) is our guide through this web – she introduces the film in the opening sequence and she is the person who has the opportunity to interact with many of the principal profiles within the film. For the most part she remains off-screen;

the viewer will, on occasion, be made privy to a facial expression of disbelief to what she is encountering.

Nygard opens his film by introducing us, as the outsider spectator, to the world of the *Star Trek* convention circuit through a series of talking heads. It really is not a difficult task to portray the average ‘Trekkie’ as a popular culture minority: a geek. Nygard achieves his aim through humour. He is able to, within the opening sequence of the film, establish the community of Trekkie as being as distant to his target audience as the very characters this group aims to emulate: aliens.

Where, then, does *Trekkies* lie in relation to the modal system of representation? Unlike the more structured forms of the competitive hobbyist films, *Trekkies* lacks a specific thrust. This is to say, while there are certainly a grouping of ‘participants’, they are not striving towards a common goal. *Trekkies* is not an expository documentary film giving an unbiased objective view of a cultural group. The film is also not of the observational mode of representation, passively looking at how this popular cultural phenomenon has grown to represent something greater than

simply a television show, but instead something of a way of life. The film's aims differ: *Trekkies* is, instead, looking for (and ultimately succeeds in finding) an emotional core. The question then, from a narratological perspective, is 'how is this achieved'?

In order to augment this distance between subject and viewer even further, Nygard proceeds to have cast members from the original show discuss the phenomenon of Trekkies as being something surreal and foreign to them as well. Leonard Nimoy is very quick to make the assertion that while he loves the adulation, he is surprised by the phenomenon of Trekkie fanaticism.

The filmmaker is thus able to establish this sense of distance to a very specific purpose. Nygard is creating a scenario wherein the spectator undergoes a transitional experience, instead of the protagonist on screen. The ultimate goal is that we, as spectators, will be able to find common links between ourselves, the spectators, and the participants that we find on screen. The final objective then, is reflexivity from the spectator: being able to understand that these people, people who we perceived as 'geeks' or socially awkward (or whatever derogatory name one might place upon them) are ostensibly no different from us, the viewer, upon closer inspection.

Trekkies, as mentioned before, represents something of a precursor to the competitive hobbyist genre of documentary film. Furthermore, its brand of narrative structure, to which we are referring as nodal, gives the film the ability to be received at feature length, in spite of any clear narrative path for any of the participants involved. The emotional transition, then, becomes that on the part of the viewer: we are encouraged by the narrative to leave behind any pre-conceived notions about the archetypal Trekkie, though also to recognise that he or she embodies many characteristics of the normal, everyday person, in spite of his or her hobby.

We will see how the approaches to narrative in both *Trekkies*, as well as the more conventionally structured competitive hobbyist films have informed the thinking when creating sound narrative landscapes which are so integral to the structures and forms within *The Love for the Game*

Thoughts on the Competitive Hobbyist genre

In looking to films that have begun to form the boundaries and rules that function within the competitive hobbyist genre, we start to see patterns emerge. The films in question inspect niche interest groups, allowing access into sub-cultures which otherwise would not be available to the spectator. In many ways this is indicative of many documentaries outside of the competitive hobbyist genre as well, though the difference is that these films focus on a game or an activity which allows us to follow the characters on the journey towards achieving some kind of grand success.

From the standpoint of structural narratology, the genre of the competitive hobbyist does run the risk of stagnating as a form: for the most part the films follow very similar lines in that, as mentioned before, the viewer is given a snapshot into the lives of a series of participants, and the audience is effectively asked to 'pick a horse' in the race (so to speak) as we follow them and watch the race towards the final moments of the film.

To a certain extent, this documentary form has already adopted something of a multi-stranded structure, and it could certainly be debated that the multi-protagonist aspect of this style of documentary allows for, and has done so for some time, a form that is in direct opposition to the classical fictional narrative. *The Love for the Game*, however, situates itself within the competitive hobbyist genre, as well as within documentary film as a whole, as an example of a new different approach to the multi-stranded narrative. While *Trekkies* is seen to be nodal, lacking forward movement, and *Wordplay* expands upon the narrative form though ultimately reverts to and adheres to a much more conventional and linear model in its second half, *The Love for the Game's* multiple narrative paths interconnect in their forward

motion throughout the duration of the piece. The film's network narrative, as we shall see, literally resembles that of a rhizome; it contains attributes of forward motion, though does not conform to the linearity of utilizing a single competition as a narrative-framing device.

Development of the Documentary

The PhD process ultimately became less inclined towards strictly theorizing on previously produced and distributed feature films that implement a Rhizomatic narrative. Instead, as a screenwriter and filmmaker, I was utilizing my research, looking to find some kind of synthesis between theorised research and my own practical endeavours. My desire, then, as a PhD candidate would ultimately become to discuss the theory of the Rhizomatic narrative structure within the realm of film practice: how does this theory that I am disseminating support new approaches to practical filmmaking?

The research that I was, and am still concerned with is very specifically informed by and aimed at understanding and expanding the knowledge base of narratological forms more specifically geared towards modes of production by implementing something akin to the afore mentioned *Rhizomatic* based narrative form.

The decision to eschew fictional narrative in favour of a documentary focusing on Backgammon arose for a number of different reasons. Let us look at these motives in turn as it is important to fully understand both the decision to make this transition, and furthermore, how I feel it was (and indeed, is) the best course of action within the PhD by film practice.

Firstly, having relocated to New York City, I became acquainted with the Backgammon community through informal social meetings. I casually play Backgammon and was interested in familiarising myself with other casual players within the New York area. The group of people with whom I had the pleasure of

becoming acquainted, some of whom would eventually feature in the final documentary (such as Antoinette-Marie Williams and Robert Regan), play the game competitively and travel the United States on the American Backgammon Tour (ABT) circuit. As I came to know some of the more outspoken characters within this Backgammon meet-up group, I began to understand the narrative potential of some of the more colourful and outgoing players within a documentary about Backgammon.

Backgammon, I had deduced, was an interesting game from a filmic perspective as it attracted a particular personality type: extroverted, eloquent and sociable in addition to being both thoughtful and intelligent. To my mind, they embodied the perfect mix of strategic gamer (the likes of the chess fanatic) and 'social butterfly'. As a result of this deduction, I began to think about Backgammon players as film subjects, moreover, how it might be possible to formulate some kind of Rhizomatic network surrounding this niche group in documentary form.

In January 2009 I had the good fortune to be at the New York City Metropolitan Open², the main ABT event in New York for that year, and meet the principal organizer, Lynn Ehrlich. It was at this time that I was informed of the burgeoning United States Backgammon Federation³ (USBGF) whose purpose would be to promote the game through raising awareness as well as to have a unionised body with the interests of the players at heart.

With this information at hand, as well as having been given access to this wealth of knowledge and material about backgammon as a subject, it became clear that Backgammon (as well as the impending creation of the USBGF) could be an insightful and fascinating subject of a documentary film. Moreover, having talked to the likes of Ehrlich as well as Rod Covlin, the then Executive Director of the USBGF, there would be a large contingent within the professional Backgammon community interested in taking part in such a documentary. In short, the opportunity arose for

² <http://www.nybackgammon.com/>

³ <http://www.usbgf.org/>

a filmmaker to capture a particular moment in the timeline of the game that was difficult to *not* accept.

It should be noted here that very quickly from the beginnings of development the decision was made to inspect the subject of Backgammon independently from the USBGF. While I was excited at the enthusiasm of the USBGF and glad that those within the community were on board to be interviewed and filmed, I was more interested in documenting a community of gamers and less interested in making a promotional video for the USBGF. The film would ultimately become something of a personal ode to the Backgammon community, though it was important that the film not be inhibited by any agenda from an outside force such as the USBGF.

The decision, then, was made to continue development geared towards a documentary surrounding Backgammon. Not just a film which teaches the history of the game and discusses the inception of a Backgammon Federation in the United States, but also, a documentary film which will investigate a number of facets surrounding the game, and indeed a number of prominent individuals involved in the US Backgammon tour. There are a number of aspects that must be dealt with in this documentary; the rules, history, profiles of players etcetera, and to grapple this list of priorities, it seems apt to implement a narrative structure that enables a foregrounding of each of these various sections in a timely manner. By imposing a Rhizomatic network structure; the film will enable a democratic distribution to these intertwining narrative threads.

Practical Documetary with Rhizomatic Theory

Essentially, and this will be dealt with in much greater detail in the second part of this thesis, the film would create a Rhizomatic network with the topic of Backgammon being the main subject, as well as functioning as a backdrop for a series of characters in a variety of different ways. The interconnected roots of the Rhizomatic narrative, would then all relate to Backgammon in some manner, though

simultaneously branch off in other directions. This documentary film then, would intersect and diverge from a standard expository historical documentary about Backgammon into something akin to a genre of documentary that I will define in detail later referred to as the 'competitive hobbyist' film. If we were to say, metaphorically speaking, that the game of Backgammon is the main character in this piece, then there are many aspects of the game and surrounding community that must be dealt with. It is as though the very notion of a Rhizomatic narrative lends itself to this particular film; a film which has multiple agenda and aims to appeal to a variety of interest groups as well as exhibit how a Rhizomatic network narrative can function within documentary film.

In thinking on documentary, an area of filmmaking which I had little experience in (as far as practice is concerned), I thought about the concept of the Rhizomatic narrative and its relationship with documentary. The central question then became, 'is the Rhizomatic narrative relevant within the sphere of documentary filmmaking?'. The answer is undoubtedly 'yes', though *how* notions of a Rhizomatic narrative might be implemented becomes crucial to the argument.

Certainly in the case of this proposed documentary, we can see that the deployment of a Rhizomatic Narrative could be a useful way of dealing with a number of narratological issues surrounding the prioritizing of people and spaces connected to Backgammon. The beauty of utilizing this rhizomatic structure is that there is less of an emphasis to adhere to a linear sense of cohesion. Within a Rhizomatic web, we are liberated from spatial and temporal impositions and instead free to explore characters and places without chronological and spatial restraints. If each section of the film is referred to as a node, the film will jump liberally between these said nodes in the creation of a rhizomatic narrative.

As we can see in the final cut of *The Love for the Game*, the various nodal sequences are interconnected, however, there is less of a focus on prioritising a singular narrative thread and more of an emphasis on democratising each node, allowing

participants (Bill Robertie, Antoinette Williams) and spaces (Las Vegas, Central Park) to coexist with an equal footing.

Documentary Narrative Theory

What we do know about documentary theory is that very little has been written specifically about subject of narrative structure in the documentary form from an academic standing. The focus of documentary theoreticians such as Bill Nichols, for the most part, is formulating and examining modes of representation (Nichols 1991: p32). There is an emphasis on narrative, though typically within Nichols' writing it is with regards to authorial and narrative voice rather than structuring. Nichols is essentially interested in compartmentalising modes of documenting reality, so to speak. Though Nichols really does not focus on structure expressly, we will look at the make-up of his modal system of representation to see how these varying modes can affect the narrative structure.

As mentioned previously, there are a growing number of articles, book chapters and indeed, entire books now being devoted to the subject of these 'non-classical' narratives. So much so, in fact, that it had ultimately come to the point where I was struggling, from an academic perspective, to offer anything more that had not already been dealt with in regards to the notion of non-linear, multiple stranded narratives in the context of the contemporary feature film⁴. And yet, seemingly none of these books deal with documentary and more specifically documentary *structure* at any great length. How has the sudden increase of films that defy traditional narrative forms affected the modes of production within the documentary world?

⁴ Recent publications dealing specifically with mainstream films adhering to a multi-stranded narrative include Denby's article *The New Disorder* (Denby, 2007), *The Poetics of Cinema* (Bordwell, 2008), *Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity* (Martin-Jones, 2006) and *Me, You, Memento and Fargo* (Murphy, 2007)

For example, in *The Poetics of Cinema* (Bordwell 2008), Bordwell mentions documentary at times to make points with regards to the omnipresent narrator, though he does not implicitly discuss his thoughts on the relationship between *fabula* and *syuzhet*. Though documentary film is clearly not his forte, Bordwell talks in *The Poetics of Cinema*, (however briefly) of a documentary aesthetic when addressing the form and style of the aforementioned, *Nashville*. While he discusses how Altman filmed certain scenes with a documentary style, when dealing with moments of convergence between narrative lines, he does not examine how documentary films coordinate their narrative structures in relation to fiction films (Bordwell 2008: p224-6).

And yet, in spite of a lack of theoretical texts on the subject of documentary narratological structure, a number of books have in fact been published in the arena of practice. I am referring here to the “how-to manual” aimed at the amateur (or indeed, professional) documentarian. It is as though the tradition of the narrative screenwriter’s how-to manual, a publishing trend that dates as far back as 1920 with *Writing Screen Plays* (Stannard 1920) and subsequently came to its apex of popularity with Sid Field’s three-act structure as discussed in *Screenplay* (Field 1979), has been paralleled in the world of documentary filmmaking.

Sheila Curran Bernard’s documentary manual, *Documentary Storytelling: Making Stronger and More Dramatic Nonfiction Films* (Bernard 2007), is a text that deals directly with narrative structure within the documentary film format. While other manuals, for example Hampe’s *Making Documentary Films and Videos*, deal with pragmatics of the production process, briefly touching on everything from how to interview subjects (Hampe 2007: p293) through to the practicalities of shooting on location (ibid: p309), Bernard seems more focused on structure and narrative specifically. Whilst this book is not specifically one that deals with narrative on an academic and theoretical level, Bernard does take the time to do a series of case studies on certain documentaries in order to justify her insistence of dealing specifically with both conventional as well as more elaborate narrative structures:

The use of multiple story lines often enables filmmakers to create films that are more complex than would be possible with a strictly linear approach. Rather than tell everything in the order in which it occurred, they select an event within a life and use that to focus the primary film narrative, which frees them to look back into the past or even ahead into the future as needed. (Bernard 2007: p71)

When Bernard raises this point, she is discussing ways of approaching documentary narrative in a manner that does not adhere to a classical three-act structure. With this in mind, it is fair to say that, of course, there are already films within the realm of documentary to which a Rhizomatic narrative approach can be applied. However, my film differs from the bulk of these existing documentaries in the sense that it employs a Rhizomatic narrative from *within* the filmmaking process *not* in terms of a narratological analysis of the final cut from the spectator.

With regard to how one decides what narrative mode to utilise when constructing a documentary narrative, Bernard states, “No matter how you anticipate structuring your film or what your process is, structure is a type of grid that allows you to anticipate and critique the rhythms of your storytelling” (ibid: p72). So, Bernard is saying, effectively, that although one might plan and structure the documentary prior to principal photography, in the developmental stages of the filmmaking process, there is a strong need to allow for an organic growth of the film’s narrative structure. Obviously, some narrative paths lend themselves to a more linear model, say for example, historical documentaries such as *One Day in September* (MacDonald, 1999) which chronologically depicts the hostage crisis at the 1972 Olympic Games; meanwhile, other narrative frameworks, as is the case of films with multiple sets of priorities (historical, exposé, etc), would be more suited to a multi-stranded network.

It is with the understanding that very little, if any, material has been written specifically on the relationship between newer narrative forms and documentary film (apart from the documentary how-to manual of Bernard) that I felt a very real justification in making this film as a PhD submission. In essence, that my documentary takes Backgammon as its subject is less important to me as a

practitioner than the fact that the narrative of my documentary is delivered through a Rhizomatic structure.

With this development process of *The Love for the Game* in mind, it is essential to look at notions of documentary analysis as far as modes of representation and see what has been written with regards to narrative form in the documentary arena that is of relevance to us when we look to the Competitive Hobbyist film and more specifically *The Love for the Game*.

Documentary Modes of Representation

To date, documentary theory had been mostly concerned with questions of ‘realism’, authenticity and truth, as well as ethics and politics of documentary filmmaking (Nichols 1991: p76) (Bruzzi 2000: p91). Far less attention has been paid to the question of how narratives are *constructed* from a formalist perspective within documentary films. And yet, as Nichols (the scholar whose work arguably forms one of the seminal contributions to documentary theory in film studies) makes clear, the slippage or blurring of boundaries between fiction and documentary film (including questions of narrative) is more extensive than is often thought. Nichols goes as far as to open the introduction with this telling caveat:

Because documentaries address the world in which we live rather than a world imagined by the filmmaker, they differ from the various genres of fiction (science fiction, horror, adventure, melodrama and so on) in significant ways. They are made with different assumptions about purpose, they involve a different quality of relationship between filmmaker and subject and they prompt different sorts of expectations from audiences... These differences, as we shall see, guarantee no absolute separation between fiction film and documentary. (Ibid: p.xi)

With regards to the documentary film *The Love for the Game*, we are interested in examining both the finished film as well as the production process through various prisms: notions of authorial voice, ethics, narratological form and where the film can

be situated within Nichols' representational mode. While these representative modes, as discussed by Nichols, are not specifically geared towards narrative structure per se, when we see the linear progression of his modal theory we can see that as the modes of representation become increasingly complex. Similarly, narrative pathways convolute further just like the modes of representation which are detailed below.

Granted, the modes that Nichols discusses are somewhat dated and, of course, borders between these various modes / styles of documentary have been blurred and have overlapped. Bruzzi (being the most forthright scholar who problematises Nichols) notes, it is difficult to make distinctions and pigeon-hole a documentary into one of these specific styles (Bruzzi 2000: p2). That said, it is important to understand the fundamental notions behind the modes of representation within documentary film theory and to have them presented within this thesis, to a certain extent, before closely analysing the film *The Love for the Game* (or any genre within documentary film that it may relate to). It is my belief that this PhD film offers aspects from four of Nichols' modes: the expository, the observational, the interactive and the performative⁵. I shall now outline these modes in relation to my PhD practice research project.

Expository Documentary

Nichols describes this mode of documentary as a "text that addresses the viewer directly with titles or voices that advance an argument about the historical world" (Nichols 1991: p34). Nichols' claim is that this mode of documentary presents itself as the earliest of the modes. The apparent objective voice-over narrator is a problematic concern as a result of biases and propaganda seen in films emerging from Europe in the 1930s.

⁵ The two remaining modes within Nichols' system, the poetic documentary and the reflexive documentary do not play a significant factor within *The Love for the Game*, and as such, have been omitted from this analysis.

Of course we still see the expository mode in existence today. Nichols himself, states that the theoretical unbiased news anchor talking over documented footage on the nightly news is a staple of this form. The BBC was responsible for an entire canon of expository documentaries from the 1950s; films with an omnipresent voice-over which address a host of topics from a seemingly objective standpoint. Furthermore, we only have to look to the television documentaries found on, say, the Discovery Channel or the History Channel to see this mode of documentary still in effect. The expository form of informational documentaries on a host of subjects, often pertaining to historical moments is the lifeblood of these channels.

If we are to look at this mode of documentary filmmaking from the perspective of the practical filmmaker (moreover, *this* filmmaker in particular), we must mention Ken Burns as a key contemporary filmmaker who uses the expository mode effectively. Ken Burns is a renowned American documentary filmmaker responsible for many lengthy expository public television series such as *The Civil War* (1990), *Baseball* (1994) and *Jazz* (2001). In his works, Burns takes on the daunting, often overwhelming task of telling the stories of Americana with the aid of an omnipresent narrator, and often without the aid of reenactments. As early as in his first venture with the American Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), *The Brooklyn Bridge* (1981), Burns is responsible for popularising a distinct style within his documentaries. As a means of adding dynamism when screening a series of still images for documentaries where there is little or even no footage available in respect to the subject, Burns would add life to the frame by panning across the pictures, or alternatively slowly zooming in towards the principal subject that the narrator may have been speaking of. Though this convention has become a trademark of Burns', he was not responsible for its creation. Burns has cited filmmaker and stills photographer Jerome Liebling as his inspiration and the creator of this effect (Kennedy 2006)

This camera effect, which has become something of a norm within expository documentary mode, has affectionately been given the name the 'Ken Burns Effect' in

consumer software products by Apple such as iMovie and iPhoto. It has become so ingrained within the language of the expository mode, that we see this concept used time and time again.

With regards to their relationship with Nichols' expository mode, the films of Burns adhere to the functionality that Nichols propagates. He notes, "The expository mode emphasizes the impression of objectivity and well sustained judgment. This mode



'The Ken Burns Effect'

supports the impulse towards generalization handsomely since the voice-over commentary can readily extrapolate from the particular instances offered on the image track" (Nichols 1991: p35).

Though while Nichols insists that all documentaries essentially will fall into one of the categories explained in this thesis, we already begin to see how problematic this sort of pigeonholing can be. The Burns films, while known for being all-encompassing when dealing with such broad subjects, also have the tendency to be overtly demonstrative as well; eschewing an objective tone in favour of creating a cohesive narrative arc. Burns ultimately is a storyteller, a raconteur. Often, as we see in his films and through his decisions to omit certain facts (for example, battle campaigns in *The Civil War*), he is able to create a more cohesive narrative arc for the viewer to receive. Burns' infatuation with presenting colorful, idiosyncratic characters rather than relying solely on historical facts further illustrates how his films problematise the expository mode of documentary.

This point is crucial, also, when we think of *The Love for the Game* in the context of the expository mode of representation. The film does have elements of the expository within (the history of the game and the rules of play, for example), though admittedly, these moments in the film offer broad brushstrokes when dealing with these subjects. As a filmmaker, my interest is not giving the absolute specifics of the history of the game, or indeed teaching all minutiae of the rules of play; instead, the practitioner is more interested in, at least to a certain extent, a notion of suture. This is to say, we are more interested in weaving a narrative

thread that will allow for some kind of emotional connectivity from the spectator and less interested in revealing absolute truths about the game of Backgammon.

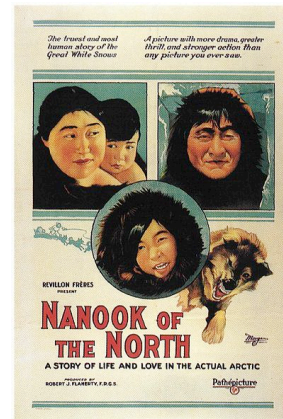
Observational Documentary

This mode of documentary “stresses the non-intervention of the filmmaker” (Nichols 1991: p38). While some critics and filmmakers refer to this mode of Nichols’ theory as *cinema verité*, ostensibly looking for some kind of filmic ‘truth’, Nichols avoids this term as a result of the mire of ethical questions it brings forth:

Since the mode hinges on the ability of the filmmaker to be unobtrusive, the issue of intrusion surfaces over and over within the institutional discourse. Has the filmmaker intruded upon peoples’ lives in ways that will irrevocably alter them, perhaps for the worse, in order to make a film? ... To what extent and in what ways shall the voice of the people be represented? If they are observed by someone else, to what extent do their observations on the process and the results of observation deserve a place in the final film. (ibid: 39)

Now, these ethical problems can be dated back to what is seen as the first truly well known attempt at the observational documentary, and indeed it is seen as the first feature length documentary: Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (1922).

Flaherty is perhaps best known for this groundbreaking work. Audiences of the time were treated to a visual feast where the filmmaker followed indigenous natives in arctic Canada. The spectator was offered cinematic truth rather than a reproduction with actors on a sound stage for the very first time.



Issues of authenticity arise when it is discovered that, in point of fact, Flaherty staged events and skewed the truth of his film in various ways: Nanook’s ‘wife’ in the film, was actually not his wife, Flaherty encouraged the principal character in the film to not hunt with a gun, but instead with traditional Inuit methods,

furthermore, Nanook was not the name of the principal profile in the film (his name was apparently Allakariallak).

“Intertitles in *Nanook*, for example, tell us that Nanook and his family face starvation if this great hunter of the north cannot find food, but they do not tell us what Flaherty ate... Flaherty asks us to suspend our disbelief in the fictional aspect of his story at the price of a certain dishonesty in what he reveals to us about his actual relationship with his subject.” (Nichols 2001: p101)

Flaherty was responsible for reworking his film in order to formulate a narrative that would appeal to an audience looking for authenticity within the construct of viewing indigenous peoples. In talking to Flaherty, Gray notes “because he is an artist and not just a reporter, he places effect, dramatic values and emotional impact above what might be called literary accuracy” (Gray 1950: p42). His deception of the audience was a decision made in favour of creating a world that presents itself as real, even if he must skew the truth in order to achieve such an image. His emphasis and ultimate goal is for a suspension of disbelief, and to create a cohesive story that envelops the spectator. So Flaherty’s film is key when we look at the question of capturing ‘truth’ on celluloid.



The Canon Vixia HF11:
HD camera used for principle photography

How do we then interpret these thoughts on the observational mode in relation to *The Love for the Game*? As we shall see with further analysis into this notion of a Rhizomatic network formation in the film later in this thesis, there are certainly aspects of the documentary that take on some of

the fundamental notions behind the observational mode. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, in attempts to capture this notion of *verité* within the Backgammon community, it was necessary to use a video camera of a certain size. In order to successfully capture moments within, say, the Las Vegas competition without being seen as a hindrance or distracting the players, it was important to have a camera of a small size which would be as unobtrusive as possible and, in the end, blend in as to not be seen or noticed by the people being profiled in the film. The decision to use

the high-end consumer sized HD Canon HF11 (pictured) was key in terms of recording Backgammon players in their element whilst simultaneously remaining unobtrusive.

We can see from the finished film of *The Love for the Game* that remaining unobtrusive is only one aspect of the film. In point of fact, much of the film eschews the observational mode and features interviews with 'talking heads'. The decision to have a smaller camera in this case is to be less intimidating to the interviewed subjects. The prime objective of the film is to capture Backgammon players at their most natural, be it being filmed playing or in the case of being interviewed. Often the larger film cameras will intimidate a subject and they are less likely to remain natural on screen.

As far as the ethics of creating a film that is looking for some kind of cinematic truth is concerned, *The Love for the Game* is primarily a film that is focusing on a narrative structure ultimately and carefully tailored into an intricate web of narrative strands. It is almost as though the observational mode, within Nichols' modal system for analysis of documentary is less relevant than other modes within his system. Though, certainly there is something to be said of the relationship between the filmmaker and subject; at times, I, as a filmmaker was more interested in capturing perceived moments of 'truth' within the Backgammon community, aiming to film moments of triumph or sadness, for example. In these instances it was necessary, from a production perspective, to remain unobtrusive in my documenting of the scene: in Las Vegas, for example, it was my directorial decision *not* to interact with players as they were in the midst of playing, but instead to record them from a distance, so as to not let the existence of a camera affect their reactions. This is where the small camera size comes most into play.

Interactive Documentary

What if the filmmaker does intervene and interact? What if the veil of illusory absence is shorn away? (Nichols 1991: p44)

The interactive mode of representation in documentary film as laid out by Bill Nichols becomes an intrinsic mode at a time in filmmaking when cameras and sound equipment become more easily transportable. Effectively what happens is that with the ability to record sound on location, there is a reduced emphasis on voice-over recording in post-production:

The filmmaker need not be only a cinematic recording eye. He or she might more fully approximate the human sensorium: looking, listening and speaking as it perceives events and allows for response. The filmmaker's voice could be heard... in face-to-face encounters with others. (ibid: p44)

The most prominent contemporary filmmakers with regards to documentary authorship in the interactive mode are Nick Broomfield and the often-controversial Michael Moore. We hear the voices of these two documentarians as they interview subjects. At times, we see the filmmakers as they interview their subjects. This often can lead to a feeling of closeness and reflexivity between the spectator and the documentarian; it is as though we are on a journey with the filmmaker. They act as literal pathfinders, as we view the documentary. They not only function as narrator but also protagonist in their own documentary: they have a narrative arc, so to speak.



Roger and Me theatrical 1 sheet

In Broomfield's documentary *Kurt and Courtney* (1998), we follow Broomfield, himself, on a journey to find some kind of truth regarding the cult persona of Kurt Cobain outside of the eye of the media following his suicide in 1994. Broomfield sets up the structure of his film to appear as though he is the protagonist: he is a filmic sleuth searching for answers about Kurt Cobain and his relationship to

Courtney Love. Clearly the subject of the film is an effort to dig deeper into the behind-the-scenes life of Kurt Cobain, though Broomfield still remains the central figure in the film. Through his interactions with a series of talking heads, we begin to see that he is, in point of fact, the protagonist of the piece. Broomfield achieves this end through showing himself on the quest for truth; following leads and narrating the film in voiceover, giving the spectator insight into the challenges of his quest. As a result, we, as the spectator, feel ease towards him and moreover there is a tendency towards trusting him, as a filmmaker, implicitly.

Michael Moore uses this documentary mode in a similar manner, though the desired effect is something much more politically charged than the films of Broomfield. The polemical style of Michael Moore, as seen in each of his films beginning with *Roger and Me* (1989) through to his more recent indictment of the United States privately run health system, *Sicko* (2007), is a hard-hitting satirical attack with Michael Moore, himself as the main character. In *Roger and Me*, Moore travels back to his hometown of Flint, Michigan on a quest to confront General Motors' chairman, Roger Smith. As with the title of the film suggests, in conjunction with an advertising campaign featuring Michael Moore in a very prominent role, the film clearly centres on Moore and his exploits in his journey towards finding Roger Smith.

Questions of ethics, too, arise within Moore's polemical film as he has been known to make accusations and assessments which are, to say the very least, not entirely truthful. Amidst the production of *Roger and Me*, for example, Moore allegedly was able to confront GM chairman Roger Smith and have an interview with him on camera, though this was omitted from the film for the sake of demonising the chairman, and furthermore, the very notion of meeting with Roger is in direct opposition to the message of the film which states the claim that Smith was perpetually unavailable (Leydon 2007).

The interactive mode of documentary is one that connects itself with this PhD filmmaker and is essential to the discussions of *The Love for the Game*. This is

because of the nature of modes of production; the film being made is entirely a one-man project. The filmmaker, himself, functions as the cameraman, sound recorder, interviewer, researcher and ultimately the editor. As far as an artistic decision with regards to authorial voice, the filmmaker makes aesthetic judgments on the basis of the means he has presented to (moreover, imposed upon) him. What this essentially means is that, through the restrictions of operating the filmmaking equipment as well as being the interviewer, often times, there was often an organic decision to make the film more intrinsically situated within the interactive mode within Nichols' theory.

Moreover, and this notion will be discussed at a greater length in the following chapter, there is the issue that the filmmaker is related directly to the community. What I mean by this is that, I as a filmmaker am situated very much within the Backgammon community. How this affects the documentary film is thus: rather than being the passive observer, standing on the outside of the game/sport, the filmmaker is an active member within Backgammon. The players within the community, then, were familiar with the documentarian and treated me, and hence, the camera, with friendship and affection. It should be noted, however, that with the exception of the opening shot of the film, wherein a laugh (specifically *my* laugh) is heard from behind the camera, there is very little of an onscreen presence from the filmmaker, a creative decision that is very much in opposition to the styles of Broomfield and Moore. This decision, which will be dealt with at greater length in the second half of this written piece, was in part made due to the technological limitations as well as due to a desire to *not* have myself as a focal point within the film⁶.

⁶ As a side note, I do play Backgammon and am a peripheral member of the Backgammon community, though it was specifically not ever an intention of this film to make myself a character within the film's narrative web.

Performative Documentary

The final thesis of Nichols' modal forms of representation is the performative mode. Often compared to and confused with the participatory interactive mode, the performative mode is, Nichols claims, the most recent mode of representation within documentary filmmaking to arise. In his description of the performative mode, we find his definition of the term to be lacking in definite form: it is hard to pin down exactly how the performative mode functions in relation to the other modes mentioned by Nichols. He states, "Performative documentary approaches the domain of the experimental or avant-garde cinema" (Nichols 2001: p134). What this implies is that there is less of an emphasis on the relaying of historical and informative facts within the performative mode than with, say, the expository mode. By the very nature of this, the assumption is that performative documentary, though still clearly in something of a nascent stage of development, dealing with forms of character and expression (of either the filmmaker or a documentary subject).

Performative documentaries primarily address us emotionally and expressively rather than pointing us to the factual world we hold in common. (Ibid: p132)

Nichols discusses the performative mode as stressing the emotional complexity of experience from the perspective of the filmmaker. His definition of performative representation claims that the similarities to the interactive mode, though with an added emphasis on qualities of experience and memory:

These films engage us less with rhetorical commands or imperatives than with a sense of their own vivid responsiveness. The filmmaker's responsiveness seeks to animate our own. We engage with the representation of the historical world but do so obliquely, via the affective charge they apply to it and seek out to make our own. (Ibid: p132)

As with the reflexive mode of documentary (which has not been dealt with in this thesis paper, as *The Love for the Game* is not specifically looking at notions of reflexivity), the performative mode is centralised around issues of authorship and the presence of the author within the construct of the film. When we look at the

performative mode with regards to *The Love for the Game*, however, we must look to Bruzzi's thoughts on the matter. Bruzzi states,

Recently, many more documentaries are emerging that take for granted the existence and inevitable presence of their filmmakers, directly demonstrating the inherent performativity of the non-fiction film. The overt intervention of the filmmaker definitely signals the death of documentary theory's idealization of the unbiased film. (Bruzzi 2000: pp163-4)



Screenshot from *The Five Obstructions* (2003)

A key example of the performative mode of representation within documentary is *The Five Obstructions* (Von Trier, 2003). In this film, we find Von Trier and his colleague Jorgen Leth conspiring to remake a short film of Leth's, *The Perfect Human* (1967), five separate times. The main point of the documentary is that Von Trier insists Leth must remake the film with a series of impositions each time the film is remade. Von Trier positions both himself as well as Leth within the narrative of this filmic experiment, performing to the spectator.

The Love for the Game's relevance comes into play with regards to the performative mode when we look at Bruzzi's comment above. While the filmmaker rarely (if ever) places himself within the frame, the relationship between the participant within frame and the filmmaker out of frame is self-evident in the rapport between the subjects and the voice behind the camera.

Furthermore, (and this will be dealt with at greater length in the second part of this thesis paper detailing decisions regarding aesthetics) the nature of the style of filming also reveals aspects of the relationship between filmmaker and subject. In the case of *The Love for the Game*, functioning as a result of resources as well as the relationship between filmmaker and subject, often we will see instances of low camera angles. This is, in part, due to necessity, though it also becomes a filming device to allow for a more natural response from the participants. Ultimately, on a pragmatic level, there is a tendency towards being camera-shy, and while the

participants were certainly aware of the camera recording, the low angle seemed to give a greater sense of ease.

Let us now look to the nature of the rhizome and how it may function in conjunction with Nichols' modal system of representation. As we have seen, the modes are not without their problems, and often is the case that we see a blurring of boundaries that allow for prominence of multiple modes within any given documentary; certainly, as we shall see, this is the case in *The Love for the Game*.

Family Trees and Rhizomes

Perhaps what is most problematic regarding Nichols' modal system is the notion of a 'family tree'. In essence, Nichols is making the claim that from the origins of documentary film; there is a vertical evolution, a genealogy, in terms of representative modes.

The fundamental problems of Nichols' 'family tree' are that it elides differences between films that fall firmly within one of the identified categories and imposes onto documentary history a false sense of chronological structure dictated by an obsession with the linearity of documentary theory's evolution. (Bruzzi 2000: p41)

If we are to presuppose, as Nichols does, that as far as chronology and evolutionary standpoint are concerned, the first mode of documentary is expository, then there has been a clear progression from that early mode, to the abstracted performative mode.

Nichols shows a clear progression through his modular form: with the inception of both the poetic and expository modes of rhetoric arriving earliest in the 1920s, the modular 'tree' evolves then, to beget observational and participatory documentary modes in the 1960s. Nichols claims that it is only in the 1980s that the reflexive and productive modes of documentary appear in the genealogical tree system, having evolved from their predecessors.

From the very outset of her treatise on documentary theory, Bruzzi is very quick to attack the theorising of Nichols:

Although hybrid, eclectic modern films have begun to undermine his efforts to compartmentalize, Nichols has, to date, identified five modes: the expository, the observational, the interactive, the reflexive and the performative... The premise is that documentary has evolved along Darwinian lines, that documentary has gone from being primitive in both form and argument to being sophisticated and complex. (ibid: p1)

This notion of a genealogic timeline to documentary is troublesome as it imposes, says Bruzzi, a chronological development onto something that is essentially a theoretical paradigm. The expository mode, for example, to which Nichols notes as being the 'first' in the tree, still exists as a mode of representation. Furthermore, there are a seemingly infinite number of examples where we see a combination of expository and observational. Moreover, the function of the voiceover, a fundamental attribute to the expository mode, is used just as frequently now as it was in the 1920s when Nichols claims the mode originated. The modular system of Nichols is ultimately out of date. We may use aspects of his system in helping to come to some conclusions, though it is necessary to look at his theories through the prism of other critical thinking such as that of Bruzzi.

I would like to posit the theory that Nichols' modal system of representation should be viewed less as a chronologically based genealogy but instead be utilised as a nodal system. Having taken on board Bruzzi's criticisms of Nichols' family tree approach, as a filmmaker, I choose, rather than simply rejecting Nichols' work out of hand, to apply the modes he proposes within this more flexible and useful nodal web. I had identified this network progression as a logical extension in the documentary field of the kind of Rhizomatic narrative that I had originally been studying in narrative feature film such as *Magnolia* and *Short Cuts*. Nichols' modal system then can be viewed as a network of attributes that overlap and conjoin at times, and other times will rupture and break from one another. After we remove this notion of a chronology to the history of documentary and simply look at an

evolution in conjunction with technological change (the ability to record sound remotely, for example), we can begin to see that narrative networks and representational networks can co-exist and co-function, rather than be mutually exclusive as Nichols' theory ostensibly delineates.

It is clear that within the advancement of audio-visual technology there has, absolutely, been a progression and advancement in terms of modes of representation within documentary film. Nichols claimed that the expository mode was a means of dealing with a lack of ability in terms of remote audio recording;



Self-reflexive screenshot of Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929)

however, we still see elements of the expository mode within film today (as seen in the case of Ken Burns as well as more generic television documentaries seen on the History Channel).

The reflexive mode, furthermore, is one that Nichols posits as being something that arises much later on in the 1970s, yet if we look to Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera* (Vertov, 1929) we see that there are aspects of self-reflexivity within his film: there are sequences where Vertov literally frames both himself with movie camera as well as his wife editing strips of film within the montage, revealing the filmmaking process to the spectator.

When we discuss notions of self-reflexivity within documentary film, we must think to the democratisation of the form: with the arrival of cheaper, smaller digital video recording equipment becoming increasingly available, there is less of a need for a large amount of financial backing in order to create documentaries. Furthermore, it becomes a simple task for a filmmaker to situate him or herself within the frame if that is the desired effect. As mentioned prior, this very film being presented as a PhD submission was produced with very little resources on a consumer model high definition digital video camera with a production crew of one; of course we will see

aspects from a number of different modes from Nichols' system in this film as the technology has allowed for these modes to flourish simultaneously. The question is this: as the technology progresses and becomes available to a wider array of filmmakers, do the modes of representation blur and intermingle?

It is clear that as documentary film has progressed as a medium, there have been innumerable developments in the modes of representation, though as we reach the contemporary we see merging and overlapping occurring time and again. Of course, we still see the expository style of voice-over used in documentary filmmaking. Ken Burns, for example, has very clearly not changed his filmmaking aesthetic since he began working in public broadcasting in the 1980s. The technology has progressed and, most certainly, made modes of production more easily achievable than thirty years ago, though *The National Parks: America's Best Idea* (2009) shares an almost identical aesthetic to, say, *The Statue of Liberty* (1985).

In her text that makes attempts at re-examining documentary theory from a counter-Nicholsian standpoint, Bruzzi finds various problems within Nichols' genealogy construct. Quoting documentarian Errol Morris, Bruzzi makes the key point that the insistence of documentary theorists to look at texts through prisms striving towards some kind of cinematic 'truth' seemingly misses the point:

It is no longer technical limitations that should be blamed for documentary's 'contradictions' but rather the expectations loaded onto it by its theorists. It can legitimately be argued that filmmakers themselves (and their audiences) have, much more readily than theorists, accepted documentary's inability to give an undistorted, purely reflexive view of reality. (Bruzzi 2000: p6)

It is with this understanding, that there is a gap in the theoretical and academic knowledge base with regards to narrative structure specifically, that *The Love for the Game*, and supporting literature become essential with regards to theory-based practical documentary filmmaking. With regards to scholarly texts pertaining to documentary theory, there is very little written with regards to narrative structure: how the story of the documentary is displayed to the spectator from a formalist

perspective. There is some time given to narrative structure within documentary filmmaking how-to manuals, though it is still an underdeveloped concept in this forum as well.

Furthermore, we will see how *The Love for the Game* makes attempts at attributing a Rhizomatic form to the ways in which it presents information, creating a web not only of narratological strands, but also strands of intention and modes of representation. Within the Rhizomatic network being presented as a documentary film, there are a number of 'lines of flight' (to borrow a Deleuzian turn of phrase) which, in the context of my work, relate to narrative pathways. However, we will also be able to look at each of these strands and see that each of their modes of representation is unique and mutually exclusive from other strands within the rhizome. Therefore, Nichols' modal system becomes fractured when implemented within the Rhizomatic network that I am proposing as both a theoretical model and practical framework for my film.

The genre of documentary that has been mentioned to this point, though not closely examined is what is being referred to in this paper as the 'competitive hobbyist' documentary. I would choose to describe this as a sub-set of documentary that very much lends itself to being approached from the vantage point of the Rhizomatic narrative and one that has only recently emerged, creating its own language and structures. The documentary film, *The Love for the Game* represents an addition to this relatively small (though growing) genre of film.

Research deductions

With an understanding of previous research into documentary representation of narrative and reality in conjunction with Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome theory, we can begin to see some of the theorizing that informs the filmmaking behind *The Love for the Game*.

Obviously, when embarking on the production process of a film (be it documentary or fictional narrative) a considerable amount of time is taken up in pre-production planning and theorizing. How will the film be constructed? How can the filmmaker implement a Rhizomatic model to this documentary about a board game? Is the rhizome relevant to the filmmaking process? Moreover, from a practitioner's perspective, there is the very visceral understanding that in spite of theorizing, the filmmaker must allow for the narrative to organically grow.

Part two of this accompanying thesis paper closely examines the production process and examines the narrative structure of *The Love for the Game*. Then we can begin to understand how in making this film where the main objective is to tell a story surrounding the game of Backgammon, the process grows from the concepts of the Rhizomatic narrative in correlation with an organic filmmaking process.

The Love for the Game:

A treatise on the state of Backgammon

Backgammon is an ancient and fascinating game, a gambling game which requires both luck and skill. With a single roll of the dice a winning position can crumble or a seemingly hopeless position can be salvaged. (Magriel 1976)

The production journey of *The Love for the Game* (2010) has been an arduous and educating one. As a filmmaker and academic with a interest in narratological structures, the production process of this film has been a task which ultimately has confirmed my ideas regarding Rhizomatic narratological approaches to film. The practical film and written thesis confirm my research, focusing on both the fiction film as well as documentary narratives.

The second part of this doctoral thesis paper is therefore devoted to making a closer inspection of the methodologies, decisions and discussions to how the documentary feature length film, *The Love for the Game*, was constructed. The focus of this project was derived from an interest in developing and synthesizing the Rhizomatic narratological theory with a practical application to film production. The film was also made as a cinematic form of homage to the game of Backgammon and the niche community attached to the game that I felt deserved to be documented.

Why Backgammon?

As discussed in the first section of the written content of this PhD in film by practice, the decision ultimately became that my research goals would be best realised in the form of a practical thesis. As a practitioner, the research methodologies that I had been inspecting with regards to narratology from an entirely theoretical standpoint, were rather best suited to being presented in the form of a practical filmic text: the ultimate goal being to have a symbiotic link between practice and theory within my PhD research.

The next task, then, would be to develop a narrative based film, lasting no less than sixty minutes in length, which would exemplify the research that had been

undertaken to this point in the field of narratological structures. The film would be specifically looking at narrative models that resemble networks or webs, eschewing the notions of a primacy of a singular narrative thread as posited by David Bordwell with his notion of classical cinema.

Developmental directions changed from the idea of creating a fictional narrative to exploring documentary fields when I was approached by members of the United States Backgammon Federation (USBGF) and asked if I would be interested in filming promotional material with the aim of creating a higher level of exposure to the game of Backgammon in the United States. Whilst the film would ultimately be a project conceived independently (financially speaking) without any monetary support of the USBGF, throughout the early stages of development as well as deep into the production process, there was certainly an understanding that one of the prime priorities within the filmic narrative would be to support and promote the USBGF throughout the film.

Amidst discussions with The Federation, I began to think of ways in which it would be possible to produce a feature length documentary about Backgammon as well as the community surrounding the game within the United States. While documentaries dealing with competitive niche groups had been made, none (to my knowledge, at that point) had been made with Backgammon as a subject. Furthermore, it became clear to me that it would be absolutely possible to implement my own academic research with regards to presenting a network featuring multiple characters, spaces and priorities all converging and intertwining within the development and production of the desired film. In point of fact, the narratological structures that I had been investigating – those fictional narratives whose network systems resembled that of the rhizome - would seemingly be appropriate for a film of this nature.

I would later discover that there is a documentary film by Israeli filmmaker Ben Bachar that is something of an expose and biography of world-renowned Backgammon professional, 'Falafel', entitled, *Falafel's Game* (Bachar, 2005). *Falafel's*

Game focuses mainly on the European and Middle Eastern / Israeli community of Backgammon players. While there is some crossover in terms of participatory talking heads between the final cut of *The Love for the Game* and *Falafel's Game* (Falafel, himself, features as a talking head at one point in my own film), the films both come at the game from very different angles. *Falafel's Game*, in keeping with Bordwellian notions of classical narrative cinema, remains intrinsically linear and constructed around a central protagonist; the film is essentially a biographical expose on Falafel and his relationship to Backgammon. In contrast, the documentary that I was developing would be of an entirely different structure, allowing for a multiplicity of narrative strands that connect and diverge from one another, develop in parallel, give primacy to particular voices at one point only to move on to another subject later; in short, the Rhizomatic structure I had been positing was intrinsically different to the expose on Falafel.

Having spent some time, prior to developing a documentary, immersed within the backgammon community of New York City, there were certainly some observations I had made which led me to a stage where I felt that dealing with this niche community would be an appropriate idea for a feature length documentary.

Firstly, the concept of a 'found community'; a community *not* structured from the tone of one's skin or from one's religious beliefs, for example, but rather a community built on a mutual interest in a shared activity, was something I was immediately attracted to. I deemed this name appropriate with regards to the Backgammon interest group because of the nature of the collective of people: it is the individual that seeks to find a collective with a shared interest.

The community, as we see within the film, is tight-knit in spite of a vast spatial divide between all participants. The term 'professional backgammon player' is something of a misnomer in that the majority of those who are part of this community continue to work outside of Backgammon – this is not their principle job, but it is this community that makes their identity. 2009 ABT champion, Ray Fogelund, makes the point of saying in the film, "I'm a firefighter by profession and

Backgammon player by avocation” (*The Love for the Game*, 2010). So the game, therefore, becomes a unifying force within one of the ‘nodes’ of the narrative network in the film that creates this said ‘found community’ as a culmination of a widespread network of individuals.

Furthermore, Backgammon, as a game that has been in existence for such a long period of time that it seemingly transcends cultural and economic boundaries. It is a game that can be shared by (and we would ultimately see this in *The Love for the Game*) the rich and poor, the intellectual elite as well as by leisurely players:

Perry Gartner: “It’s fascinating and it’s captivating to people on all socio-economic levels. Backgammon can be played as an intellectual game on a very high level, or it can be cool and fun and exciting and challenging at a relatively low level of play”
(*The Love for the Game*, 2010)

So, as a practitioner, it then becomes intriguing to be able to tell a story of an all-encompassing game that seems to attract a well-spoken and lively group of people. Essentially, these people are attractive to the documentary filmmaker because they are passionate, articulate – I felt that their story needed to be told. Films within the competitive hobbyist genre seem to capitalize on the innate eccentricity of these niche groups of relentless enthusiasm, to have such a diverse, yet verbose group of participants helped in giving me the enthusiasm towards documenting these players.

Methods and approaches

“Structure is the foundation on which story is built, whether it is being told in person, in a book or on a screen. It is the narrative spine that determines where you start the story, where you end it, and how you parcel out information along the way.” (Bernard 2007: p42)

Following the decision to make the then untitled Backgammon film, there was the question of narrative structure. How can this documentary film cause us to rethink

some of our assumptions about conventional narrative structure in documentary more generally as well as the competitive hobbyist documentary in particular? As we are interested, from an academic standpoint, in the issue of structure, we look to ways in which this film can appropriate and expand upon the ideas that make up the Rhizomatic narrative.

It seemed clear to me that at least some of the film would be devoted to an examination of one or more of the many Backgammon tournaments that occur throughout the country. What, then, becomes the focus of the film? Would it be a series of participant profiles, much akin to something in the likes of *Spellbound*? Instead should the film appropriate more of a nodal structure similar to that of *Trekkies*, a film that is also examining a niche interest group with a vibrant community surrounding it, though with less of a formalized and conventional structural through line? Moreover, could the film more closely resemble *Wordplay*, a film that makes attempts at approaching its niche interest group in an innovative manner, though ultimately falls back into the convention of following a series of contestants towards the ultimate goal of 'winning the final'?

Now, in the course of the filmmaking process, the documentary practitioner cannot create the circumstances that have been thrust upon them. Of course, the filmmaker can dictate the course of action to a certain extent, though with the absence of some kind of ideological agenda, I was interested in, to a certain extent, allowing the film to grow organically; allowing the interviewees, to some extent, to help in dictating what direction and what drive the film would have. The rhizome as a root system, after all, is an organic entity: nodes and branches (or 'lines of flight') deviate from one another in a random way and so the film, as an embodiment of the Rhizomatic narrative, must allow for this process to occur. Nodes within the Rhizomatic story structure, then, become essential when construction of this narrative



Ginger Root - The Organic Rhizome

path begins. That said, unlike the nodal network of the aforementioned *Trekkies*, this film takes on the attributes of a rhizome – it is essential that there is a horizontal thrust to the narrative; there must be a sense of perpetual motion.

As far as the notion of allowing for organic growth within documentary and more specifically this Rhizomatic approach to documentary filmmaking, we are *not* positing that other documentary film's narratives are not organically discovered, indeed, quite the contrary. The competitive hobbyist film *King of Kong* (Gordon, 2007), for example, was originally intended to be an expose of 8-bit video arcade machine enthusiasts. It was not until the emergence of the deep-seated rivalry between two competitive *Donkey Kong* players, that the film's narrative arc became apparent (Gordon 2007).

The Rhizomatic narrative structure being utilized in *The Love for the Game*, however, is also applicable within an organic development process, though with less of an accent on the linearity of a singular narrative thread and more of an emphasis on the interconnectivity of multiple strands of narrative. *King of Kong* develops organically but then relies on a very binary structure (namely the rivalry between two key players). *The Love for the Game*, though, refuses such a binary position as it allows for a more complex, rich and layered documentary that engages not only with various protagonists/subjects but also a network of 'representational modes' to return to Nichols' term.

The first task in preparation to begin shooting this documentary was to think about the sets of priorities that had been emplaced upon the film. The priorities within the film ultimately become a series of nodes within this Rhizomatic network of the film narrative as well as narrative nodes, and are a necessary part of the network.

Principally, the film is a Backgammon film. It is a film that is made with a specific agenda in mind: to generate interest from the general public through informing them of the game. What are the methods that I am able to implement within the documentary to fulfill the task of generating an emotive response from a non-backgammon related spectatorship? This would, in the end, prove to be a very

difficult question; one that would not truly be answered until the post-production process was well underway.

Secondly, the game is exciting and fun to those who are involved, though from the outside, the game can be baffling. I realized that there would be a great challenge ahead, from a filmmaking standpoint, to try and make the game of Backgammon visually interesting and dynamic to a spectatorship that is unfamiliar with the game. In doing so, the seemingly clear objective, then, was to explain the game and its history in a manner that is visually engrossing.

Thirdly, the principle aim within the production and postproduction stages, was to search for ways in which the narrative form of the film, aiming to resemble the rhizome, can be enabled and moreover *how* would this Rhizomatic system be generated. Ultimately my goal is to produce a completed film that does *not* adhere to the previously utilized structural guidelines of the competitive hobbyist genre inasmuch as I am trying to extend and augment the narratological form of the genre.

The first plan of action, in fact, was to follow several participants as they headed towards a common goal – while this might seem to have been a counter-intuitive manner of approaching the collection of data as it would be falling back on pre-conceived narratological procedures, I felt that I would be able to focus on narratological structure and the rhizome more in the editing suite. By emulating a pre-existing procedure whilst in the stage of collecting footage, I thought I would be able to re-formulate and re-order the narrative paths in post production. The objective was to find the single most important Backgammon event in the United States and follow four participants as they prepare for this final tournament. Through this structural template, the spectator would be given access into the lives of Backgammon players, ranging from a variety of different racial and socio-economical backgrounds.

Logistically (and from a very early stage in production) this planned narrative method would prove to be a problematic way of undertaking this documentary

film's principle photography period. The nature of the American Backgammon Tour (ABT) is such that there are over twenty separate events held within the United States throughout the year, furthermore, there are no 'finals', *per se* – each of the events are ostensibly as important as any other. In many ways, then, the ABT format would be conducive to the nature of a Rhizomatic narrative: there is always a general thrust towards the end of the year, though the network of tournaments does, indeed, resemble the very kind of Rhizomatic narrative system that we are exploring in this thesis.

The event within the ABT staff are connected inasmuch as there is a unified points system, though they are all autonomously run by separate organisers. In addition to this, there is no guarantee that any of the participants filmed would necessarily be attending all of these ABT events. As mentioned before, as a result of this, a more organic method ensued with regards to principle photography – the filmmaking process, according to my research concepts, would be fluid; a more structured web would be crafted in the editing room. Thus the 'story' of the very structure of the organization I was documenting (the ABT) was, arguably best suited to be told in the kind of Rhizomatic narrative structure that I was exploring in my practice-based research.

Aesthetics

The Love for the Game opens with a joke. Jerry, a regular on the Backgammon tour, tells the story of a boy and his Grandmother who teaches him how to play Backgammon. As Jerry comes to the punch line, he proclaims, "When I play Backgammon, I play for blood!" followed by the sound of a bellowing laugh (my own); the filmmaker immediately within the opening moments of the film, becomes an element within the Rhizomatic network being displayed. The laugh indicates to the observant viewer a presence behind the camera: a subtle indication that my arc within the rhizome as filmmaker, member of this 'found community' as well as

backgammon enthusiast is also one of the lines of flight that will converge and diverge with various other narrative pathways within the film. However (and as I hopefully made clear in the earlier section on performative documentary) the fleeting presence of my laugh in the opening moments of the documentary is absolutely not intended to mark the documentary in the absolute or controlling way that we find in the case of Michael Moore or Nick Broomfield's work, where their relationship to the subject becomes arguably the central focus of the film.

I open this section on aesthetics looking at the opening shot as an indication of how I chose to frame the film and to give indication of the 'home-grown' style of camera work which would become a key element to the film's entire aesthetic. From a very early stage within the development process of *The Love for the Game*, questions regarding aesthetics and *mise-en-scène* came into play. The pragmatics of the production process (the need to move between multiple locations at short notice to obtain interviews) combined with the financial constraints I was working under (as the sole financier of my own film) were such that I would be responsible for the majority of the camera work within the film in addition to functioning as an interviewer.

The decision to function as camera operator in addition to directing would not be a negative experience, quite the contrary. The reality of the situation was as such that I was entering into this community of Backgammon players and was interested in capturing their actions on camera in hopes that affectation and histrionics from players would be at a minimum. If there were to have been a larger crew on site at these tournaments and in the parks where I had been filming, I would have likely generated a very different film.

Backgammon does not generate the commercial and media interest that a game such as poker does at this point in time, and the players, as such, are not used to being recorded: the camera, therefore, was to remain as unobtrusive as possible. Moreover, the fact that I am a known face within the Backgammon community allowed for a potentially more 'authentic' open and less mediated 'performance'

on the part of the subjects who were not accustomed to having cameras follow them in a tournament environment⁷.

Early on I made the decision that, depending on what was being situated within the frame at the time, the aesthetic quality of the camera-work change accordingly. In this respect my aesthetic choices were mirroring the desire for the film's narrative to develop organically and not to be bound by classical or continuity style, or indeed dominated exclusively by one 'mode' of documentary representation. Certainly, in the case of interviewing Bill Robertie, as the 'expert' and historian, for example, it was appropriate to use a tripod and to have a more conventional expository style. The expert is situated in front of books; his own personal library, there are no hand-held shots, the lighting is high for optimum visibility.

Conversely, the nodal point within the film where we meet Antoinette in the park playing Backgammon, the more colloquial atmosphere allowed for a more fluid, hand-held camera operation. There is even a point within this park sequence that I, as a filmmaker and interviewer, allow myself to be placed within the frame briefly.

As we shall see, amongst the interconnected nodes that make up the network of *The Love for the Game*, there are clear aesthetic differences from sequence to sequence. With the transitions from one nodal point to another within the film, so do we see subtle aesthetic variation from node to node. Let's now look more closely at the Rhizomatic network of *The Love for the Game* to see how it has been configured and how these aesthetic divergences allow the spectator to understand lines of flight between the nodal sections.

⁷ Unlike, for example, leading poker players who have become used to participating in televised competitions. The presence of a camera has become normal within poker play to the extent that a kind of filmic grammar for shooting poker is emerging - e.g. the under the table shot looking through the glass to see the cards and cutting between players at key moments - my documentary has none of these things.

The Rhizome in *The Love for the Game*

Let us suggest the supposition that interconnected within the nodal points of the narrative network mentioned earlier, that there are these series of branches. Each of the branches, or 'lines of flight', is representative of a narrative pathway within the film. Typically, when discussing the narrative pathway of a character within a film, the terminology of 'an arc' is reserved (Field 1979). In the case of this Rhizomatic narrative, yes, the participants are on journeys, of sorts, though the geometric shape of the arc does not prevail. Instead, in this collection of nodes, participants travel from node to node, their story progressing, though intertwined and converging with other participatory branches, ultimately creating the entangled web of this rhizome.

So the Rhizomatic network for *The Love for the Game*, then, becomes a series of nodal points interconnected by these converging branches. The branches are representative of both central participants to the film, as well as sets of priorities and agenda to the film. At moments, the branches converge upon nodal points for example when we see Antoinette watching the youth backgammon competition in the final tournament in New York.

We have had the opportunity in the first part of this thesis paper to look at some of the Deleuzian / Guattarian theories behind notions of the rhizome. Moreover, we began to look at how this Rhizomatic concept had been implemented within my research with regards to narrative film and then furthermore, into the ways in which we approach documentary narrative.

The Rhizomatic concept, then, seems to be an appropriate method to examine films, either fiction or non-fiction whose ontological approach to narrative construction is non-linear, fragmented and spatially fractured. This is to say, films that construct a narrative through a series of interconnected, though at times disparate nodes, at times converging with one another and at times rupturing each other's pathways.

Let us look then in more detail at how this notion of the Rhizomatic narrative specifically interplays with the PhD thesis film being presented.

The completed film, *The Love for the Game*, much like the aforementioned *Trekkies*, is a nodal film. It is a film that has a series of sequences that are connected through character and space, though ultimately are not specifically leading towards a traditional arc of a narrative through line. What this means is that whilst, for example, the spectator is given information into the life of Antoinette, a key figure in the film, outside of the world of Backgammon, the film is not specifically about her, *per se*. She, instead, represents one of the many branches of the Rhizomatic structure. Granted, Antoinette stands for an essential branch within the Rhizomatic narrative web of the film, being a principle node whose pathway intersects with a variety of other strands, though still the crux of the film is not specifically her journey.

Instead, the film's nodal points are a series of distinct spaces, times and personae. What this means is that this film, whose principle focus is Backgammon both as a game but also as a broader subject beyond simply the game, focuses on these separate but equal subjects through these interconnected nodes in the same way that we might look at a sculpture: from a variety of angles and perspectives. As an example, we can look at the ancient history of the game, which represents one of the nodes within the film, and then we might be able to inspect how boards are manufactured, which would represent another of the nodes within the web. Each of the 'angles' or perspectives on Backgammon represent a node within the Rhizomatic web of *The Love for the Game* sometimes overlapping, co-existing and converging, yet at other times, these nodes fail to unite.

The nodes are also represented through the characters that make up the film. Obviously there are some key participants within the film that help to maintain a sense of connectivity throughout the documentary's narrative. Antoinette proved to be a very crucial focal point to the film, and while she was not necessarily the prime thrust of the narrative, her availability to the production allowed for her narrative to

feature prominently within this Rhizomatic network. Let us look then, at some of the key figures who contributed to the production of the film and how they, as nodal moments within the film contribute to the Rhizomatic narrative of *The Love for the Game*.

Nodal System

Making a documentary is, or should be, a process of discovery that begins with questions rather than answers. First you question yourself to find the quest you embarking on... Then you go out into the real world and keep asking questions. (Hampe 2007: p167)

This quote from Hampe's instructional manual on the production of documentary was a key way for me, as a practitioner, to undergo the filmmaking process. In taking time to question the concept behind creating this documentary film, I was able to formulate something of a plan to undertake the project.

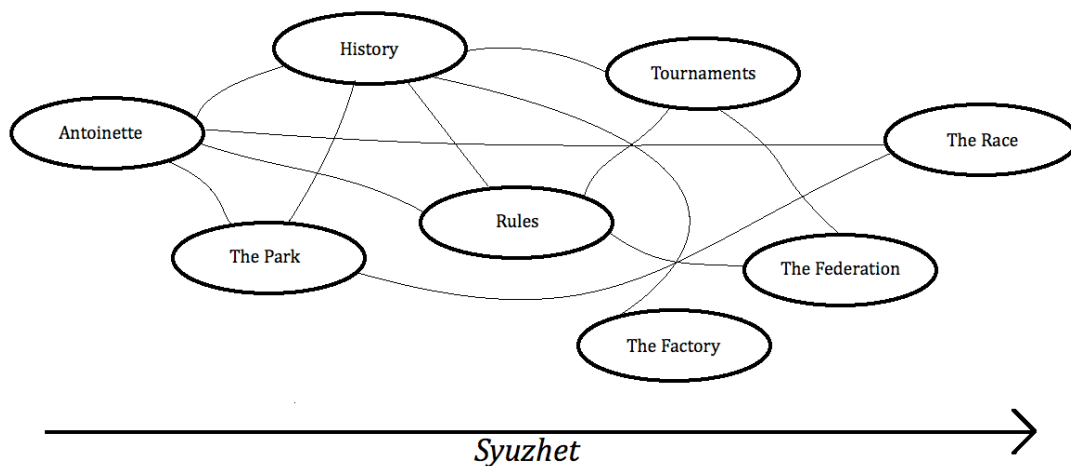
The goal then was to create a story about Backgammon as a network with multiple interconnected narrative strands that at times meet, yet at times are disparate. To this end, both times and spaces within the film (this is to say, the times and spaces of the varying nodal sections) would ostensibly be disjointed and mutually exclusive from one another. To take a direct example from the film, the narrative path of Antoinette in her journey towards racing in the park is disparate from her relationship to Backgammon tournaments.

As can be seen in the final cut of the documentary *The Love for the Game*, there is a great deal of participants of varying significance to the narrative structure of the film. While there are a series of more prominent participants (Bill Robertie, Antoinette Williams, etc.), other participants are less prominent 'talking heads' who were interviewed at tournaments or in the park location.

The participatory characters who function as talking heads within the film are essential to the very notion of this Rhizomatic narrative. If we are to adopt more of the Deleuzian terminology in an explanation of the Rhizomatic narrative we would utilise the notion of 'lines of flight' as discussed in *A Thousand Plateaus*, "multiplicities are defined by the outside: by the abstract line, the line of flight or deterritorialization according to which they change in nature and connect with other multiplicities" (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: p9-10). What is meant when we allude to this particular quote by Deleuze is that these nominal characters serve the network through embellishment of nodes within the rhizome. Furthermore, in addition to the notion of divergence and convergence of the varying nodes discussed, without the talking heads serving as lines of flight between nodal sections, the Rhizomatic narrative of *The Love for the Game* would not be able to function.

If we were to map out the narrative network of *The Love for the Game* in the same way that we have mapped out the narrative through-lines of *Spellbound*, *Wordplay* and *Trekkies* mentioned as precursors in part one of this piece, it would look like this:

The Love for the Game (2010) Rhizomic Network



As can be seen by this map, the nodal framework akin to the likes of *Trekkies* has been maintained, yet *The Love for the Game's* network (unlike that of *Trekkies*) maintains a steady and strong horizontal sense of movement resembling the rhizome from whence it obtains its name. The nodes presented (and will be dealt with one by one specifically in the following chapter) are not arbitrarily placed, they are specifically structured to function in this horizontal manner allowing for a cohesive narrative through line, whilst also managing the multiple pathways within the network.

To hark back to the formalist terminology discussed in part one of the thesis; the *syuzhet* signifies *how* the *fabula* (story) is executed. Within the Rhizomatic structure, then, we look at the *syuzhet* to be something of a horizontal flow. In the case of this Rhizomatic structure, the *fabulae* (plural as there are multiple strands and nodes within this film) flow from left to right. The *syuzhet* then is how these branches are interconnected together.

As mentioned before, the differing perspectives / sections are represented as the nodes within this Rhizomatic structure. The participants who are involved as interviewees, then, are essential to the creation of these said nodes. What this means is participants and the spaces they occupy are the embodiment of the nodes which make up the rhizome. Let us then look at how this nodal network became established throughout the production process. As mentioned before, in keeping with the notion of the organic rhizome, the production process was just that – organic - thus, the creation of these nodes occurred as such.

1st Node – Backgammon History

With the assistance of Antoinette as a champion of the idea of a documentary dealing with Backgammon and serving as an integral starting point and a wealth of contacts, I was able to locate the names and connection details of some of the more prestigious members of the Backgammon community within the US. Antoinette was always intended as one of the participants within the film, though her involvement

at this stage, as far as her contribution as an on-screen participant, was still to be peripheral – she had stated that she would like to help out in anyway possible, though the development of her narrative had not come to full fruition. Through her involvement within this niche interest group of Backgammon from the 1970s till present day, Antoinette represents a cornerstone and catalytic agent in my ability to access a number of individuals who otherwise would not have been receptive to the concept of a documentary and the imposition of being interviewed.

Immediately, the first person that I was able to be in contact with was Bill Robertie. Robertie, based in Boston, Massachusetts, is a key expert within the Backgammon world as he is responsible for publishing over ten Backgammon books, with major publishers. As an interviewee, Robertie would prove to be a veritable font of knowledge providing his willing involvement. Furthermore, in addition to an interview, Robertie would presumably be able to allow an even deeper access into the pool of Backgammon contacts that could prove to be crucial interviews for this documentary.

Robertie, following his very keen acceptance to be interviewed for the film, then appropriates the role of ‘the expert’. What this means is that while Robertie’s personal narrative may be of great interest, I decided it was of more importance for him to function as the objective expert and thus his personal story was to fall by the wayside to his contribution as an historian and perhaps the foremost authority on the rules and history of the game. Because Robertie is introduced in the film as such, the spectator can make the assumption that Robertie is the objective voice within the film. Admittedly, we do see him jest towards the end of the film when he makes a joke about Backgammon players having prostate problems, though by this stage of the *fabula* he has already firmly established himself as the authority and this comment shouldn’t undermine that fact.

While Robertie is never utilized in the form of a voiceover, he is functioning within *The Love for the Game* as something akin to the ‘voice of God’ as posited by Nichols with regards to the expository mode of representation:

Exposition can accommodate elements of interviews but these tend to be subordinated to an argument offered by the film itself, often via an unseen “voice of God” or an on-camera voice of authority who speaks on behalf of the text. (Nichols 1991: p37)



The use of Robertie as an authoritative voice within the film, particularly with regards to the history and the rules of the game, though also weaving in and out of other nodes, functions as lines of flight within the Rhizomatic network.

Robertie allows the film, at times, to fall into conventional modes of documentary representation at times (expositional, observational), while at other times branching away; a further characteristic that we might associate with this idea of the Rhizomatic narrative.

Robertie, functioning within the Rhizomatic network of the film, flirts with a variety of the nodal points of the film: he is responsible for leading the discussion of the rules (a problematic sequence within the film for a number of reasons that will be discussed later in this paper), he also acts a principle speaker in the history sequence within the film, as well as making comments in the section that would ultimately be titled ‘risk/reward’. Robertie’s role within the film is certainly not unconventional with regards to documentaries. The role of the expert is a key component of many documentaries from a variety of the modes of representation.

Indeed, the point should be made that many of the participants and interconnecting nodes within the film may, certainly at first glance, appear to be conveyed in a similar fashion to the documentaries that have preceded it within the competitive hobbyist genre. It is imperative that we recall that what this thesis is positing is not that the Rhizomatic narrative form is necessarily something entirely new within documentary, but rather the approach to this narratological pathway is expanding the knowledge base within the genre of documentary we are referring to as the competitive hobbyist film.

So with Robertie being the first key voice within the film, the production began to look at other ways of expanding upon the idea of Backgammon as an abstraction of various nodes functioning as differing perspectives of the game: what other perspectives are available for this game?

2nd & 3rd Node – Pragmatics to a Game: the factory & rules of the game

In addition to the history of Backgammon, as a filmmaker, I search for other avenues of inspecting the game. The final goal of this film is to create a feature length documentary wherein Backgammon (the all encompassing history, community, rules and personae surrounding the game) can also be seen as one of the central character. Put differently, while the participants of the documentary are key, the game must have the prime focus.

The second avenue, then, was to document the Backgammon industry from its enormous popularity boom in the 1970s in US through till present day. While the popularity of the game was never fully sustained, there is still a small, though thriving industry that surrounds the game and its players to this day. With regards to looking at the manufacturers of the actual board that Backgammon is played upon, I felt it would be essential to this film which is looking at *all* facets of the game of Backgammon to see the process of making boards. Though there are many smaller manufacturers of Backgammon boards within the United States of America, the most prolific commercial American manufacturer of Backgammon boards is Crisloid Products Inc.⁸. The company has been in the games manufacturing business since the 1940s based out of Providence, Rhode Island. I was able to get in touch with the owner of Crisloid, Jeff Caruso who very kindly invited me up to his factory to film the Backgammon board production process.

I did pursue the developmental tangent of trying to find higher-end Backgammon board production lines with a smaller output of boards at higher cost. Tak Morioka, a resident of Chicago, Illinois, for example, is known throughout the Backgammon

⁸ <http://www.crisloid.com/>

community for handcrafting high-end Backgammon boards⁹ typically bought by the professional players. Morioka, I felt, would be an excellent balancer to show in contrast to the factory based fabrication of boards. Unfortunately, Mr. Morioka was not available for an interview at any of the Backgammon tournaments I had attended as a filmmaker, and therefore was unable to have the opportunity to see this other side of Backgammon board manufacturing.

The inability to shoot the manufacturing of the Morioka boards, while frustrating at first, was ultimately not an enormous problem. Caruso's Crisloid factory was, contrary to my initial pre-conceptions of the company, an interesting aesthetic experience with a rich narrative unto itself: Backgammon was once a popular game and Crisloid was responsible for the majority of boards to be made within The United States. He claims that his factory, at one point, housed over seventy employees to help with the large output of Backgammon boards. The factory now only has four fulltime employees. As a filmmaker, I was intrigued with this story: the story of the demise in popularity and how it has affected the game and its core players since the initial craze in the 1970s.

The Crisloid factory node also becomes emblematic of a moment of fissure in accordance with the description of the Deleuzian rhizome. Not all pathways are neatly interconnected with one another; in this case, the narrative pathway of Jeff Caruso became a rupture in the Rhizomatic web. Perhaps a more conventional route would have been to follow the path of a board manufactured at the Crisloid factory as it makes its way to distributor and then ultimately a player. I chose *not* to do this as I felt that the Crisloid node could finish incomplete – his factory still produces, though there is no coda to his narrative and it seemed appropriate from a narratological standpoint to allow this moment within the narrative thread to break in a moment of fissure.

So within the first two weeks of production on the film, I was able to generate the impetus which would be the beginnings of the production process: a production trip

⁹ <http://www.chicagopoint.com/takboards.html>

to New England to interview both Robertie and Caruso in their places of work and to begin the extrapolation process into discovering where the narrative of this film would begin.

Various specific issues of the current state of Backgammon had surfaced on the production trip to New England. The main points that had revealed themselves to me were with regards, as mentioned, to the demise of the game. Robertie, for example, in spite of his celebrity throughout the Backgammon world, seemed to have lessened his involvement within the Backgammon world in favour of pursuing professional poker. In point of fact, he had so deeply moved into the world of poker that he has been responsible for one of the most critically acclaimed series of books on poker methodology to be released in the last ten years (Robertie and Harrington 2006). Off camera, Robertie had expressed to me that professional poker was an alluring distraction for the Backgammon professional due to the monetary rewards.

I initially thought that this would possibly be a narrative pathway I would follow. As a filmmaker looking for narratives to explore, I was drawn to the idea of Backgammon falling to the wayside in favour of poker. How had one game increased in popularity so much while the other falls into virtual obscurity? This would become one of the Rhizomatic nodes I chose to follow throughout the production process, often asking participants (including featured interviewees such as Antoinette and Robertie) what their views were on the rise of popularity with poker in contrast to the decreasing number of tournament Backgammon players.

I chose not to include poker as a focal point within *The Love for the Game* for one principle reason: within the editing process of the documentary, where the Rhizomatic form of the piece would fully take shape, I felt that any comparison to poker would somehow lessen the impact of the film. What I mean to say is that I was more interested in documenting a rebirth of Backgammon autonomously from the gambling world; with the omission of poker as a major through line, I felt that renaissance of Backgammon through the Federation (as we will see in the 5th node) would be of greater emotional impact. Whilst in the final cut of the film poker is not

dealt with specifically, there certainly is an emphasis upon the notion of Backgammon as a dying tradition and asks participants within the community how they feel that the game may recover from this steady decrease in popularity.

4th & 5th Node – Tournament & Park

Following New England, the production process took the film to Las Vegas. The Nevada Open, one of the three larger tournaments on the professional Backgammon circuit, the American Backgammon Tour (ABT), were kind enough to give the film permission to shoot coverage at the 2009 event.

Prior to having arrived in Las Vegas, it became very clear to me that, if there was a question regarding an enforced chronology within the context of the film, the narrative would begin at the Riviera in Las Vegas. The location is exotic, it would have been an opportunity to film a convergence of a number of differing participants from all over the United States and furthermore it would be a good opportunity for me, as a practitioner, to attempt full coverage of the event filming as a lone filmmaker without a crew.

Within the editing process, the decision was made, that rather than opening the film focusing on the Las Vegas tournament as a starting off point, the film would instead utilize this node later in the piece. The lack of emphasis on chronology would allow for this event (which occurred in November, 2009) to be placed towards the end of the film, coinciding with filmic nodes that occurred much later. This eschewing of a strict / conventional chronology in the film – or a linear approach that would build the narrative tension of the documentary to a final event (cf. *Spellbound*) was a further indication of my desire to promote a Rhizomatic rather than linear approach to documentary form.

If the film were to follow a collection of players who frequent the tournaments on the ABT circuit, the film would be similarly structured to another competitive hobbyist film that hasn't been mentioned up to at this point; *A League of Ordinary Gentlemen* (Browne, 2006). Browne's film follows the resurgence of the

Professional Bowling Association (PBA) of the United States as they are rebranded following a lull in popularity in the 1990s. Browne follows four bowlers, who are at varying points in their career, as they make attempts of claiming (or in some cases re-claiming) the glory of winning the PBA tour. The film, unlike that of *Spellbound* and *Word Play*, shows a series of competitions chronologically following each of the players as they find successes and failures along the way. As a means of humanizing and detaching the participants from exclusively tenpin bowling, the spectator are also given a glimpse of what the lives of the players are like *outside* of the world of bowling.

If the film were to take on the narrative structure as shown in *A League of Ordinary Gentlemen*, it would be a difficult undertaking. In addition, this could possibly be counter-intuitive to the narratological priorities laid out by me as a practitioner in the developmental stage of the film. *The Love for the Game* is quite specifically looking to not emphasise chronology. Yes, there are certain aspects of the film which appropriate elements of linearity: the spectator first sees Antoinette learning to ride the hand-crank cycle and later in the narrative web we are re-introduced to her when she is ready to perform in her first race. Furthermore, the history of backgammon, from the earliest discovery of the game through to the 1970s if, for the most part, structured chronologically.

While this is the case, there is certainly not an *emphasis* on time: we are interested instead at capturing the essence of the game in/at *this* moment. We are interested in capturing how so many people are affected by the game and how their lives have changed as a result of the game. There is no specific reference, for example, to the chronological placement of the tournament in Las Vegas, or for that matter, the sequence of Antoinette and others playing in the park in Harlem, *when* these sequences occur are of little importance when compared to *how* they reveal backgammon as a game which ostensibly continues to be played, in spite of a decrease in popularity. The linear chronologies that are expressed are secondary to capturing the essence of the game through this style of portraiture.

My presence at the five-day tournament was a success in several ways. Firstly and



most importantly, I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to interview some key professional Backgammon players who are not based in New York (the city where I was living throughout the filming of this documentary).

Neil Kazaross, the Armenian American who is noted as being one of the best players in the world was happy to give me some time to talk about his relationship with the game. Ray Fogerlund, another great within American Backgammon gladly spared me some time to be able to talk to the camera. Both of these men, who add to the rich tapestry that had already been growing, were able to give me some insight into the game beyond the likes of Robertie and my visit with the Backgammon factory: these men are still in the game. Unlike Robertie, who ultimately turned his back on the game, these two men (in addition to a collection of their peers) had stayed in the professional game of Backgammon in spite of the financial benefits of professional poker.

The filming of the Las Vegas tournament was also a successful endeavour with regards to documenting the nature of a typical Backgammon tournament within the ABT. The nature of Backgammon tournaments are such that there is a certain amount of luck involved with regards to reaching the final rounds of tournament play; as is mentioned in the film, the game is dice based and therefore, in addition to the skill of play involved, a player must be prepared for the element of chance to come into play. Because of the amount of players involved in the Las Vegas tournament in 2009 (seventy-four entrants in total), it would have been virtually impossible to have interviewed and tracked the progress of all players involved.

As a documentarian, then, I had made the decision to interview and track the records of only a small sample size of players. The hope was that at least one of the six participants tracked would survive to the final stages of the tournament. One of the key interviewees Mike Corbett, a professional Backgammon player and author,

was fortunate to progress to a stage of play that would allow for his narrative to be documented on film. Furthermore, Corbett continued throughout the tournament to win the first place prize.

As a result of having the footage of Corbett progressing through the entire five-day tournament through to the final stages of the Nevada Open, as a filmmaker, I was confident that the coverage shot would substantiate to the point where it would be a suitable node within the film. I would be able to visually display this crucial tournament in completion.

6th & 7th Node – Antoinette & the race

Perhaps the most prominent of the participants within *The Love for the Game* is Antoinette Marie Williams. As can be seen from the description of the production process, not only was Antoinette a key participatory figure within the filmic frame, but fundamental as far as coordinating key contacts within the film, as well.

Let us look at Antoinette's involvement in the film as an on-screen persona. She participates as a pivotal character within the film, who not only features in many of the nodes within this



Rhizomatic network, but also, is the embodiment of one of the nodal paths as we watch her renaissance, for lack of a better word, as she manages to overcome the supposed limitations of her own mobility caused by Multiple Sclerosis (MS) through leading a very active life in spite of her limitations as well as racing using a hand-crank cycle.

Antoinette's involvement in *The Love for the Game* stems from her involvement in the community of Backgammon on a variety of levels of play; she will play on the streets and in the parks, she will also compete at the highest level of play against some of the world's best players.

Antoinette is an African-American woman and thus represents a very small minority within the professional Backgammon community. Her inclusion also offers a line of flight within the narrative to draw in other spectators (most obviously female and/or black spectators). She is a principle figure within the community in spite of her perceived other-ness given that the majority of the participants within professional Backgammon are predominantly middle-aged white men. Certainly what can be seen in the documentary is that whilst the game does have a universal appeal, the upper echelon of the game is occupied typically by white males ranging in age from approximately forty-five through to eighty. As seen in the film, this is problematic, and ultimately was the reasoning behind the creation of the United States Backgammon Federation (USBGF) as a means of broadening the appeal of Backgammon to a larger audience. This was also one of my reasons for wanting to include voices and participants in the documentary such as Antoinette and, indeed the children interviewed towards the end of the film: to provide evidence of the existence of a more diverse bedrock of Backgammon players and the need for their incorporation into the structures of the game's governing body in the United States if Backgammon is to have a realistic chance of surviving as a popular pastime in the US.

As development began on *The Love for the Game*, Antoinette's role in the film was to be one of five or six principle participants who would have been followed over the course of a year leading towards a final tournament. As we can see from the final cut of the film, the decision was made in post production that this would not be the best possible avenue to allow the film to function in the Rhizomatic manner that is being explored in this thesis with a focus on narratology and alternative narrative structures.

The question within the production process then becomes, 'how is Antoinette able to function within the narrative?' She, perhaps more so than others related to the film as participatory members of the Backgammon community had made herself fully accessible to me as a filmmaker; agreeing to be filmed in her life outside of the

world of Backgammon. As an articulate and educated interviewee, Antoinette seemed to be intuitively aware of what was required as a participant in relation to the film: this is to say that her interviews were lively and vivacious needing a minimal amount of direction. As an interviewer, I was able to ask Antoinette quite broad questions and she would be able to talk on any subject for an extensive amount of time.

In my time documenting Antoinette's life activities outside of Backgammon, it seemed very clear to me as this was occurring, that she was very specifically making attempts at showing the camera how much of an active person she was – essentially trying to ignore her impairment and continue on with life without having MS be a serious issue; ultimately intent on creating an identity (both on and off screen) wherein the mechanised wheel chair she sits atop does not configure. In our interviews, she certainly at first was reticent to talk about the subject and only when specifically asked a question about her disability situation would she answer – though even when specifically addressed, Antoinette insists on making light of her disability and that she rides in the mechanised chair, as she says, “To get around! To speed where I need to go!”

Only when pressed, did Antoinette begin to open up saying that she was very clear about her intentions to learn how to race on a hand crank cycle; her ultimate goal to be able to cycle in the New York City Marathon in 2010. Antoinette was kind enough, for two days, to allow access into her day-to-day activities outside of the world of Backgammon. It was in this time, when we are able to see Antoinette in a state of physical rehabilitation, which she opens up as a character in this narrative - her narrative pathway being so distinctly different to those who surround her within the Backgammon community. We follow her as she struggles through physical therapy, making attempts at overcoming her physical impairment. In interviews, Antoinette discusses MS as though it does not factor in her life, though ultimately, in her actions, we see that she has some kind of acceptance of her situation.

Her transition to the hand crank cycle was an interesting one from a narratological perspective. It was clear to me, as a practitioner, that Antoinette's journey as an amateur racer was a story that deserved to be told. The narratological question for me, then, was how it would be possible, not only to include the narrative tangent of Antoinette as a cyclist, but furthermore, how this narrative path would function in relation to the film. Antoinette is a Backgammon player, though it was crucial for me to be able to find thematic links as well which would situate a story about a woman's new beginnings in the world of competitive sports in relation to Backgammon as a game.

Admittedly, it had taken some time before I was able to formulate a narratological structure web that would be able to incorporate Antoinette's story into the framework of *The Love for the Game*. Firstly, there was a reasonable hiatus in between the time I was able to view one of Antoinette's first practices on the hand crank cycle and the Achilles Hope and Possibilities Race¹⁰ in New York's Central Park that she was involved with. Secondly, during the winter months in between these two moments, I had been focused on structuring the film around the newly forming Federation that would, in due course, become a nodal point of the film as well.

The tangential nature of the Rhizomatic narrative structure, ultimately lends itself to Antoinette's story in relation to the narrative pathway of Backgammon, as presented in the film. The film's inherent structure allows for a variance in plot threads within the web. Antoinette connects back to the other nodes within this Rhizomatic network: she competes in tournament play, her introduction to the game coincides directly with its zenith of popularity, she discusses the history of the game in the 1970s when she talks of her time playing backgammon in the discos for five dollars a point. So the establishment of Antoinette as a firmly ensconced member of the backgammon community both in higher level play as well as in the parks in New York City has been successfully achieved. The key moment in

¹⁰ <http://www.nyrr.org/races/2010/r0627x00.asp>

Antoinette's narrative path is the internal realization, in the final moments of the film, that Antoinette's journey as a hand crank cyclist is following the same arc as she had when she first started to play Backgammon:

“[Racing] is like my first time learning to play Backgammon. Something that I didn't know how to do, and now that I have made the achievement it is going to be something that I continue to do and go out there and push myself to get better at it – because I'm determined.” – Antoinette (*The Love for the Game*, 2010)

The parallels of Antoinette's story outside of Backgammon are twofold. The correlations to the game of Backgammon manifest themselves in that, as mentioned above, Antoinette reaches a stage of self-reflexivity that allows her to understand this re-birth. Instead of finding her identity in Backgammon, she is finding a sense of identity through her racing. We can even see this exemplified in her choice of wardrobe: throughout the film, Antoinette (of her own volition) can be seen wearing backgammon paraphernalia when in frame (t-shirts, jackets etc); it is only post-race, however, that Antoinette makes the subconscious choice to eschew the backgammon wardrobe in exchange for her medal and racing bib.

Furthermore, and perhaps more fundamental with regards to the rhizome of the film, Antoinette's narrative arc thematically mirrors the arc of Backgammon. Returning to Bordwell's terminology the *fabula* of the film establishes Backgammon as a game that is literally dying as popularity continues to wane and professional players, for the most part, are aging and there is little interest being regenerated in a younger assemblage of players. As the film progresses, we see that with the establishment of a federation, a unionised association of players intent on publicising the game to a newer audience, the game is at the threshold of a renaissance.

8th node – The United States Backgammon Federation

The culmination of the arc of the game of Backgammon as a central focus within this Rhizomatic network in *The Love for the Game* can be seen in the nodal point within the film which pertains specifically to the United States Backgammon Federation. As mentioned before, the USBGF was certainly one of the pivotal lynchpins with regards to early development of this documentary film. If it were not for their involvement at such an early stage, the film might never have come to fruition in the way it has. Former executive chairman of the USBGF, Rod Covlin, was one of the early champions of this project and legitimately sees the film as an avenue to attracting more people to the game of Backgammon.

It should be said, however, that the film is *not* a propaganda piece. Certainly it was noted in an early stage of development of the film that, in spite of the cooperation from the USBGF, I as the filmmaker, would retain creative control with regards to content. Yet, in spite of full creative control, there is the obviously self-evident agenda within the film as an avid and active Backgammon player myself: revealing and promoting the game of Backgammon to a wider range of spectator through some sort of emotional connectivity to the community attached to the game rather than as an educational platform for the game to be explained.

The first tournament of the year (in this case, 2010) on the American Backgammon Tour is New York City, having their tournament days after the New Year holidays. In having discussions with various people involved with the USBGF, it became apparent to me that this would be the venue of the first public announcement of the USBGF and make a drive for membership to the newly founded organisation. Furthermore, in addition to the announcement of the USBGF in a public forum, Lynn Ehrlich, the event organiser for the New York Metropolitan Open, had been responsible for coordinating the first year of a 'Junior' tournament wherein children under the age of 16 would be allowed to compete, for free, in a friendly environment which would help them to learn more about the game. One of the Federation's main

concerns is to attract a younger audience, and what better way to do so than to orchestrate an event that allows them access.

The combination of these two inextricably linked events at the New York Tournament was a great opportunity for me, as documentarian, to capture this pivotal moment within the US Backgammon community. Moreover, it would be a rare opportunity to interview and to hear opinions from some key participants within the Backgammon community who are directly linked to the new Federation.

Conclusions & Convergence

The diagonal frees itself, breaks or twists. The line no longer forms a contour, and instead passes *between* things, *between* points. (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: p557)

To conclude, as a filmmaker, this PhD has led me to pose this final question: how am I to apply the Rhizomatic narratological methodologies to my own work as a practitioner? In essence, the Rhizomatic narrative is successfully applied and is ultimately beneficial because of a broader set of issues and questions that surround documentary theory with regards to narrative structure. I open this section with a quote from the concluding remarks of Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* for specific reason: to expressly exemplify the liberalizing nature of the Rhizomatic network within a narrative context. As a practitioner, there is a need for the filmmaker to understand on a theoretical level the necessary departure from conventional form and ways to discover newer narratological approaches within films with numerous priorities.

The Love for the Game, then, becomes a film that not only portrays multiple narrative strands that both intertwine and interconnect, but also depart and break from one another. Yet, the film has not been abstracted to the point of impenetrability: the narrative structure is accessible as the multiple strands of the story interact with one another.

As mentioned in part one of this written piece, there is a noticeable gap within documentary theory with regards to narrative structure. Key theorists Barnouw (Barnouw 1993) and Nichols (Nichols 1991) as well as the more contemporary interventions by scholars such as Bruzzi (Bruzzi 2000) have shown that there is a fundamental interest within documentary theory inspecting notions of authorship and modes of representation and authenticity; these subjects are dealt with at great length. It is important to understand where the author is situated within the filmic text, especially considering the preconceptions surrounding the notions of truthfulness that are implied when discussing documentary theory. Yet, it is very difficult to find academic texts analysing the narratological structures of the documentaries examined. There have been, however, a series of how-to manuals, geared directly at the documentary practitioner, that do spend some time dealing with narrative form, though their analysis is ultimately basic and often harks back to notions of a three-act structure as dictated by classical narrative fiction film.

This thesis, *The Love for the Game*, hopes to offer a bridging of the divide between the 'how-to' manual intended specifically for the practitioner and the theoretical documentary texts that are aimed quite directly at creating a discourse within academic environments. The film and supporting text, aim to show a synthesis of theory and practice in the development of the Rhizomatic narrative structure within documentary film.

The Love for the Game is a film that inspects and ultimately sympathises with a community as well as a culture of reasoning. The participants of this professional community of Backgammon players struggle to broaden the appeal of the game, contending with a series of issues that impede their ability to make the game more popular to a wider audience. Within the film we also see the personalization of struggle with the quest for rebirth of identity with the narrative pathway of Antoinette Williams, a professional backgammon player herself. The very nature of the multiplicities which co-exist within the narratological web of *The Love for the*

Game lend themselves to being crafted into a network which we refer to as Rhizomatic.

Leading on from the creation and placing of these series of nodes which would ultimately be intertwined within the Rhizomatic network that would make up the body of the film, the filmmaker is forced to ask some key questions with regards to compositing narrative threads in the editing suite: What is the subject that I am dealing with? How is it possible for me to extract not only information from my participants, but furthermore, enable them to allow for the construction of some kind of narrative?

The film's Rhizomatic web deals with a number of interconnected narratological strands which are connected to one another on a literal level, though also parallel one another and fragment one another in a thematic sense. The narrative network of *The Love for the Game* gives voice to a series of narrative strands pertaining to various participants, such as Antoinette, through giving them a degree of autonomy in allowing their narrative pathways to navigate themselves organically through the Rhizomatic network.

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A League of Ordinary Gentlemen, Christopher Browne (2006)
Baseball, Ken Burns (1994)
Belly Button, David Hewitt (2004)
The Brooklyn Bridge, Ken Burns (1981)
City of Hope, John Sayles (1991)
The Civil War (TV), Ken Burns (1990)
Crash, Paul Haggis (2004)
The Daily Show (TV), Chuck O'Neil (1996-2010)
Dekalog, Krzysztof Kieślowski (1988)
Eclipse, Jeremy Podeswa (1994)
Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, Michel Gondry (1994)
Falafel's Game, Ben Bachar (2005)
The Five Obstructions, Lars von Trier (2003)
Hoop Dreams, Steve James (1994)
Jazz, Ken Burns (2001)
King of Kong, Seth Gordon (2007)
Kurt and Courtney, Nick Broomfield (1998)
Magnolia, Paul T. Anderson (1999)
Man With a Movie Camera, Dziga Vertov (1929)
Memento, Christopher Nolan (2000)
Monster Camp, Cullen Hoback (2007)
Nanook of the North, Robert Flaherty (1922)
Nashville, Robert Altman (1975)
The National Parks: America's Best Idea, Ken Burns (2009)
One Day in September, Kevin MacDonal (1999)
Pulp Fiction, Quentin Tarantino (1994)
Roger and Me, Michael Moore (1989)
Short Cuts, Robert Altman (1991)
Sicko, Michael Moore (2007)

Slacker, Richard Linklater (1991)
Special When Lit, Brett Sullivan (2009)
Spellbound, Jeffrey Blitz (2002)
Spirit of the Marathon, Jon Dunham (2007)
Star Trek, Gene Roddenberry (1966-69)
Star Trek: The Next Generation, Gene Roddenberry (1987-94)
The Statue of Liberty, Ken Burns (1985)
Traffic, Steven Soderbergh (2000)
Trekkies, Roger Nygard (1997)
Trois Couleurs: Blanc, Krzysztof Kieślowski (1994)
Trois Couleurs: Bleu, Krzysztof Kieślowski (1993)
Trois Couleurs: Rouge, Krzysztof Kieślowski (1994)
Under the Boardwalk: The Monopoly Story, Kevin Tostada (2010)
Wordplay, Patrick Creadon (2006)
Word Wars, Eric Chaikin (2004)
21 Grams, Alejandro Iñárritu (2003)