As we might watch

What might arise from reconsidering the concept of interactive film?

Abstract

To date, an interactive film form has been conceived of in terms of branching, multi-linear narratives predominantly drawing on the mechanics of the computer games industry. The interactive engagements that have been produced within this framework have failed to revolutionise either the gaming or the film industry, leading the director Peter Jackson to remark on the announcement of his deal with Microsoft to develop the form, that his team still have to "work out how to do it" (Waters: 2006). Might this apparent stalling in the production process actually arise from an incomplete consideration of the potential of interactive film? Film and interactive experiences have much to offer each other beyond simply altering the narrative structure of a linear story. In this light, a rethinking of the modes of address afforded by an interactive environment, both in new media and more traditional narrative form, highlights a new territory that might be created by merging their agendas, rather than attempting to reconcile their forms.

In his introduction to *McSweeney's Mammoth Treasury of Thrilling Tales*, the collection's editor Michael Chabon proposes that the staple form of modern short fiction: "the contemporary, quotidian, plotless, moment-of-truth revelatory story" (2003: 6), with which the medium has been enamoured since the middle of the last century, may in fact be stifling experimental narrative development. Advocating a return to the values of pulp fiction; of plot and of genre; Chabon suggests that we must look to the past in order to revitalise the future of short written fiction. Assessing that introduction in light of interactive artefacts illustrates the degree to which Chabon's position might be pertinent to the future convergence of interactive media and film:

> "Imagine that, sometime about 1950, it had been decided, collectively, informally, a little at a time, but with finality, to proscribe every kind of novel from the canon of the future but the nurse romance. Not merely from the critical canon, but from the store racks and library shelves as well. Nobody could be paid, published, lionised or cherished among the gods of literature for writing any kind of fiction other than nurse romances."

Chabon's alternative present illuminates the nature of contemporary interactive design, particularly with regard to a nascent interactive film form. The field has been encouraged and pushed in equal parts toward a constant recycling of motifs and themes, offering little in the way of genuinely neoteric[1] development. The promise of an early convergence of film and new media, identified by David Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin as "*interactive films*" was a form by means of which "the new medium remediates by trying to absorb the older medium entirely, so that the discontinuities between the two are minimized" (2000: 47). This strategy of remediation, of absorbing the qualities of an existing form into the new, has produced a genre of computer games (for example - Myst, Doom, and the Resident Evil series) within which the impact of classical cinematic form has been presented successfully in new media, but with no corresponding development in the language of film and audience.

Bolter and Grusin's thesis identifies the presence of remediative strategies in illusionistic[2] painting and photography, proposing that "they are all attempts to achieve immediacy by ignoring or denying the presence of the medium and the act of mediation" (2000: 47). That desire to break free of the mediative action, to place the viewer in the same space as the subject viewed, informs their exploration of the nature of remediation in new media. By positioning the viewer thusly, immediacy of reception is achieved, and the

frame of the medium itself is at least partially removed. Simultaneously, the nature of new media as hypermediated - multiple screen views offering a cacophony of content, produces a tension between the viewer's perception of immediacy and their experience of distinct media elements. Critically though, this exposes a flaw in the logic of remediative strategies in new media. By desiring, as they express it "to borrow avidly from each other as well as from their analog predecessors such as film, television and photography" (2000: 9) remediated new media content exposes itself to the risk of simply repeating the initial difficulties of expression encountered by each predecessor. Certainly, new media cannot operate in cultural isolation from other media forms, but by embracing this strategy, its potential is curtailed, and in doing so, any opportunity to genuinely develop an interactive film form is strangled at birth.

Interactive narratives have long offered the promise of emergent experiences, a narrative flow determined by the reader of the text, rather than its author. Geoff Ryman's *253*, Jorge Luis Borges' *The Garden of Forking Paths* and Michael Joyce's *Afternoon* all represent structuralist experiments with interactive narrative form. Each proposes a form of story governed by formal rules and devices. A degree of interactive playfullness is present in each, but as a byproduct of the form, rather than one embedded into its purpose, offering each reader an experience that is usefully considered in line with behavioural definitions of play, rather than a reading dependent on literary analysis. Ryman's work is dependent on repeated reading, the pleasure of experiencing each path through the narrative is the result of each course apparently representing a unique route through the conceit of the structure. Borges' text, representing the primary model for much practice in hypertextual narrative to date, offers a reading of the universe as possessing innumerable possible futures, each experienced as the path taken by a life lived through individual moments of decision and consequence. *Afternoon*, while retaining the formal qualities of early hypertext, modeled on Borges' narrative, is nevertheless designed to have a 'superior reading' or 'sequence', one that results in the conclusion of the narrative being reached. However, this is a sequence that serves to, as Jill Walker (Walker 1999) points out:

> "ease the new reader into reading Afternoon. Reading this sequence gave me enough background information to start enjoying the leaps between story lines, and to understand connections where I'd earlier only been confused."

Further exploration of *Afternoon* yields its richness; escaping the confines of linear text is the ur-purpose of the structure Joyce employs, rather than its result. In both Ryman and Joyce's work though, there is a deliberate effort on the part of the author to instill a structure to the reader's experience of their texts. Formal

devices are employed; Ryman uses a diagram of a tube train to 'restrain' his reader, Joyce the confines of

linked nodes in hypertext; and by means of this subtle 'control', the reader is denied an experience of true

narrative agency within an interactive environment. Both authors resist the lure of postmodern freedom; their

reader is not permitted the free-form exploration offered within a wider reading of the internet, rather they

are guided into patterns designed to maximise their pleasure inside the interactive text. In terms of

interactivity, they are constrained within a text authored from afar. The equivalent, in cinematic terms, of

selecting an alternate camera angle through which to watch unfolding action on the screen, or following a

minor, rather than major character's actions. Rather than desiring the freedom of exploration, the interactive

reader is comforted by the knowledge that the multiplicity of their destinations will eventually converge.

Ernest Adams' 1995 presentation to the Computer Games Developer's Conference addresses the territory of

Bolter & Grusin's "*interactive movie*". Adams' proposition, that:

> "I think, in truth, interactivity and storytelling are in an inverse relationship to one another. I don't
>
> actually want to say that they're mutually exclusive, but I do think that the more you have of one, the
>
> less you're going to have of the other, and vice versa,"

highlights the tension between an author (or director)'s desire to tell a story, and their audience's expectation

of some facility to alter its outcome. Ten years later, Adams developed this theme, pointing out that

interactive film, modeled on a form derived from computer games, would produce:

> "this problem of logical consistency, or at least internal consistency. We've got this problem of
>
> narrative flow, of getting the player to the dramatic climax, all prepared for the dramatic climax. And
>
> we've got this problem of amnesia.[3]"

The detail implied in Adams' complications come clearly to the fore if the nature of film, computer games

and a merged form of the two are compared in summary:

	Classical Film	Computer Games	'Interactive' Film (drawing on Bolter & Grusin's suggestion)
Logical Consistency	Author is in control - characters behave within guidelines	Player engagement is constrained by the plot and circumstances of action	Problematic - the player has free will, and will probably act on it
Dramatic Climax	The pace and story threads determine the point of narrative climax	Driven by level, score, linear direction of play	Inherently difficult - the reader will choose when to finish the story
Character Amnesia	Third-person viewing perspective affords the writer control over information	Artificial - Second-person player perspective only allows information to be released as and when required	Hugely problematic - First-person viewer perspective results in character/reader not understanding scenario

A hybrid interactive film form, as offered by a remediative strategy, appears unduly problematic in this light. The competing desires of author and audience are difficult to resolve while considering an interactive film as a discrete object.

Furthermore, a viewer of classical film form expects to be able to reach the final reel and have the story satisfactorily concluded. A participant in emergent interactive fiction is apparently afforded no such closure. On what basis then, do they decide that the story is complete?

Susan Sontag (2007) obliquely addresses this issue in her essay *Pay Attention to the World*, in that she proposes "a writer of fiction...creates - through acts of imagination, through language that feels inevitable", and later in the same essay, "characters in a novel act within a time that is already complete, where everything worth saving has been preserved" (Sontag: 2007). The accusation Sontag levels against interactive narrative, that its emergence is symptomatic of "the ideology that has come to dominate departments of literature in many major universities... feeding at the same trough of standardised entertainments and fantasies of eros and violence manufactured in the United States, Japan, wherever", and furthermore, that "we do not expect to have to write other peoples novels for them", in this light, appears to possess some merit. Interactive narrative that possesses no defined 'right answer', a superior reading, might indeed present the reader with an "endless expansion of words".

However, Sontag's resistance to the pleasures of interactive authorship denies her the opportunity to address the traces of story she suggests the likes of Henry James have resisted including within *The Portrait of a Lady*. Later in the same essay, Sontag expresses a desire for Isabel Archer to leave her husband for Caspar Goodwood[4]. Considering Espen Aarseth's notion that interactive texts can be defined more widely as *ergodic* (developed in *Cybertext* (Aarseth 1997)), signifying an act of reading that requires non-trivial effort to negotiate, it is arguable that Sontag wishes, ergodically, for a more unified ending to Henry James' novel, and while she is content to grant James his rights as author of a world with borders, her desire reveals a tension between an author's right to closure and their reader's fragmentary visualisation of those margins of story. Later she rightly points out that "A novel is not a set of proposals, or a list, or a collection of agendas, or an (open-ended, revisable) itinerary. It is the journey itself - made, experienced and completed", but her position excludes the possibility that if the narrative, and arguably story[5], is a journey, then the negotiation of that travel is made between both parties; the author and the reader[6]. Only on completion is the reader privileged to recognise the route. The extension of Bob Hughes' suggestion that experiencing interactive narrative presents "the duration of the present moment" (Hughes 1997) is a shifting of the usual perspective of journey from one that lies in front of us (the duration of a TV show or film) to one that becomes apparent, as Sontag suggests for the novel, only after we have completed the path.

Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy*, written in such a manner as to deny the reader an objective, closed, perspective on events, is narrated by a first-person observer who refuses to use the personal pronoun to situate himself. As Bruce Morissette (1981: 9) suggests, "a first-person narrator who, however, never says 'I' and whom one never sees or hears, draws us into an identification with him, installs us in the 'hole' that he occupies in the center of the text". This situating of the reader as observer, as a flâneur, works to free the reader from the closure of an imposed narrative exposition. Their need to explore and divulge meaning addresses the tension between Sontag the reader and James' writing. An alternate reading of *The Portrait of a Lady*, in which Isabel Archer's refusal to forsake her scoundrel of a husband is actually a prelude to self-discovery is no less valid than James' decision to leave the tale told on the note he does. If Archer is capable of existence inside the mind of the reader, then responsibility for her fate is a shared pact between author and audience. George Steiner's (2001: 141) metaphor of an intertextual narrative echo, by which means "the burning of Virgil's Troy comes after that of Dresden in fresh immediacy" illustrates the reproductive role of context in regard to the reader and their participation. Sontag's refusal to consider sharing the task of

authorship speaks not only to a distrust of interactive media, but also to the responsibility of the reader in the creation of a world.

Returning to the metaphor of the journey might serve us well here. A journey taken is realised as such at the point where a destination is reached. Events that occur along the way; stops, lane-changes, meals, meetings etc, are experienced as part of an emergent narrative dictated by the act of leaving one place and arriving at another. Iain Sinclair's walks across the landscape of London are only finished in terms of an act of recalling the experience. As Sinclair (in Meacher: 2005) describes it:

> "The process of movement, moving a body through space, is writing; and when I come to write, I'm just re-remembering, re-experiencing, shaping, revising, editing. I'm not going to give an account of the entire experience; I essentially want to register the high moments and the connections of that experience, which I will scribble down immediately at the end of the day because otherwise I'd forget things"

As such, the journey undertaken by an interactive participant becomes a series of Sinclair's 'high moments'. If an interactive film can induce the pleasure of such disorder in concert with a sensation of underlying structure, then the participant's version of events, Sontag's 'made, experienced and completed journey', becomes the superior reading she desires.

Within a merging of the agendas of film and interactivity, then, what might be the methodology for offering such a route?

Jorge Luis Borges' *Tlön Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* centres on the discovery, within a fictional encyclopedia, of entries detailing the customs and practices of an obscure middle-eastern state called Uqbar. Borges crafts the story in the first-person, requiring the reader to believe in the existence of not only Uqbar, but in the *Anglo-American Cyclopedia*[7] that, in a unique edition, contains the information signalling entry into the narrative, and in turn, in the '*First Encyclopedia of Tlön*', whose assembly is discussed during Borges' tale. Much has been written on Borges' tactic of inventing a text whose existence drives his narrative forward, the author himself commenting (2000: 5) that:

> "The composition of vast books is a laborious and impoverishing extravagance. To go on for five hundred pages developing an idea whose perfect oral exposition is possible in a few minutes! A better course of procedure is to pretend that these books already exist, and then to offer a resume, a

commentary . . . More reasonable, more inept, more indolent, I have preferred to write notes upon imaginary books."

Borges' tactic, employed, among others, by Umberto Eco in *The Name of the Rose,* Eduardo Sanshez and Daniel Myrick in *The Blair Witch Project* and Mark Danielewski in *House of Leaves*, asks the reader to participate in the construction and maintenance of an illusion. In addition to simply reading a narrative, they are complicit, in their assumption that each imagined text referred to exists outside of the narrative, in calling those writings into existence. This subtle displacement of the reading experience (in that no action is required on the part of the reader; the displacement occurs naturally) is used to a lesser extent within all fiction; the reader conjures into existence characters, settings and motivations described by the author; however Borges, Eco, Myrick, Sanchez and Danielewski conjure something more than simply a reader's imagination. Initially, the fictional realms of Tlön, Uqbar and Orbis Tertius only exist within the volumes described by Borges' text. However, evidence subsequently surfaces that this may not be the case. Borges raises questions about the nature of the creative act: might imagination, to some extent, manifest reality? The interactive process, as has been suggested earlier in this paper, represents an opportunity to co-author an emergent text. If the displacement of reader into participant within Borges' text is reminiscent of an ergodic reading experience, it might be through similar instances of narrative - and reading - disruption, that interactive authorship manifests itself.

Narrative displacement, though, is requisite on the reader encountering the text. Within traditional film, this act is achieved by purchase of a ticket to a performance; a moment of active engagement with the 'journey ahead'. Interactive narrative though, as proposed above, manifests as the 'journey taken' by the reader. The first act of interactive authorship is to determine the reader's initial encounter with the interactive territory itself. Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) typically feature a 'rabbit hole', entry into which indicates a willingness on the player's part to engage with the text presented. These points of entry; websites that request users sign up and create login details or emails inviting participation in a game-grounded activity; manufacture the first stage of a consistent alternate reality. An interactive film within the bounds of this paper, however, is designed to be viewed by an individual rather than a team of geographically dispersed players. The terms upon which that reader encounters it necessarily differ from an ARG's rabbit hole. Dan Hill, Director of Web & Broadcast at Tyler Brûlé's *Monocle* made mention of *Lost*'s emergence as a meta-level new media artefact in 2006. The television show, already discussed and dissected across a wide range

of forums and blogs, became defined by a use of new media suggested by Steven Johnson in *Everything Bad Is Good For You*, that, as Hill (2005: 28) puts it,

> "The amount of content produced about your content should be of far greater weight than the originating content itself. This in turn creates a new kind of content, forged from a social process of collaboration with users, viewers, listeners."

As with *House of Leaves*, *Lost*'s ability to generate independent content reliant on the textual information present within the ongoing series, establishes it as a centre for 'ripples' occurring across the landscape of new media. As demonstrated by these two examples[8], all that is needed to begin the generation of what Johnson labeled "*para-sites*" is a sufficiently engaging, interwoven source text. An interactive film, then, ought to be able to access this function of narrative, extending the existence of the interactive object beyond its formal, authored boundaries.

In light of Marshall McLuhan's (2005: 497) observation that "Official culture still strives to force the new media to do the work of the old media. But the horseless carriage did not do the work of the horse; it abolished the horse and did what the horse could never do," it is tempting to shrug off the mistakes of existing digital narratives, and expect that the new 'animal' will emerge as a result of experimentation and logical development within new media. Yet, thus far, the degree to which directors have been willing, or able, to engage with that experimentation has been limited. The principles of ARGs, wherein an extended narrative is presented across multiple websites and short, interstitial film clips, affords a model for considering a more significant future. Film, as film, is unlikely to be superseded by the emergence of interactive media. The audience's engagement with an authored narrative remains a key aspect of the viewing experience. A properly interactive, neoteric merging of film and new media might differ from both traditional and interactive narrative form in that without the participation of an active audience, the story-object has no tangible existence.

Within such an environment the act of interaction itself gives rise to narrative.

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[1] It is the belief of the author that it is incumbent on new media to develop a language by which content produced for it genuinely operates within the frame of the medium, rather than solely relying on a production and critical framework belonging to an earlier mode of address. 'Neoteric', defined here as 'being of recent origin; modern', is suggestive of such a status.

[2] The Italian tradition of illusionistic painting applied a Renaissance-led confidence in handling perspective upon the painted surface to projects for ceilings in order to overcome the problems of applying linear perspective to the concave surfaces of domes in order to dissolve the architecture and create illusions of interior space.

[3] Simply put, that since players enter a game scenario with limited understanding of the narrative environment and character, their actions are subject to an in-game 'amnesia' as regards the world within which the game takes place.

[4] Sontag notes that as he completed *The Portrait of a Lady*, Henry James confided in his notebook '*his worry that his readers would think that the novel was not really finished, that he had* "*not seen the heroine to the end of her situation*"'.

[5] The Russian Formalist distinction between *fabula* (a chronological series of events represented in a fiction) and *sjuzhet* (the manner of their presentation in the narrative) offers some measure of clarity regarding the function of narrative and story. It is included here though, merely to suggest that the shared space betwen author and reader is worthy of further examination.

[6] David Bordwell (Bordwell 1985: p53) however, refuses narrative such status, abjuring the status of story as a negotiated space in favour of a model prescribing narration instead as "*the process whereby the film's syuzhet [plot] and style interact in the course of cueing and channelling the spectator's construction of the fabula [story]*.".

[7] It should be noted that the *The Anglo-American Cyclopedia* is real. The edition possessed by Borges' colleague Bioy Casares is the fiction.

[8] Johnson cites HBO's *Six Feet Under* as another meta-conversational text, I would add the BBC's *Doctor Who*, Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* and *American Gods*, David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*, and Alan Moore's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. Each of these texts boasts a meta-existence out into new media, largely responsible for their ongoing success.