

Seven Parts

An Essay on the Digital Media Project "A Lovely Affair"

1. Introduction.

Some characteristics of digital media:

It is a large unexplored and confusing zone for the construction of new kinds of narrative structures.

There is no single medium that is favoured in today's digital media. A personal computer that costs under a thousand pounds is capable of delivering everything from high quality surround sound, full-screen high-resolution mpeg2 movies (dvd-movies if you prefer), 3d animation rendered in real-time, high quality text display and 32 bit still images with an insane level of detail when it comes to colour and alpha channel transparencies.

No one medium is superior to another. The days when the image (3d images and mpeg2 movies to be more specific) were the main focus of computer hardware development are over. Graphics chipset makers such as nVidia and ATI (the makers of the graphics cards in today's Apple Mac's) have changed their focus towards unified chipsets that combine high quality surround sound processing, font-rendering and font-caching (storing fonts in a specialised memory-chip to speed the visual rendering of text) with their image-display chipset technologies.

Digital media is a gestalt of all the media it is capable of incorporating. Video, animation, sound and text create a new kind of multimodal narrative. Before, in the novel, the narrative was constructed out of a web of stylistic languages or linguistic images of various characters, all in a varying distance from the author's voice (Bakhtin 1981, p.42-49). Digital media on the other hand exists as a web of narrative forms, each creating its own subtle version of the story, sometimes reflecting a unique side of a character, sometimes a different theme.

The novel's linguistic image is replaced by digital media's narrative image that simultaneously represents and is representing. The narrative image represents its part in the multi-modal whole and is also representing a certain narrative method and tradition as a whole, bringing all the history of that tradition to bear within the larger digital media narrative.

Since the computer interface is multi-modal as well (being a digital narrative on its own) some thought has to be given as to how to present a narrative within the computer environment. There are a few options:

The Web Browser: By far the most popular method of disseminating information today (second only to television). It shares many characteristics with newspapers that make it unsuitable for anything except very short narratives (such as daily strips or short animations). One is integral to the name given to this kind of application. The web browser is made for browsing and most web-surfers scan web pages in a similar manner to the way they read newspapers. Nobody reads every single word or sentence on a web-page. Nobody looks at every single image and even on a broadband network (such as the university's computer lab) people rarely have the patience to download every single quicktime movie on a site. This has nothing to do with download times and everything to do with the way people approach the web as a source of information (see www.useit.com for truckloads of information on how people use web browsers and computers in general).

An Application Window: This would be a typical application window in the computer's interface. Useful if you want to integrate the narrative into the computer experience but not so useful if your narrative doesn't involve opening and closing folders.

Taking Over Full-Screen: The fact that this is the favoured method of the vast majority of computer games and software dvd players out there (the only really successful digital media narratives so far) should give this approach quite a bit of credibility. This allows the application/narrative to create its own context through its interface while still acknowledging the general computer context when needed.

"A Lovely Affair" is a full-screen (two full screens in fact) set-based and multi-modal digital media installation. It integrates video, soundtracks, music, text, voice-overs, and graphic interface design with a minimalistic set featuring a large screen, a television and camera, wine-glasses and truckloads of polaroid-like photographic stills taken from the video movies.

It is an attempt to complement a multi-modal digital narrative with a real world set.

2. Multimodality.

"To a greater or lesser extent, every novel is a dialogized system made up of the images of 'languages,' styles and consciousnesses that are concrete and inseparable from language. Language in the novel not only represents, but itself serves as the object of representation." (Bakhtin 1981, p.49.)

A poem printed as a part of a novel is not just a poem. It exists as a stylistic and linguistic structure on many levels. A poem may have been recited or written by one of the characters or it may have been quoted there because its theme or mood suited the author's purpose.

Bakhtin's example is "Lensky's Song" from *Evgeny Onegin* (Bakhtin 1981, p.44-49). Lensky's song represents Lensky's feelings and emotions in his own words but also brings to bear the entire poetic tradition by representing a certain genre of romantic poetry.

The poem therefore exists on many levels as a linguistic image placed in dialogue with the other threads and images Pushkin builds into the narrative structure of his novel.

The novel can bring to bear poetry, diary entries, journal extracts, direct first person speech, third person speech, newspaper quotes and dramatic monologues. Digital media can in the same way incorporate the traditions of sound drama, video (and with it the traditions of both film and tv), text (with all the stylistic possibilities of the novel), animation and music.

The strength of this approach to digital media does not lie merely in the fluidity and flexibility of the medium that results but also in the fact that it gives us the capabilities of placing different media with all their traditions in direct dialogue.

"A Lovely Affair" is constructed out of several different media. The ones that bear mentioning in particular are the voiceovers, movieclips and text. All three represent the characters and events from three different and subtly conflicting perspectives.

The voiceovers and text are supposedly the same but differ in many ways putting the veracity of both in a bit of doubt. The characters in the movieclips are implied to be the same as those speaking in the voiceovers and narrating in the text but the movieclip versions of the characters never speak.

The non-verbal images in the movies leave the viewer in a considerable amount of doubt as to how exactly the three representations of the narrative

(movies, voiceovers and text-based interfaces) are related.

Nothing is confirmed and everything is uncertain, not too unlike the way the characters themselves might be feeling.

"[The novel] is plasticity itself. It is a genre that is ever questing, ever examining itself and subjecting its established forms to review." (Bakhtin 1981, p.39.)

3. Inspiring a Thought.

"I maintain that the practice of fiction--including our emotional responses, where appropriately motivated by the text--is actually built on our capacity to be moved by the thought contents and to take pleasure in being so moved." (Carrol 1990, p.83)

Carrol's thought theory of fiction as outlined in his book *The Philosophy of Horror* is simple. It is not the realistic representation of characters, character identification or intricate plots that are the reasons for the pleasure people take in fiction (or any sort of entertainment media for that matter). It is the thought that counts.

When a reader is moved by the events in a novel they are not being moved directly by the authors carefully structured prose or realistic dialogue. The authors work inspires the reader with thoughts, provokes him or her to imagine events and characters which then finally result in thought contents which move the reader emotionally (Carrol 1990, p.79-88).

Focusing too much on the issues of form and structure takes us away from what should be the ultimate goal of a project like this: to affect and hopefully move the audience/participants.

When the goal is to create a thought in the viewer which makes him uneasy, sad or freaked out in some way removes the need for worrying about intricate narrative structures and debating the issue of linearity vs non linearity. The only need is to create a web of narrative images that stir up some thoughts in the viewer by undermining the viewer's sense of stability and concepts of innocence, truth and love. Simplifying the objectives of a digital media project is essential in a field where the possibilities seem endless from the start.

"Standing on a precipice, though in no way precariously, one might fleetingly entertain the thought of falling over the edge. Commonly this can be accompanied by a sudden chill or a tremor which is brought about, I submit, not by our belief that we are about to fall over the edge of the precipice, but by our thought of falling, which, of course, we regard as a particularly uninviting prospect." (Carrol 1990, p.80)

4. There Be Monsters.

"The many partial, dual, multiple and dismembered selves scattered throughout literary fantasies violate the most cherished of all human unities: the unity of 'character'. It is the power of the fantastic to interrogate the category of character--that definition of self as a coherent, indivisible and continuous whole which has dominated Western thought for centuries and is celebrated in classic theatre and 'realistic' art alike." (Jackson 1981, p.82-83.)

The characters are presented in a very schizophrenic manner. Every single narrative fragment is askew with the others.

The Movies:

They feature at least two different versions of each character: The 'face'-shots and the 'body' shots.

The 'face'-shots are the only times where we actually see the faces of the characters in camera and even then they are made grotesque and freaky with weird white face paint. Every care is taken so that the viewer cannot warm to or identify with these grinning, distorted faces.

The 'body'-shots show only close-ups of flesh or scantily clad bodies. At this level just figuring out what body part is being focussed on is difficult enough for the viewer, let alone identifying the characters as such.

The interfaces:

The text is the only binding element as such. Lines from the text in the interfaces appear in the movieclips and are read by the voiceover narration. The text is unifying only to a degree, though. It never appears as a whole. The lines in the movies are but a part of the whole, as are the pieces of text in the interfaces. The only place where the text can be found as a relative whole is in the narrated voiceovers and even there it differs slightly from the same pieces found in the interfaces.

The voiceovers:

These are the only narrative fragments where actual characterisation takes place in any degree and as such it is important to note that the voiceovers conflict with other characterising elements in the installation. The characters in the movieclips

do not speak, so whether these are actually their voices or someone else remains in doubt.

The characters of the story have become fragmented, schizophrenic. We have the sinister 'face'-shot versions of the characters, images of people who seem to have awful and sinful things in mind. We have the sensual 'body'-shot characters who unlike the 'face'-shot characters do not think, they just act. Finally we have the whispering, backstabbing, hurtful and hurting whisperers.

The two lovers have become moving targets, disjointed outcasts and fragmented monsters.

"Fission, then, in horror occurs in two major form--spatial fission and temporal fission. Temporal fission--which the split between Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde exemplifies--*divides characters in time*--while spatial fission--for instance, the case of doppelgangers--*multiplies characters in space*. Here characters become symbols for categorically distinct or opposed elements. [...] Both fission and fusion are symbolic structures that facilitate--in different ways--the linkage of distinct and/or opposed categories, thereby providing vehicles for projecting the themes of interstitiality, categorical contradictoriness, and impurity." (Carroll 1990, p.47.)

6. Fragmented.

"Anxiety, then, is not merely a thematic feature, but incorporated into the structure of the work to become its defining element." (Jackson 1981, p.28.)

The narrative is structurally unrealistic. The events that are represented and discussed are in themselves realistic but their very presentation and context in the installation undermines that reality. The interfaces are never read in the same order twice, the movies are random, non-repeating and outnumber the interfaces four to one, and the characters have been exploded into several fragmentary and contradictory subcomponents.

Nobody know what happened to those two. Indeed, it is hard to be sure whether the two characters are only two and not a horde of people all with similar problems.

Are we supposed to experience and interpret those characters as 'real', subjects of sympathy, identification and judgement? The way the voiceovers present the characters would suggest that but the way the characters are portrayed in the movieclips undermines that. In fact, the movieclips contradict that idea with their mad surrealistic imagery.

The story structurally resists being interpreted and considered as a whole being extremely fragmented, random and contradictory. A part of the basic reason for this intentional narrative dissolution is the fact that it is the personal perspectives of the characters that is being presented as opposed to a description of events or a chronological story. It is a journey through people's memories, visiting events they do not fully understand and have not fully made their mind up about. It is about characters still seeking a way out of their confusion and fears and the whole installation and its narrative, from random movies and voiceovers to sparse set, has been designed to that end.

The exact feelings evoked in the viewers are unimportant, it is the characters' thoughts of uncertainty, fear and confusion that should be echoed in the installation viewers' minds.

"The narrator is no clearer than the protagonist about what is going on, nor about the interpretation; the status of what is being seen and recorded as 'real' is constantly in question. This instability of narrative is at the centre of the fantastic as a mode." (Jackson 1981, p.34.)

5. Restabilisation.

"A cyborg exists when two kinds of boundaries are simultaneously problematic: 1) that between animals (or other organisms) and humans, and 2) that between self-controlled, self-governing machines (automatons) and organisms, especially humans (models of autonomy). The cyborg is the figure born of the interface of automaton and autonomy." (Haraway 1989, p.139.)

"Taking this as a working definition, one can consider any body a cyborg body that is both its own agent and subject to the power of other agencies." (González 1995, p.268)

The installation's narrative structure is a hybrid, a cyborg by nature. It takes forms that are arguably regarded as fluid and organic in nature (imagery and sound narration), cuts them up and shuffles them around in such a random and fragmentary manner that they form an entirely different kind of form.

That form and the narratives formed in its image cannot be regarded as wholes in the same way that a movie or play is regarded as a whole, unified being. Like the novel, it encompasses several other narrative forms, each of which represents a part of the story and is also representing that form or media as a whole. Unlike the novel this multimodal jumble is co-ordinated and presented in a mechanised manner. Random but programmed events take place in response to the viewers actions.

This automaton of forms, media-cyborg can only exist as a whole unified creature if our understanding of what a unified story with a beginning middle and an end can consist of. We have to accept the hybrid mongrel that is digital media as a whole, not a collection of whole forms. It assimilates all previous media, their structural characteristics and cultural histories as a part of itself.

All other media become tools subject to the whim and needs of the digital media author.

"The cyborg body is the body of an imagined cyberspatial existence. It is the site of possible being. In this sense it exists in excess of the real. But it is also imbedded within the real. The cyborg body is that which is already inhabited and through which the interface to a contemporary world is already made." (González 1995, p.267)

7. Living It Full-Screen.

Return is how the Way moves.

Weakness is how the way works.

**Heaven and earth and the ten thousand things
are born of being.**

Being is born of nothing.

(Lao Tzu, translated by Ursula K. Le Guin 1998, p.55.)

"A Lovely Affair" is an experiment and a personal one at that. It is a discontinuous and disjointed story where inspiration has been drawn from the histories of my family as well as Viva's family.

It is a fiction inspired by memories and as such takes on several qualities unique to memories. Memories are first of all never quite real. Their only your own idea of events, filtered through your desires, ideas, conceptions and preconceptions. Memories are disjointed and unstructured, pulled into your head randomly in response to whatever emotional stimuli you are encountering.

The veracity of ones childhood memories can never be fully proven and as such they will remain forever in doubt. All those who can answer whether your memories are correct and true to reality were probably participants in the events remembered and are as such clouded by opinion and emotion.

The question whether a clouded and personal (but nevertheless important) memory is truth or fiction becomes a constant debate. It, the memory, becomes a hybrid creature, something that exists on the interstices between your personal reality and your dreamscape, simultaneously a memory, a question, a dream and a nightmare. It flits back and forth in your mind because it cannot be pinned down.

The installation's narrative, like a haunting, insubstantial memory that doesn't exist, is a hybrid monster. Something that crawls along the boundaries of what can be defined, simultaneously fragmented and whole. It is a context mutant, encompassing everything that comes near but formed of nothing.

11. June, 2001. Baldur.