

Figurants

¹
because really, what else is there to talk about?

²
Not the fact that you hang out at pool halls...the bit about interactive narrative.

³
if not since the beginning of time.

When it's Friday or Saturday or Tuesday night, and you're hanging out down at the pool hall or local watering hole and you're having a good time with your buddies, downing some suds and most likely talking about New or Dynamic Media¹, inevitably, someone's going to mention the phrase "Interactive Narrative". It's going to come up. There might be some guffaws. There might be silence. There might be ambivalence. But chances are, what there will not be is a stranger present at the bar to regale you and the rest of your crew with stories of having had a mind-blowing recent experience involving interactive narrative.

This isn't so much a problem as it is a resignation². Recently³, there's been basically a collective shoulder shrug on the part of interactive designers and media theorists when it comes to interactive narrative. Not that there haven't been attempts to make work within its confines; there have been a lot. The shrugging is a result of the fact that so many projects and experiences made under that particular umbrella have fallen into the chasm between what is good about interactivity and what is good about narrative. These works have subsequently lost their grasp on both of the concepts, drifting out of arms' length from their respective shores, rendering them neither a meaningful interactive experience nor a cohesive narrative. Too often, designers and artists are seduced by the potential that technology offers them, and as a result of their pursuit, forget what it is about the work that makes it compelling. For example, people will, say, apply a web site structure to a series of video clips and expect the clips to have the same resonance and cinematic effect when experienced this way as they do when



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Ok, maybe not the same effect, but I think they're expecting at least a similar one.

viewed in a darkened room on a 25-foot screen⁴. Or they'll apply a free-flowing, non-linear experimental film structure to a *Flash* (Adobe Systems, Inc., San Jose, CA, USA) website and expect the experience to somehow be not confusing. I don't need to name names here. Some wise-ass critics would probably say "all of them" when asked to give an example of a crap interactive narrative project. This is the perception. People are skeptical. They're jaded. "Oh, you're interested in interactive narrative? Good luck."

So it was with this skepticism and general eye-rolling in mind that I set out into the chasm, spelunking my way toward my own personal interactive narrative project. I had my head lamp. I had my rope. I had my carabiners. I had my CLIF bars. Let's go.

The biggest thing for me, or the overarching goal that I had in mind that would inform the project, theoretically at a high conceptual level, was to not make a traditional narrative film, then fragment it and cut it up and shoehorn it into a predefined structure or interface that I thought would work. It seemed that whatever content or media I would create must be intrinsically linked with the structure and form of the interaction. They would need to be made for each other—not that everyone who's ever attempted one of these projects didn't think the same thing going into it.

But so I had the idea that rather than trying to tell a specific story with distinct plot points that needed to be hit or viewed (or didn't) in a particular order or sequence, that I would attempt to create more of an open-ended experience that conveyed a mood or feeling. But this open-endedness can get cumbersome and far-reaching and maybe a little dangerous. Bill Viola articulates this particularly well when he says, "Interactive works often try to offer too many possibilities, so that the parameters of the work end up being too wide. I'm not sure that the social experience sought by the artist is always sufficiently well defined to be meaningful."⁵ I needed to create content that was concrete enough for people to be able to derive meaning from it, while being ambiguous enough with the creation of it for people to make their own interpretations about it and have their own experience within it.

On a very basic level, I thought about filming someone in a series of spaces. Each of these spaces would then be a video loop. The viewer would

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Interviewed in *Art in America*,
March 1998. pg. 76.



6 Who has time or patience to figure out how to operate an interface in that most leg-tiring of spaces, the art gallery, or wherever this thing might live?

7 which is a system-crash waiting to happen when you mess around with video.

8 which has better video-handling capabilities, but is sort of squirrely in general.

9 this is the pseudo-construction term for the making/authoring of a DVD. It's actually used in "the business".

10 Though the (4!) instructors in the class had pitched the project with the rallying cry of "Story first!", meaning don't embark on your project voyage without a specific story packed in your carry-on.

11 One of the (4!) instructors in the class for which the project was done, who shall remain nameless but whose identity probably won't be too hard to guess, said "That's not Dorchester. That's a landfill." when I mentioned my shooting location during my idea pitch in class. I shot back, "Ok, Guy from Brookline." which, as you can imagine, didn't go over well.

be able to control this person or character's movement through the spaces through an extremely simple and intuitive interface. If there's a door, click on the door and the person goes through the door. If there are stairs, click on the stairs, and the person walks down the stairs. I wanted there to be basically no learning curve to figure out how to interact with the project⁶. Figuring most people have used a DVD player, I decided to use the DVD as the format of the project. Compared to something like *Processing*⁷ or even *Flash*⁸, the DVD platform was specifically built to handle video, especially video loops, which were what I was interested in using as the basic unit of content. The format allows a traditional interactive narrative/choose your own adventure-style "branching" structure to be applied to the clips, while also offering the capability of randomness and variability to be incorporated into the build⁹.

As the project developed and I started storyboarding the shots, it was clear that not only did I not have a story (which was fine, since I had decided that the project wouldn't be about a traditional story *per se*¹⁰), but I didn't have any tangible idea for the content, other than this unspecified person (me?) moving through these as-yet-undetermined spaces, and that I wanted it to be vaguely about loneliness. It didn't seem that a viewer would have any real connection to the experience, other than as a sort of omniscient controller/narrator, moving the character along a path. Meaningful interaction requires investment from the interactor, and with this direction, there wouldn't be enough there into which the viewer could put themselves. But what if the viewer *was* the character? Switching the perspective from third person to first person would put the viewer directly in the space, rather than simply observing it from a detached point of view, and would perhaps allow for a greater level of interest and emotional investment.

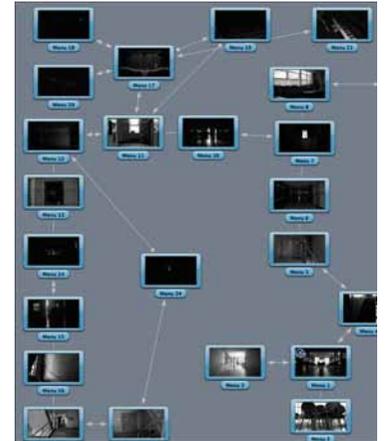
I shot the project at my high school, in Dorchester¹¹. It has long corridors and large, empty spaces. Old gymnasiums. Theaters. Logistically, it was appealing because my father still teaches there, so I could physically get into the place. I also wanted the spaces to be dark and empty, so I shot during their spring break, on a Sunday. The place looked abandoned. I shot on HD video, in high-contrast black and white, with a lot of natural light spill, attempting to give the footage a dream-like haze. I moved around

the school with the camera on a tripod, looking for interesting spaces and shots. I had my wife, Sarah, wear a semi-formal black dress and my father (functioning as chaperone and actor) wear a dark suit. They moved through the frames wordlessly, "figurants in a lonely sort of memory", as I described later. I tried to film the spaces with interaction in mind; the architecture dictated the interactivity. If I moved down a hallway and the end of it had a door, I went through the door and shot what was on the other side of it. If we were in a theater and there was a curtain, I filmed what was behind the curtain. This allowed a natural structure to take over. When the clips were dropped into *DVD Studio Pro* (Apple, Inc., Cupertino, CA, USA), I simply had to create invisible buttons over corridors, doors, stairs and other places that might lead to other rooms or spaces. The user/viewer could spend less time figuring out how to operate the work, and theoretically more time experiencing the video, contemplating the spaces they're navigating, and considering the emotional effect of the combination of the two¹².

When I edited the footage, I created dissolves between the shots of the empty spaces and the shots of Sarah and my father moving through them, to give the figures a transparency and a sense of fleetingness. I embedded these moments at different points in the shots, some immediate and some after considerable time had passed, so the viewer would be "rewarded"¹³ by staying in a space and experiencing it. These moments were the only movement in most of the shots; I liked the idea of making the clips barely perceptible as moving images¹⁴, sort of lulling the viewer into, well, not complacency, but something more like meditation, before interrupting that moment with gentle movement or apparitions. I also added "flash frames" of out-of-focus close-ups of my father's face glowering into the camera, or playing the piano, to add a sense of unease or uncertainty to the proceedings.

So, did it work? Did I solve the decades-old quandary of how to create a meaningful interactive narrative experience? Well, that's a ridiculous question, obviously. I don't think it's something that can be universally solved. And how does one quantify a meaningful interaction? It would probably depend on who you ask.

A nice thing about making the project as a DVD was its inherent por-



12 Not consciously, mind you.

13 I always think "reward" is such a lame word to use in this context. But people love to use it: "Excuse me. What's the reward that the user gets for their attention?" You get a hand job, ok? You get a fucking hand job.

14 Bill Viola, in his tome, *Reasons For Knocking At An Empty House*, which contains writings about his early work, wrote, "In video, stillness is the basic illusion: a still image does not exist because the video signal is in constant motion scanning across the screen."



tability. I gave my Mom a copy of it¹⁵, and not very much information, other than telling her she should put it into her computer and open the *DVD Player* (Apple, Inc., Cupertino, CA, USA) application. Apparently, she did. She then called me and said that nothing was happening. I said, “What do you see?” She said, “It’s BC High. The cafeteria. Chairs. But I think it’s frozen.” I said, “What do you mean frozen?” She said, “Nothing’s happening.” I said, “Look out the windows. Do you see cars going by in the distance?” She said, “No. Oh. Wait. Oh, way off in the background? Oh. Yes, there are cars going by.” I said, “So, it’s not frozen.” Eventually she got the hang of it and was able to navigate the space. I don’t know how meaningful her experience was. I think she thought it was interesting on some level.

Jan Kubasiewicz requested a copy to bring to an exhibition/seminar in Poland. He had multiple students and what I’d imagine to be European New Media People interact with it, and reported back to me that they were “fascinated”¹⁶ by it, trying to uncover new layers of video and layers, immersed in the space. As the creator of the thing, this would be pretty close to an ideal interaction.

I included *Figurants*¹⁷ as part of my thesis show. Considering how to move the experience into a physical space was a bit daunting, as I definitely didn’t want it to exist as a laptop on a podium. I ended up projecting the piece onto duvetyne, which is a black fabric used in theatre and film/television to block out light or create a black background. One of the sides of the fabric is very soft, and absorbs an incredible amount of light. By projecting onto it, it creates a semi-surreal early-cinema effect. Blacks become very rich and warm and whites become slightly antiqued. The duvetyne was pulled taught and fastened to one of the two walls that created the viewing space for the project. Visitors could use a mouse on a podium to move through the piece.

The reaction was, again, close to ideal. People compared it to “choose your own adventure” novels, and to video games like *Myst* (Cyan Worlds, Inc., Mead, WA, USA). These connections are inevitable, and I would imagine, mostly favorable. People look back at these kinds of experiences with something akin to nostalgia, it turns out. The fact that people were able to figure out how to interact with it and experience something from it

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She was in London visiting my sister when we had our “field trip into the past” at BC High and was naturally curious about what we were up to, especially since I had mentioned that my father had “acted” in the piece.

16
His words.

17
The title comes from a semi-esoteric term for an extra, as in theatrical or cinematic background performer.





was the most important thing.

In *Figurants*, I'm not trying to tell a story so much as create an environment in which people can explore their own perceptions and reactions and emotional responses by viewing and interacting with video loops that are evocative of something like the past. I'm attempting to give people a way to think about things and see themselves in something other than their existence. Some people will see a static image. Some will see cars moving in the background. Some will wonder about the point of it. And some will see themselves, following a path down a darkened hallway, wondering what's at the end, what's on the other side.

