

Media in Transition 7

Stories with Choices: Artist's Multimedia Narratives

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Abstract

In this presentation attention is focused on so-called artist's multimedia. The field could be defined by terms such as interactive narrative and cinema, documentary multimedia, interactive art, combinatorial art and films, database narrative etc. Examples are brought from new media art history: „The Exquisite Mechanism of Shivers“ (Bill Seaman 1991/94), „Portrait One“ (Luc Courchesne, 1990/95), Chris Hales „Jinxed!“ (1995), and especially from the Estonian art scene. Works by students are analyzed in depth, particularly documentary and fictional interactive stories with local sensibility: „Ülikooli-Vanemuise-Pepleri-Vallikraavi“ (Gabriela Järvet, Lauri Järvlepp, Kaiko Lipsmäe 2002) and others.

I try to answer questions like: does possibility to choose narrative path give additional value to the artwork? What are differences between artistic or fictional interactive multimedia narrative and traditional narrative forms in literature or cinema? Possibilities of breaking timeline, interfering with content, designing custom content give additional playful and open value to the narrative, but blurs authorship of the artwork. Sometimes giving away the author's responsibility is used by the artist to hide their author's position. In other cases interactive structure of the narrative is rather a distraction and disturbance for the reader and viewer, the „story“ could be much better in non-interactive form.

The 1990s introduced the phenomena of the artist's multimedia, which had even name art-CD-ROMs, CD-ROM-art and artist's multimedia. Nowadays it seems almost ridiculous that artistic phenomena were named after medium, also because we are starting to forget data carriers like CD-ROM. But thinking on “film” as cultural phenomena and art form or on “video”, we can see similarities – they are also named after the “carrier”, the physical medium which holds the data and art. As there is “film art” or just “film” and “video art”, why shouldn't there be a “CD-ROM-art”? Objection would be, as it was even in the mid of 1990s

when topic was hot, that in same way we can speak about “diskette-art” or “diskette-culture”.¹ Prominent theoretician of new media Erkki Huhtamo defined distinctive qualities of artist’s multimedia on CD-ROMs: it allows navigating in non-linear rhizomatic structure.

“With the CD-ROM the artist has a medium which turns this potential (of non-linearity – R.K.) into reality, leading into a radical questioning of the prevailing spatial-temporal categories of expression.”²

Another aspect is that the CD-ROM creates a personal and intimate relationship with the user and the user becomes a (co-)protagonist, “exploring and also modifying the organized world of the artwork”.³

Now it seems self-evident – intimate qualities of artwork, it’s cheapness and lightweightness, interactivity - , but a decade or more ago it was new and unexpected, not speaking about the possibility to distribute the artwork from you bag. Another dimension is the technological hype of the interactive media which was driven by commercial publishers and excitement of the “new”. Evidently this “newness” and “hype” of truly new medium like CD-ROM was new territory to conquer for artists. That was a reason of a boom of so-called “artist’s multimedia” on CD-ROMs. After technology developed and advanced, the DVD-ROM replaced tiny CD-s, at same time freshness of artistic medium vanished. Capacity of the carrier is out of the question, interest is focused rather on the content of the programme of artwork distributed by carrier or presented online, as it is more usual today.

I would argue that a lot of interesting works were done in time of the emotional excitement about new medium, new carrier. After freshness and innocence was gone, possibilities are much wider, computers are much powerful, but there is no need to step on same road of simple interactive applications.

What is most valuable and distinctive in beginning of the 1990s, was artists’ feeling of being first and avant-garde, being special of doing something completely new in visual arts. This was an unrepeatable situation. What is common now, to build yourself application where there is possibility to choose between stories, pictures and moving images was exciting and new 15 years ago.

¹ Erkki Huhtamo, Art on the CD-ROM Frontier – a Mirage, a Fly in the Eye, or a real Thing? – 5th International Sound Basis Visual Art Festival Wroclaw, May 3rd – 7th, 1995. Open Studio/WRO, Wroclaw 1995, p. 132.

² Ibid., p. 130.

³ Ibid., p. 130.

One can see it in many legendary multimedia works of that time: selection of multimedia compiled by ZKM in collection of “Artintact” 1-5 , artists' Interactive CD-ROM Magazine (1994-1999/2002), „All New Gen“ by VNS Matrix (1994, Australia), „She Loves It, She Loves it Not: Woman and Technology“ by Chrstine Tamblyn (USA 1993), Chris Hales „Jinxed!“ (1995), Marita Liulia „Ambitious Bitch“ (1996), Mari Soppela „Family Files“ (1998) if to mention just few. They are „telling“ stories through interactivity, giving choices to user, in such way, that user was able to forget a need of direction of narrative. It actually didn't exist in traditional sense either. Stories where rather multiple or if they were linear, then interactivity was added. There was evidence of consistency in visual and emotional atmosphere.

I want to also mention that the newness of interactivity and possibility to participate in visual and narrative multimedia in the beginning of the 1990s was not completely new, there were many experiments in earlier art history and electronic arts of the 1980s. Also there are many signs of “emotional excitement” or hype about new media for instance during the 1960s. There have been many “new media” periods in art history (telephone, cinema, television) but first time this new media (computers and internet) was called “new media”.

Participatory art

The theme of participatory art unites a number of sub-topics. In post-WWII art, we can see an increase in participation in two forms.

First, the author's activity became a phenomenon worthy of exhibiting. **Second**, we can speak of participation through allowing the spectator to participate. The viewer's co-authorship becomes prevalent. Good examples here are the works of Yves Klein, Nam June Paik and Valie Export.

We can mention Yves Klein “Antropometries” and fire paintings. They were in same time collective refined rituals as creative process. Fire paintings were made collaboratively with firefighters⁴, a painting/wooden surface was made wet with water and burned same time. Result was almost black and white surface with random forms and lines. Klein and firefighter were working alternately. After that, naked models were leaned on to surface, their siluettes were drawn on surface with water, which was followed by the burning process. Wet areas

⁴ Yves Klein. - <http://www.yvesklein.org/>

were unburned, intact by fire and dry areas were burned. It was a collaborative project in good sense, where Klein's position was of a conductor and director. Activity of art making was as much a part of the artwork as the final physical work itself.

Secondly, we can speak about the participation of the viewer, which interests us most. Here are works where the participation of the audience is decisive, essential. These works cannot exist without the active involvement of the audience. Here we can categorize kinetic artworks where the audience should do something, pushing or switching buttons or dragging some bar. Take for example many works by Jean Tinguely where you should push something and switch it on or off.

It is similar with optical artworks, where visuals and appearance of artworks elements depends on audience movement in front of the work. If in connection with traditional artworks interactivity and participation is hidden, then in kinetic and optical works participation is evident, explicit – the audience should physically do something or move in required order in relation to the artwork. We can say that the artist gives tools and instruments and the audience continues where the artist stopped halfway. From that moment artwork belonged rather to the viewer and viewers became users.

Examples could be brought from Fluxus art and happenings, also from early video art. Here is classical example of Nam June Paik's audio project „Random Access Music“ from 1963 exhibition “Exposition of Music—Electronic Television” in Wuppertal, Germany. The visitor can use the sound head, which has been detached from the tape recorder, to interactively run through the tapes glued to the wall, and constantly vary the sound sequence according to location and speed. This random access to the musical raw material enabled visitors to produce compositions of their own.⁵ Audience could also turn TV-sets buttons, changing the image. These are classical examples which supposedly introduced interactive art.⁶

Valie Export's „Tap and Touch Cinema” (1968) is a remarkable example of early participative work where audience was actively involved. As usual, the film is ‘shown’ in the dark. But the cinema has shrunk somewhat – only two hands fit inside it. To see (i.e. feel,

⁵ Nam June Paik „Random Access Music“ - <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/random-access/>

⁶ Dieter Daniels, Strategies of Interactivity. - Frieling, Rudolf ; Daniels, Dieter: Media Art Interaction, The 1980s and 1990s in Germany, ed. Goethe-Institut München / ZKM Karlsruhe, Springer, Vienna / New York, 2000, p. 170–197. - <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/source-text/65/>

touch) the film, the viewer (user) has to stretch his hands through the entrance to the cinema. At last, the curtain which formerly rose only for the eyes now rises for both hands.

The tactile reception is the opposite of the deceit of voyeurism. For as long as the citizen is satisfied with the reproduced copy of sexual freedom, the state is spared the sexual revolution. ‘Tap and Touch Cinema’ is an example of how re-interpretation can activate the public, writes Export.⁷

Erkki Huhtamo describes Export’s work in the context of tactile art,⁸ mentioning Marinetti’s „Tactilism“ (1921) manifesto, a significant ideological founder of art based on touch.⁹ Physical contact with a work of art is important in the interactive art of the 1990’s.

The limits of materiality are tested in Fluxus and conceptual art process-oriented works. Well-known examples are Yoko Ono’s imaginary and useless works (recordings of falling snow, machines for dissipate clouds). She thought that it would be healthy for somebody to buy things which are useless.

CLOUD PIECE (1963 Spring)

Imagine the clouds dripping. Dig a hole in your garden to put them in.

SNOW PIECE (1963)

Think that snow is falling. Think that snow is falling everywhere all the time. When you talk with a person, think that snow is falling between you and on the person. Stop conversing when you think the person is covered by snow.¹⁰

Naturally, poetical quality of those works is self-evident and we shouldn’t ascribe intention to be performed, to be taken as instructions. Still, their performativity is immanent and unavoidable.

Audience participation is expected in Ono’s performance „Cut Piece” (1964, performed in Kyoto, Tokyo, New York and London), where she was kneeling on the stage and audience

⁷ <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/tapp-und-tastkino/>

⁸ E. Huhtamo, *Twin-Touch-Test-Redux: Media Archeological Approach to Art, Interactivity, and Tactility*. – *MediaArtHistories*, Ed. By O. Grau, MIT Press, 2007.

⁹ „Tactilism“ http://www.peripheralfocus.net/poems-told-by-touch/manifesto_of_tactilism.html

¹⁰ INSTRUCTION PIECES BY YOKO ONO <http://www.a-i-u.net/instructions.html>

members were requested to come on stage and begin cutting until she was naked.¹¹ It is example that participative work could happen without complicated mediums. Similar is Yoko Ono's "A Box of Smile" (1967), where user can look into a box with mirror on bottom and encounter his reflection inside the box.

Authorship was challenged by artists in beginning of 1970ties, when they instructed viewers through television or video recordings, as was done by Nam June Paik, Wolf Vostell, Douglas Davies, Richard Kriesche. These actions via TV could be called telecommunicative and additionally to participation of audience they were multi-local, assumingly performed in several places simultaneously, as audience was probably performing them at their homes.

Artist's multimedia narratives

A narrative is defined as a story that is created in a constructive format that describes a sequence of fictional or non-fictional events, as a work of speech, writing, song, film, television, video games, photography or theatre.

More or less, narrative is convention of sequential presentation of information and interactive narrative is non-sequential or non-linear narrative.

I explained already why artists were keen to build their interactive works: newness of the medium and excitement of working on unexplored territory. Naturally, another drive was possibility to engage audience with multiple plots, stories, where control is in hands of the user.

Film and documentary makers do it differently as artists. Combination of interactivity with live-action filmed scenes opens numerous possibilities to creators. Documentary makers may wish to create pathways to access relevant material. Media artists might wish to empower their audience to have an active dialogue with the videos of the artwork in an installation format.¹² It could be illustrated with examples like Luc Courshesne's „Portrait One“ 1990, Bill Seaman's „The Exquisite Mechanism of Shivers“ 1991/4, Miroslaw Rogala's „Lovers

¹¹ Yoko Ono, „Imagine Yoko“. Bakhall, Lund 2005, p. 36.

¹² Chris Hales, *Interactive Filmmaking: An Educational Experience. – Developing Interactive Narrative Content*. Sagasnet Reader. Ed. By Brunhild Bushoff, Munich, High Text Verlag 2005, p. 102.

Leap“ 1995. All of them have also „compact“ versions on CD-ROMs, published by ZKM.¹³ The disc was apparently made after physical installation.

As participation of audience in the artworks was nothing completely new in the beginning of the 1990s, then taking part in the film or the moving image was sort of surprising.

One fact is worth of mentioning, which shows that interactive relationship towards the moving image was not surprising even earlier (not mentioning games). Early interactive CD-ROMs were preceded by interactive videodisc (or „laserdisc“) technology, which was pivotal in development of interactive movies as it was first to offer non-linear video access capabilities, and at full-screen quality.¹⁴ First legendary works like „Aspen moviemap“ (1978-80) and Lynn Hershmann „Lorna“ (1979-84) were made and presented on laserdisc.

One version of Bill Seaman’s „The Exquisite Mechanism of Shivers“ was realized as interactive videodisc installation in 1991. Then later it was published on interactive CD-ROM Magazine by ZKM. The interactive activity enables the user to combine sentences created from the 330 words in the poetic menu, which in turn drives the succession of video and audio sequences. It reminds us of the famous surrealistic game „exquisite corpse“ for construction ambivalent sentences and it evidently inspired the artist for the title. As Dieter Daniels writes, the real message of „Ex.Mech“ is found in this overlapping of technology and content. The poetic construction and the technical function cannot be separated from each other.¹⁵

The result is thousands of possible combinations of words in new sentences. The artist’s role in connection with this work is limited to creator of the tools; true artist is the user who authorizes the result.

Similar conditions are in Luc Courshesne’s „Portrait One“ where the user can „talk“ with woman on the screen choosing the sentences. Participation and control is illusionary, offering even less possibilities as Seaman’s work. Naturally, number of choices is not the value in itself, rather the final „game“ with the screen personality. Important is face-to-face interaction with charming personality.

¹³ „Artintact“ 1-5 , artists' Interactive CD-ROM Magazine (1994-1999/2002). Karlsruhe : ZKM/Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie Karlsruhe; Ostfildern: Cantz Verlag, 1995.

¹⁴ Chris Hales, New Paradigms <> New Movies. – New Screen Media. Cinema/Art/Narrative. Ed. By Marin Rieser/Andrea Zapp. British film Institute 2002, p. 109.

¹⁵ Dieter Daniels, Bill Seaman: *Ex. Mech* – Artintact 1, Ed. ZKM | Karlsruhe, Stuttgart: Cantz, 1994, CD-ROM and book, p. 45.

Another example is Chris Hales' "Jinxed!" (1995). Authors description:

““Jinxed!” is a fiction with no complexity of plot, and could be summarised completely in a single sentence: an unfortunate man trying to get ready for a job interview, but things in his apartment are potentially ‘jinxed’ and can painfully and comically hinder him if the viewer touches/clicks on them at the right moment.”¹⁶

User can touch/click the objects (hotspots) on screen, which give hints how to disturb a poor man. Interestingly, being interactive this work is linear; it has beginning, middle and the end. In that sense it is similar with Courshesne's work, still there was possibility to choose several “conversations”. In “Jinxed!” is only one succession of event.

It seems common to all interactive works defined as good: they are simple to understand and they have distinctive intentionality which is mediated consistently.

„It is one of my claims that consistency in application of the employed interface metaphor is vital if the audience are to maintain their engagement with an interactive film.“¹⁷

Chris Hales' opinion concerning uniqueness of artists' interactive stories is worth of presenting:

„My practical experimentation has led me to believe that when movie sequences are linked together non-linearly, under computer control and with possibilities for user interaction, new forms or paradigms can potentially emerge. Links in space and time between specially art-directed movie sequences can be orchestrated to produce something that seems unique. My personal rule is that narrative structure and content can be successfully subjugated in favor of visual linking system through time, space, colour, object and point of view. Narrative scriptwriting of the sort which has been propagated in the movie industry for 80 or more years no longer plays a role, and even the concept of what constitutes a „story“ must be re-evaluated.”¹⁸

Surprisingly, as Hales writes in other publications, students with least flexibility and experimentation are those with a traditional “film school” education, something that seems to brainwash a fixed methodology in the use and production of moving image.¹⁹

Contemporary forms of participatory film (Estonian examples)

¹⁶ Christopher Hales, RETHINKING THE INTERACTIVE MOVIE: A practical investigation demonstrating original and engaging ways of creating and combining ‘live action’ video segments under audience and/or computer control. Doctoral thesis, University of East London, 2006, p. 83.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 43.

¹⁸ Chris Hales, New Paradigms <> New Movies. – New Screen Media. Cinema/Art/Narrative. Ed. By Marin Rieser/Andrea Zapp. British film Institute 2002, p. 118.

¹⁹ Chris Hales, Intersecting Boundaries. - Kunst.ee, 3/2003, p. 50.

There are several Estonian examples of interactive movies with shared authorship and stories with choices. I am consciously focusing attention on the younger generation which perhaps has more interesting mature artists, not speaking about the fact that there are not much professional artists who work permanently in interactive media in this country.

Here I would like to give credit to my colleague and friend Chris Hales, who has taught 15 or more workshops at the Tartu Art College since 2002 and Estonian Academy of Arts. Many students works owe their existence to institutional framework.

I illustrate the topic with examples of university student projects (supervised by C. Hales and R. Kelomees).

Tuuli Lepik “Artificial Intelligence” (Tallinn University, 2000) reminds us database of forgotten memories, but in fact author tries to solve question of AI. “Is it possible to build a machine which thinks like human?” Simplest instructions should be build into hardware, what we call reflexes. This multimedia is visually consistently designed; there is no other instruction of use as button in the corner which bring back to the main interface.

“Ülikooli-Vanemuise-Pepleri-Vallikraavi“ by Gabriela Järvet, Lauri Järvlepp, Kaiko Lipsmäe and Stella Vainikko (Tartu Art College, 2002): a girl, the character of this interactive story, moves along the streets listed in the title. The viewer chooses from four speeds: standing still, walking, running, and riding in a car.

“The Sleepy Tramp” by Holger Lihtmaa, Ingrid Väärsi, Maiken Urmet and Heiko Unt (Tartu Art College, 2002) is about the occurrences of a vagabond in a Tartu slum. The viewer can choose ways to disturb the tramp who is wearily looking for a place to sleep and sober up.

„Origami“ by Aive Kalmus and Evelin Meier (Tartu Art College, 2004) offered the listener options in telling an oriental tale through its clear, open nature that addressed the public and easy-going approach.

Works like Kristo Rihm “Who Lives in the Closet?” (Tartu Art College, 2003) and Alis Mäesalu “8 Etudes about Rooms” (Tartu Art College, 2003) could be defined as database cinema as material there is presented in repeatable structure. In Rihm’s work portraits as short narratives of the students and in Mäesalu’s multimedia are 8 interviews on space, collected from different personalities, one of them blind.

Multimedia projects are mainly designed in canonical paradigm, in the beginning is the main interface and „stories“ evolve starting from there. There are still exceptions, like “The Sleepy Tramp”, where user following linear story have always two choices. The main story is without a change. In other works the user chooses between different stories on same topic (“8 Etudes about Rooms”).

Conclusion

Performativity and participation has deep roots in artistic practices and direct influence to interactive art.

The question of „stories with choices“ doesn’t concern only digital artworks, but has cultural history. I am intentionally avoiding exploring it deeper, but would like to mind of pre-digital existence of interactive narrative.

If material is linked together non-linearly, under computer control and with possibilities for user interaction, new forms or paradigms can potentially emerge.

Narrative structure and content should be dominated by visual linking system and other media elements and qualities (time, space, color, object and point of view).

Narrative scriptwriting for interactive multimedia must be re-evaluated and the consistency of application should be maintained.

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