

# Experimentation with New Narratives and Visual Aesthetics in the Internet

## Abstract

The birth of the World Wide Web and Mosaic Navigator has marked a crucial turning point in the history of the Internet – that is, the beginning of a primarily visual and multimedia phase. The development of the Internet as a multimedia space has been a direct result of the integration previously existing narratives and means already present in the web.

The following report is part of a more extensive research project titled, “*Towards a More Authentically Expanded Cinema*,” which has contributed significantly to the study of the Internet as a multimedia resource in two main aspects: firstly, in *the experimentation of new narratives and visual aesthetics* (from which the title of this report is derived) that encompasses various methods used on the Internet better known as Expanded Cinema (Youngblood, 1970). The second main aspect consists of *New Methods of Audiovisual Transmission and Diffusion through the Internet*. This can consist of streaming.art pieces all the way up to those that conceive the Internet as an audiovisual media archive space.

This report attempts to analyse the different narratives that are emerging from the resources available on the web through a more ample perspective (expanded cinema) while elaborating on the tools being utilised. New digital formats have generated new aesthetics which resemble known models of video-art such as the construction of *video-walls* or video installations through the use of GIF and Quick Time animation as is the case with the piece, *Heated Pool* (2001) by the German group T-2K: a web version of the famous installation *il nuotatore* (1984) by Studio Azzurro; as well as **new narratives** made through Hypertext and from new formats like Quick Time VR or Flash, and its elaborate interfaces. These non-linear narratives, that can be placed somewhere between traditional cinema and interactive books, have created such interesting terms as *videoweb*, *web cinema*, *net.art.film*, and interactive *net.film*, etc.

## NARRATIVE COMMUNICATION STYLES 2005: A Report

In the article, *Real Life as an Immersive Media*<sup>1</sup> Louis-Philippe Demers y Bill Vorn distinguish between two forms of basic compartments enabled by the author for the spectator and user-actor. These two are implanted behaviours and emergent behaviours.

"Implanted behaviors are individual reactions engendered by simple rules and conditions intentionally programmed in the system. They are easy to anticipate because they are a direct response to a precise triggering cause. Low-level agents are responsible for producing these compartments.

Emergent behaviors are group reactions engendered by the sum of the individual reactions. They are much more difficult to foresee because they depend on a global interpretation of an exponential number of possibilities. These compartments are derived from the dynamic and complex interactions between low-level task agents."

Using these two types of behaviours cited by the author as a guide, we can differentiate between two main groups of narratives: "programmed and conditioned narratives" which refer to those narratives that are structured and pre-formulated; and "dynamic and emergent narratives" which refer to those that result from the interactions of its various components within the emergent processes that will be discussed in more detail shortly.

- 1. Programmed and Conditioned Narratives:** are non-linear narratives, where the sequence can be altered within a demarcated structure in a rather traditional format that includes a beginning, a middle (where the story unfolds), and an end. The piece does not show nor allows for only one type of story. Instead, it offers multiple story options to the user. The story changes with each spectator-user that accesses the piece; thereby participating in the story's space-time construction. Thus, the user's participation ends up being significant. However, due to the fact that the possibilities for compartments are previously programmed by the artist, the options available to the user are limited. They are rather closed and pre-formulated story lines where the stories that emerge from its structured format are somewhat dull and pre-conditioned. The role of the spectator-user becomes limited to choosing between those paths previously designed and specified by the artist.
- 2. Dynamic and Emergent Narratives:** Within this second group, the narrative is understood as an emergent process: the result of an interaction between different units. They are rather dynamic narratives that are difficult to predict; due to the fact that they are the result of complex and dynamic interactions between its various components. These pieces usually offer the user-spectator the necessary tools required to alter and influence the existing structural format of the story. The level to which the tools provided by the

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<sup>1</sup> VORN, Bill y DEMERS, Louis-Philippe: "Real Artificial Life as an Immersive Media". En *Convergence: 5th Biennial Symposium for Arts and Technology proceedings*. Center for Arts and Technology in Connecticut College New London (Conn.), 1995. Available online at: <http://www.hfg-karlsruhe.de/~ldemers/machines/alife/description.html>

author permit one to alter and influence the story determines the level of dynamic and interactive emergence.

## **1. PROGRAMMED AND CONDITIONED NARRATIVES**

Programmed and conditioned narratives are not exclusively available by Internet. These narratives (often found by surfing the World Wide Web) are made available by hypertext. Originally “surfing” was a term utilised in multimedia to refer to the execution of a non-linear story, as previously described. A form of narrative and reading where one alters the sequential structure of a story that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. The concept implicit in the hypertext format was adapted to fit neatly with CD-ROMs and, subsequently, with artwork on the web. Both can be located via surfing. These similarities have resulted in the fact that it is common to find projects on the Internet that have been designed well beforehand on CD-Rom, or on the Web, where the format of access can be exchanged or even combined.

### **Simultaneous or Parallel Narratives: a choice of pathways**

**Hypertext** is the most common tool that enables traditional surfing from which non-linear narratives are derived in accordance with hyperlinks. The first reference to the concept of hypertext, is found in the 1940's by Vannevar Bush<sup>2</sup>, who pointed out the need for the creation of machines that allow for the emulation of the associative nature between different texts as present in the in the human mind and to which he later named, *Memex*. Later, his disciple, Ted Nelson, adopted the term Hypertext to refer to “non-sequential writing -- text that branches and allows choices to the reader, best read at an interactive screen. As popularly conceived, this is a series of text chunks connected by links which offer the reader different pathways.”<sup>3</sup>

Within the electronic context of the WWW, the maxim, “[I link therefore I am](#)”, made famous by Mark Amerika summarises the key concept that hypertext represents. The link makes evident the interactive/hyper textual and non-sequential construction of the text while, at the same time, demonstrating the equal importance acquired from that which is present and not present. Additionally, the space provided by links permits the creation of a medium for multimedia links from which various forms of media subsequently acquire meaning via their interrelation. In his book, *HyperText Consciousness (HTC)* (1997), Mark Amerika explores these new experimental narratives. “HTC as

<sup>2</sup> The first appearance of the concept of hypertext appears, "As We May Think", in 1945, in the magazine, *The Atlantic Monthly*. This copy can be obtained in <http://www.isg.sfu.ca/~duchier/misc/vbush/vbush-all.shtml>

<sup>3</sup> NELSON, Theodor H.: *Literary Machines*. Swarthmore, PA: Self-published, 1981, pp.0/2. Cited by George P. Landow in, *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.

experienced in cyberspace is creating a new form of narrativity to get lost in. This narrativity may be more hallucinogenic or clickual to the reader/participant, but it still has the feel of a narratologically-mind discourse.”<sup>4</sup>

Within this narrative formula provided by hypertext, one can distinguish one type where the user is induced to choose between one compartment or another. These projects which we will call, “**conditioned parallel narratives**” contain different elements that condition the spectator/user in his/her choice- and that subsequently influence the construction of the narrative through the formulation of questions that the user is required to answer (or through the usage of parameters such as pop-menus). The selection of one or another determines the pathway chosen: thereby, influencing and altering the story. This narrative formula seeks to reflect the personality of the user/spectator within the development of the story. Of course, there is always the possibility that someone can lie; but the process implicit within the unfolding of the story will still be influenced and delimited regardless. The project by Roberto Acuirrezabala, titled, *EasyONE: Man Seeks Woman* (1998) is composed of 7 stories, whose plots intermix at various points of the narratives. Previous to access, the visitor must respond to a series of questions that predetermine the conditions of the commencement of one’s journey within EasyONE. In the case that the visitor has been honest, the experience will reflect something about him/herself. However if he/she has opted to lie, they will experience a different form of being within the narrative.

Are you... ...a man?	or a woman?	¿or do you prefer not to define yourself?
Are you surfing.. ...alone or with someone else?.	Are you surfing... ... alone or with someone else?	Are you surfing... ... alone or with someone else?

Relative Schemata of “EasyONE”

### Parallel and Simultaneous Narratives: the fragmented screen

Combining the possibilities of hypertext with those of the different **frames** enabled via HTML text, Olia Lialina has experimented with what she defines as ‘interactive montage’. These narratives correspond to Lev Manovich’s<sup>5</sup> definition of spatial montage which states that, “Spatial montage would involve a number of images, potentially of different sizes and proportions, appearing on the screen at the same time”. Her first piece, *My Boyfriend Came Back from the War*, is a story about love and loneliness. It is a stunning example out of Russia

<sup>4</sup> PACKER, Randall: "Net Art as Theater of the Senses. A HyperTour of Jodi and Grammatron". Please see *Beyond Interface* in: [http://www.archimuse.com/mw98/beyondinterface/bi\\_frpacker.html](http://www.archimuse.com/mw98/beyondinterface/bi_frpacker.html)

<sup>5</sup> Manovich, Lev: MACROCINEMA: Spatial Montage. Available online at: <http://www.manovich.net/macrocinema.doc>

of what has come to be known as 'net-film.art'. The story starts off with the statement, "My boyfriend came back from the war. After dinner they left us alone." This then links up to a scene where a couple is sitting down beside a window. In the next link, the screen unfolds into two frames: the former image is placed on the left, where it will remain during the entire narrative as if it were the background or the scenery. The frame on the right becomes the place where the story gradually unfolds with each click. Images of warfare, memories, photos (and a watch that symbolises time lost) is seen just as the text shows the relationship between both of them. All are simultaneously linked together throughout the story as the text, "Where are you? I can't see you" is shown.

Perhaps the format that is most promising; but has yet to be utilised more extensively within a creative context is **Quick Time VR**. This multimedia format integrates different interactive hot zones and areas which permit different types of archives to be linked together in a similar manner as hypertext. This commercial format has been utilised by Jeannie Finlay, in order to develop, [A Home\(maker\) page](#) (2001), a project that sketches 4 panoramic portraits of Florrie, Roy, Lilian, and Betty in their respective homes. Through the doors of their four flats the stories are interconnected with each other. A radio, a television, and a window are some of the objects that can be chosen to activate different visual and audio archives that complete the narrative for these 4 short documentaries.

Lastly, of noteworthy mention is *Waxweb 3.0* by the artist, David Blair. This has been considered the first interactive film created specifically for the Internet. This piece contains different **graphic interfaces** with varying levels of complexity that intermix various sequences in Real Player with sounds, images, and text from the film, *Wax or The Discovery of Television Among The Bees*. The various possible combinations of elements allow for different experiences of this film.

## **2. DYNAMIC AND EMERGENT NARRATIVES**

Although they do not abandon the use of hypertext, the tools used in dynamic and emergent processes do relegate a greater level of importance on other factors. Hypertext is substituted by other strategies that allow for the contribution and the participation of the user in the actual piece. These narratives are derived from the utilisation of resources and interfaces present in the web: acquiring meaning and residing, in most cases, only on the Internet. One of the main innovations of these types of narratives resides in the dissolution of author's control. These are collective and open narratives that are entirely unpredictable.

### **A. Emergent, Parallel, and Simultaneous Narratives: the Fragmented Screen**

One of the main tools used here are **webcams** or cameras connected to the internet that allow for the transmission of live images via the Internet. The project, *Little Sister: a 24 hr Online Surveillance Soap* (2000) by Andrea Zapp is a soap opera whose story is told through different scenes in real time as captured by private and public webcams. A total of 26 cameras allow for the construction of different parallel and simultaneous endings where fiction and reality are intermixed by the placing of fictitious images previously recorded by the author. With each mouse click, and through a simple circular graphic interface, the user activates the different images assembled by the webcams. Different stories situated in various places typically used in television programmes (kitchens, supermarkets, hair salons, etc.) are mixed with day to day life images on the streets of cities. They are displayed together, fragmented on the screen, in a similar manner as in the classic film, *New Book* (1975) by the Polish Director, Zbigniew Rybczynski. Here, the spectator chooses his/her own narration by the purposeful gaze of the eyes.

## B. Emergent and Collaborative Narratives

**Email** is demonstrated as a key tool in the piece, *Being boring* (2004) by Fran Illich. This piece has been placed under the genre of what has been come to be known as e-mail drama. The mass-sending of email messages to various users all over the world, regardless of the geographic distances involved, has permitted the creation of this democratic net.film (as described by the author). *Being boring* is based on a simple plot. Two women unable to watch television for one week have to confront real life and occupy their free time. The audience is offered different options; and is entrusted with deciding what these women will do each week; and, hence, the scenes that have to be filmed.

**Subject:** [delete.tv] being\_boring\_[a\_democratic\_net.film]\_run.girls.run.

**To:** delete@delete.tv

**From:** Delete@delete.tv

**Data:** Tue, 8 Jun 2004 23:02:59 -0500

being boring: [a net.film by fran illich]

[http://delete.tv/being\\_boring/](http://delete.tv/being_boring/)

With 21% of votes, the girls decide to exercise in order to change her usual boring lifestyle.

what should the girls do on Wednesday to kill time? Vote online now!  
clean their house? create a media revolution? criticize people? discuss serious topics? disturb the streets? foresee future? get drugged with canned air? kung-fu fighting? session of many dance styles? storytelling?

curated by Isabelle Arvers, for BananaRAM Art Festival, Ancona, Italia, July 6-11 2004.

with sol- ho & adriana segura.

Lourdes Cilleruelo, 2005

*Unmovie* (2001-2002) is a project by the artists Alex Heide, onesandzeros, Philip Pocok, and Gregor Stehle. It owes its success to three key factors: **bots**<sup>6</sup>, **chat**, and **databases**. Presented in the prestigious cinema festival, *Future Cinema*<sup>7</sup>, this project consists of two main screens: *stage* and *streaming*. The section, *Stage*, is where the chat is situated. Here is where different bots (a total of 5 personalities) dialogue with human users. The dialogues started up feed on and determine the final result of the movie which is displayed on the second screen, *streaming*. The final result is constructed from video fragments placed in a database that are associated with key words that are activated based on the various conversations that occur while chatting. Due to algorithms created using parameters of Artificial Intelligence, the bots are able to learn from their interactions with the human users. The final movie is generated by humans and machines. The final result becomes absolutely unpredictable. It varies based upon the following factors: the level of participation by the anonymous collective (composed of the users that take part) that interact with the various bots in combination with the progressive evolution of the latter's behaviour.

Last but not least, **graphic user interfaces** are also of noteworthy mention. They permit visitors to actively participate in the piece: even altering and modifying it. An example of this type of piece can be found in the installation, *The Imaginary Hotel* (2002-04) by the researcher and artist, Andrea Zapp. A complex interface, that virtually reproduces the stage of the installation, permits the visitors to take up space in both physical terms (through the television interface) and in virtual terms (via the Internet). In the process, the visitors consciously create theatre within the space of the installation. Virtual and actual visitors generate a collective story through their various interactions.

Lourdes Cilleruelo, 2004

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<sup>6</sup> **Bot** (from *robot*) is a programme that completes linear functions normally done by humans. In linear conversations (chat or IRC), a bot can simulate a person. Definition taken from: <http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bot>

<sup>7</sup> This show has the subtitle, "*The Cinematic Imaginary after Film*" and curated by Jeffrey Shaw and Peter Weibel took place from the 16<sup>th</sup> of November 2002 – 30<sup>th</sup> of March 2003 in the ZKM of Karlsruhe. For more information please see: [http://www.zkm.de/futurecinema/index\\_e.html](http://www.zkm.de/futurecinema/index_e.html)