



Paths

Instead of lying in bed listening to my bedtime stories, Morgan has started to take an interactive role in their telling. For example in the story of Snow White and the Seven Dwarves there comes a point where the Huntsman has the line 'No, I cannot kill you, you are too beautiful, run away and hide in the forest'. At this point Morgan interjects with 'No, tell it where the Huntsman does kill her'. I then have to change to an improvised, grisly, alternative plot that continues, devoid of the main character, and ends with an arrest for murder.

I am telling a truly interactive story, reacting to input from the listener whilst at the same time guiding the narrative to reach a successful closure where I can finish the story with a graceful 'and they all lived happily ever after'. A truly interactive narrative in film form is the ideal goal of many concept makers working in the media and entertainment industry. We have random access digital media, we have affordable delivery systems and we have a click-literate public willing to engage with new media forms. What we don't yet have is the content; the engaging, interactive films long promised by the industry.

One reason is that computers are no substitute for a creative imagination honed sharp by improvising nightly stories. One could envisage a true AI based system that 'knows' about the

world and how people and things interact with each other and (more importantly) knows what makes a good story. However this is, and has long been, an unattainable goal of more of the industry than just the entertainment sector.

More realistic approaches give limited support to interactive messing with the narrative by ensuring that the choices are thought out and hard-wired into the narrative structure beforehand. This can lead to very controlled interactions with readers all too aware of the points where they must make choices and what those choices are limited to. The Huntsman says 'No, I cannot kill you, you are too beautiful, run away and hide in the forest'. Does Snow White run into the forest? Choose YES or NO.

The latest wave of computer games allows the user to solve a mystery or achieve some other goal by searching a virtual world looking for clues. In effect the environment is scattered with bits of narrative that the user must find and piece together to build up the authors story. This is not an interactive narrative, but more an interactive way of reassembling a narrative. Rather like putting 'War and Peace' through the office shredder and getting someone to try and put it back together again.

What is needed is a way of giving the user the illusion of choice. Either presenting them with choices where the author has got a good idea of what they will choose, or presenting them with choices that sneakily lead back to the same story line. The user thinks they have freedom to choose and the author has freedom to tell their own story.

One of the projects I am involved with at the moment is a web site related to a collection of sculpture in a large forest. There are interesting navigational/path following issues in both the sculpture collection and the web site. The sculpture trail is a collection of works of art at various locations throughout an area

of the forest. Originally the idea was that visitors should explore the forest themselves and 'stumble' upon the sculpture as they did so; a truly user-led navigation with no predefined paths to follow. This led to frustrations; 'Have you seen the Giant's Chair?' 'No, I couldn't find that anywhere!' and some structure was given to the user's navigation through the collection; a pathway was set up linking the key pieces of sculpture together.

Users could now wander through the forest on the path, feeling that they had freedom to step off the path at any point and explore for themselves and yet in reality allowing themselves to be led by the path. The decision to link just the key pieces together meant that there was still scope for visitors to set out on their own paths and discover other exhibits. A further twist to the idea was that unbeknown even to the organisers some of the sculptors added their own mini-sculptures to the forest without telling anyone, so there are some wonderful little lead-cast mushrooms adorning occasional trees waiting to greet those who chose to wander off the beaten track.

Finally there is the whole issue of real consumer demand for the engaging nature of interactive entertainment. As a follow up to my opening remarks on storytelling, I should add that often, after having jumped through narrative hoops for quarter of an hour at the end of a busy day, I would bid my good-nights and then slump in front of the TV. There I would enjoy a truly non-interactive, non-active time following someone else's pre-baked, mediocre, narrative structure.

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