Expanded Cinematic Forms of Narration

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The works on this DVD-ROM were produced in response to the narrative platforms of Betaville, urban environment and the screen and Surveillance, transgression and detection as proposed by Cinemedia, Melbourne. This was in the scope of the Interactive ScreenArts program commission which funds the broader iCinema (interactive and immersive cinema) research program of which (dis)LOCATIONS is one manifestation.

iCinema focuses on the research and development of a digitally expanded cinema. This cinema addresses the comprehensive domain of the moving image that is currently being radically redefined and extended by the vast potential of new digital media systems. The scope of the cinematic covered by this digital expansion includes all forms of the moving image –made visible on any type of screen or in any sort of immersive environment –whose temporal structure is constituted by any method of narrative coherence.[1] It is possible, although still early in the process, to articulate some of the principle features of a digitally expanded cinema. The technologies of virtual environments point to a cinema composed of an immersive narrative space wherein the interactive viewer assumes the role of both camera person and editor, while advances being made in video games and the Internet suggest a cinema of distributed virtual environments that open upsocial spaces.

In these virtual spaces, the persons present become protagonists in a set of ever evolving interactive narratives. Central to all these innovations is the reformulation of narrative itself. A great deal of debate has been expended over the death of narrative per se but little attention has been given to its powerful persistence, albeit in entirely new and emergent forms. The current dominant position in new media and cinema theory conceptualises digital narrative in a monochromatic manner, reducing it to a mechanical single-layered process that fails to account not only for the potential of interactive digital narration but also the workings of conventional cinematic narrative. According to this monochromatic point of view, non-digital narrative operates as a thread linking events and scenes: in other words, as a linear ensemble of scenarios. In its classical formulation, non-digital narrative is conceived as being composed of the chronological ordering of events in time, the symmetrical sequencing in which the events occur in space along with their monocular act of representation in narration. These three components combine, through a set of linear causalities, to produce narrative form.[2]

This monochromatic framework is generated from the point of view of a non-interactive viewer. Yet when applied to the interactive framework of the digital arts, in which the viewer is obliged to interact with the narrative structure, this framework misconceives digital narratives as non-linear and non-narrative. In little more than a simple negation of classical narrative, this formulation equates narrative structure with hierarchy, and digital structure with randomness. As a consequence, theorized within the precepts of this reductionist terrain, narrative in digital systems is regarded as carrying little artistic and representational significance, since it is associated with a world of closure as opposed to the apparent openness of the digital domain. This limitation expresses itself in the aesthetic superficiality of much current interactive technology and discourse which treats narrative as a corpse and database as a demi god.

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In comparison with the monochromatic notion of narrative, the works in (dis)LOCATIONS explore a polychromatic concept. This dynamic form of narrative is profoundly dialogic in character. Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the dialogic suggests how fictional characters, such as those in Dostoevsky's novels are allowed to speak in their own voice, a voice not subject to the single authorial control of their creator.[3] Bakhtin terms this a 'genuine polyphony'. The arrival of digital systems permits this polyphony to be an emergent property generated by the viewers' interaction with the author's narration. This results in an efflorescence of linear (sequential) and non-linear (asequential) narrative streams. There is no 'truth 'to uncover in any of the works. Instead there is a series of transformations in which narrations falsify one another but may just as easily oppose as corroborate one another. In other words: although individual narratives are linear, there is no linear hierarchy of narration or viewer interaction that can enable either the characters or the viewers to make, as they might in a conventional hierarchic situation, a final judgement resolving all differences within and between the narratives. In the fibrously dominated structure of (dis)LOCATIONS, all the narrative and discursive components remain independent, yet overlapping and mutually defining of each other.

Digital narrative here operates as a fluid interaction between radically divergent internal structures combining both linear and non-linear streams in a manner similar to the way in which Manuel De Landa conceives the immanent workings of linguistic and biological structures.[4] Therefore rather than treating narrative – one of the fundamental ways of organizing data – as if it were a singular and monocular structure, each work in (dis)LOCATIONS experiments with the new types of data organization made possible by the digital domain: namely, narration as a coupling of evocative aesthetic forms, both linear and non-linear, which in the non-digital domain have been conceived as mutually exclusive.

1.Cf. Jeffrey Shaw, 'Movies after film –a digitally expanded cinema.' Unpublished paper, 2001.
2.Cf. Gerard Genette, Figures of Literary Discourse.Trans. A. Sheridan, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.
3. Mikhail Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics. Trans. C. Emerson, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984.
4. Manuel De Landa, A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History. New York: ZoneBooks, 1997.

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