

Empowering the Author in the Creation of Interactive Narrative Experiences

By Christine Pillsbury

I. Introduction

The subject of authorship is paramount to unlocking the potential of how interactivity will change the manner in which we experience narratives in the future. That may sound obvious, but there is great debate over the role of author juxtaposed against the role of a participatory audience. There is also the misconception that an author can be substituted with an artificial intelligence or a multitude of users feeding a structured system of presentation.

On top of that, the word narrative cannot be taken for granted either. Currently, the term is being grossly misused - especially when it follows the word interactive. One of the definitions offered by Webster's is: narrative – *n.* a narrated account; a sequence of events, a story. It's as simple as that. So in some way, it's of little surprise that everything but the kitchen sink ends up being called interactive narrative. But don't we expect more from our stories than just a sequence of events, or an endless string of dialog?

We should be more focused on new ways to experience narrative, rather than new ways to create or define narrative. Once we come to terms with that we can focus our attention on the most important question:

How can technology and new media enhance and change the ways in which we experience narratives?

II. To create or to recreate? That is the question.

Neither the machine nor the audience will replace the author in the process of creating a story. Participation does not equal authorship, and the endless possibilities of database will not magically manifest a uniquely human interpretation of existence.

There are many who believe that issue with creating a truly interactive narrative experience is simply a problem of scope as it concerns the database and medium. Their problem is two fold: 1. They believe that, in time, they can create a database that is big enough and smart enough to encompass the details of human existence. 2. They believe that the participant can be the author of the story. Insisting that the

apex of interactive narrative experience will allow the user to have absolute control over every aspect of the content and presentation – otherwise known as the Holodeck.

Who are they? They are not the authors, they are not the artists and designers, they are the technologists. This philosophy prescribes that every thing can be categorized, labeled, and filed. But concerning the creation of stories, what this really implies is that everything about life, our hopes, dreams, fears, our minds, is generic.

It's tempting to see the patterns of good pacing, plot, and characterization and say these things are a "formula", and therefore they can be treated as formulaic. Even though most writers agree that there are only so many plots, that doesn't mean that it becomes a plug n' play situation. A good story is not the sum of its' parts.

What we have come to expect from a narrative is a story structure that follows a set of rules for a specific purpose. That purpose being: to communicate a subjective interpretation of the human condition. I emphasize the words: structure, rules, and purpose. These are the author's tools to create and communicate a unique human experience, but not the communication itself, and cannot just be handed off to a demigod database.

An author has a point of view. They construct a situation in which to communicate and discuss their own point of view. We are confronted with it and form a connection to it based on our own innate subjectivity. In this way, stories are already interactive, the author's perception and persuasions entangled with the audience's perception. Therefore, subjectivity is what makes a story immersive, so it cannot just be discarded, as if it were something tainted, for the purity of universal algorithms.

My question is this: Why is there so much time and resources devoted to replacing the human author with a machine author that is modeled after a human author? Does "A copy of a copy of a copy" ring a bell with anyone? I think anyone with a moderate education has read enough books and seen enough films to be satisfied if not awed by the diversity, talent, and insight that already exist so why not start there?

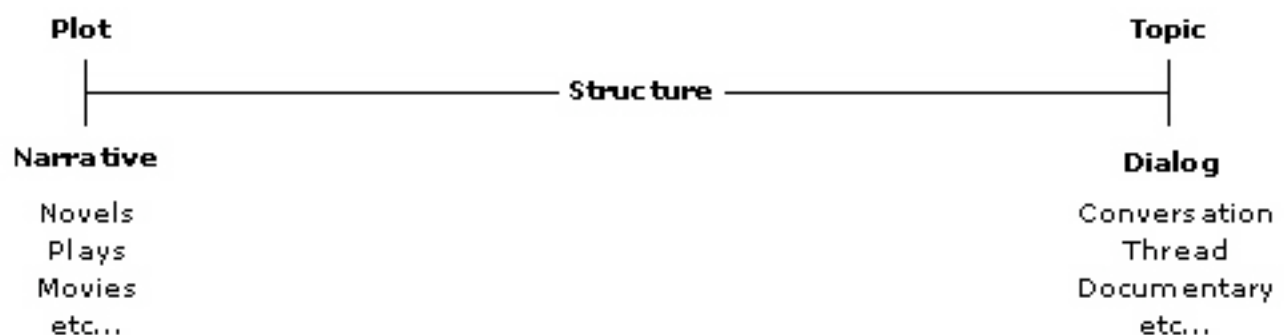
III. Do you believe in fairies?

There is also the myth that narratives can create themselves. It's an idea rooted in the belief that with enough input into a structured environment the output will be magically sew itself together to produce a coherent story. Or better yet, that the audience's unique path through content produces a personal narrative, devoid of any plot of course.

It's time to call a spade a spade. A stream of dialog, no matter how vast and various the source, will not manifest itself into what we expect a narrative to be. A good story is a series of cause and effect relationships. Without this, without a subjectively designed outcome we are left with what we put in – a stream of consciousness. Consider your favorite book or film. Do you get the same things out of a thread in a chat environment? It's like saying that if it's made up of words it's a book, or if it's presented in video its' cinema.

Defining narrative

The underlying difference between narrative and dialog is the manner in which the sequence of events is structured - this hold true for both pre-published and dynamically published environments / single author and de-centralized authoship.



Again, it may sound like I am overstating the obvious. But if you take a look at what some of the self named leading authorities of interactive narrative and interactive cinema are doing – it's exactly what I

mentioned above. Devising complicated hardware and software that enable multimedia input and output whose content structure is based on a specific topic at best. Or what about the serious attention multimedia Blogger type environments are getting. Now instead of threaded text messages we can appreciate real-time video and audio as well.

Some would have us believe that this is interactive cinema. If you take a closer look at this work, what you'll find is sophisticated systems that enable and record multimedia dialog. Don't misunderstand me I think this work is groundbreaking. It's just not breaking the ground of interactive cinema or narrative. This type of research will benefit the telecommunications industry, not the world of art.

Let me put it to you this way: Dialog has always been interactive, and it has historically been a multi-sensory experience. It just hasn't always been those things digitally. But if you had a video-phone conversation with your best friend, you wouldn't feel like you had just been to the movies, would you?

IV. You say potato...I say potato.

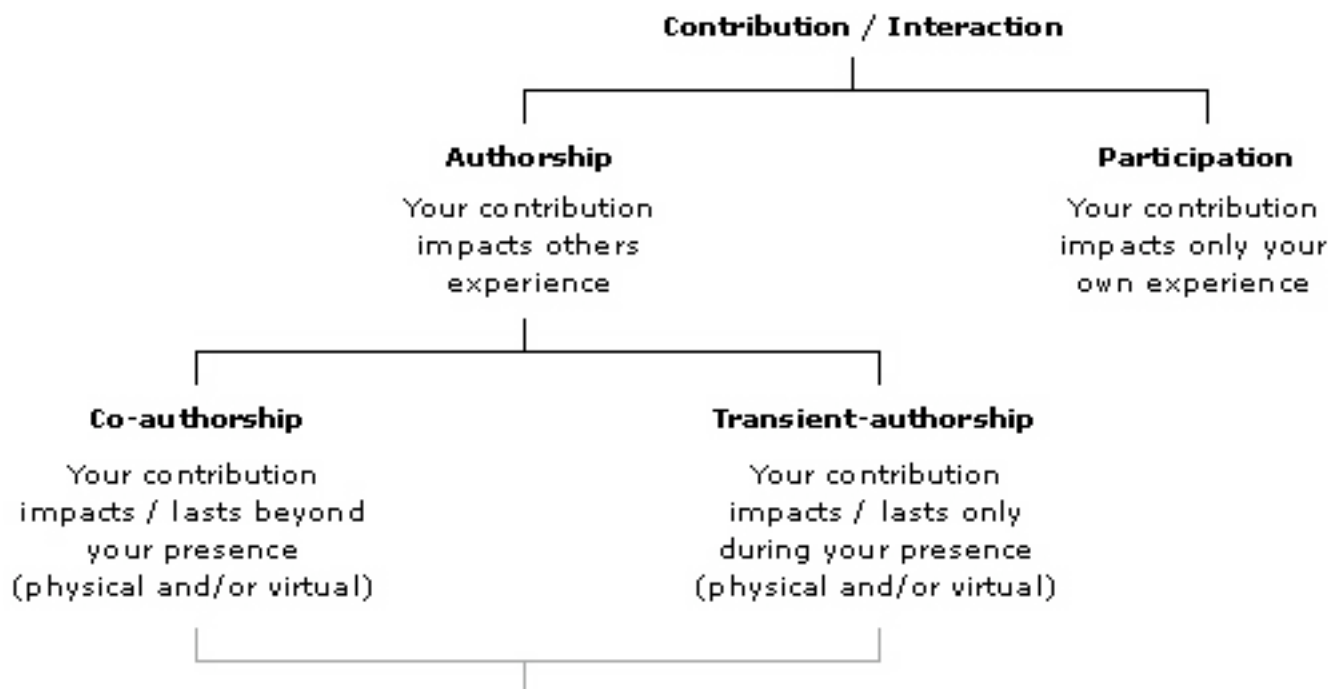
Perhaps what is needed is a clarification of the terminology that we use. Words like narrative and authorship are being thrown around like they were on sale at by the crateful at Walmarts' multimedia department. Pick up on aisle eight.

It seems to me we live in the golden age of holistic word-smithing. I am always one for making something sound "polished", but there is a time and a place when you need to separate the "buzz" from the words. Making something sound good can often get in the way of communicating the essence of what the concept is. Worse yet, it is sometimes used intentionally to hide the fact that there is no real concept to begin with. For this reason, we must be pay close attention to the technologist that happily uses the language of art to describe their algorithmic dreams.

What defines the difference between an author and a participatory audience is not the quality or quantity of contribution, but the impact of that contribution. Quality and quantity are extremely important issues, but they speak to the experiential aspects of narratives not what creates them. By analyzing the impact of contribution we can begin to define user roles in dynamic environments.

Authorship, in its many possible forms, requires that one contribute to another's experience. Put this way, one can clearly see a definitive line drawn between the author(s) and the participant(s).

Defining user role in interactive environments



Note: The role of the Director is required to differentiate a narrative system from digitally facilitated dialog.

To be clear, the presence of an author(s) does not automatically create a narrative. Two people conversing are both participants and authors of that experience, but that hardly means their conversation has the structure of a plot (or even a point)...