

A Map Larger Than the Territory: "La petite Roquette"

Karen O'Rourke
Université Paris 1

Abstract

This paper describes a prototype environment designed to explore possibilities of interactive storytelling.

Children's play is fuelled by stories of all kinds, grounded both in fiction and personal experience. Prolonging episodes drawn from school or home life, books, movies, television, the Internet, they act them out, adapting characters and situations to their own unfolding narrative-in-process. Stories determine to a large extent the way we all live. They allow us to step into other lives or try out new roles; they offer insights, points of view, alternative solutions to the problems life always provides in abundance.

For adults and children alike listening is the continuation of the story by the listener as witness and interpreter, but also as potential storyteller. Each listener builds her own version of the narrative, appropriating what is useful, making associations and drawing connections in order to move the story further, elsewhere. In this larger perspective, listening, telling and enacting stories are all part of the same basic activity. Authors, storytellers, actors, audience members, goal-based behavior, unforeseen events, reactive environments and computer programs may all participate to one degree or another.

My first goal is to set up a dynamically evolving story visitors in different places can explore, enact, annotate, inhabit and extend. They can do this by questioning characters, reacting to what they say, by providing information, choosing a new take on it or by inadvertently provoking response. Drawing on oral storytelling and dramatic techniques from Balinese wayang kulit to Italian commedia dell'arte which combine traditional storylines or situations, stock characters and improvised dialogue, as well as contemporary research on human-computer interaction, games and emergent systems, the project aims to create a real-time story-generating environment.

A Parisian park built on the site of the legendary women's jail, "la petite Roquette" is the scene of three interconnected narratives: a tale of adventure, a "fait divers" and an account of prison life and political engagement. Moving through the garden, we meet characters from the three worlds. We all evolve in parallel lives; each of us speaks our own language. Even the most ordinary conversation involves interpretation, however narrators or prompters can help us negotiate our passage.

The installation comprises a wall-sized backlit video projection of images shot on location and, facing it, an automated jogging mat flanked by two touch-screens on pedestals. An overhead microphone captures sound input. To explore the park, the visitor activates the images by treading the jogging mat. She must choose her own speed and direction. If she gobbles up asphalt, voices may interrupt each other, if she sidles toward someone talking, she can eavesdrop, if her pace is slow and regular, she can engage conversations with passers-by. Any character within earshot might

answer. An important aspect of the interface is the speech recognition and synthesis. Voices have a particular timbre; different speakers' prosody patterns reveal personality traits, emotional states. The visitor can converse with several kinds of characters: members of the "chorus" whose remarks have been pre-recorded, genii loci in the form of chatterbots found in various strategic spots in the garden, participating visitors, players, and agents endowed with motives and percepts, capable of learning and evolving. The touch-screens provide alternate ways of obtaining information and furthering the story. When visitors consult a map on one of these orientation tables, they can locate a character or a place in the park, access an on-line conference on the project website. On the other table, they can erase one by one the layers of a palimpsest, wiping through an archive of linked pictures (snapshots, newspaper clippings...) as they search for relevant items.

The narrative will emerge across media out of the actions, reactions and interactions of individual participants as they experience an ever-changing situation, modified by factors both internal (changes programmed over time) and external (previous visitors' input). The story is conceived as a dynamic system rather than a finished object. Theoretically a data bank is never finished: it remains a work-in-progress. The database may be a relatively stable structure, but its contents (objects consisting of both data and program code) are continually being renewed. Here the focus is on the circular process of constituting, organizing, updating and rebuilding an archive.

Can fixed and changing elements be articulated so as to create a dynamically evolving yet dramatically plausible story? Can visitors add narrative developments or construct characters themselves without causing the entire edifice to collapse? Where does one story end and another begin? What about the apparent incompatibility between the database, paradigmatic in nature, and the narrative which is sequential or syntagmatic? Isn't "interactive narrative" an oxymoron? One of these terms totally precludes spectator participation, while the other invites--requires--the audience to influence, modify and even initiate events. Can agents whose responses are generated in real time acquire the depth of character we expect from good fiction? In this era of photorealistic VR simulation, how will human participants deal with artificial characters whose visual presence is only suggested? What kind of stories will be told?