Evolving Stories

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ABSTRACT

New media technologies allow us to produce works which are complex systems rather than static objects, interactive works which require the participation of the viewer, and collaborative works over distance through the use of the Internet. Our research addresses these basic shifts and new opportunities in a wide array of applications such as: emerging models of database supported artworks, network-based interactive work, narrative as a temporal process and interactive installations and performances.

Keywords

Interactivity, non-linearity, community, participatory, broadcast, narrowcast, communal story, installation, women, medicine, digital, media, new media art, network environment, cyber culture, virtual environment, interactive database, interactive documentary, virtual presence

INTRODUCTION

Advances in digital communication technologies have had and continue to have a profound impact on all areas of communication and design. The first wave of applications concentrated on the development of powerful tools that dramatically changed the production process. The second focused on the development of enhancements to established communication and entertainment forms. The third wave will be in part the application of existing media forms and communication devices in a wide range of synthetic relationships. The hybrids produced during this period will by necessity generate new art forms and innovative communication and design systems. These hybrid forms call into question some basic assumptions implicit in our understanding of art objects and linear narrative structures.

PROJECT

This research investigates open systems, propelled by the active participation of the audience, who, through the process, become authors as well. We are developing systems designed to elicit interaction and to inspire participants to add their own stories to existing narratives. These new multi-vocal image based stories, saved in a data-base, will then be interwoven into the original stories and sent out again. The stories are not only open ended - they literally never end. This is one of the most powerful opportunities afforded by New Media to conventional narrative structures. The emerging participatory, non-linear and evolving new narratives open up a wealth of possibilities for culture, communication and design.

One of our primary goals is to empower communities, across the country and around the globe to communicate in new and creative ways, providing a mechanism for building bridges among communities with common concerns. Ours is the exploration of the notion of the horizontal mosaic, where people who share a culture, a lifestyle or even a means of livelihood become part of a community that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries. Each of our projects build on previous ones, pushing the boundaries of the technology further each time and developing partnerships with more and more communities. Indeed the success of our research depends on establishing national and international partnerships.

Our research is innovative and experimental as it requires the development of new technological tools. This is particularly the case for interactive networked art and sensor-based works over distance. The intersection of art and technology itself makes the research innovative, not because this has never been done before, but rather the paradoxical relationship set in motion when art and technology meet necessarily pushes the limits of both, stretching the minds of the artists and scientists involved. There are similar research projects going on at several major research universities such as MIT but their focus is deeply rooted in established media forms. Our project seeks to

break new ground by unleashing New Media's creative potential, particularly in the areas of investigating the emergence of new forms.

LILA'S STORY
My Aunt Lila: A Mad Documentary
Background

When I was a child Aunt Lila was only mentioned in whispers. It was not until I grew up that I discovered the reason for the secrecy. My aunt was in a mental hospital. Years later, long after she died, my sister told me that there was nothing wrong with our aunt – that her menopause had been misdiagnosed as manic depression.

The idea that my aunt was put in a mental hospital because she was a woman haunted me.

I began to write a screenplay about her. As research for the screenplay I made a documentary. Now I am creating an installation and interactive narrowcast around my aunt's story.

My sister was shocked when she heard about this project. She immediately denied the story and enlisted my other sister as co-conspirator in the cover-up. In the beginning, it was like pulling teeth to get anyone in my family to talk about my aunt. Consequently, the project has become as much about family secrets as it is about my aunt.

Silenced in life, Aunt Lila left few traces of herself. A portrait painted when she was in her early twenties triggers the often-contradictory memories her relatives have of her. From such insubstantial evidence, this project constructs a memory of Aunt Lila.

The Video

Through a series of interviews with family members different versions of Aunt Lila's life are constructed. The tightly framed direct address to the camera interviews add to the development of the constructed character, as well as paint a portrait of my 'real' aunt and reveal each participant's emotional relationship with her. Aunt Lila left very little behind. In life, she was silenced. In death, she remains so.

From inside the walls of a digitally built hospital the story reconstructs her memory and her history. A digital copy of a painted portrait is projected across her bed, spilling onto the floor like "a cut paper shadow"[1]. This image draws our attention to the manufactured characteristics of memory, spilling over the edges, never quite certain.

[1] Plath, Sylvia. Ariel, Faber and Faber, London, 1965

Reality breaks through the walls of the virtual space as Aunt Lila's daughters and granddaughter talk about her from the present tense location of the 'real' interviews. At times their voices overlap, blending into an indistinguishable texture where clarity vanishes. The images constantly move in and out of frame drawing our attention to the border between reality and what lies beyond.

Aunt Lila's Room

This site-specific installation, set up at Women's College Hospital in Toronto, Canada, is a conceptual representation of my Aunt's life. Roughly cut out windows reveal videotaped interviews from behind the walls of Aunt Lila's hospital room. Multiple and contradictory voices remember her life and the truth of her story lies somewhere in the mix.

While real visitors explore the installation, virtual visitors from a remote interactive narrowcast appear and disappear from a 'television' beside her bed. She responds via an oscilloscope atop the monitor.

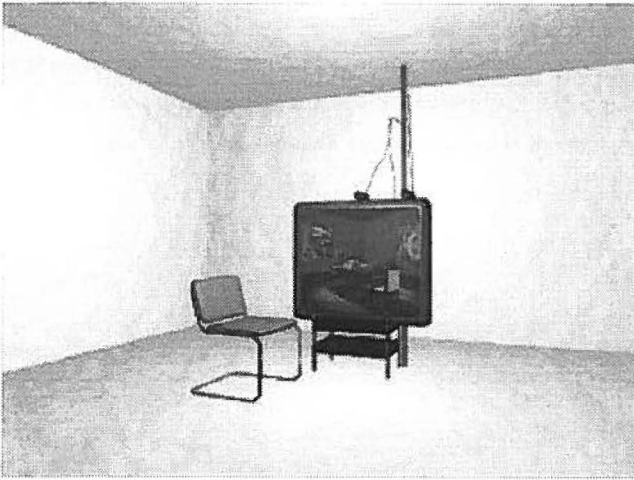Figure 1.Aunt Lila's daughters and granddaughter from behind the walls of the hospital room.
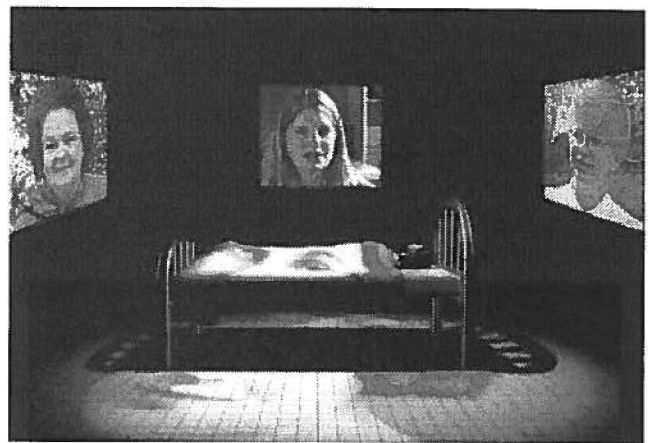
The Visitor

The installation shall be extended into a remotely accessible, interactive narrowcast, through a camera set up to capture the installation environment.

The image is then narrowcast to a monitor on a hospital cart in a gallery or in a hospital in another city. A camera and microphone hang from an IV pole allowing viewers to visit my aunt in the hospital.

Figure 2.The Visitor

The video feed from the remote location is analyzed by a computer, both to sense the presence/absence of the visitor and to trigger corresponding events in the installation.

Audience Participation

The audience will be invited to pay my aunt a virtual visit. The stories that the "visitors" tell my aunt will become part of the installation in Toronto. Their contributions will be saved into a database and incorporated into the content of the work. The story of my Aunt becomes a shared story, expanding the context to create a communal, open-ended narrative.

EMIL'S STORY

The nature and tone of the rhetoric that followed the events of September 11 were almost as disturbing as the events themselves. While this may sound cynical, to some extent it was as if the disaster provided justification for the intensification and escalation of the policies and pursuits that brought it about in the first place.

In response and within the context of the larger Evolving Stories Project, I created an interactive work that juxtaposes images of war, poverty and repression, records of interventions in foreign soil by the US Government with audio samples from speeches and statements in the ensuing months.

The visual metaphor is one of trying to scratch away at the surface of the event, represented by one image of the devastated World Trade Center, to reveal the elusive underlying context. The viewer is, however, frustrated in this effort, since the surface "skin" of the event constantly restores itself.

Figure 3.The devastated Word Trade Centre.

The cursor is hidden as the viewer tries to uncover the layers of information and to propel the piece forward.

Originally, the only quotes were from President Bush and Dr. Jerry Falwell. While the piece worked, I felt that it suffered from not making the distinction between the American people and the US government policies. So, I brought in quotes from a talk by Noam Chomsky given at the MIT Technology and Culture Forum, subsequent to the September 11 events. The addition of segments from this talk, interspersed with sound bytes from President Bush created a richer and far better-directed context. An analysis emerges from the 'conversation' surrounding the event.

Audience Participation

By the end of the piece participants find themselves included within it, introducing an element of performativity, as well as a degree of responsibility.

While the deconstruction of the images within the piece highlights the nature of information in the digital age, it also suggests the possibility of liberation, a useful metaphor for the future. The dialogical structure of the work is a model for the next stage of the project, where all sources are placed in a database, and participants will add new material and initiate new 'topics'.

The installation will consist of 2 webcams and 2 mice each connected to a computer networked to a 3rd computer.

The computers' screens are projected onto suspended screens in the room and two participants at a time interact with the projections.

INFORMATION AND QUESTIONS

For more information, contact Lila Pine at l1pine@ryerson.ca or Emil Kolompar at kolompar@ryerson.ca. More detail about each story can be found at the following web sites: http://imagearts.ryerson.ca/l1pine

http://www.ryerson.ca/~kolompar