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Is there a future
for interactive "live action" films and TV?

Introduction

"Live action" moving images (whether using prerecorded scenes or live transmission) form an overwhelming majority of television, video and film content, whereas synthesised graphic images make up most of gaming content and the web. So what are the future possibilities for adding interactivity to these "live action" scenes? The idea is not new and has been investigated since the 1960's in a variety of delivery formats, mostly for entertainment and educational purposes, but with little or no public penetration and most commercial ventures have lost money. This paper will show that it is not just the technical issues of delivery that cause difficulties, in fact the problems arise at the very top of the production process: the products are misconceived. The future will depend less on the technologies than on necessary paradigmatic shifts in interactive thinking.

The practical problems

For anyone with a passing knowledge of interactive systems, the practical difficulties that arise from linking together prerecorded video/film sequences into an interactive structure are quite easy to identify. A very common structural model is the "what if?" action scenario, which manifests itself through a branching structure. For example in a drama, should the protagonist visit his sick mother or have a night out with his friends? Each choice will probably lead to more and more divergences in the plot as the story develops through time. In the case of a video or cdrom for training purposes, we may be presented with several alternatives to choose from, of which only one provides the correct response. If this structure is run throughout, say, a 30 minute show, it becomes clear that much more than 30 minutes of content needs to be produced and made available to the viewer. Therefore there is an inherent negative economic overhead in making such a product, which

may be clawed back by using second-rate actors and cheap production values: in which case the final product can lack credibility and quality. A third problem can arise if the branching structure becomes too ambitious since the number of branches to be filmed increases exponentially, though this can be controlled by clever scriptwriting which makes some of the narrative branches "recombine".

A second structural model is a parallel one, in which several stories are playing simultaneously and competing for the attention of the viewer. This fits the "point of view" type of storytelling, whereby the plot itself may not necessarily change, but we choose which character to follow, or which location to look at. This can be delivered through television broadcast if more than one channel is used at the same time, the viewer "surfing" between the channels whenever they wish. Many countries with state television channels (eg BBC 1 and 2 in the UK, SVT 1 and 2 in Sweden) have experimented once with this format, but it has never caught on. Independent yet carefully synchronised programmes need to be filmed and edited, and then broadcast at the same time, so the problem of filming extra scenes arises again. This type of synchronised multi-stream drama is more suited to cable or satellite systems, where greater channels are available. The Canadian company Videotron experimented with this in the early 1990's, a notable example being the murder mystery *A vous l'enquete: L'affaire Landreux* which was delivered simultaneously over 4 channels. On certain scenes viewers could choose point-of-view whilst at other key points there was a choice of which suspect to interrogate (there were 4 possible endings, only one of which was the correct supposition). Although all the footage from such a project will be aired in parallel, multiple channels are tied up with the same show, which audiences do not seem to approve of. The overwhelmingly negative public response to the "D-Day" project shown on 6 Danish terrestrial channels on New Years Day 2000 is evidence of this. It seems that the use of parallel broadcast channels will mostly be used for live broadcast, for example multiple views of a Formula One car

race, than for prerecorded drama programmes. Sky Sports, for example, have packaged up several channels and made them appear like a single so-called "interactive" channel, by offering the audience the possibility to watch a football match from the camera angle of their choice.

In both cases, because of the demands of filming many more scenes than are seen at one viewing, it is difficult to sustain the structure and interaction over a long period, and as such the final product becomes a "short" film or tv show, normally of between 20 to 30 minutes – which might the audience may not perceive as being a substantial and value-for-money product. There have actually been very few commercial attempts to make cdroms, DVDs, broadcasts, and cinema experiences that keep true to dramatic and filmic principles within an interactive context and many of the companies involved no longer exist. When the audience can choose between spending their money on a half-baked film which retains interest for two or three interactions, and a computer game with tens of hours of gameplay, the latter seems to corner the market. For this reason many interactive film and tv makers have introduced elements from computer games into their products, and many games add *Full Motion Video* (FMV) scenes. This has led to the inevitable conflict between the passivity of watching and the activity of gaming, two opposing forces that seem extremely difficult, if not impossible, to successfully combine in one product. Many products have been savaged by the critics for the fact that they end up being both bad games AND bad films, with the filmic scenes generally inserted as non-interactive exposition inbetween highly interactive graphical gameplay such as piloting a spaceship. Titles like *Wing Commander* typify this style, a more successful and recent example being the *X-Files* game by Hyperbole Studios which has sold well on the back of a large fanbase loyal to the cult television series of the same name. This game is composed almost entirely of video sequences linked together using the manufacturer's patented VirtualCinema (an interactive engine and interface for interactive media), but the use of video does not disguise the formulaic gaming paradigms upon which the product is built.

The conceptual problems

In my opinion, it is not only due to practical issues that interactive film and tv drama have failed to gain market penetration. In order to make an interactive film from "live action" material, one would naturally seek frames of reference from existing products in either the world of film/television or the world of interactive products – which include computer

games and "multimedia" CD-ROMs. Film and television making is so self-referential, stereotyped and formulaic (there are plenty of cookbooks about how to make a successful "Hollywood"-style feature film) that its pervasive influence stifles new thinking and creativity. Most of the film and television schools only teach their students how to make the same type of product because that is what the marketplace demands. The result is a perception that what has proved successful for mainstream cinema or television can be translated directly to an interactive format, and although this can be true for certain specific cases, we shall see that "remediation" is by no means automatically successful: the Hollywood format can probably already do the job better. And as was discussed above, if one were to be influenced by computer games, the same conclusion would be reached: a "proper" game is better than a half-baked compromise of live filmed scenes which, although they add a sense of narrative and reality, get in the way of real gameplay. Many of the makers of interactive products suffer from a Hollywood-envy, with a diet of formulaic adventure movies as inspiration.

It proves interesting to study the first example of the interactive film genre from 1967, which actually used film itself as its display medium. The Kino-Automat showed a short film called *One Man and His World* directed by the Czech Raduzs Cincera, at Expo67 in Montreal. The problem of choice was overcome by having theatrical performers (including the film's main protagonist) appearing "live" on stage in front of the projected film which would stop in split-screen-form at key moments, whilst the audience was encouraged to make moral judgements upon which direction the plot should take. Lamps around the screen would light up to show each viewer's selection (each seat had a button offering two choices), and the majority vote determined which choice would be shown next. There were actually only seven moments where the audience could "vote" during the 30 minute film, and the film's events did not diverge: the two alternatives offered, although played out in very different ways, would recombine to bring the story back to the next choice point.

The film played out to packed audiences and gained widespread worldwide press exposure during Expo 67, then afterwards the show returned to Czechoslovakia, toured the major cities...and vanished into oblivion, only referred to occasionally and nostalgically in scholarly New Media literature. It became nothing more than a sideshow, an interesting oddity with a short lifespan. Yet the IMAX screen format which was also publicly demonstrated for the first time at Expo 67 has established a main stream presence and a successful worldwide financial model since that time: because it has concentrated almost exclusively on immersive

non-fictional documentary works filmed in specifically chosen visually exciting environments.

In fact, apart from the novelty of the voting and theatrical interface, the Kino-Automat film had all the usual elements of a quality cinematic release: well-defined characters, a beginning, middle and end, relationships, dilemmas and crises, good cinematography, a musical score. Maybe its format dealt very well with the "what if?" question which often occupies our thoughts during the playout of a drama, but in fact the linear cinema can deal with this quite successfully anyway. The result is that the interactive version is no better, and probably worse than the linear version. The fact that a user might "replay" an interactive film in order to discover things that were missed in a first playing could be meaningless if the film's director chose to show all the possibilities in a linear edit. A review of the movie *Sliding Doors* states how "a beautiful young English woman learns that she has been fired from her PR job. On the way home, the doors of a tube car close on her, opening the 'what if' floodgates. She begins to live out two lives: if she had made the train, and if she hadn't". Both alternatives are shown in the film which, though watched passively by the audience, maintains the strength of the director's personal vision, and keeps the element of surprise that could be lost when the viewer's interaction is causing changes in the film. *Sliding Doors* is only one of many films to explicitly show several destinies to the audience, another example being Resnais' film "Smoking/No Smoking" (itself based on the stage play by Alan Ayckbourn).

The parallel structure might be typified in some of the films of Robert Altman. *Short Cuts* (1993) has a large cast with interlinked destinies, essentially a point-of-view film in which the Director himself has chosen his preferred optimal edit. This is almost certainly preferable than an interactive version in which the audience can choose which protagonist to follow, because Altman presents us with the most interesting and revealing route. Kurosawa's "Rashomon" has a more subjective approach, the audience sees how the events of a murder are interpreted in different ways by several witnesses.

I conclude that an interactive cinema which tries to mimic the dramatic and expositional characteristics of its well-established older sibling is fighting a losing battle. Interactive movies as they have developed since 1967 seem to try either to emulate the dramatic conventions of cinema with its characters, structures and stories, or they take an existing cinema "hit" (for example, Bond or other action movies) and reconfirm as so-called "Interactive Entertainment" even though to all intents and purposes it is an action/strategy game. Even with the benefit of all our lightning-fast interactive computer controlled digital technology, most interactive movies still want

to do what has been done before. The protagonist still has an emotional dilemma or crisis, there is still a choice to be made by the viewer, and although this is carried out by interfacing a computer and not through a vote in a cinema theatre, the structure and intent of the work appears so often exactly the same as it was thirty years ago – and still the interactive movie remains an interesting sideshow! There is clearly no Holy Grail to successfully interactivise dramas.

This opinion is very different from that of Greg Roach, founder of Hyperbole Studios (which has created several disk-based productions including the X-Files Game) who has stated that "the interactive movie [...] tries to create and sustain the drama that characterises real films. The scriptwriters try to make their characters behave in a deep and realistic fashion within a properly structured plot". The interactive movie he imagines would be "like its big screen counterpart [...] it will have emotion-filled storytelling with clean production values. Hollywood developers are concentrating on the storyline, striking a middle ground between passivity and interaction"¹.

Is there a future?

So if well-established linear drama products will never work in interactive format, what possibilities remain? I believe that we should move our frames of reference further away from established cinema and TV drama. For example, the filmic work of the artist Peter Greenaway does not follow the usual norms and conventions. He puts it quite succinctly "Why has the cinema associated itself with the business of story-telling? Could it not profitably exist without it? My cinema experiments with numerical systems, alphabetical sequence, colour-coding, have all been attempts to dislodge this apparently unquestioned presumption that narrative is necessary and essential for cinema to convey its preoccupations". A personal inspiration is the innovative Polish filmmaker Zbigniew Rybczynski, described by the Polish critic Ryszard Kluszczyński as being one of the most important artists deserving merit for delineating the cinema... *New Book* (1975) and *Tango* (1980) in particular, when seen from today's perspective, seem to be an extremely important stage in the development of non-linear film poetics². The author describes this stage as "pre-interactive". Whereas his rarely shown splitscreen movie *New Book* uses multi-scene film editing in a tour-de-force of spatial representation and choreography, the Hollywood product

¹ <http://www.virtualcinema.com./press.htm> (13. 04.2004).

² R. W. Kluszczyński, *Film, wideo, multimedia. Sztuka ruchomego obrazu w erze elektronicznej*, Warszawa 1999, s. 160.

Timecode (Mike Figgis 1999) appropriates a similar format without innovation simply to simultaneously show four strands of a conventional "point-of-view" drama, filmed with the freedom and economy of single concurrent takes using digital video cameras. It is in fact an "old-thinking" product rather than anything new. Experimental film makers and artists, from the Surrealists through Maya Deren to Bill Viola, could offer more suitable inspirations for models of interaction because they often throw into question the nature of moving images themselves.

Although the use of broadband websites to deliver interactive video content is certainly far from ideal, there are no technological problems with DVD and interactive television which are both effective in the delivery of interactive live action content. But the content itself should not be "remediated": very specific fictions should instead be created based around the interaction metaphor. Although the DVD film *Tender Loving Care* is no major paradigm shift, the premise of the interaction (answering psychological profiling questions) is integral to the story itself. Its manufacturer's website describes it as a

provocative, psychological thriller designed to take full advantage of the stunning capabilities of DVD technology, while lifting CD-ROM to new heights. Starring two-time Oscar-nominee John Hurt, and based on a novel by Andrew Neiderman (*Devil's Advocate*), *TLC* provides all of the pleasures of a traditional motion picture while satisfying the voyeuristic and self-analytic interests engaged by its unique interactive elements. *TLC* is not like other so-called interactive movies; its design is unprecedented in that the viewer's psyche is the invisible director of the tale, determining both character and plot development every step of the way³.

My own CD-ROM films are carefully created around the interaction, for example a slapstick comedy film *Jinxed!* in which there is no humour... unless the viewers click on certain objects in the protagonist's room at exactly the right time. The protagonist then takes a tumble or some other gentle mishap. The film might be portable to interactive TV if the slapstick humour scenes could be downloaded locally before the broadcast, only to be shown if the viewer interacts at the right moment. The humorous television quiz show *Banzai TV*, aired in the UK on both Channel 4 and Sky Interactive, is a prototypic example of this "download beforehand" model. The show is designed to be off-the-wall, wacky and entertaining even without the adjunction of the interactivity which is only available on Sky (in the UK). In the latter broadcast, some

extra scenes are downloaded onto the set-top box at the beginning of the programme, so that the viewer who places bets using their handset receives humorous praise or insults from the show's main characters. In one respect the creators of this program have not gone down the obvious route, but made it into a betting show in which it is not even necessary to bet or compete, and the programme has already been sold to other countries.

Other creative examples from interactive TV are still extremely rare, partly because the technology is still developing, needs proprietary hardware, and lacks substantial household penetration. The Finnish program *Akvaario* (*Aquarium*) was broadcast on Finnish national TV throughout March 1999 during the early hours of the morning for six nights a week, and revolved around the lives of two sleepless urban "singles", Eira and Ari. They are portrayed as being awake at night in their homes and can be influenced by a voting system of telephone calls from the viewers: the four predefined telephone numbers would satisfy the character's needs for food, drink, to party and to be cared for. If nobody calls, the character becomes upset and melancholic. The technology behind *Akvaario* is essentially a computer which composes the show on-the-fly according to the moods of the virtual Ari and Eira from a media database with 5000 different videoclips (which include some dreams). The essential principle is that *Akvaario* is NOT meant to be watched as a normal serial, from beginning to end, it is conceived as a place to drop by, to see how Ari and Eira are doing, and to help or disturb their lives.

Unfortunately, changing the paradigms in the way an interactive programme communicates, also demands a reeducation of the audience. *Akvaario* might be found confusing and boring if the viewers are expecting a fast paced drama with significant events happening and evolving relationships between characters, and it would be unlikely to secure a "prime-time" broadcast slot. Financially it was conceived and produced by students (producer: Teijo Pellinen) at the University of Art and Design in Helsinki and not by a commercial company. There is always the danger that experimenting too much with the form will result only in attracting a marginal audience.

One possible successful formula might be possible to bring back the theatrical element, to produce a screening that was a special event, harking back to the Kino-Automat from 1967. As discussed earlier, IMAX has proved to be a very successful "spectacle", only available in a small number of special cinemas worldwide. In fact, the concept of audience voting as a group experience was resurrected in the early 1990s when a number of small cinemas were equipped with pistol-grips by the US company Entropy Entertainment Inc (in

³ <http://www.aftermathmedia.com/tlc/aboutframe.htm> (10.04.2004).

association with Sony), who showed 30-minute movies such as *Mr Payback* and *I'm Your Man* which had been shot on film but transferred to laserdisc for instant random access. There were frequent three-way choice points in the plot which would be determined by majority vote from the buttons. This venture was unsuccessful and short-lived, almost certainly because the films were short, unsubstantial and lacking in mental stimulation, and the expense of kitting out special cinemas with high-tech electronics must have been financially crippling (as an interesting footnote, following the demise of the company some of the original material was revived by ChoicePoint Films, re-marketing the original stories but this time targetted at the domestic DVD environment).

Along with others, I was involved in staging a theatrical presentation of 8 short interactive films at the Espoo Cin festival in Finland in summer 2002, using a reasonably low-cost solution for audience participation: shouting. A microphone hanging over the auditorium picked up the volume of the audience's shouts, which could be used both for choice-making in branching films and for specially made films using the shout as the interaction metaphor. Each film was short and the subject matter varied, to retain the audience's interest. The success of the event has led to plans to tour the show (under the name of *Cause and Effect*) to small theatres and cinemas⁴.

Of course, the most obvious strategy might be to disregard the drama market, and to concentrate on non-fictional

and educational content in which the audience learns something or explore a territory rather than seek entertainment. After all, these types of multimedia titles represent one of the only remaining successful markets for CD-ROM, the interaction enabling the viewers to find out the information that they want. Examples might be a First Aid training film, in which different modes of action might be available to the viewer when presented with a film of an accident, only one of which is the correct course of treatment. Or a video tour of the streets of a distant city in which the viewer can choose where to navigate, a technique sometimes known as a "movie map" or "surrogate travel". And yet again, a documentary film which the viewer themselves can configure from a large repository of filmed material. Finally, there might also be a future market in interactive film for advertisers, since the ultimate goal is neither to educate nor to (necessarily) entertain. For example, the award-winning Milko-cow musicmachine website (www.fjallfil.com) promotes a well-established yoghurt brand by enabling the audience to create their own version of a music video featuring animated sequences of the product's cow character.

It can only be hoped that future attempts to add interaction to live action scenes will learn from the mistakes of others. A British website entitled www.itsyourmovie.com, active during the year 2000, proudly proclaimed itself to be "the world's first interactive movie", suggesting that its makers had not even carried out the most basic of research before making their product. Only by learning from the past, and making informed experiments, can new models come about. This type of experimentation does not fit into a profit-making model and is a luxury of the non-commercial sector, so we may need to look to artists and students to create the most interesting and successful interactive films of the future.

⁴ This success is not measured financially: the show had free admittance and none of the films shown were made by commercial companies. *Cause and Effect* was performed at Kino Lab, Contemporary Art Center Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw in 2003 year.