Interface: The Actual Story

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Abstract
Technological enhancements and the integration of digital media into our daily lives have brought us many possibilities to form new associations and interact with the content that we are confronted with. Digital storytelling is such a field, which by using the characteristics of new media tries to form new semantic and syntactic relations between the authors/producers/designers/creators, the stories told and the users. Interface appears as the gateway through which the user accesses the content. The physical and digital interfaces (graphical user interfaces) and how the user interacts with them set the rules of the process by which the data is accessed. New media places the interface and the user at the heart of this interaction. The possibility of customising the user experience is an exciting one, which can bring dynamism to any story that is being told. The graphical user interface not only provides access to the content being represented but also gives freedom to the user to a degree on how to experience the story and provides visual information about the look and feel of the story. This chapter probes into the idea that an interface beyond being an undetachable part of the story being told, also acts as a part of the story with which it unfolds. Whether it is an online book, a hyperlinked story, a new media documentary, a computer game, or any other form of transmedia storytelling, interface becomes an important element of the story that gives visual hints and designates the look and feel of the story being told. This study intends to put forward *interface* as the element that is the gateway to the story, a part of the story and the reflection of the user who access the content through interacting with the interface.

Key Words: New media, interface, interaction, look and feel, database, hypermediacy, immediacy.

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> *There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories.*[1]

Stories have always been an integral part of culture we inhabit. We construct, remember, re-write, record, alter, read, or in some occasions even forget about stories; pass them on to other generations and cultures through oral, gestural, written or visual courses. Storytelling is an act of conveying narratives in amalgamation with the memories, experiences, and point of views of the storyteller and the receiver. Hence, no story in history is neutral or objective, and it changes every time that it is being told and experienced. We tell stories to inform, entertain,

inspire, persuade, dissuade from, encourage, discourage, teach, and share ideas, assets, knowledge, memory or even history. Today, transmedia stories embody interactive narratives, scenarios, documentaries, computer games, commentaries, as well as fables and fairy tales and can be considered more than just mere *remediations*[2] of cultural products that reflect the operational logic of digital culture.

Digital technologies offer us expandable possibilities through which such stories can be practiced as new experiences both for the storyteller and the audience. Its interactive nature, continuous flow of data, the interrelatedness of the content, and the methods we use to construct, navigate through, and experience the story become as vital as the storyteller and the audience as well.

Digital technologies, without any doubt, act as one of our extensions we use to communicate, be entertained, and be informed about our environment, our culture, and society. At this particular point, the *interface*, which moderates the *human-computer interaction*, manifests itself as the key component of new media. Basically, an *interface* is the object that mediates/brings together the user and the system, which she intends to interact with. Through the interface the content is made accessible to the user and can be made possible to be explored by the user only through interacting with it. The interface of a digital system includes the hardware of that system such as the screen, the mouse, the keyboard, the microphone, the camera, etc., and the software that is implemented in the system, such as the application with which the content is presented, and graphical user interface. Interfaces shape, alter, and affect how we experience and perceive the content through their designs, applications and logics. As Rokeby stated '[T]he interface itself, by defining how we perceive and navigate content, shapes our experience as that content.'[3] The designer of the interface has great responsibility to provide the necessary design that would function in the way to attract and engage the user in the story being told. Hence, the interface is not just a mediator that connects the audience with the content but is a cultural entity. Manovich argues that the interface becomes what he calls *cultural interface* since the data that the user is accessing is the digitally encoded cultural input.[4] The concept of *cultural interface* is significant for this study because of the reason that the accessed content is a product that has its roots deep in culture and the interface accompanying it is a reflection of the content, the storyteller and the user.

The audience/listener of a story becomes *the user* as she experiences the story via digital media. Hence, digital media has the promise of interactive participation, where the concept of the audience alters dramatically. She has to interact with the digital story being presented via using the specifically designed interface. The graphical user interface, which depends on visual expressions and metaphors, acts as a gateway to the story. It introduces the story to the user, offers visual hints about the story being told, designates the look and feel of it, establishes the setting, provides the continuity in the story, and adopts the user to the system. Thus, the

interface becomes the story itself without which the content, in this case the digital story, cannot be accessed and experienced.

In a digital story, the user is welcomed by the interface. It greets her, first of all by its visual design. The user can only experience the digital story after she figures out how to use the interface. She must be willing to interact with the system and to achieve this interaction the interface must be inviting. If the designed interface is not intuitive enough or is complicated the user might be repelled from the work.

> Interface metaphors are considered successful by designers if they seem "intuitive," and if they help the uninitiated to quickly and comfortably adopt the tool in ways that feel productive to them.[5]

Some users of digital media are engaging with the technologies so frequently that they unconsciously develop a memory and habitual behaviours on how to interact with the content that they are offered. Regardless of the devices that are used, the user is expected to figure out rather quickly how to engage with the data. To access the content, the user should trigger the system by making a choice whether it is an online book, a new media documentary, a webisode, a computer game, a DVD, etc. This act of choice making is a promise of digital media that offers a democratic environment. However, these choices are most of the time limited and pre-planned by the designer. Hence, within such works the active participation of the user turns out to be an illusion.

The first choice the user makes can be considered as the first step taken for an immersive experience. Meadows talks about four steps of interaction through which the user is introduced and is engaged with the interface of any system; observation, exploration, modification and reciprocal change.[6] The user observes the system, explores the possibilities/choices she is provided with, acts on these choices, and if it lets the user to make changes in the system through her interaction by generating new content, mutually the system alters the user who demands to see new outcomes.[7]

The interface acts like a portal through which, the story can only be triggered via making a choice that it is offering. At this instance, the interface is what a book cover and pages are to a novel, or a photo album; what a poster or a stage are to a theatre play; what a poster, a title sequence, or a screen to a film, or a documentary; or what a CD cover, its insert, or the music player to a music album. First and foremost, the user should be attracted by the design of the interface to engage with the story. The interface of a digital story will likely be more engaging and informative if it gives hints about the content of the story, the genre, and even the intended affect expected to be awakened in the user. The design of the interface should be consistent with the content, if it is not it may confuse the user, which in some cases can be the intention.

The interface is like a theatrical stage where the audience may get clues about the play from the stage decoration, even before it starts. It establishes the setting of the story and prepares the user for what is to come. The interface should encourage the user to engage with the system, draw her towards the story being told and help her to select a subject position. Thus, the interface takes an outsider and transforms her into a user who is immersed in the story being told.

As the user adopts the operational logic of the interface and is drawn into the story, she chooses her desired options from a range of selections that will help the story to unfold. The choices of the user are of significance in the sense that they may change the course of the events in the story being told. So, the interface not only acts as the stage on which the story unfolds, but also as the agent by which the continuity and progression of the story is provided. The interface allows the user to connect different cause and effect relationships that are collected in the database of the work. Hence, even if the content is expected to be experienced in a non-linear fashion, because of the interaction of the user with the interface, the fragments of the stories are experienced in a linear fashion. In some cases the project may consists of contents that would be unveiled simultaneously to evoke an emotion or a reaction in the user. For instance in the film *Timecode*[8] the viewer is confronted with 4-channel screening, within which she is free to choose.

The choices, although pre-planned and limited by the storyteller, offer the user an immersive environment that she continues with the digital experience. If the digital experience is claiming to be an interactive one, it requires active participation of the user. The instances in the digital narrative where the course of the story has the possibility to change are most likely to be triggered or decided upon by the user, who makes selections or interacts with the work through the interface. The user is expected to be more willing to interact with the system if the system provides a higher level of interactive experience that offers an active participation, where the user feels like she is the one with the power to shape the story. The existence of any interface is already an evidence of interaction; the level of this interaction depends on its structure.

> The ability to "read" a medium means you can *access* materials
> and tools created by others. The ability to "write" in a medium
> means you can *generate* materials and tools for others.[9]

Hence, the user experiencing a digital story may become a writer if she can generate new content. However, a user may prefer to be a passive participant of the system. While designing and producing for digital media, one should keep in mind that interactive nature of the media does not have to necessarily transform every user into a content-maker. Whichever degree of participation is chosen for the user, the interaction platform is always the interface and it determines a forced on perspective for the user to adopt. The interface helps the story to unfold through

the interaction of the user. Thus, it is at the same time a representation of the user. It reflects the user as well as the storyteller. However, this reflection is never a neutral presentation of the user. It always carries cultural imprints and the point of view of the storyteller, since a story is first and foremost is shaped by the experiences, knowledge, and memory of the storyteller and it always operates on the fact that it is told for a reason.

Apart from the story represented, the visual language of the interface always carries cultural connotations and depends heavily on our daily practices. Along with helping the user to grasp the story easier or surprising her through creating a shocking effect by implementing a visual design, the storyteller or the interface designer in order to communicate a preferred message, rely on the visual design of the interface that carries cultural specific connotations which are never neutral or objective.

The decentred, rhizomatic structure of digital media and the logic of database as a *cultural form*[10] open up new possibilities towards how to assess narratives and interfaces. Manovich emphasises the anti-narrative logic of the Web because of the dominance of the database as the cultural form[11] and argues that 'narrative and database are natural enemies.'[12] However, through interface design the storyteller has the potential of transforming the bits of data into meaningful syntactic formations that would be revealed by the user who is interacting with the system through the intent of experiencing a digital narrative. Hence, the storyteller and interface designer have the power to direct the user in the desired route to help her in unveiling a content in the projected way. In a digital project the key aspect is the interface, without which the user cannot operate, navigate through, and experience the content.

The interface accompanying the story in digital media acts not only as a mediator through which the user reaches the content, but also as a gateway that indicates the mood, feel and look, and point of view of the story being told. It functions as a stage where the audience is transformed into the user and she is introduced with the story being told. The user provides continuity by engaging with the interface through which she navigates and reveals the story in samples of digital stories with high levels of interactions. The user is encouraged by the storyteller to step in the process of storytelling and choose from variety of selections that would alter the structure of the narrative (even the choices are amongst planned and a limited ones) and reflecting the choices and perspective of the user. Thus, the interface, especially the graphical user interface becomes an undetachable part of the story, moreover, a story by itself.

Notes

[1] Ursula K. Le Guin, *Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*, ed. Sarah Wood (New York: Ultramarine Publishing, 1980).

[2] Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000), 90.

[3] David Rokeby, 'The Construction of Experience: Interface as Content', in *Digital Illusion: Entertaining the Future with High Technology*, ed. Clark Dodsworth, Jr. (The ACM Press, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company), accessed 26 February 2013, http://www.davidrokeby.comexperience.html.

[4] Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001), 70.

[5] Tartleton Gillespie, 'The Stories Digital Tools Tell', in *New Media: Theories and Practices of Digitextuality*, eds. Anna Everett and John T. Caldwell (New York: Routledge, 2003), 115.

[6] Mark Stephen Meadows, *Pause and Effect: The Art of Interactive Narrative* (Indianapolis: New Riders, 2003), 44.

[7] Ibid.

[8] *Timecode*, dir. Mike Figgis (2000, USA: Optimum Home Entertainment, 2003), DVD.

[9] Alan Kay, 'User Interface: A Personal View', in *Multimedia: from Wagner to Virtual Reality*, eds. Randall Packer and Ken Jordan (New York: Norton, 2002), 125.

[10] Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 219.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid., 225.

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Filmography

Figgis, Mike, dir. *Timecode*. 2000. USA: Optimum Home Entertainment, 2003, DVD.

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