DRS Report

Analysis of Interactive narrative media for non-fictional narratives

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Approval sheet

The Project titled "Analysis of interactive narrative media for non-fictional narratives" by Thuli N Chishi is approved, in partial fulfilment of the 'Master in Design' Degree in Interaction Design at the Industrial Design Centre, Indian Institute of Technology Bombay.

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(Prof. Ravi Poovaiah)

Declaration

This is a presentation of my original research work for the project titled
"Analysis of Interactive narrative media for non-fictional narratives".
Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate
this clearly, with due reference to the literature, and acknowledgement of
collaborative research and discussions.
The work was done under the guidance of Professor Ravi Poovaiah.

I understand that any violation of the above will be a cause for disciplinary
action by the institute and can evoke penal action by parties whose content
was used for this project without proper citation.

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Acknowledgement

I am sincerely grateful to my guide Professor Ravi Poovaiah, who with patience has guided me through the progress of the project and giving me the freedom to explore possibilities with this project.

I thank my classmates for their valuable feedback and constant support and my family for their support.

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Abstract

Interactive narratives present a novel way of storytelling where the user is engaged in the dynamism of the narration, sometimes influencing it by being a performer or by simply executing controls while observing the story. In this paper, we try to analyse non-fictional narratives using a theoretical model framework, while trying to best understand what media could be best appropriate for a non-fictional interactive narrative and the parameters that define it.

Introduction

Interactive narratives are narratives where the story or the plot is driven by user actions or user decisions. The user or the receiver of information can perform activities through a digital media, taking roles within the story to drive the plot, issue commands or observe as a third person and make decisions to influence or manipulate the story. The user becomes directly involved in the narration and often based on the control they can exercise in the story environment and the flexibility of the story the role of the user becomes more of a performer than a receiver.

Interactive narratives are an emerging trend, finding one of its uses in delivering factual pieces of information in an engaging way. Storytelling is a cognitive tool for situated understanding [1] and therefore can be appropriately used for narrating non-fictional stories. In journalisms or documentation, interactive narratives are now being explored to put across a more compelling and engaging opportunity to their viewers or readers. A few examples are simulation articles like Haiti: Rebuilding Haiti, where the plight of the people of Haiti trying to rebuild their lives after the hurricane is conveyed with the user being put in a position to make decisions for the future of Haiti. And Hacked, Al Jazeera's interactive article about the hacking crimes in Syria, where the user is asked to investigate the Syrian cybercrimes. Interactive narratives give us a powerful and engaging opportunity to engage with the users and put across meaningful information through varying media.

While interactive narratives exist in its simplest traditional choose your own adventure books, DnD and mobile games, the majority of the existing interactive narratives lie in websites and web applications. Within these web applications itself, there arises a large subset of interactive documentaries or articles which contain factual information. The main aim of the application itself to present this factual information or non-fictional narrative to the user in a more novel way, getting them to participate or partake in the relieving and investigation of this information and make a meaningful thread out of it.

In fictional narratives, there remains the possibility of increasing the extent of the player controls, allowing the user to author the narration by creating

new possibilities with their decisions as long as the drama manager allows it. However, in non-fictional narratives, the information remains unalterable and the endings or events are fixed. So in non-fictional interactive narratives, the information may be more conveniently scattered or sequenced allowing the user to create their own narrative from the already existing events or follow along a sequential narration by performing tasks.

Taking into considerations, fundamental dimensions of an interactive narrative. This report takes in an already established model for theoretical analysis of some popular non-fictional interactive narratives out there.

The model for analysis of interactive digital storytelling

J.V Pavlik and J.O Pavlik analysed ten interactive documentaries by identifying the main parameters for journalism in the age of digital storytelling. The model relies on three main dimensions of journalistic storytelling; the foundation, the structure and the media. Table 1 outlines the model the authors used for analysing the documentaries.

Journalistic documentaries or articles have a pre-authored narrative structure. Because it has a lot of factual information and non-fictional elements to it the narrative arcs and ending/endings are fixed and authored, allowing the user unravel and make sense of the information through exploring already defined options and tasks.

For non-fictional narratives, running similarities with a journalistic approach, the fundamental elements on which these stories rely on are the sources, the quality of writing with extensive fact-checking. The structural elements of the stories in the digital age can be linear or non-linear, can include dynamic elements in the form of interactive data etc. In the current digital age, the narratives can also be represented in virtual or augmented reality. The digital narratives could also be accessed through different devices, and the level of interactivity could be direct, indirect or passive. Interactive narratives also allow a certain degree of contextualisation of the story through methods like locative narratives.

Foundational	Structural	Features of Digital Media Environment
• Extensive reporting • Message substances • Production values	• Non Linear • Dynamic • More processed centred/ less episodic • Immersive, 1st person view increasing	• Multiple modalities • Interactive • Contextualised

Table 1. Digital media journalism storytelling model

Methodology

The following interactive narratives in Table 2 was analysed through textual analysis of the narrative, the media and all aspects of the story were scrutinized. The dimensions used are the ones used by J. Pavlik for his analysis.

Each narrative was assessed based on each dimension in the model. Scoring the narratives based on the dimensions on a scale according to defined parameters under each category.
The narratives chosen were based on the popularity of the narratives, variety, and accessibility on media platforms.

| Foundational	Structural	Feature of Digital Media environment
• Extent of evidence (Sources, credibility) • Message Substance (Novelty) • Quality of Writing Editing • Production Values (quality of audio, video)	• Use of non-linear narrative structure • Presence of dynamic driven content • Use of immersive (1st person vs 3rd person)	• Number of media modalities • Extent of interactive content elements • Incorporation of social media Interactivity • Extent of presence of contextualised content • Approach (Game, simulation, narrative exploration)

Fig: Landing page of Rebuilding Haiti
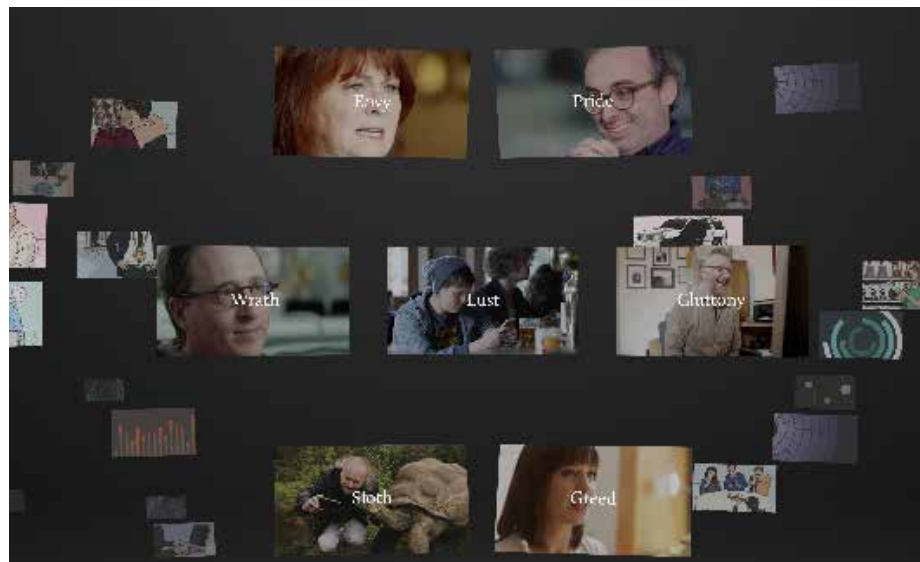
Fig: The seven deadly digittal sins

The Interactive Narratives

The balloons of Bhutan, Jonathan Harris 2007 A documentation of the lives of the Bhutanese people in the audio form taken over a two-week journey and assembled.
Seven digital deadly sins, NFB digital studio and The Guardian 2014 An interactive documentary giving insights to the evils, the current digital world enables and allows the user to condemn or absolve acts.
ReBuilding Haiti, J Abbiatici, F. Maurin, 2014 An interactive article about the plight of Haiti trying to recover after the hurricane and the problems they face. The game simulation format incorporated allows the user to make decisions for Haiti that could make or destroy Haiti.
After the storm, Andrew Beck Grace, 2015 An interactive documentary essay about the experience of living through a natural disaster.
Pirate fishing: An interactive investigation, Al Jazeera, 2014 An interactive investigative game on uncovering the illegal fishing off the coast of Sierra Leone.

Title	Extent of evidence	Novelty	Message Substance (Novelty)		Quality of Writing Editing	Production Values		Production Values
The balloons of Bhutan	high		The novelty of this project lies in the experiental aspect of the author's journey and the fact that the data collected was from the origin source itself.	5		HIgh, The quality of audio and the presentation of the 117 stories along with a data visualisation of the statistics make it a high quality production	0	5
ReBuilding Haiti	high		A game based approached that allows the user control and make descisions	2		High, the artwork, audio and the articles well were presented.	3	3
After the Storm		5	A personalised journey or experience	3		High, very neatly presented with a cinematic feel	5	5
The seven digital deadly sins		4	A collection of documentaries with polls and other activities	5		High, the audio, video and the websit itself reeks of high quality production	5	5
Pirate Fishing An Interactive investigation		5	The project takes the user in as an active participant in the investigation.	5		High	5	5

Title	Use of non-linear narrative structure	Presence of dynamic driven content	Use of immersive
The balloons of Bhutan	Non Linear	Data visualisations	1st person
ReBuilding Haiti	Linear	Fluidity	1st person
After the Storm	Linear	Fluidity	1st person
The seven digital deadly sins	Non linear		1st person
Pirate Fishing An Interactive investigation	Non linear	Gamefied	1st person

| Title	Number of media modalities	Extent of interactive content elements	Incorporation of social media Interactivity	Extent of presence of contextualised content	Approach (Game, simulation, narrative exploration)
The balloons of Bhutan	High	Clickable and explorable	Yes		Narrative exploration
ReBuilding Haiti	two	Clickable	no		Simulation Game
After the Storm	High	Clickcable	no		Narrative exploration
The seven digital deadly sins	High	Clickable and exploarable	Yes		Narrative exploration
Pirate Fishing An Interactive investigation	High	Game interface	no		Game

10
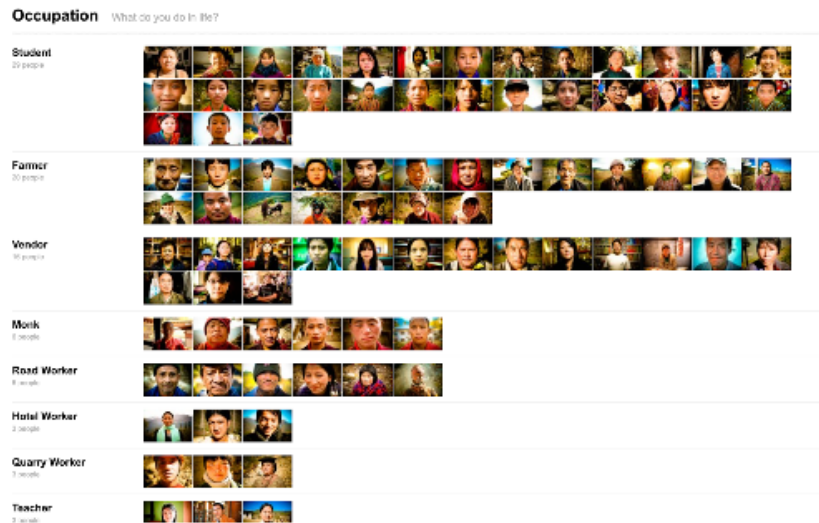
Fig: Balloons of Bhutan

Discussion

The quality of productions of each of the narratives was of considerably high quality, The ones which were purely journalistic in nature had decent sources. There was ascertained two kinds of sources: Harris's Balloons of Bhutan and Grace's After the storm was based on personal experience, the former being a collection of other people's stories collected through conversation and the later one an essay of a personal account. These two's claim of credibility is legitimised by the evidence of their own personal account.

While Harris's narration is novel in its subjects telling their own stories, most of them try to incorporate some game or decision making to promote user engagement/involvement.
Structurally the narratives are divided between non-linear and linear narration. While Harris's do not follow any linear narration, the information is scattered finely allowing the user to make sense of the narration by themselves. The narration Harris provides do not have a fixed ending or a conclusion, it remains as a repository of stories where one can revisit over again to listen to the stories.

Similarly, the seven digital sins follow a similar pattern but with added interactivity where the users do not simply receive information but involve in it.

The other three seems to have a clear directive objective, following a linear story with an end, in ReBuilding Haiti however the game element allows the user to experience different endings based on their choices throughout the narrative.

The gamification and the presence of dynamic driven content like data visualisations keep the user engaged.
The immersion of the narratives is particularly high with added visual and audio effects in almost all the narratives. After the storm, stands out as an immersive experience due to its production quality and the poignancy of the narrator. All the narratives are addressed in the first person view, where the

user is directed by the narratives to be involved as an active participant or a listener.

The unidirectional scrolling in ReBuilding Haiti and After the storm gains the least points for user interactivity, while Al Jazeera's game interface delivery and Harris's Balloon's of Bhutan provides interactive content elements.

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The seven digital sin's use of polls enables collective involvement adding to the experience.
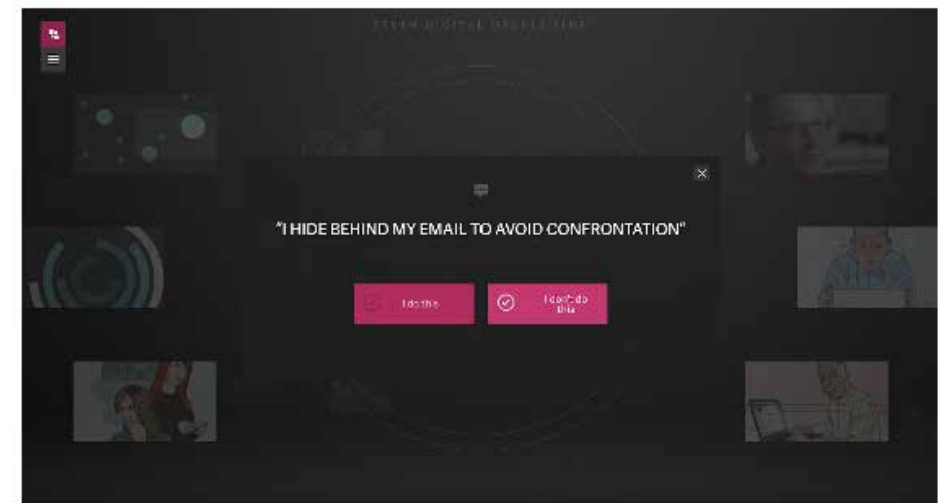

Fig: ReBuilding Haiti

Fig: Polling in seven digital sins.

Conclusion

On analysing of the slective narratives it is evident that for immersive experiences, all stories follow a 1st person narratives. Role-playing is only used in the interactive investigation by Al Jazeera. The rest of the findings have been discussed above.

While J.V Pavlik's model is used to analyse these narratives, a different approach could have yielded different results. The nature and number of narratives also limit our understanding within this small sample. A broader study, with an improvised version of Pavlik's model or a mix of different models, could provide more in-depth insights.

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