

### Computers and Media: Narrative and Context

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#### 4 Laws of Media?

# Laws of Media ENHANCE **OBSOLESCE** RETRIEVE REVERSE

#### Global Village

Is it true that we are getting homogenized information using the web?

Eli Pariser (2011) TED Talk: "Filter Bubbles"

#### Global Village – Tribal Knowledge?

Is it true that we are getting homogenized information using the web?

Was it ever true?

#### Global Village – Tribal Knowledge?

Is it true that we are getting homogenized information using the web?

- Historical: Newspapers have a "left" or "right" bias (examples?)
- Web technologies become the new gatekeeper, showing us what we "like" and not what we "need"
- Should algorithms take on a role of civic responsibility?

What is the difference between mass media and communication?

They are very closely related, but there are three major differences

First, mass media always has a small group of producers and a large group of consumers, there is no one-to-one communications

This restriction does not hold for communication

Telephone: communication, but not mass media since it's one-to-one

Second, mass media always involves some form of technology, the medium must be based on some form of technology

Communication can use just normal speech, this doesn't involve technology so its not media

Third, the content in communication is more general than in media

Media tells a story, it can be a form of entertainment, but it does not need to be

Example: a news story

While communication can tell a story, it does not need to, it could involve a straight transfer of information

#### NARRATIVE

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Narrative is the theory of story structure and how we tell stories

A story is an abstract concept, it exists in our mind not in any form of media

We can tell the same story many ways in different media, but it is still the same story

Example: there can be both a book and a movie of the same story

The story is told differently in a book and a movie, there are different narrative techniques

A book is not visual, but can go into more detail than a movie, there is more room to develop the story

Movies are shorter, but they can be a more complete experience, with visuals, sound, etc.

The distinction between narrative in general and in a particular medium is very important

Each form of media will have its own particular set of narrative structures (how the story is told in that medium)

But this should not be confused with *general narrative theory* 

#### General Narrative Theory Problems

Example: many people have tried to apply film narrative to computer games

Since games are very different from films this doesn't work

These people then conclude that there is no narrative in games

This is completely false, games have their own form of narrative, but it is different from film narrative, the two cannot be compared in such a simple way

#### Story Segments

At the abstract level a story consists of a sequence of nodes or segments, each tells a small part of the story

Each segment can be viewed as one event in the story, something important that occurs

In order to make sense some segments must occur before other segments, they are the causes of the events

#### Story Segments

Consider two segments A and B

- In segment A Joe raises a gun and shoots at Frank
- In segment B Frank is hit by a bullet and dies

The only way this story makes sense is to have segment A before segment B

We could add a third segment:

• In segment C Jill gets into her car and drives home

Segment C is independent of A and B, so C can occur before, between or after A and B

#### Story Order

Whenever we tell a story we must sequence the segments, decide on a story order

This order could be different each time that we tell the story, as long as we respect causality

Causality: the action that causes an event must occur before that event, otherwise the story doesn't make sense. Also called temporal dependence

#### Linear Narrative

In linear narrative the story is always told in the same order

• This is the case with movies and books

Each time that you view a movie the story is told in the same way, all the events occur in the same order

#### Nonlinear Narrative

In nonlinear narrative the story can be told in a different way each time its told

Consider a level in a game, there are multiple paths from its start point to its end point

The player can decide which path they follow, which monster they fight, which puzzle they solve

They can do it a different way each time they play the game

#### Books / Games

When an author writes a book they expect it to be read once, but a game designer expects a game to be played multiple times

Game designers aim for at least 30 hours of play for a game

The general flow of the game is governed by the level structure, within each level there can be multiple paths

Most games have mechanisms for passing information between levels, what the player has experienced

#### Narrative Structures

Graphically we can represent the two types of narrative in the following way:



Nonlinear narrative requires a lot more material, each time the story is told only part of this material is used

Difficult for books, the author would need to write a lot and the reader would only read parts

Nonlinear books exist but are rare, the extra work required to produce them really is not worth it

Readers do not expect a book to be nonlinear

## Examples of Nonlinear Books?

#### Games are Nonlinear

There are parts that are linear, usually the beginning or end of a level, but most of it is nonlinear

The player is controlling part of the narrative, they are making choices about the path through the story

Player participation in the narrative is an important part of games, we will come back to it later

#### Non Linear Movies

#### Final Destination 3: "Choose Their Fate" DVD (2008)





http://finaldestination.wikia.com/wiki/Final\_Destination\_3

### DVD Choice Technology

Instead of a home menu with several choices, there are several menus with choices which will switch the play to a different track



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#### You Tube Interactive Narratives

"Ronald has a Spider on his Head"

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QtG6yw2Irll

#### Convergence Points

At some points, all nonlinear paths converge to a point

At that point, players/readers must have the knowledge needed to continue the story

 E.g. a character may experience different scenarios, but 'game state' considerations such as who may have died in the story must be the same at a convergence point

#### Causality

How do we handle causality in nonlinear narrative?

How do we guarantee that we see the cause before the result?

This is important, otherwise the game or story doesn't make much sense

Example: In a game we would always die because we didn't have the weapon required to kill a particular monster if we did not follow the correct path through the level

#### Adhering to Causality

The problem is the player could take a path that contains a segment without having seen its cause

There are solutions to this problem

The player carries some information, either visible or invisible, that shows that she has completed some task, acquired some information, solved a puzzle, etc

#### Adhering to Causality

This information is used to control the paths the player can follow

Example: a door will not open unless the player has a particular key, we can only get this key by solving a puzzle

In this way paths can be blocked until the causes for the events on the path have been encountered

Level structure also helps us with this, it divides the story into chunks so the player cannot randomly move through the game

#### TENSION

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### Tension (Freytag 1860s)

Tension or complications develop over the time span of the film, movie, game, etc

Initially observed by Freytag, a theatre critic, this predates modern media

Start with calm, tension builds as events occur

Tension peaks just before the end of the story when the actors face the largest challenge

Once this challenge is met the tension level goes back to normal, everyone lives happily ever after..

#### Tension



#### Tension

Tension is easy to control in a film or TV show, think about a sitcom which follows a standard tension pattern

Each node in the story increases the tension level by a certain amount, since these media are linear the tension just adds
# How do we do this with nonlinear narrative?

#### Tension

In games a number of mechanisms have been developed to control tension:

- Music
- Speed
- Bigger monsters

Music is very important for controlling tension, this is used extensively in film as well as games

As we get closer to the end of a level the speed or pitch of the music increases which increases our sense of urgency

#### Tension

In skill based games the speed of the game increases towards the end of the level

This makes it more difficult to accomplish tasks, increases panic level, discovered very early in games

Can always make the monsters bigger, or the task harder to perform, increases the difficulty and thus the tension

#### Tension

Example: a classical first-person shooter (FPS)

The monsters at the start of the level are easy to kill, tension level is low

As you go through the level the monsters become harder to kill, the tension level increases

At the end of the level you encounter the boss, the hardest monster to kill, this is the tension peak

After the boss is killed you go to the next level and tension decreases

Shannon-Weaver Revisited

#### NARRATIVE MEDIA MODEL

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#### Considering Context in Shannon-Weaver model



### Encoding

The author or producer has a story they want to tell

• this is an abstract story in their mind

To tell it they need to convert it into some form of media, a book, film, game, etc

The process of converting the abstract story into a media form is called encoding

 producing a concrete version of the story that can be communicated to the consumer

#### Decoding

At the other end the consumer or viewer must decode the story

They must convert the media into an abstract story in their own mind, this is how they understand the story

This process is called decoding

The problem is the story that the consumer gets may not be the same story that the producer had in mind story ≠ story'

#### Noise

How does this happen?

Both the producer and consumer have different histories, they have experienced life in a different way, they have different cultures

A symbol or mechanism used to tell the story may have different meanings for the two of them

They may interpret what they see in different ways

This is called context, and in our model the context is different for the consumer and producer, so they could interpret the story in a different way

This notion of context is important in both media and communication

We want to tell our story in a way that is understood by the widest group of people

We need to find the common context, that is common to all of our viewers

In this way all of the viewers will understand the story

#### Example of Contextual Mismatch

Example: Hong Kong film industry

In 1960s thru 1980s the Hong Kong film industry challenged Hollywood, produced over 300 films per year

Hong Kong films were shown throughout Asia, more popular than most Hollywood films

Over the last decade this industry has collapsed, now produce less than 40 films per year, roughly 10% of its original size

#### Hong Kong Film Collapse

There are many reasons for this collapse

One of the main reasons is story telling

Early Hong Kong films told universal stories, they were understood by a very wide audience

Genres such as Kung Fu, fantasy and gangster were either developed or perfected in Hong Kong

### Hong Kong Film Collapse

Many of the later films told stories that were very Hong Kong specific, you could only understand them if you lived in Hong Kong

These films did not sell well outside of Hong Kong, so they lost money, Hong Kong is a very small film market

Once films started losing money the investors went away, the financial resources required to make films were gone

Only the very best film makers can get funding

### Hong Kong Film Collapse

It takes around 3 years to make a film, a good film maker will have several films in production at the same time

This results in about 30 films per year

There are still "good" Hong Kong films, *Infernal Affairs* was remade as a Hollywood movie, *Crouching Tiger*, *Hidden Dragon* was widely viewed in North America

In both cases the producers were careful to produce a widely understood story

#### Lesson

Hong Kong film makers made the context so specific that they lost most of their audience









#### Contextual Transfer

Example: MXC, this is a TV program based on a Japanese game show ("Takeshi's Castle")

If the Japanese show was shown in North America very few people would understand it, even if it was translated into English

#### Contextual Transfer

To solve this problem MXC changes the context

The show is re-edited and redubbed for North America with a completely new script

The story is no where near the Japanese version, but people in North America can now understand the show

The producers have manipulated the context to make the show meaningful, and it was very successful

#### Can a Narrative be Context Free?

#### Can a Narrative be Context Free?

Just for Laughs Gags

- Purchased for use in over 100 countries (Ale numer! Pilanpäiten, Смеха Ради, ...)
- Popular on airline entertainment systems
- No dialogue, stories intentionally designed to be free of cultural knowledge requirements



story ≠ story'

In the 1990s Dino Ignacio started the "Bert is Evil" website, which was offline but has been revived (on and off) (<u>http://www.bertisevil.tv/</u>)

This was intended to be a satire site, poking fun at the Sesame Street character (may be offensive!)







Soon after September 11, 2001 this picture appeared on the Internet

Folklore claims that it came from Ignacio's website, but he denies ever putting it on his website

He claims he received it in an email message, but never put it up on his site

Soon afterwards the US invaded Afghanistan and protests started in many Muslim countries, including Bangladesh

Story source: http://www.snopes.com/rumors/bert.asp





#### Associated Press

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USAM

# How do we know *these* are real?





Reuters spokeswoman Felicia Cosby said the photos were authentic. The original doctored image of Bert and Osama bin Laden. "We've just noticed it ourselves, since you queried, that there is Bert on that poster," she said. "I don't know if they're mass-producing these posters, but what I can say is that it is definitely our policy not to doctor photographs."

www.foxnews.com Sunday, Oct 14, 2001, by Michael Y. Park

The poster appeared in many newspapers worldwide, there was also video coverage of the protests

It is reported that Bert appeared on other signs and possibly T-shirts, but these pictures are no longer available

## Do supporters of bin Laden also like Bert?

#### How?

When the protests started local printers searched for images of bin Laden that they could quickly turn into posters

The quickest place to find them was the Internet, and a Google search on bin Laden found the Bert and bin Laden image

This was quickly turned into a poster without much thought

#### Reaction

When the images started appearing none of the news services would carry them, they thought they were a hoax

They sent reporters to investigate and found out that the images were real, so several days after the original protests the images were distributed

They were viewed with considerable interest by people in the West

#### Lack of Context

The protestors did not know that Bert was a Sesame Street character

But, there was a local version of Sesame Street, so when the connection was made they were not particularly happy

CTW which owns Sesame Street was not very happy either and threatened to sue everyone involved

All the pictures were quickly removed from the news sites and the "Bert is Evil" website was shut down

#### Bert, in Context

In North America and Europe, where Bert is seen on Sesame Street, these protests did not have their intended impact

Protestors carrying pictures of Bert are just not taken seriously
## Bert', out of Context

The protestors originally did not see it that way, after all Bert looks pretty angry

The differences in context turns a very serious protest into a very silly protest

When we get into multicultural situations context can be very important

#### Digital Media Enabling Context Shifts

The poster is a photo montage probably created in Photoshop, basically gluing two images together

It was possible to do this before programs like Photoshop, but it took a considerable amount of darkroom skill, so it was not very common

With Photoshop everyone can do it

2000 posters printed in one day!

# Photographic 'evidence'

Before computers, pictures were viewed as absolute proof

Now scandals involving modified news pictures are becoming common

Could the news media manipulate the news completely to follow their own agenda, or could the government do it?

New security controls to give digital fingerprints to undoctored photos are becoming common

## Implications

First, be careful what you put on websites, it can be found and maybe at the wrong time or the wrong context

Second, almost anyone can reach an audience through the Internet: democratization of media, anyone can participate in it, it is not limited to the rich and powerful

## Context and Gaming

How might context affect the new media (especially gaming) industry?

- The British/European version of Fallout and Fallout 2 are censored, to remove child killing and extreme violence;
- The U.S. version of *The Witcher* is censored, to remove the nudity and sex scenes.
- Call of Duty 4 removed nuclear weapons for Japanese versions

## The Spread of Global Media

#### "Relative Exportability"



#### Your Action Items

Read chapter 1 and 2 of course text (if you have not done it yet)

Start Assignment 1, which is posted on Blackboard (deadline: October 6th)

#### Summary

Today we:

- Examined the nature of media, looked at some examples, produced a definition
- Examined narrative, the difference between linear and nonlinear narrative
- Examined a model of media and used it to examine the collapse of the Hong Kong film industry
- Looked at the effects of context on interpretation of media, and the impact of technology on taking things out of context