
Between Passive Viewing and Active Choosing in Storytelling

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ABSTRACT

Since the dawn of the Internet, abundance of content and information is constantly being created and shared at the speed of light across different media. Media technologies have given us almost unlimited access to choose and interact with vast amount of content and information. We seem to be in active control in choosing what information we want to see and interact with on the internet. Ironically, with all this interactive freedom, most of us still prefer to watch their favorite TV programs or films passively on interactive media platforms. New technologies such as streaming TV have provided many new platforms to present passive content but to what extent how these new technologies have affected the form and shape of content remains a question. Simply by looking at the ratio of programs for traditional passive viewing vs. programs with interactive content, the audience has spoken by choosing to watch conventional content passively. Interacting with content is more than just choosing what pre-made content to watch, for that we always have our remote control. Interacting with content is about having our own say or control about the outcome or direction of a story (Crawford, 2013; Roth, 2015). Unlike what many media theories have predicted many years ago, interactive narrative has not become mainstream and would never replace conventional form of storytelling. Nevertheless, as more content is being delivered on mobile or personal computer in addition to the big screen, more interactive content will be made available in the foreseeable future. Many popular 4As video games have already mixed conventional storytelling elements with some interactive gaming functions in recent years (Yip, 2021). This paper focuses on the concepts of choice and decision-making in storytelling and how interactive functions could be blended in with the narrative. Decision-making has always been an important part of storytelling, in which it's the storyteller who make decisions for the characters and for the audience. A good story may still be best uninterrupted and told by the storytellers who know about the crafts of storytelling (Yip, 2020). Typical audience still enjoy watching adventure chosen for them rather than to choose their own adventure. This paper discusses the role of interactivity and the concept of choice-making in interactive storytelling.

Keywords: Creative arts, Cinematic arts, Cinematic storytelling, Interactive storytelling, Interactive narrative, Visual communication, Visual storytelling

INTRODUCTION

Storytelling is always one of the most popular forms of human communication, expression and sharing. Many of us tell stories to share our experiences and imagination. We enjoy a good story so that we can be inspired and stay connected. The power of a good story is its ability to relate, connect, inspire

and motivate. A good story can resonate, speak to our mind, and touch our heart. Storytelling is almost always about someone's experience or a journey of someone's transformation. It always involves one or more key characters. The most basic fundamental elements of a story are character, time and location. Despite how different subject matter each story is, stories share similar functions: they arouse our curiosity and can bring joys and excitement.

Storytelling is both art and design and its applications are very broad (Yip, 2020; Parrish, 2006). The art of storytelling requires both creative, critical and design thinking in various stages of story development. The design of storytelling takes many factors into considerations, such as character desire, motivation, dramatic situations, plot structure, twists and turns so on and so forth. In this creative and explorative story development, storytellers develop story content and then explore different styles of telling the story content. Storytelling is not exactly science because it has no one equation, formula or solution. And there are no right or wrong in storytelling, which should to be personal, subjective with no one unified theory or standard. However, every good story, including science fiction fantasy genre, must establish and coincide its own internal logic. The art of story and the techniques of telling and structuring a story are very important. A story is not just about what is being told but also about what is being implied or not told. For that, storytelling is an art form. Often, it is the subtext, hidden meanings or multiple interpretations of a story that are more powerful and fascinating.

ROLE OF INTERACTIVITY IN STORYTELLING

A written story is generally to be read or heard. For a screen story, it is traditionally intended for passive viewing. The audience rarely interacts directly with a story, of which the events should have been written or designed long before it is published or released. Besides, simple interaction in the form of POV or perspectives shifts as available in some blu-ray never are intended to alter the plot or outcome of the story. We might actively interact with the presentation or supplementary information of a story but all these could only provide additional layer of passive content. Having control over different forms of presentation of a story can, to some extent, enhance the viewing experience but it never could change the meanings of the content. Real interaction of a story means the audience having some kinds of control over the flow, the plot and/ or the decision-making of the character with alternative plots and endings (Crawford, 2013; Roth, 2015). If a good story can be described as a roller coaster ride with highs and lows or ups and downs, then the analogy of an interactive story would be for audience to be able to design this roller coaster. But then, this analogy falls apart when typical audience, who has no knowledge of physics and mechanical engineering, gets to design this roller coaster. Furthermore, too much interaction would disrupt and destroy the flow of the story arc structure creatively and thoughtfully designed by the storyteller. Excessive control on the part of the audience would turn a story into a game or the audience into game player. With all these technical and creative considerations, what is then the role of interaction in good storytelling?

THE QUESTION OF CHOICES AND WHAT IF

A good story almost always reflect life but in a dramatic way; how dramatic depends on the genre and the creative treatment of the storyteller. As life is about different choice-making, so is a dramatic story. Drama is a reflection of life, a dramatic story should naturally be about dramatic decision-making of the characters, whom the audience cares about and identifies with. Equally important is that any decision in a story should have consequence in order to make the story convincing and coherent. Life is about making choices and story is about how important and relatable these choices are to the characters and to the audience. Storytelling is about interesting ways of sharing of these important choices of life, which should have no simple good or bad or right or wrong. Difficult choices are always more interesting. As the story progresses, they should also have high stake consequence in order to intensify the drama. Game theory (Bushko et al. 1997; Levin et al. 2004), which is entirely different from game design theory, deals with one's incentive and motive and self-interest behind every rational decision-making. This aspect of game theory is adaptable to character analysis and plot choices in storytelling.

Storytelling is also another way of asking the question what if. What if Alice didn't jump inside the rabbit hole in *Alice in the Wonderland*? In *Matrix*, what if Neo didn't take the blue pill but decided to take the red pill instead. On the surface, all these what-if examples above seem big story decision; strictly speaking, they are never really decisions to begin with. Choosing it the other way in a story would just end the story all too early because there is no alternative plot for the otherwise. Dramatically speaking, these decisive moments these characters appear to have chosen are not really good choices and decisions. These choices are not even or equal and therefore they are not dramatic. They are just part of the inevitable plot point that drive the plot forward. To be or not-to-be is never a question in a conventional story. In setting up a story, there is little room for not-to-be. Arguably, in a conventional story, there is really only one version of the plot, which requires one type of decision.

However, in reality, every big and small decision affects our fate in life. There are famous movies such as *Sliding door* (1998) and *Run Lola Run* (1998) and even the latest popular interactive story '*Bandersnatch*' (2018) (Roth et al. 2019) that deal with the theme of causality. Unlike the latter popular interactive story, the former famous movies dealt with this theme in a linear structure by showing each episode of cause and effect one at a time. But life never works this way. In reality, different kinds of decision and their consequence are not unfolded one episode after another in a linear order. If parallel universe existed, interactive story would function similar to a parallel universe, in which one decision can trigger a series of events and set off a chain reaction and a new reality. Life itself as we know it is complex and intertwined with actions, reactions and decisions, which are not necessarily in direct and linear causality. As drama imitates life, life can be much stranger than fiction.

In interactive story, instead of watching a reality one at a time, it is possible for audience to choose the decisive moments that set off different paths. These

choices are different from clicking which chapter to watch in Blu-ray. Choices in life are made at important decision points followed by the consequence of the events being unfolded. Multiple paths could branch out to different plot structure in an interactive story. Some of them would lead to the same ending while some would lead to different endings. Interactive storytelling requires the story to offer many versions of reality. Choices and decisions are not there just to move the pre-determined plot forward. They should demonstrate real cause and effect consequences in interesting ways.

ABOUT THE ROLE OF STORYTELLER AND AUDIENCE IN INTERACTIVE STORY

In an interactive story, the role of audience is no longer just the passive observer but an active participant of a story. However, although this active participation could alter the plot, meanings and outcome of the story, it does not make the audience the co-creator of the story. The audience is just participating through choosing the pre-made choices pre-programmed by the storyteller. The storyteller is still the creator of the story through his or her crafts in storytelling and to pre-determine all the actions, reactions and consequences that should have dramatic values, effects and meanings. As most stories are told from a third person point of view, the audience of an interactive story is supposed to be choosing not based on their own preferences but on what the character would do under the circumstance. The storyteller of an interactive story needs to make sure that the interesting choices for the audience are not for their own but for their character's. For consistency, the storyteller must design choices and decisions that are based on the character's personality, belief system and behavior. For instance, if a character is impulsive or a fast thinker, an interaction button could provide less time for decision making. On the other contrary, more decision time could be given to audience for character who thinks slowly or has a tendency to complicate matters. In other words, the storyteller is inviting the audience to take part in the thought process of the character.

CHOICE MAKING IS PERSONAL

Storyteller should make choices more meaningful, challenging and limit the range of decisions in the context of the story. It is reasonable to say that choices of the audience are also reflection of who they are themselves. Interactive story allows audience to see for themselves the choices they make for their character. Therefore, interactive storytelling is suitable for personal media. Interactive story designer or storyteller can also apply certain programming logic to the story diagram tree structure by assigning different score to different choices so that audience's choices can be reflected in the story outcome with callback function. In the past, there had been some interesting interactive cinema that asked audience to choose during the screening in a movie theatre (Vosmeer et al. 2014; Kolhoff, Lobke et al. 2019). Before there were mobile phone, the audience was asked to vote openly how the story should be unfolded. Even with mobile phone, the audience was still asked the same

question and to vote through their mobile phone. The result was majority rule and only the winning side got to see their result on the screen. There is nothing wrong to add some fun competition in choosing for the character in interactive cinema. However, there is a big different between vote-your-own-adventure from choose-your-own-adventure. In the age of personal and social media, every choice can be and should be made personal as choosing is a personal act of expressing freedom, autonomy and self-determination. As media has become more mobile and personal, interactive story allows this personal choice to be made in watching a story. If it is done right, incorporating choices with audience participation can add more viewing experiences in the art of storytelling.

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