

An Interactive Documentary Manifesto

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Abstract. In the last few years the word "documentary" has been loosely used to describe multimedia pieces that incorporate video no matter its nature, technique, language or scope, taking advantage of the fuzzy and fragile boundaries of the documentary definition. The present manifesto aims to give a brief insight on the interactive documentary arena and also to sketch some production remarks for future interactive documentary productions.

1 Introduction

As a rule, all film literature starts with a reference to the Lumière brothers and their 1895 cinématographe, but when it comes to interactive documentary, should it begin with Lumière's invention or Babbage's Analytical Engine in 1830, the starting point of the modern computer? Probably both, and we might use this question as a pretext for a discussion on the current state of the art of a new "type" of documentary that lays between film and interaction: the interactive documentary. As for its definition we will cite Galloway's et al. [1] straightforward but nonetheless accurate: "any documentary that uses interactivity as a core part of its delivery mechanism". On a first glance this joint venture appears not only to be a simple task given the current state of evolution of both documentary and interaction but also creates high expectations on interactors since both concepts are two appealing buzzwords. However, the sad truth is that so far the current production of interactive documentaries has failed to meet the built expectations and is often no more than a series of multimedia pieces closer to PowerPoint than cinema. Regarding this matter, Whitelaw [2] wrote that interactive documentary "is little more than a catchy tag and an open question" and we couldn't agree more. How should an interactive documentary be? How does an interactor relates to the work? These questions and many others are not totally new as we can track its roots at the Word Expo 67 in Montreal in the sixties [3] and Gene Youngblood's seminal book "Expanded Cinema" [4] that followed, or the Aspen Moviemap Virtual Tour in the seventies, or Moss Landing in the eighties (probably the first piece of digital production to be officially called "interactive documentary" [5]), so why this manifesto today? Three main reasons ahead. First and foremost, because the time of interactive documentary has come: online video distribution has proven its feasibility on a high bandwidth world and its proximity to interactive environments is pushing it towards interaction. Second, the massive convergence process in course on a battle for "the screen" between TV broadcasters, online newspapers, and media distribution companies that desperately need innovative quality products to

survive. Third, it appears that nowadays everyone is using the word "documentary" to describe every single multimedia piece that incorporates video no matter its nature, technique, language or scope, taking advantage of the fuzzy and fragile boundaries of the documentary definition. Regarding this semantic abuse, the term "documentary" has been used with all sorts of prefixes, namely "interactive", "expanded", "database", "locative", "evolving", "cross-platform", "transmedia", "enactive", "docugame", among many others. We believe this matter can't be seen as a minor question of semantics since there's a secular cinema tradition inherited whenever the word "documentary" is evoked. Not wanting to enter the realm of documentary theory, many of these "prefixed" documentaries don't "feel like" documentary at all, when "feeling like" is a crucial assessment to validate the belonging to the documentary family. These pieces recurrently end up poorly made with a serious deficit of engagement when compared to traditional linear ones [6], failing to embrace the best features of both worlds with an inclination towards interaction. Just because the Web is successfully incorporating some types of linear video -usually the short and the user generated kind- that doesn't mean that video is adjusting itself to the interactive format. In the words of Whitelaw [2], "many make only a very modest engagement with the potentials of interactive media. Very often they follow the path of remediation, reproducing the language of documentary film: cue music, fade in titles, cue voice of god narrator-all in 16:9 widescreen". So, thinking in practical terms, to what extent can we import the guiding principles from both documentary and interaction into the interactive documentary field? To what extent these rules can be combined and which new hybrid creatures might emerge from this process? One of interactive documentary's problems is being in No Man's Land, a place in-between different knowledge areas, such as cinema, interaction, videogames, video art to name a few, and it is not likely that any of them will find the answer alone. No one knows exactly what skills are needed for an interactive documentary or how to build up a team; even more challenging, no one knows for sure if some of the skills exist yet. "Who are the interactive documentary makers? Are they filmmakers who experiment with a new media or are they coming from different fields of expertise?" [5]. Under these uncertainties and dilemmas the only way interactive documentary has to find its identity is through a heuristic push based on a new orientation, so we noted down a few production remarks for interactive documentary makers to consider.

1.1 On Prima Materia

The Prima Materia of linear documentary is moving images and so it should be on interactive documentary, from content to interface. Gaudenzi [5] raises one legitimate point for further investigation: "why should interactive documentaries still mainly based on the moving image?" But, for the sake of the manifesto, we have to promptly say "yes" because that's what documentaries are made of. By saying this we're not rejecting the incorporation of other media as documentary always did, but only in those cases where conceptually the subject demands it and not for any other reason. Interactive documentary makers have been overusing pictures and it's time to go back to moving images. And, regardless the screen, interactive documentary should always pursue a full screen approach for the sake of immersion and engagement.

As far as audio is concerned, it's a key element of interactive documentary due to its versatility and engaging properties (it can even make a picture be perceived as a moving image). Bunt [7] wrote down "I'd originally regarded sound as secondary. It was only very late in the production phase that I realized it's importance, both in terms of lending coherence to the spatial experience and of enabling a musical play of interactive sound/image juxtaposition".

1.2 On Subject and Framework

Not every subject is suitable for an interactive documentary, on the contrary: we can guess that very few are so every piece needs to start with a firm belief of the subject's suitability to the format. Interactivity is not a universal formula. As stated by Manovich [8], it's easy to go for the "temptation to immediately create an "interactive CD-ROM", or to make a feature length "digital film", instead of focus on determining the new media equivalent of a shot, a sentence, a word, or even a letter". Linear documentary is a successful centennial formula so the question "why not linear" should always come first, any attempt to force a subject into an interactivity is a recipe for failure. Regarding this topic, the approach to the subject must be willing to change as interactivity demands, the relation between format and subject needs to be resilient (as it should happen on every documentary, actually). The framework of the interactive documentary should look for formal arrangements within the subject - like geography, chronology, or preferably more sophisticated ones- and, more important, should run away from the traditional approaches we can find on traditional multimedia products (like geography="a map"; chronology="a timeline") that usually moves the production away from cinema. Formal arrangements shouldn't compel interactive documentary into structural rigidity, it's important to find a solid but flexible structure that allows some degree of freedom. There's also no need to make it too clickable, too interactive: if linear documentary has zero interaction points and is a successful model, why would we make an interactive one a "clickable extravaganza"? Seek for continuity first, interaction last. And, of course, it's always better a good idea made simple.

1.3 On Input Devices

As far as input devices are concerned, two ideas stand: simplicity and universality. Input devices should be those people know how to operate and they should never surpass the consumer market. The mouse is central to the operation; tactile technology is becoming a standard, too. The microphone is also a good tool to trigger events. Wii controllers might bring something interesting to the arena in the future (and these days Wii is planning on launching a pulse detector so interactive documentaries might incorporate basic biometric data into their input feed, good news for the enactive documentary model [9]). If the work has a locative component, then GPS. The input can also come from multiple data sources over the Internet, like weather or news reports just to name a few. But, again, we emphasize the orientation towards simplicity: every single input should have a grounded purpose and shouldn't be used just because it's fun for the maker. The outcome of the input should be clear to the interactor and significant to the experience, otherwise it should be avoided.

1.4 On Interface

The interface should be moving images based (any other approach will easily lead to a traditional multimedia piece) and has to merge with content to the point where one cannot be dissociated from the other. Interface is content, content is interface. Manovich [8] wrote, "contrary to traditional media, in hypermedia the elements and the structure are separate from each other. The structure of hyperlinks -typically a branching tree- can be specified independently from the contents of a document". And that's precisely what we should avoid. Smooth continuity between both is compulsory, engagement is a shared responsibility; interactors should "watch" the interface too. Shaul [6] identified incoherent transitions within and between different narrative threads as one of split-attention stumbling blocks of interactive cinema. So, every click (cut) should match the previous one. The Tate Street Art website (www.tatestreetart.com) is a great example on how moving images can have engaging properties even when there's no particular action. Interface should keep away from text and buttons as much as possible (audio cues is a good alternative).

1.5 On Navigation Structure

When considering the navigation structure of an interactive documentary it's essential to move away from a linear mindset, any attempt to emulate a linear structure will most certainly fail. An interactive structure has no ability to compete with a rigorous and linear edit made with story arch and closure in mind. Moreover, why giving someone the option to choose if, in a way, it's a blind choice? Can't linear documentary be regarded as a navigation curatorship? And if the goal of some documentaries is to challenge the interactor and its beliefs, should he be able to choose? Some of these issues could be overcome with input data that wouldn't depend on an explicit choice of the interactor, like biometric data, but it's too early for that.

Consequently, interactive documentary should always explore unique approaches to the subject that cinema can't achieve -the so-called "being there" feeling comes to mind. In that sense, the interactive documentary "Only Fish Shall Visit" is a good model: before the flood of Halfeti due to the construction of a dam, Bunt [7] has decided to document the place under an interactive "flâneur" approach, whereby the interactor wanders through the soon to be underwater town. This technique allows a particular relation with the subject as it comes close to the actual experience of exploring a place, the decisions the interactor make are more or less similar to those he would do if visiting the real town perpetrating a sense of freedom, like choosing the left trail on a junction. This real life emulation generates a strong relation with geography; the choice given to the interactor endures an engaging and memory friendly experience, very useful for pedagogic content. So, the plastic nature of this approach allows exploring some aspects that cinematic montage has been traditionally ignoring for a long time. In a way this approach reminds us a game structure, so it's crucial for interactive documentary to assess what can be merged with other areas and how to perform the operation.

Another successful approach can be seen on the documentaries "The Big Issue: Obesity" and "Prisonvalley", where a "Choose Your Own Adventure" type of strategy is used to engage the audience.

1.6 On Time

How long should the experience take? Duration is a tricky issue and the answer depends entirely on goal of the work, on how it is supposed to be experienced by the interactor. Some topics should be stressed out, though. First, the replication of the golden rule for video on the Web "keep it short" might not be valid to interactive documentary: if, as we predict, interactive documentary might be consumed on the biggest screen on the living room (note: during leisure time), why can't it be experienced for at least the duration of a linear one? But maybe our mind is too deeply connected with linear when it comes to duration, maybe it's an experience that can last for several days if we consider, for instance, that people play video games sometimes for months or even years. Are interactive documentaries supposed to be consumed one time straight or throughout several days? Is the interactor expecting the Aristotelian drama path as usual? Is the closure within the piece or does the interactor needs to find its own closure? Does interactive documentary requires full attention throughout the whole piece? Too many questions to be answered.

1.7 On Tools

Since interactive documentary is such a new production area and since every single documentary has it's own approach then it's normal that the market has no ready-made authoring tools, and we wonder if it will ever have. As a result, interactive documentary has to be built either using general-purpose programming languages, that offer basic or no support for moving image narrativity [10]. Concerning the use of Macromedia Director in 1997 (but still up to date), Weinbren [11] stated, "these products bring a conception of interactivity (centered around "buttons" and a notion of "choice"" that he finds deeply problematic. "Advanced users of the software, of course, trick it, or bend it at least, into doing what they want it to do: but novice users repeat the same structure again and again" [11]. If we look closer into the market, probably the best software to author interactive documentaries comes from the video art arena, but these tools are impractical for wide distribution since they don't work as a stand-alone. Max, for instance, starts with a blank page to which we add modules, and "everything can be connected to everything, because everything speaks numbers" [12]. Hence, makers aren't conceptually propelled to follow a specific paradigm allowing a welcoming intellectual freedom. It's important to think ahead, to explore concept before choosing the tool or it will conform thought.

1.8 On Attitude

On documentary we replace the script for a notebook [13]. This statement is representative of a mind-set towards documentary filmmaking, but can we expect this same attitude on the making of an interactive one? Is it possible to perpetuate a certain degree of freedom under a structural formalism demanded by interactive documentary? We would guess that in most cases interactive documentary isn't (unfortunately) as open so we wonder if this transformation won't harm the documentary's essence. And, speaking about the essence, "making a choice involves a moral responsibility. By passing on these choices to the user, the author also passes the responsibility to represent the world and the human condition in it" [8]. If montage is at the center of

cinematic meaning, and if choice is given to the interactor, then the interactive filmmaker's task becomes that of producing a set of film materials and plotting some pathways through it. The filmmaker becomes more the designer of a pattern of trails through a landscape of images, less the tour bus driver [11], which inevitably forces us to think if the filmmaker is set aside from one of its crucial purposes on the production: point of view. Only the future will tell, but it's definitely worth trying.

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