BAIMP Image Studies Essay 1 –

Narrative can never be non-linear. Discuss.

The concept of 'narrative' originates from the ancient urge within us all to bind cause to effect; to translate the intricacy and sheer density of an experience or an intense mental projection into a coherent plot and story that thus unfolds and makes sense to an audience - though hard to evaluate because it is so embedded within everyday life and reality. 'Linearity' is concerned with chronological media in a set sequence. It is the key difference within this audience that defines whether a narrative can be linear or non-linear – whether they are classed as spectators or participators, which requires a degree of interactivity. Different types of media have to approach linearity differently, as an individual similarly approaches differing media types with dissimilar combinations of the senses. Film, book, music, web-based and video game narrative can all either be divided into either linear or seemingly non-linear media, yet innovative and pioneering approaches have caused the boundaries to blur in some cases.

Narrative is comprehended via causality, or everyday cause and effect; that equal causes ultimately have equal effects. Simplistically it can be seen as a mere chain of events in a time (duration) and a space (location). The agents within this framework as usually characters with distinguishable character traits, but can also be animals or natural events. Time and space can also be toyed with within the narrative to accentuate or intricate intensity, originality, complexity and coherence. Time linearity can be masked using flashbacks, flash-forwards and sliding the plot order around; the linearity of a spatial presentation can be camouflaged with other techniques such as the use of a camera's contra-zoom technique, as seen in Spielberg's 'Jaws'. Even real life recorded causality such as the everyday news on television can be seen as narrative 'individual news stories are like individual myths, it reassures by telling tales that explain baffling or frightening phenomena and provides acceptable answers; myth does not necessarily reflect objective reality, but builds a world of its own'[1A].

Film narrative represents a classic linear media in that it is constantly presented in a strict chronological manner - even if the plot itself is not. Tarantino's 1994 released 'Pulp Fiction' is a good example of this; even though the plot jumps between time zones as fresh chapters open, the intrinsic story always remains the same linear structure with every repeated viewing. The overall narrative of film is comprised of these two separate aspects - the always-linear 'story' (in turn consisting of implicit, implied events and explicit events) and the not necessarily linear 'plot' (a combination of blatant explicit events and added non-diegetic material that frames the overall film, such as music or a narrator). The film media can never break free from a linear structure, even with clever and inventive use of plot; Nolan's 2000 released 'Memento' had a unique narrative revealed in reverse flashback, starting at the end of the plot and working backwards, though forwards through the natural linearity of the viewer's time. The overall effect was a successful distortion of emotion, time and fundamentally memory – the protagonist has a ten-minute length recollection. For a non-linear element to be added to a film narrative it would have to include the interactive ability of the spectators to choose what to happen next to not only plot, but also story - to avoid too much confusion, although not impossible, the plot would have to be presented in a linear fashion. The Film Director would have to film many branches of potential effects, as many as there are potential audience choices for causes within the story; structurally presented as non-linearity narrative within the

inevitable linearity that the limits of recorded media present. Even so, the mental activeness of a film audience is a result of physical passiveness – the question whether physical participation could be incorporated within a similar linear masquerading as non-linear narrative is answered with the reality of computer-games, an interactive hybrid fusion of music, script and video.

        The very nature of computer-game production requires developing and programming a believable Universe, whether fictional or not, and as a result boundaries within this are naturally imposed. The best example of potential non-linearity within these narratives are from Role Playing Games (RPG's) where a player may spend many hours developing a set of characters from scratch along an ultimately linear path yet after playing, if the Universe is believable enough, the player is thus compelled to write fan-fiction, draw fan-art or follow other forms of media creations based on the franchise as their imaginations run riot. Squaresoft's 'Final Fantasy' series, and its many fan-based websites suggest this point. An example of the blurred boundaries between linear and non-linear video gaming is the highly innovative title for Sega's now defunct Dreamcast console 'Rez' where 'The game is essentially on rails. It's a linear game'[1] although

       'Rez entertains the notion that video games can be more than a visual creation. Instead Rez enjoys a steady balance of interesting graphics and what might be described as interactive music… There's a strong argument on what Rez actually is. One could argue that it's a traditional shooter, with power ups, a linear path, and a number of interesting, yet unique, levels. On the other hand, somebody else could argue that the game is a music game, where interacting with the music, and simply enjoying the trance beats is the real enjoyment of the game. Both convincing arguments, so who's right… The way the graphics work with the sound, though, is a style all it's own. The enemies, backgrounds, even you change as the music does, it's simply stunning.'[2] Music is typically one of the few media outlets that is shamelessly strictly linear, an album or track begins and ends in exactly the same narrative fashion much like a book. The idea of interactive, non-linear music could only exist in a videogame format, although as seen it must sacrifice seemingly non-linear playability that is the usual asset of a videogame if it is to convincingly work. A certain linear narrative story could also be employed within such a game to emphasize player satisfaction when levels are passed, and to give context.

        Juxtaposed against the physical and mental activeness of an audience of video-game participators are the sole mental decoders of film and novel. Further, to quote Jean Mitry 'A film is a world which organizes itself in terms of a story… (A novel is) a story organising itself in a world' or whether the structure of a narrative novel is linear or non-linear is far more undemanding to direct as it is a simple story in comparison to a whole believable world that needs creating in a film. An average linear novel follows a set chronological path, illuminating a distinct period, or a particular situation where by comparison 'the non-linear structure does not follow strict chronological order. It jumps around, summarizes, and speaks in generalities. When I discuss the traffic on the Kennedy Expressway, I am not referring to a single time, or a single place. That's what I mean by non-linear'[3]. An interesting take on the non-linear novel structure is similar to the idea posited above regarding non-linear film and its potential 'branching predestination decided by the user' nature; the interactive adventure novels of the 1980's whereby the reader chose the fate of the protagonist of the story by leaping to different chapters around the book and reading where their choices have led. The foundations for modern adventure gaming were laid with these books, and similarly to hypothesized interactive cinema and videogame design, it is a non-linear illusion within an inevitably linear media that has to have a beginning and conclusion, starting and finishing on the first and last page respectively. The more branches offered is in direct coloration to the amount of choice the user is given, and as a result the more the medium is seen as non-linear.

The only ostensibly true form of non-linear media would require a constantly developing and changing medium void of a set known conclusion, with the users interactivity limited only by their thoughts; also what has evolved as the Internet, yet it is still an evolving medium which would unavoidably would still be governed within the limits of the author, and thus some linear rules

'The only person who had anything to say about non-linear narrative was Mark Meadows, who is working on non-linear graphic novels at Xerox Parc. He postulated that there was room for online narrative, and that it was just going to take time and experimentation. He made a nice analogy to how these stories might work. He explained that existing in a non-linear graphic novel would be like driving a car in a city. You would be free to go wherever you like, but there were some rules: you have to stay on your side of the road, you have to stop at the corner. Great, I get it. Now can someone show me something that works?'[4]

The spectacle of interactivity could therefore be argued to not even exist, comprised of false choices, but innovation will always push the Internet. Not only have non-linear graphic novels been emerging but also 'hypertext', where the author pens the notion of a subject but the reader navigates it themselves along non-set paths; it thus blurs the boundaries between readers and writers as there can be a near infinite set of endings, yet this could also be the mediums death knell – because they have no closure they could go on forever, much like television soap operas. It is no longer about narrative, rather about character.

Any form of narrative is bound by its authors, directors or designers as linear by default because all work on a project begins and is predestined to end when completed or not updated; and as seen non-linearity within the narrative framework of linearity can be exploited in many different ways, yet ultimately it is just a false impression. This concept of non-linear narrative will undoubtedly continue to be tackled with the new interactive media industry, however true non-linear media will linger a façade, bound by the very nature of authorship no matter how many branches within a potential destiny conclusion.

Academic texts

Surname	Initial	Date	Title	Publisher
1A, page 70 – Carey	J	1988	Media, Myths and Narrative	Sage Publications
Dovey	J	2000	Freakshow: First person Media and Factual Television	Pluto Press

Websites

Site name	Web address
1+2, - Defunct Reviews	http://www.defunctgames.com/reviews/rezdc.htm
3 – Page 19, Linear/Non-Linear Narrative	http://members.core.com/~patstoll/page19.htm
4 – What happened to narrative on the web?	http://www.indiewire.com/biz/biz_990317_calcanisedit2.html