Player Agency in Interactive Narrative: Audience, Actor & Author

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April 2007

Outline

Motivation

- How can computer-based interactive narrative be used as a constructivist learning activity?

    - 62% of students say they would find games motivating
      Ipsos MORI survey Feb-May 2006
    - 59% of teachers would consider using games in the classroom
      Ipsos MORI survey Nov 2005

      Figures from *Teaching with Games: Guidance for educators*, Sandford et al, Futurelab 2007
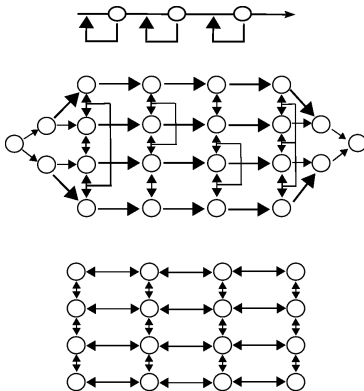
Interactive Narrative

> **Definition**
>
> "An interactive narrative is a time-based representation of action in which a reader can affect, change, or choose the plot."
>
> *Mark Stephen Meadows, Pause & Effect, 2002, p.62*

> **Definition**
>
> Plot: A series of chronologically ordered, causally-related events.

Constructivism

"Education, for most people, means trying to lead the child to resemble the typical adult of his society . . . but for me . . . education means making creators . . . You have to make inventors, innovators — not conformists"
Jean Piaget, quoted in J.C. Bringuier, Conversations with Piaget, 1980, p.132

Definition

- Active and critical, not passive and receptive
- Learners construct their own understanding
- Emphasis on free exploration, interaction, enjoyment: *learner agency*

Approach

- Use *player agency* to link interactive narrative to constructivism
- and to classify approaches to interactive narrative from the point of view of constructivism

Player Agency — A Phenomenal Category

Definition

Player Agency: "the feeling of empowerment that comes from being able to take actions in the [virtual] world whose effects relate to the player's intention"

Michael Mateas, A Preliminary Poetics for Interactive Drama and Games, 2001, p.2

"[Player agency] depend[s] on what's going on in the interactor's head, on what's communicated between the technical system and the person, not only on technical facts like counting the number of system actions that are available at each moment."

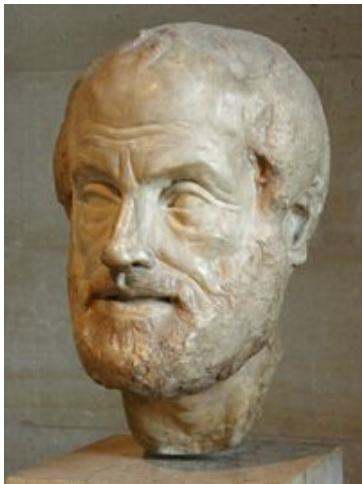*Micheal Mateas, Interaction and Agency, 2003, on the blog Grand Text Auto*

Player: Audience, Actor & Author

Audience **Actor** **Author**

A player in an interactive narrative is:

- *Audience (spectator):* witness to the dramatic spectacle
- *An actor:* playing the role of a character in the narrative
- *An author:* collaborating to create the narrative experience

Aristotle

Aristotle

- Ancient Greek philosopher, 384BC-322BC
- Gave an account of Tragedy, a form of theatre, in his *Poetics*
- Very influential up to this day
- Has influenced interactive narrative

Example: Façade,

Image from http://interactivestory.net

A Façade Transcript

Audrey (the player) knocks on the front door.
Trip opens the front door.
TRIP: Audrey!!
AUDREY: TRIP I'VE BEEN SHOT!
TRIP: Uh...
TRIP: Well come on in...
TRIP: Uh, I'll – I'll go get Grace...
GRACE: Audrey, Hi! How are you? I'm so happy to see you after so long!
– (interrupted)
AUDREY: CALL 911
GRACE: Uh...
GRACE: So, come in, make yourself at home...
AUDREY: OH, F**K THIS
TRIP: Ha ha! Oh I think we're going to need some drinks first if we're going to talk about sex.

Ernest Adams, A New Vision for Interactive Stories, GDC 2006

A Façade Transcript

- The agents ignore misunderstood inputs...
- then try to gloss over it and carry on.
- The agents reject unwanted inputs...
- then try to redirect the player.
- Conclusion:
  - Player Action: the system dismisses unwanted input from the player and follows it's own path
  - Player Reflection: the system tries to manipulate the player in subtle ways so that the player doesn't notice

Aristotle: Role of Player Agency
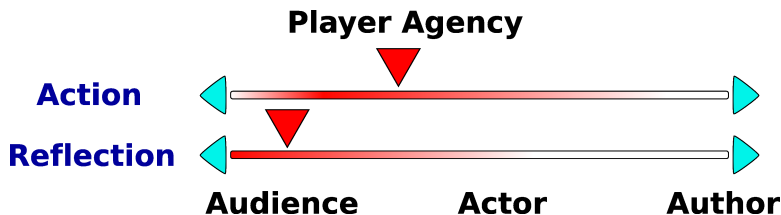
Action: The player acts from the perspective of a *constrained actor* within the narrative structure.

Reflection: The player reflects from the perspective of a *passive spectator* within the narrative structure.

Bertolt Brecht

Bertolt Brecht

- Influential German dramatist, 1898-1956
- Believed theatre's broadest function was to educate
- Created an influential theory of theatre: Epic Theatre
- Designed to provoke rational self-reflection and a critical view

America's Army

http://www.americasarmy.com/

Example — Dead In Iraq

Joseph DeLappe: dead-in-iraq 'online gaming intervention,' 2006

Example — Dead In Iraq

- A Brechtian technique, using narration to:
  - Prevent immersion
  - Draw attention to real-world consequences
  - Promote critical discussion
- But limited — not changing the medium itself, just doing something novel within it
- Ultimately this is the limit of the Brechtian approach

Brecht: Role of Player Agency
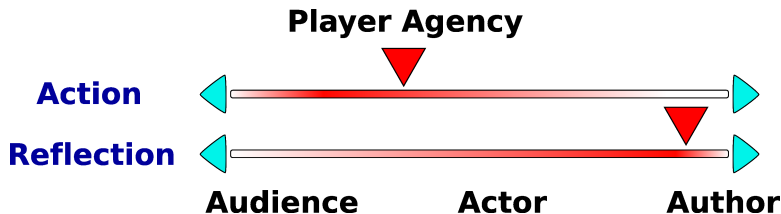
Action: The player acts from the perspective of a *constrained actor* within the narrative structure.

Reflection: The player reflects from the perspective of an *author*, reflecting on the narrative structure from outside of it.

Augusto Boal

Augusto Boal

- Influential Brazilian theatrical director, 1931-
- Founded a non-didactic theatrical form called *Theatre of the Oppressed*
- Related to Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*
- Used in radical popular education movements

Example: Forum Theatre

A model forum theatre: 'It's too late':

- The Stage: three desks and a clock on the wall
- The Oppressors: a clerk standing behind each desk
- The Oppressed: a citizen who must use a document s/he is holding to enact some transaction
- The Action:
  - The citizen must visit each clerk in turn and attempt to initiate the desired transaction
  - The clerks must find ways to deny the request because 'It's too late.'

Source: Carlo Jaccuci

Example: Forum Theatre

- The anti-model is presented: the oppressed fails
- The play is repeated with spectators able to temporarily replace the oppressed to avoid mistakes, present solutions: become spect-actors
- Oppressors respond to spect-actors solutions with new forms of oppression
- Becomes a competition between actors (oppressors) and spect-actors (oppressed)
- Over several iterations a social or political problem and its solutions are discussed

Boal: Role of Player Agency
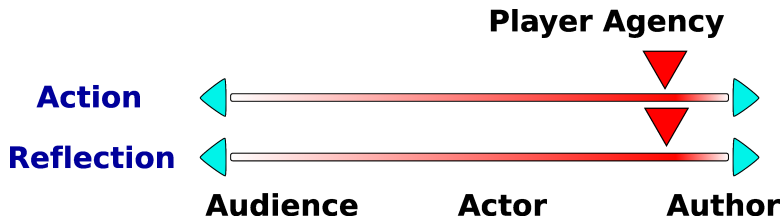
Action: the player acts from *outside of* the narrative structure, acting on the *structures* and *processes* of the experience as a *fictional representation*.

Reflection: the player thinks from *outside of* the narrative structure, reflecting on the *structures* and *processes* of the experience as a *fictional representation*.

Summary: The Role of Player Agency
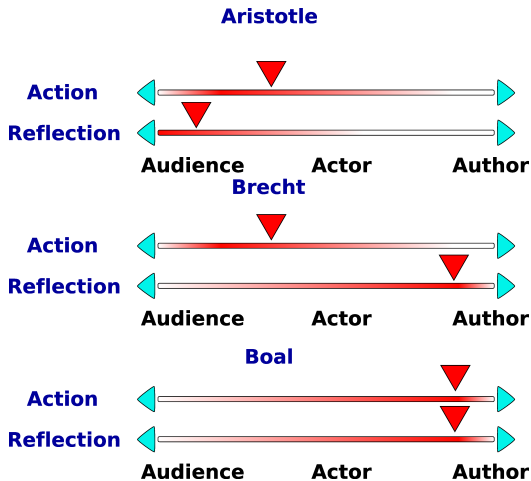
A Boalian Approach to Computer-based Interactive Narrative?

The ideas Boal gives us for interactive narrative are:

- Learners shifting between acting within the narrative (in the role of actor) and acting on the narrative (in the role of author)
- Using these roles in an *exploratory learning* process by making a game of iteratively constructing an interactive narrative
- Using this process to explore within a context

Future Work

How can an interactive narrative system provide a story model that supports creative and critical expression through constructing stories?

Questions?

Specific Research Questions

- What kind of story model best supports creative and critical expression through constructing stories?
- What kind of interface and interface metaphors best support intuitive interaction with the story model?
- How can the roles of actor and author be combined in a seamless and intuitive way?
- How can a learning experience be structured within and around this interactive story player-authoring environment?