

The Rise and Fall of Black Velvet Flag: An “Intelligent” System for Youth Culture Documentary

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Abstract

The use of databases and interactive tools has enabled filmmakers to discover new ways of authoring. This paper reveals the research and thought that preceded the design of an interactive documentary about a cocktail-lounge band that played hard-core punk songs. The decision to create a system where the presentation database “learns” from each viewer’s choice, was as much a way to best accommodate the particularities of the band as it was a way to find the most effective medium to represent youth culture and all of its dynamism.

A record, if it is to be useful to science, must be continuously extended, it must be stored, and above all it must be consulted.

-Vannevar Bush

Making Order and Telling Stories

I have a habit of spending as much time organizing my materials to make a film as I do actually shooting and cutting it together. I realized 10 years ago from the glee that I experienced that this organizational process was a creative one. I made complex libraries that would enable me to try hundreds of possibilities without losing a single image or sound clip. This was in the days when nonlinear editing was cost-prohibitive to the documentary filmmaker.

Depression set in when I had to dispose of many ideas and intriguing possibilities to serve the needs of a primary narrative. Brenda Laurel refers to the Flying Wedge model where even in game playing, as participants (or spectators) engage further, the scope of interest narrows to accommodate the more precise objectives of the players. (Laurel 1992:78) And so, as is the case in most media production, a lot of precious things (and useless things too) end up on the editing room floor because they do not serve the purpose of the author(s).

When I began to see that querying a database was a request to be told about something, then I realized that multimedia powered by database engines might allow for an autonomous reconstitution of narrative and the audiovisual materials on which it depends. In a sense, every story the system tells can be responsive to the unique qualities of the audience that asked for it.

Now that you have an idea of the context that attracted me to this discipline, I must confess that my enthusiasm needs to be coupled with some principles to consider. What I intend in this brief document is to describe some conditions where databases are useful to me in the construction and presentation of my own narrative art, specifically an interactive documentary called *The Rise and Fall of Black Velvet Flag* - a work in progress, and give a little history of the predecessors whose excellent work I have found useful. But before I can continue

and give a more specific account of my creative strategies, I should define my use of one term that I have repeated and will continue to use throughout.

How a Query Result Might Create “Narrative”

Some digital media theorists have resisted the legacy of the concept of narrative, and celebrate a liberation from its imposing structures and systemization of temporal and spatial representation for digital media. Specifically I am speaking of Lev Manovich and his recent discussion of database culture and its resistance to the implied orderings of classical notions of narrative. (Manovich, 1998). However, my experience with databases differs. While looking at a minimal list generated from a database query, there still remains from the representation of an object by its ordered title, a set of loosely unanchored signs held in each field of a record. From these signs the perceiver may uncontrollably detect a pattern, a story perhaps as to the logic behind the structure of the list. It is the structure and representation of the data that are the essential components that allow a list to be a narrative.

David Bordwell’s exhaustive inquiry into classical Hollywood cinema provides some useful parallels. As he used Vladimir Propp’s taxonomic study of Russian folktales to understand the underlying functions of Hollywood films, I believe that a similar application to the database query is useful. Three important concepts are relevant in my definition of narrative that I will use from Propp. *Fabula* describes a sequence of events in a causal and/or chronological order that a perceiver can extrapolate from a text. *Syuzhet* describes the actual presentation of events in the text (Some would call this the plot.) Also there is *narration* - a cue to the perceiver to construct chronology or cause-and-effect relationship by recognizing patterns of events represented in the text.

A simple list resulting from a database query may demand some intellectual labor from the perceiver to make any meaningful associations. If a search mechanism is programmed to evaluate thematic or chronological data for each record, then the three elements of narrative that I use from Propp can be present. That is the premise from which I am creating my database-driven art: an experiment still in the process of development.

One problem I anticipate is implied from the notion that narrative does not exist outside of the mind of the perceiver. Narrative in a documentary is the result of a series of pre-planned understandings resulting from cues that fit remembered *syuzhet* patterns. With database culture still in its infancy, we have very few database configured patterns embedded in our collective memory. Therefore I rely on other forms of expression. Cinematic patterns of narration are what I choose.

Using a Database for the Presentation of Interactive Documentary

To address this issue, let me first say that my creative work is not explicitly educational. Nonfiction and documentary has much to offer the student or researcher of any subject. This product is not my objective. I intend for my documentary films to entertain in a similar way that fiction films do. One can also learn from fictional drama, but the didactic characteristics between an "educational" film and a fictional dramatic film are quite distinct. My interest is to effect the viewer with a memorable experience more than to instruct on a particular concept. But unlike many fictional dramatic films, my documentary films are not scripted to the detail. They are loosely defined in their videographic plan. And the material I bring to the editor can be, and has been, restructured many different ways to suit very distinct purposes.

What makes a nonfiction documentary film, video or multimedia project distinct from its fiction cousin is that the objects used in the making of the finished work often have a previous life of their own, a value to another context, another system of meaning. The photograph on my license serves one context: it enables me to drive legally. And yet, that card could be a useful document in the making of a documentary.

This other context is what makes any conscientious creator feel the arbitrariness of giving a narrative function to any document in a film. The questions a responsible author must face repeat themselves in every project: "Is my use of this document respectful of the meaning it evokes outside of my film's context? Am I making the most effective use of this document for my own narrative?" (The answers often contradict.) A photograph or film clip in one of my projects may serve an insignificant need if in the end I must tell only one story, told one way, in a fixed order, by only me. But, given the freedom to re-purpose my material to accommodate a variety of other possible narratives, I may be able to exhaust more of the possible significations any photograph or film clip may offer. Though a documentary will have only one fabula, multiple syuzhet can be the result of numerous restructurings and revisions of the author's narration.

Multimedia enabled creators to design multi-threaded narratives. But we have crossed a junction where many authors realize that branching structures still have profound limitations. While we have experienced branching story structures in many nonfiction multimedia works, an accounting of each possible version can be made and calculated vis-a-vis a matrix and a linear equation. Hence in branching stories, the narrative trail gains more possible tributaries and alternate routes, but adds no responsive mechanism to the potentially dynamic intentions of its authors and the changing interests of its audience. Only intelligent systems developed to accommodate this change allow autonomous, dynamic and even modular characteristics to be realized.

One such system that explored an essentially identical set of concerns in the making of documentary is the "Autonomist storyteller system" (Davenport and Murtaugh, 1997) of Davenport and Murtaugh. They too, saw the limitations of effecting the viewer with television documentary, and wanted to find another way to engage the viewer interactively while

allowing for recombinant narrative structures to be determined by keyword matches. The resulting experience for the viewer is unpredictable, yet by carefully coding the video clips with attached alphanumeric values, narration is maintained in its presentations of sequenced material.

The effect of the "Autonomist storyteller system" as a communicative work indicates that the documentary is an appropriate narrative genre from which to contribute to this developing expressive form. Each document can be catalogued and coded in a database for the service of multiple narratives. If the database is programmed to organize its records to make narrative construction possible, than a query to the database is in a sense, a request for it tell a story, or more specifically put: to make a temporal and spatial ordering of records sensitive to the logical systems created for the type of narrative the author and audience intend. Furthermore the presentation interface is an environment where the author and audience develop objectives for evolving a story, or more specifically stated: multiple queries are given a context where they can have value in relation to each other. Though I suggest here a rudimentary use of a database system for an intelligent nonfiction narrative engine, the iterated possibilities that I am using for the project based on the content described below are more complex.

How the Presentation System Works: Very Simply

The user is presented with sixteen images randomly chosen that appear on the boundaries of the frame of the computer screen. (See Figure 1)

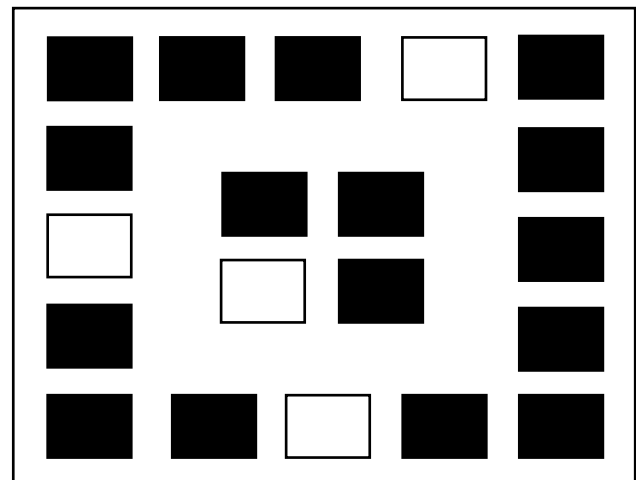


Figure 1: Static Image Selection Screen

Of these sixteen, four among 32 different invisibly coded primary themes are represented - each image has its own theme. Each theme has four images representing it among the sixteen. The user must then select four images in any order by clicking on them. The user can pass the cursor over each image to hear a sound bite associated with the image to help decide to choose it. The user can then select four images in any order by clicking on them. The images move to one of four positions in a rectangle in the center. The user can also make changes at will.

When the user has decided on the chosen four, s/he is taken to a screen where videos associated with these images play. (See Figure 2)

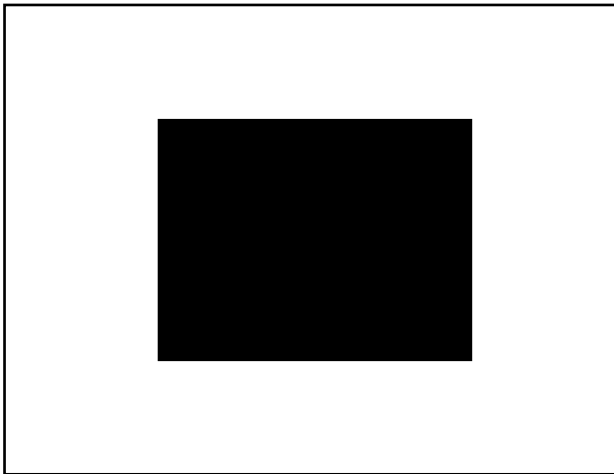


Figure 2: Video Viewing Screen

At the end of the viewing, the first screen returns and sixteen more images are selected. However, these are not all randomly selected. Twelve of the sixteen new images are selected by an algorithm whose variables are provided by the theme data of the previous sixteen images chosen. Four of the new images are randomly selected. With each subsequent cycling between the two screens, two things happen. 1) The system collects and stores information from the choices the user makes, and repeatedly interprets this information to provide a constantly refined response to the user's interests. 2) The user sees more and more of the audiovisual material in a variety of contexts at the service of multiple queries.

The four randomly chosen images invite the user to diverge from a path of inquiry that can become too narrow and predictable. The user can play for two minutes or many hours. There is no predetermined beginning or end. But some video clips are coded to occur as *openers*, others as *closers*. Most of the didactic or pedagogic intentions I may have for this film play themselves out in the algorithm. I am not saying that my control of the storytelling disintegrates; it never does. But the systems allows a space for the user to subvert the narration to some degree. (How much remains to be seen.)

Why *The Rise and Fall of Black Velvet Flag* Should Be Database-Driven

The inseparable intersection of media culture and youth culture is an increasingly difficulty relationship to keep up with. There was a time when youth culture was limited to a few possible genre of expression at any given moment. But the channels of cultural production are directed at more specific demographics than at any other time in history. Hippies and punks were once at binary poles with very little in between. Today the list of subcultural identities not only revisit past ones, but the genus continues to propagate new species and subspecies every year. Ready to exploit, and even invent this dimension of cultural production are the major commercial forces that produce media for all - young and old, mainstream

and "alternative."

Youth culture has, since World War II, and at moments before, when affluence and leisure time were abundant, been a leading force in the dynamic characteristics of the host culture of most every industrial nation. Perhaps an explanation has something to do with the fact that industrialization, for an educated middle class, separates youth from the pressures and distractions of modern life for an adult working-and-consuming person. A young middle class young person has the free time to take in the media of the world, attempt to understand it, and create a material response to it. This process can proceed with few repercussions to the means of maintaining a livelihood - parents typically take care of that - even if their children have tattoos, piercing or colored hair. And even with some personal repercussions considered, the fact that young people are less obligated to property and its continuous acquisition, allows a freedom of expression that usually is not revisited until old age, if ever again.

The three members of Black Velvet Flag provide an unusual combination of characters and objectives. Two founding members work in advertising and were once punks who grew up in Southern California in the early eighties. Their adolescence was spent reacting to the pressures of conformity with LA punk culture. The ideology of the culture was critical of the political economy and the social values of the host culture, while paradoxically punks enjoyed the freedom of expression and consumption it permitted. The third member was too young to know what Punk was, and wanted to use the band to become a successful pop musician. The band's membership reflects the paradox that its music so profoundly illuminates. Together they covered hard core punk song lyrics that others wrote, while re-accompanying and rearranging the score to the lounge music of the fifties and early sixties - the music of the band's parents. The dialectic between the musical elements is disturbing, polemical and humorous. Most reasonably intelligent listeners decoded the intent of the band. They learned something about the workings of media culture and its relation to youth culture while grooving to some very catchy tunes. Likewise, the audience contemplated their own passive behavior and politically anemic incentive to act on behalf of their conscience and convictions.

Historically and cross-culturally, youth in this century have been an active progressive political force to be reckoned with by every nation organized into a discrete political structure. For reasons that continue to fascinate me, youth in the United States since the mid-seventies have been among the most passive and narcissistic citizens of the world. What I set out to do in my work is to explore why and how this happens, and to find the examples and exceptions to this as well. What forces exist to co-opt and commodify the impulse to resist conformity, and thereby making resistance an act of conformity? What forces exist that teach us to value private property, and then to conform and resist and conform again to a system that allows an individual to acquire and protect their acquisitions? It is the transition from the stage of questioning adult authority into assuming the power and role of an adult that is the subject of documented inquiry and my poetic response.

The Use of Narrative Intelligence To Document Youth-Culture Phenomena

Youth culture responds to two social pressures. First from the young, there is the urge to acquire power in a social system that is abundant with contradictions. When the notion that a hard worker will be amply rewarded is frequently confounded, resistance to conformity has its first powerful rationale. Why conform to this notion if it is seen to be untrue? Sociologists Widdicombe and Wooffitt answer the question.

Subcultures offer a solution at a symbolic level. Subcultures solve at an imaginary level the problems which remain unresolved at the concrete material level, and this is why the solution is necessarily symbolic. Style enables the young person to achieve in image what they cannot achieve in reality. (Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1995:17)

Second, the dominant culture seeks to teach the young how to gain power. In a capitalist culture, this goal is accomplished by teaching the young how to buy, and more importantly, how to construct identity with what you buy.

Once contradictions are realized, the incentives for resistance are discovered. From this resistance, a theme in the social history of urban post-WW II industrial society is realized - the handmade creation of identity through youth culture, its fashion and music.

The materials, the artifacts and their symbolism are dynamic. Each generation finds its signifiers and modifies them constantly. Similarly their meanings are modified. Likewise, the young grow up. Many cease to resist. They accept the contradictions, or at least, they repress them.

The challenge of documenting this process is finding a way to accommodate massive change - change in the subject and in the audience. With few exceptions, most films I have seen on punk culture struck me as either too celebratory or too analytical. They either excessively subjectify or excessively objectify. But, perhaps the real culprit is I. In fact it was I, who as a young viewer, was alienated by *The Decline of Western Civilization* (feature documentary by Penelope Spheeris, 1981) for its distancing and objectification, but then years later found it uncritical and accommodating. Can one film accomplish multiple objectives in the audience? Likewise, the evolution from these two poles was gradual. There was a place in-between when *The Decline* was just right for me. I was ready for questions it asked and the answers it gave.

But the documents in that film are precious and unique. They cannot belong to another film without being taken out of context. How can Spheeris' film evolve without it being remade? Should it evolve? Or should it forever be a document symbolizing the ideas of those individuals of that time? If it were to be remade, could we save the original version so that we might compare and see the evolution? If we were to construct a mechanism that could integrate new content and accommodate an evolving author and audience, are we not creating a "context-controlled event-world"? (Weibel 1997: 348) New Media artist and theorist Weibel describes the possibilities:

Another aspect of the variable virtual image is caused by the dynamic properties of its immanent system. As the system itself is just as variable it will behave like a living organism. It is able to react to the context-generated input, altering its own state and adapting its output accordingly. (Weibel 1997: 348)

Weibel continues his discussion by describing three specific characteristic elements of the digital image: virtuality (the way the information is saved), variability (of the image's object), and viability (as displayed by the behavioral patterns of the image). (Weibel 1997: 348) All three characteristics describe ways in which the image - and here I mean the cinematic, documentary image - changes. Hence the digital imaging system becomes a clear solution in the quest to find a medium that will represent change - in my case the evolution of youth culture as subject, youth culture as spectator, and ultimately, youth culture as author (myself and those who come after).

The use of the database as a creative medium is well argued by Manovich. (Manovich 1997)

In general, creating a work in new media can be understood as the construction of an interface to a database. Database becomes the center of the creative process in the computer age. Historically, the artist made a unique work within a particular medium. Therefore the interface and the work were the same; in other words, the level of an interface did not exist. With new media, the content of the work and the interface become separate. (Manovich 1997)

I not only choose the database to make more efficient the achievement of my creative objectives. I feel as much commitment to educating my audience, and to providing a socializing experience. Turkle describes her work with young Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs). She surmised that networked gaming was a use of the computer and its correlated technologies not only "for thinking things through [but also for] working out personal concerns." (Turkle 1997:356)

In this respect I come back to my original theme. The need for people to explore the contradictions discovered in the process of acquiring power from youth to middle age. My intention is to create a malleable system that will bring insight and identification as the generation that was punk comes to terms with its accommodations of what it once rejected. And, I intend to create systems that can generate new iterations from the intelligent responses it gathers from those who interact with it.

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