

GETTING TO THE BOTTOM OF REALITY: DESIGNING CONTEXTS FOR THE EMERGENCE OF TRUTH(S) IN DOCUMENTARY VIDEOGAMES

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ABSTRACT

Documentary filmmaking and the design of videogames are often seen as two divergent art forms: the former as a medium for the filmmaker to record and share an aspect of reality with their audience and the latter as a means for the designer to give players a space to explore or create a new emergent reality. Some game designers, however, have taken on the task of creating what they call 'documentary games.' This paper will discuss the history of documentary videogame design, its relation to experimental documentary filmmaking and how documentary design process can inform traditional game design methods (and vice versa). The paper will discuss the process of an original experimental videogame that uses documentary techniques in its creation. In July of 2013 the author visited the suburb of Cachiche in Peru, a town that has a history as a refuge for witches during the Peruvian Inquisition and is in the process of developing infrastructure for 'spiritual tourism.' Staying with a *brujo* ('sorcerer'), who is actively involved in this process, the author has used the audio interview and visual documentation to create a videogame that explores the cross-cultural conflicts between the narratives constructed through the experience of an outsider and the other locally constructed narratives, perceptions and realities. To do this he is using gameplay to give the player a sense of investigative agency and the power to recombine and re-contextualize information, using a simulation of the experience of both the documentarian and documentary audience. The paper will also outline possible experiments at the crossovers between the borders of documentary filmmaking and game design.

INTRODUCTION

While working to expand the art of game design, it is important to look outside the medium to other, often very different, art forms. Sometimes the greatest insights into the unfulfilled needs of a medium come from hybrids of the original and other mediums –those that have defining elements that seemingly contradict what is seen as core definitional elements of the original medium. In this pursuit I have worked toward blending documentary film process with that of game design.

This is not entirely new: "documentary" is a term applied to a variety of video games: generally serious, journalistic games, about current topics or events. There is debate as to whether the term is descriptive or "aspirational pre-naming," an attempt by game designers to borrow from the established cultural cachet of documentaries. [1] This paper will focus less on the creation of rules by which to decide what is or isn't a documentary game or "docugame," and more on the benefits of applying elements of documentary process to game design, as well as vice versa.

The following describes a work-in-progress experiment in game design, Cachiche, that attempts to use documentary process to expand the expressive vocabulary of games. This is under explored territory: although most self-described documentary games use research for their nonfiction subject matter, there are processes specific to film and other journalistic work that are often not utilized, such as on-site information gathering and the incorporation of materials such as interviews. Documentary films that incorporate game-like processes in their creation will also be discussed and potential contributions of gameplay to the realm of documentary media will be provided.

I will describe the process of documentary material collection and how the current product transformed into an impressionistic interactive narrative. The paper will discuss why this process was essential and how the found content directly informed game design decisions. It will present observations on the effects of these experiments and draw attention to areas of current and future experimentation.

VIDEOGAMES + DOCUMENTARY FILM

History of Documentary Games

As stated before, the styles of games that have been given the name "documentary" are varied, making definition difficult. One approach to acknowledging the impact these games have had on documentary and game-based media would be to discuss the benefits that game context provides for documentary content. First, one can apply gameplay to a documentary in order to give the player a sense of investigative agency by simulating the system in which the documentary content takes place. One example of this technique is the game *JFK Reloaded*. [2] The player takes the role of Lee Harvey Oswald to re-enact the 1963 shooting of John F. Kennedy. With the realistic simulation of environment and physics, as well as relative freedom of movement to test hypotheses that differ from the Warren Commission's findings, the player is able to investigate the circumstances of the shooting to test the veracity of the official narrative. Created in the context of popular conspiracy theories questioning that narrative, the company states it is "the world's first mass-participation forensic construction." [2]

Another benefit that gameplay bestows on documentary material is the ability of a player to recombine and create meaning, assembling pieces of reality, as well as re-contextualize images. In a previous interactive narrative based on my two years as a development worker in Mali, West Africa, *The Mischief of Created Things*, I used this technique. [3] My process involved creating a 3D environment populated by 2D characters and objects, which the player can explore non-linearly. The player can converse with

characters and experience stories from my travels that were chosen for their personal, surprising and multilayered nature. The narratives build on one another throughout the course of gameplay, as the player recombines my stories to form a meaningful picture of the environment as a whole. The order selected to experience the narrative changes the context within which it is understood and therefore its interpretation, since experiencing some events influences the understanding of subsequent events. The recombining and re-contextualization create a surprising and non sequitur narrative that makes the non-player characters as well as the environment itself feel more plausible.

Making documentary content interactive can also assist the player in developing an empathetic response to either someone who is the subject of the documentary or the documentarian him or herself. Benjamin Poynter's *In a Permanent Save State* was created in response to news of the suicides of workers at a Foxconn factory in China that develops electronics such as iPhones. [4] Rather than create an investigative simulation surrounding the circumstances of the suicides and conditions of the factories, Poynter focuses his narrative on an imagined journey of the people who died through the stages of their afterlife. Though the game was based on real-life people, he says "I guessed in my mind what they would have wanted to see in their eternal setting, as I had visions of it myself." [5]

Another that focuses on empathy with the subject of the documentary while engaging directly with the historical context is *The Cat and the Coup*. [6] This is a surreal exploration of overthrown Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh's life and CIA-backed coup through the hallucinatory memories provoked by the movements of his cat. In it, the player uses the cat to disrupt Mossadegh's environment (under house arrest), forcing him to move physically through a retelling of key moments in his past. The gameplay does not simulate the political and historical narrative, but rather a jogging of the memory. Just as the player is forcing Mossadegh to relive the memories, they are also forcing themselves to remember. Both of these games take a much more fluid and impressionistic approach to the real-world subject matter than *JFK Reloaded* and provide an important alternate method, as similar philosophical contrasts are present within the documentary film community.

Game-like Documentary Film

Going in the other direction, there are a few documentary films that are created using game-like or at least interactive, processes and philosophies. The most rare are those that use actual games as influences in their construction. More common are films that expect a certain amount of cognitive interaction or detective work, on the part of the viewer to assemble facts and decide what is reality.

Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Mysterious Object at Noon* is a documentary that involved the filmmaker visiting villages in his native Thailand and asking locals to contribute to a surrealist

exquisite corpse story. [7] On one level, the film is a fictional narrative created through an improvisational game where each subsequent person adds to a long and unpredictable story. On another level, it is a traditional documentary investigating the imaginations and collective unconscious of people living in rural Thailand. The film is composed partly of the storytelling interviews, but later on the filmmaker requests that participants act out scenes from the narrative they've created. This is revealing in a way similar to a straightforward documentary, despite the fact that the story itself is fictional. Surrealism has always had a relationship with ethnographic documentary, as they both embrace the disruption of a familiar reality. [8] This film was a major influence on the gameplay in *Cachiche*.



Fig. 1. *Cachiche*, 2014, Aaron Oldenburg, video game.

Another documentary film that incorporates a traditional game into its construction is Omer Fast's *Talk Show*. [9] Following the format of the childhood game "telephone," it begins with someone telling a true and highly-personal story to an actor who plays the role of talk show host. When the story is finished, the teller leaves, to be replaced by another actor who has not heard the story. The actor who was originally the host now assumes the role of the storyteller and recounts the narrative imperfectly as if it were their own. This continues for several rounds until the original storyteller is in the role of listener and is presented with the final divergence from their narrative. Fast's work often investigates the nature of memory and purposefully uses game-like or playful elements to create slippage between reality and fiction.

Errol Morris's *Thin Blue Line* was created through more conventional investigation, but requires of its viewers a form of cognitive interactivity, refusing to tell them to what conclusion they are to come. [10] Its story focuses on Randall Adams, unjustly convicted of murder and presents the facts of the case in an open-ended manner (which led to an overturning of the conviction). In the presentation, Morris gives multiple views of reality rather than one truth, which he allows to emerge within the viewer (although much as games do, Morris led the viewer to a conclusion that was nearest his own). Although the medium was not interactive, he bestowed cognitive investigative agency on the viewer. Unlike documentarians such as Michael Moore who incorporate an editorial philosophy into filmmaking, he did not directly dictate an interpretation of reality.

Some films go even farther toward forcing the viewer to question the narrative. Luis Buñuel's *Las Hurdes: Tierra Sin Pan* gave the viewer "the freedom to see" by accompanying its documentary content with an unreliable narrator. [11] The narrative falsifications presented over genuine documentary footage become more apparent to the viewer, requiring them to use their own critical faculties to analyze the visuals. All of these films have characteristics that are difficult to capture in real-time simulation. The presence of a camera recording what it sees gives the viewer a sense of objective observation in a way that 3D constructed simulation may struggle to emulate.

Creating a Game Using Documentary Process

One of the major benefits to the designer of adding documentary design process to the creation of electronic games is social: it requires the creator, who may spend months or years in front of the computer coding and making visuals, to go outside of their comfort zones, interviewing and inhabiting another space. It adds an element of randomness and lack of control to what, for many solo independent game designers, is often one of total imaginative control over the scope and boundaries of narrative content. In the documentary process, an interview or a turn down a particular road may change the direction of the entire project. This is particularly true if one begins without a specific game mechanic in mind and uses discovered content to dictate the appropriate gameplay.

I have an obsession with empty spaces with powerful histories as well as strange, often failed colonies of people. I create videogames that often involve documentary process. As a former Peace Corps volunteer and game designer, I have figured out how to blend two discordant parts of myself by combining the social aspects of documentary with game design.

In July of 2013 I visited the desert suburb of Cachiche in Peru, a town that has a history as a refuge for people who were considered witches during the Peruvian Inquisition, where their descendants still live and continue to practice traditional healing and fortune-telling. It is now in the process of developing infrastructure for spiritual tourism. Staying with a *brujo* ("sorcerer"

or traditional healer) named Miguel Angel, who is actively involved in that process, I have used the audio interviews and visual documentation I gathered there to begin creating a videogame that explores the cross-cultural conflicts between two narratives: one constructed through the experience of an outsider and the other constructed through local perceptions and realities. To do this I am using gameplay to give the player a sense of investigative agency and the power to recombine and re-contextualize information, using a simulation of the experience of both the documentarian and documentary audience.

During my time in Cachiche I collected not only audio from several interviews about the spiritual history of the area but photographs of textures, architecture and people to use in 3D environmental reconstruction, ambient audio and notes from interactions. I traveled there with the intent of making a game, though I did not initially know what the final gameplay would be. In preparation for the trip, I contacted a local agency to see if they could put me in contact with a *brujo* to interview and a host family with whom to stay in town, as there were no hotels. They introduced me to Don Miguel, who sounded excited about the idea of doing a documentary on Cachiche (as well as my eventual disclosure that it was a documentary game) and put me up in a dusty back room of his restaurant. He was an essential interview subject as well as a key facilitator to my experience of the town, introducing me to important people such as the daughter and grandson of a well-known local witch. The time I spent with his family and conversing with the people who worked at his bar/restaurant, observing tourists, took the game's story far outside of the documented historical narrative of the town. It was fascinating in the way that many small towns are fascinating: for the subtle, hidden interactions and magic found in the mundane.

In the months following the trip I began the process of turning this material into a videogame using the software Unity3D. The game involves generative cross-cultural narrative through the lens of spirit photography tourism. My personal documentary narrative is recombined procedurally based on the player's actions within the videogame to produce new fictionalized narratives attached to the player's in-game photography. It focuses on the tension between the static narrative created over the summer and the dynamically-changing narrative created over the course of the game.

Evolution of Gameplay: Questions and Experiments

The process of game design, through the apparent randomness of its algorithms, is a path of continuous surprise for designers. *Cachiche*, in the early stages of its process, leaned heavily toward documentary game. I, however, had the realization that using the documentary technique-derived materials to create a fictionalized narrative would allow me to get at the feeling of the space and the experience of the town, closer to what filmmaker Werner Herzog calls the "ecstatic truth." [12] For the purposes of this project, I will use John Grierson's definition of documentary as "a creative treatment of actuality." [13] I use elements of reality that

are reinterpreted through the procedures of gameplay. It functions much like Buñuel's documentary surrealism, which film critic André Bazin states is "nothing more than his concern to get to the bottom of reality." [14]

In game design there is a fixed narrative, that which the designer gives as context for gameplay and emergent narrative, that which describes the unique experience of a particular play session. In most games the two inform one another. In playtesting *Cachiche*, I have watched the narratives that emerge out of play and altered the design, including the fixed narrative, accordingly. For example, early playtests showed that players were interested in exploring the alleys between houses. Because of this I chose those locations for observable vignettes, conversations between non-player characters (NPCs) that begin when the player is in close proximity, allowing them to eavesdrop and learn about life under the surface of the small town.

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

Currently a work in progress, the game allows players to explore the town, take pictures, then show those pictures to non-player characters, whose descriptions of the photos' content is based on metadata tags added to the in-game photo at the moment it is taken. Sometimes the description is a literal interpretation of the photo, other times it's a poetic non-sequitur. In each case these photo-based stories create a new reality within the town. *Cachiche* gives the player access to its originating documentary subject matter, but allows the player to recombine and re-contextualize elements of actuality, creating meaning as they assemble pieces of reality. The player is presented with multiple stories: those created by the NPCs and what emerges in the conflicts between these stories and the 3D visual representation of the physical environment. Specific in-game events also demonstrate slippage between the official narrative and the reality peeking through from the background. The rules create a system of discovery, a conversational mechanic where the player finds that they can ask NPCs questions through their photography. It simulates the experience of the documentarian who is interested in the varying levels of reality. These are the opportunities created through the dialogue between documentary process and game design.

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