Viewers' Engagement in Nonlinear Storytelling: 'Journeys in Travel'

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1. INTRODUCTION

This is a demonstration of a practice-based research project that investigates contemporary modes of non-linear digital storytelling based on algorithmic computer-controlled systems and the viewers' cognitive and emotional engagement in the visual narrative construction. The video installation 'Journeys in Travel' tells a complex story of travel and investigates relationships between travelogue, cinematic essay and digital database narrative.

2. NONLINEAR STORYTELLING

Decades after its original promotion, the development of nonlinear narratives remains a traditionally intractable topic, because there is often a gap between artists' radicalizing innovation and audiences' quite different expectations. The database video installation 'Journeys in Travel' tries to establish its own unique setting amongst the multiple approaches towards nonlinear narratives by addressing this issue. Lev Manovich suggests that "one of the challenges in creating database films is to come up with narratives that have a structural relationship to database aesthetics." (Manovich, 2005, 22)

2.1 Database essay: 'journeys in travel'

'Journeys in Travel' suggests that:
- The episodic structure of travelogue and cinematic essay is a suitable adoption for database aesthetics, which can be called accordingly a 'database essay.'
- It is also important to consider film rhythm and the viewers' cognitive and emotional engagement in the narrative construction. Watching a film can be an absorbing and emotional experience, but how can this be achieved in nonlinear or database film?

A central aim of the project is to create a stimulating intellectual and emotionally challenging experience for the viewer, an open-ended, associative narrative, which sets in motion a seemingly endless chain of references to related topics: Foreign places, tourism, identity, ethnography, globalisation, pace, rhythm and the relationship of film (structure), narrative and travel.

2.2 Film rhythm

The project relates to recent research findings on film rhythm in relation to brain science: Karen Perlman's '*Cutting Rhythms: Shaping the Film Edit*' draws on the work of neurologists and physiologists to establish a foundation for 'rhythmic intuition' likewise as Daniel Levitin and Robert Jourdain who investigate rhythm in relation to music perception. Perlman suggests two significant physiological modes of perceiving movement are through 'mirror neurons' and 'kinesthetic empathy.' "The function of rhythm in film is to create cycles of tension and release, which the spectator 'rides' physiologically, emotionally, and cognitively." (Perlman, 2009, 86)

These findings are applied to control film rhythm in the database essay 'Journeys in Travel'. The experimental mixed genre form of cinematic essay allows the creation of an alternating audiovisual flow. The clips are allocated to five different genre groups: documentary observation, travel narration, sociological reflection, experimental video and text inserts and provide different perceptive qualities and varying intellectual, visual and auditory stimulus for the viewer.

3. REFERENCES

Manovich, L. and Kratky, A. (2005) *Soft Cinema: Navigating the Database.* MIT Press. Cambridge, MA

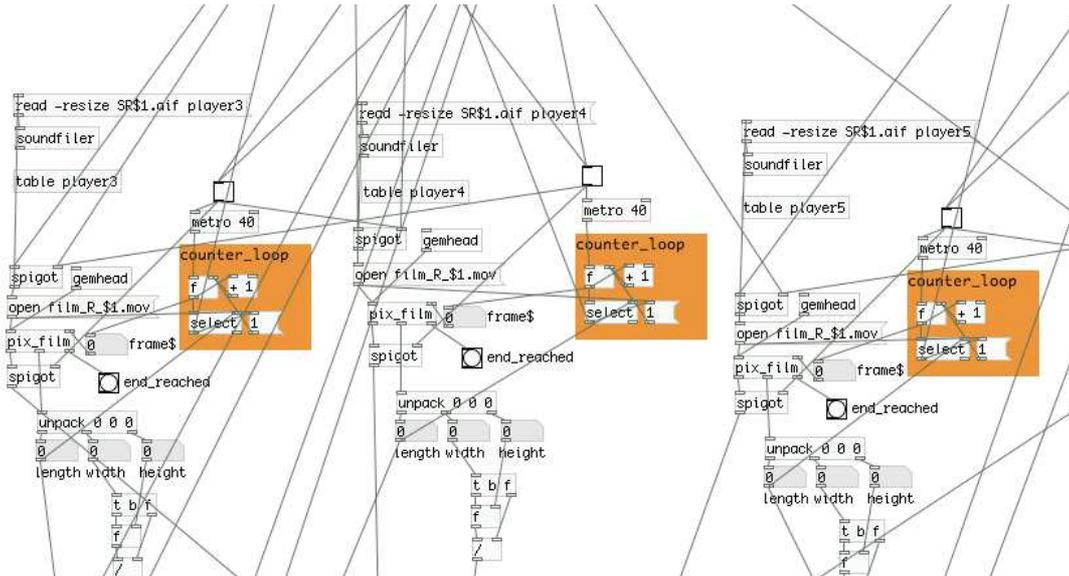Karen Perlman, K. (2009) *Cutting Rhythms: Shaping the Film Edit.* Focal Press. Burlington, MA

Figure 1: *The PD/GEM computer algorithm alternates randomly pre-edited sequences with subplots and narrative closure*

Figure 2: *The database contains currently 160 clips recorded in Asia, Australia, West Africa, Europe, North and South America. Additional sequences can be uploaded at any time creating an infinite narrative system*

Figure 3: *Experimental clips with a high editing frequency or layering of multiple imagery provide high visual stimulus*

Figure 4: *Text inserts interrupt the cinematic flow and a more active and intellectual mode of participation is required*