Understanding Mockumentary as a medium for storytelling

Design research seminar

Project guide: Prof. Jayesh Pillai

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Approval Sheet

The Design Research seminar Project two titled "Understanding Mockumentary as a medium for storytelling" by Mridul jain, Jonathan Joseph Mathew and siddarth aredath, is approved,in partial fulfilment of the 'Master in Design' Degree in Interaction Design at the Industrial Design Centre, Indian Institute of Technology Bombay.

Supervisor:

(Prof. Jayesh Pillai)

Declaration

I declare that this written document represents my ideas in my own words and where others' ideas or words have been included, I have adequately cited and referenced the original sources.

I also declare that I have adhered to all principles of academic honesty and integrity and have not misrepresented or fabricated or falsified any idea, data, fact or source in my submission.

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Abstract

The authors explore mockumentary as a medium to communicate. An interactive storyline has been penned down where the narration is pushed forward by choices the viewer makes. The story is about a design student and choices he is to make in his final days. Mockumentary is an ideal format to talk about our story because it brings across serious issues masqueraded as a comedy to the audience. This could ensure that the viewer maintains a light mood even if the questions posed are troubling and brooding. The paper describes first a background study into mockumentary and interactive films followed by the process of planning the plot, constraints faced / limitations and discuss possible future work.

Keywords: Mockumentary, Interactive Storytelling, Planning.

1. Introduction

This work talks about the relevance of mockumentary as a medium to communicate. We try to look into the general perception that many students fail to introspect and find one's own calling while skimming through rigorous academic guidelines within the design field. We believe mockumentary is an ideal format to address this story by standing objectively on the sideline, While trying portraying serious issues in the plot through the 'Mockumentary treatment'.

Initially, we studied classic mockumentaries to identify treatments, approaches towards the plot and scene. We have used the format of interactive storytelling with a choice based narrative. Followed by a short study into interactive films and the possibility of integrating mockumentary through this interactive medium. Which brings about the question to the approach, emergent narratives or the traditional storytelling ways. Later part of our work we elaborate on the process followed while outlining the plot and pre-production planning while working with the Text RPG approach to identify possible problem areas while conveying our story to the audience. Finally, we talk about challenges while working with interactive mockumentary as a medium and its ability to persuade compared to the traditional narrative median path we choose to stick to.
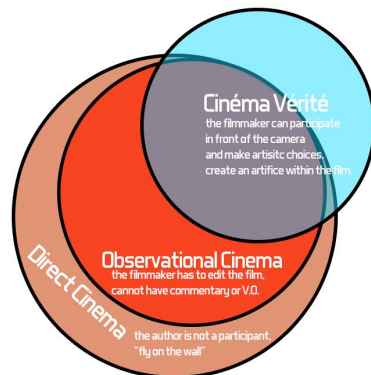
2. Background research and related work

The approach for the background research was to pick up relevant examples of films which correlates with the depiction of a non-fictional series of events set in a design school and analyzing them. We wanted our narrative to inform and/or persuade the audiences by simply portraying the world to them in an unemotional pragmatic sense. The second most crucial thing was the role of the filmmaker in the film. As we have seen in many documentaries, the filmmaker plays a important part. For example, in many documentaries (and mockumentaries) the omnipresent 'voice of God' narration of the filmmaker is there over the footage. In other films one can hear the filmmaker's voice behind the camera, persuading subjects with questions or cues and many other films just relies on a simple portrayal of events as a narrative with no role of the filmmaker whatsoever. As our narrative would be more from an observational point of view rather than expository, the 'voice of God' narration doesn't suit very well to our style. The Venn diagram shown here [Fig. 1] tells more about the nuances in narratives which exists when the portrayal is from an observational point of view.

Figure 1
Classification of observational storytelling

Within the diagram:
Cinéma Vérité — the filmmaker can participate in front of the camera and make artisitc choices, create an artifice within the film

Direct Cinema

Observational Cinema — the filmmaker has to edit the film, cannot have commentary or V.O.

the author is not a participant, "fly on the wall"

The Office (US) The series depicts the everyday lives of office employees in the Scranton, Pennsylvania branch of the fictional Dunder Mifflin Paper Company. It is presented as a documentary, using direct-camera address in the form of interviews and characters looking at the camera or speaking to an off-screen presence. The genre can be categorized as a Cinema Verite. The humor arises from the innocent and delusional nature of character.

This is Spinal Tap (1984, US) is another famous mockumentary made in the Cinema Verite style. Four members of the fictional British heavy metal band Spinal Tap, and Reiner as Marty Di Bergi, a documentary filmmaker following the band on their US tour. The film satirizes the behavior and musical pretensions of rock bands. As Roger Ebert, the famous film critic pointed out, there are two stories told in the film: the story of what the rock band Spinal Tap thinks, hopes, believes or fears is happening, and the story of what is actually happening. The reason the audience is so hooked on to the characters is the sheer stupidity combined with their innocence and optimism of the band members.[1]

Borat (US) a fictional TV host from a fictionalized village in Kazakhstan and his producer embarks on an epic journey to the fabled land "US and A" to make a documentary aptly titled- **Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan**. Sometimes the film works as fiction, sometimes as a documentary, sometimes as a mockumentary and sometimes as narrative fiction. Borat's fictional journey consists of interviews with real people, staged encounters etc which are standard in a traditional documentary. The humor arises from the stark contrast between fictionalized Borat and the real Americans. Borat's innocence, xenophobia, and stereotyping people provides dark humor but also clearly expose bigotries behind the libertarian and egalitarian ideologies which exist in America in contrast with the fictionalized version of Kazakhstan which is portrayed as rather uncivilized and boorish in the film. The film accomplishes more than what it sets out to do. [2]

2.1 Interactive Film and Video
For the purpose of studying interactive videos, we looked at Helloeko's platform for interactive cinematic videos. These interactive videos consist of film's,TV-shows, music videos and animated content. After shortlisting the videos that relate to our genre we are trying to explore, we identified scenes within these content that would be considered in a mockumentary film. Example, *That moment when, episode: You Vaguely Remember Someone Who Totally Knows You (2018).* This talks about awkward moments a person goes through while remembering someone's name. The choices sarcastic comments a person

would ask in a comedic sense to try to figure out his name by mocking certain attributes of the character. This scene was followed by a new scene that talks about that attribute. Another Example, *War Games, Episode: Making Coffee (2018).* This series offers viewers a parallel experience of real-time conversations where you can shift the view or focus between characters. When the character makes a comment "This looks nothing like the coffee shop in F.R.I.E.N.D.S" She pans around her workplace implying they are all boring and the same, just a typical coffee shop. In other episodes within the same series the choice offered to look at specific characters and their reaction to an event brings in the users perception of the scene and details they would want to look at, which a typical mockumentary film would portray as a glance at the camera.

The platform provides a generic guide that talk about an interactive choice in four areas: Dialogue, point of view, action and exploration. These are major areas were choices have logic that affect the story. But building a narrative solely around the intention of making a film interactive strays away from traditional narratives, as a viewer tends to linger in the interactive content rather than immerse themselves into the story initially. This we believe can be addressed by the quality of the script that a filmmaker entertains and their approach of storytelling through story creation. This brings into question, should a filmmaker start off a Nonlinear script through a linear approach or the other way around? Focusing on the non-linear script would entertain the emphasis around choices rather than the story we would want to communicate. What would be the right approach to undertake for a mockumentary? Interactive Films do possess great potential to be a mockumentary through the nuances of the choices within specific scenes. Eg. How would a character react if I asked or showed this instead? (To the viewer it maybe true as it occurs within the context of a mockumentary). To probe more into this, we look at categories of an interactive documentary to help us understand where an interactive mockumentary would fit into being a sub-genre of documentary.

2.2 Interactive Mockumentary
While Mockumentary being a sub-genre of documentary, the interactive documentary category that has been proposed by Aston and Gaudenzi (2012) gives us an opportunity to place mockumentary under these modes based on our previous background study. The four modes proposed where;

> *-The conversational mode (the Illusion of freedom in navigation);*
> *-The hypertext mode (linked asset archive exploration);*
> *-The participative mode (users create their own digital artifact);*

-The experiential mode (the participant is brought to a designated space and the experience challenges their senses and their perception of the world)

We consider that Interactive Mockumentary is a combination of the conversational Mode as its base with any one of the other three modes based on the medium we use to communicate through a film, a interface etc... In our plotline we believe that It is a combination of the conversational mode and the participative mode because of the illusion of the freedom in navigation and the digital artifact they create is their version of the story. Scenes within the same plot in traditional interactive narrative will jump from scene to scene to communicate the same content that can be communicated in one quirky scene in an interactive mockumentary, this again based on the approach of emergent narratives or storytelling because *"mockumentary frees the filmmaker from the constraints of traditional narrative [3]."*

2.3 Emergent narratives vs Storytelling in mockumentary
What drives the need for emergent narratives in comparison with the traditional storytelling? The answer to the question can be found in the role that the viewer has to play. The different narratives emerge from the points where the viewer has to make a decision. The parallel timelines arising from a common point reflects the viewer's conscience and ideology. The viewer actively becomes a part (participant) of the story at these points. As mentioned before, the illusion of free will in navigation is prevalent throughout the narrative. As the aim of our mockumentary is to provide a satire and commentary on different design processes and ideologies, the design processes can be seen from a ludological perspective (Refer Appendix A), which in turn gives us the opportunity to make use of emergent narratives like in computer games where viewer is a player of the game, or in our scenario, the viewers ideologies are reflected through the emergent narratives.

The aim of the research is also to understanding mockumentary as a form of storytelling. The creation of a fictional plot within the realms of the observational style of mockumentary viz. Cinema Verite or Fly on the wall or a combination of both of these is a challenge in itself. Keeping in mind the time constraints of the project as an academic exercise, the authors have chosen one of the timelines to be developed as a traditional storytelling format devoid of choice making scenarios.

3. Process overview of modeling the plot

3.1 Plot outline
In a nutshell, the story talks about the final days of a design student (product design stream) and the tumultuous events of the final semester. We have attempted to show a cross section of student life by bringing in varied aspects like academics, vices, friendships, family and career choices. We aim to make the viewer feel involved and connect to the protagonist, and, thereby be enabled to make choices that reflect/reveal their own character. We ask questions that provoke the viewer to make philosophical standpoints and search for a worldview, for it is our observation that many students fail to introspect and find one's own calling while skimming through rigorous academic guidelines. We question the ethics of following one's free will and vision (in a world where collaborations are certainly taking centerstage) and the merits /demerits of working within a set structure, giving up on intuitions and individualism. We have tried to compare these with a lifestyle (median) that prescribes no thought to speak of..

3.2 Understanding the character
We have set ourselves the aim of understanding various worldview students might adhere to and present them coherently so everyone has a path they might can associate with. While some standpoints are extreme (heavily one-sided with strict adherence to unique philosophical views) we try to nudge everyone into the median (a view that refuses to accept any strict policies and avoids being jingoist about any philosophy). We hope to understand how many students have a clear path set out in their mind and how successful we are at nudging students to follow the median path as set by us.

3.3 The Audience
The target audience for this project is students of design colleges and design professionals and academicians. We hope to know a little more about how their minds work, while they get to know something about themselves. We hope to understand how choice based storytelling can be a tool for designers.

3.4 Technical
Our gear for production was in tune with the treatment of the visuals we had in mind. A DSLR on a tripod for steady shots and a DSLR mounted on a rig without stabiliser for shots that involved chases or following around a subject. A Zoom H1N sound recorder and lapel mics were to capture the audio.

3.5 Constraints

Production and post production takes up a considerate amount of time. But working with an iterative process of Non-Linear narratives there is a need to test out and ask for opinions about the plot outline while making decisions. These have been explored in traditional linear narratives, but for an interactive medium we choose to approach this using a game based Text-RPG Prototype.

4. Pre-Production and Planning: Prototype

While planning the film, making decisions within the storyline for our intended audience with respect to an interactive film needed clarification from our end. Is an interactive medium worth exploring over traditional narrative styles? Creating sample production shots after finalizing the storyline would take time. As an alternative to look at how people would react to the situation keeping in mind the nonlinear script we propose the use of Text-RPG model of games to identify problems in the storyline and possible callbacks and transitions between scenes and shots. This approach would help us in the pre-production and production planning as well as cater to problems within our script. The Purpose of the Text-RPG is to understand how our viewer becomes the story creator while we the storytellers have given a specific plot line.

4.1 Platform Choice

Platforms like Storyboard Viget (https://storyboard.viget.com) is a free tool that one can use while working with Text-RPG. The platform lacks integration with pre-production and post-production planning. Hence we identified the platform EKO STUDIO as ideal medium to publish our work that is choice based due to its flexibility and resources to create interactive content.

4.2 Prototype details

The Non-linear narrative was structured and each path chosen was awarded points that in turn reflect on the overall outcome of the story. This structure is encoded with scene points of the storyline that is used as anchors for Pre-Production and Production shots of the plot. Each Scene of the Text RPG consisted of a text that appears on the screen for 15 seconds and a timer and choices that follow this after stay along for an additional 10 seconds. With a total time of 25 seconds per scene. The timer in the Text RPG was set to maintain the timeline of the sequence of events. For the initial plot a total of 18 Paths with 44 scenes are set. A link to the prototype is at appendix A. Note: we were are looking into the details of the interface for its visual appeal. The purpose of this prototype is to help understand the integration of the nonlinear plot and the choice.

4.3 Identifying Viewers as Characters

To get initial feedback of our plot we identified students who would fall in specific categories (conformist, non-conformist and median) by a peer review using google docs. These students were to try our text RPG and obtain feedback regarding the same. This would help us identify problems with callbacks, the plot lines as well as how well we could convey our intentions. The feedback collected is to help us create a more intuitive and seamless plot for our mockumentary, not justify our plot outline.

4.4 Discussion on the Interactive Plot

While it was clear to us that we had to offer choices that were context relevant, we were unsure as to how to go about it. We wanted to question the philosophical standpoint of participants as well as see how the choice they make stand up when put in situations we face in an academic setup. We chose our narratives from real life experiences we have been in or our peers have been a part of. We have setup the structure in such a way that only those who completely give in to their chosen philosophy will have an extreme outcome. For most part our aim has been to nudge the participants into the median line. We conducted pilot test with participants to ensure that no one outcome is achieved more often than the other, with the exception of the median outcome. As a result of this exercise, some choices were worded differently and some completely revamped to achieve the right balance.The Text-RPG tests and observations were to help us better understand the plot, the characters and the audience while working towards our mockumentary through an interactive medium. A link to the plot is at Appendix A

5. Conclusion

5.1 Challenges of Interactive Mockumentary

Charles Forceville (2017) spoke about four problem areas (Length, Interface, navigation and Motivation) that should be looked into while working with the hypertext mode of an interactive documentary. We take a look at our work through some of the areas he pointed out earlier to see how they impact the conversational mode with the participative mode while modeling the plot.

While considering how long an interactive mockumentary should be, there is no ideal time, based of our background research videos that spanned about 5 to 24 minutes it depends on the plot and the filmmakers ability to engage audience, with the choice at hand that is integrated into the scene along to the degree of impact over the storyline. We understand the Higher the perceived impact of the choice on the next scene the level of immersiveness increases. The interface follows later but making the

aspect of choosing more intuitive by added visual elements rather than a button impresses the audience. While Navigating through the emergent narrative plot people choose to explore first few choices then follow the intended path of the filmmaker. So within a mockumentary treatment, adding comedy by introducing the characters and their delusions through an interactive medium adds a layer of personalization the character. While Novelty exists, the audience will be bothered by the number of choices they would have to make and would rather switch to an autoplay mode, as seen with our text-RPG.There is potential of mockumentary within an interactive medium but the choice or the level of interactivity relies on the filmmakers ability to integrate. Filmmakers can choose to cast aside interactive mockumentary for the sheer creative freedom to express a viewpoint through a direct medium.

The approach of research into the area was predominantly more from an inductive reasoning perspective due to the novelty of the task i.e. exploration of emergent narratives in a mockumentary format. The reason for choosing emergent narratives has already been explained as it compliments the ludological structure of design processes, which in turn makes the viewer an active part of the story. The categorization of the types of design perspectives as well as narratives has been done on the basis of the worldviews which commonly exist. The authors have taken the liberty of defining the common (stereotypical) worldviews or ideologies with respect to personal identity viz. Conformist, non-conformist and neutral (median). Once these rules were established, the exercise of the text RPG questionnaire gave the authors further insight into the nuances and layers which a character can imbibe from real life people. A simultaneous task was to create a traditional storyline in an observational documentary style for one of the timelines. The chosen timeline was the neutral (median) one. As humor is the key element, the aim was to make the plot for the median timeline in a manner that it intrinsically is a joke in itself apart from the situational comedy moments which are secondary to the overarching plot. Filmmaking being a collaborative process, limitations exists in terms of time, budget, resources and talents, yet the style of Cinema Verite or Fly on the wall can be accomplished with minimal resources and gadgets. A well written script and narration drives the storyline with directors vision being the most important thing. It has been commonly observed that when the observational style of filmmaking is adopted for the mockumentary genre, the on screen performances are usually partially improvised (off the script) to give a realistic feel.

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List of figures

Appendix A

TextRPG - Link

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Interactive Plot Structure and Planning

https://whimsical.co/Qvr88SjTmRQURrMpgiPxCK

First Draft

https://drive.google.com/open?id=1ZNdWScbszY8W11nTv5nmCG4sVoXOD0QludnIOJcKbVU

Second Draft

https://drive.google.com/open?id=1XKu361ZcGB1SHE7eltRpMdIqnnqphTXZU1F5hIob9aw