

Narrative Dialogues as Social and Psychological Environment Within Interactive Television

Michael K Hulme
Institute for Advanced Study of
Management and Social Sciences
Lancaster University
michael.hulme@csmtc.co.uk

Julie Fordham
Centre for the Study of Media, Technology
and Culture
at Henley Management College
julie.fordham@csmtc.co.uk

Abstract

The authors suggest that iTV formats should be considered as social and psychological environments within a narrative discourse phenomenology. This is discussed in the light of more traditional usability research and in specific relation to the BSkyB and Canal+ Pilotime formats.

Keywords

Interactivity, narrative discourse, addiction.

Research carried out by BSkyB shows increasing levels of interactive engagement. However, the overall numbers disguise the fact that interactions per user per week/month are limited and are of very short duration. The average length of an interactive visit to one site is approximately one minute. It seems reasonable to suggest that were these visits longer in duration they may become more meaningful and in so doing, lead to a rise in the total number of interactions. The central question is therefore, why do interactive functions fail to sustain prolonged interest and lead to a consistent desire to return to the visited area or to explore further areas. Whilst there have been many usability studies and accounts of these studies [Freeman & Lessiter, 2003, Eronen, 2003, French & Springett, 2003] these have tended to concentrate on issues of screen organisation, function and navigation. Whilst these are undoubtedly important (indeed are central to the 'environment') we believe they have been over privileged and that a more fruitful line of thought may be with reference to narrative theory and in particular the narrative discourse of environment and addiction. Our purpose is to establish a line for further empirical

research based on the ontological position that iTV represents a series of meta and sub-divided spaces made meaningful by their narrative structure and nature. Additionally, contained within the notion of meaningfulness, are ideas of 'endurance' that in least in part bear similarities to narratives of addiction. To more firmly locate the work at a more practical level, the paper refers to some recent analysis of the BSkyB iTV platform with particular reference to the EPG and the recently launched Sky+. This in turn is contrasted with Pilotime, recently launched by Canal+ which attempts to integrate PVR functionality and EPG usage into a more coherent environment.

Bettelheim [1975] states that '...our greatest need and most difficult achievement is to find meaning in our lives'. He goes further to argue that, 'For a story truly to hold a child's attention ... it must at one and the same time relate to all aspects of his personality'. In other words narrative is more than simply meaning-making, it is discursive, active and contains the past, present and to some extent, future aspirations within its discourse. Recently narratologists have sought to emphasise the actual

activity, or process of narration (or indeed the presentation of the story), as a central component of the story's meaning [Culler, 1983]. Hayden White [1987] described narrative as a 'metacode' by which 'trans-cultural messages about the nature of a shared reality can be transmitted'. Thus the form or act of telling the story becomes in itself 'a primary object of interpretation' [McDonald, 1994] or as Henry James [1984] 'the story of the story'. In itself, this being one of 'three basic parts of meaning and narrative, the story itself, the telling of the story and the cognition of the story' [Kelly, 1998]. The lines emphasising the telling of the story and the cognition of the story appear to be most fruitful when considering the role played by the iTV medium in the telling of the story. One could for instance ask, what are the central features of successful story narration for clearly 'failing to tell a story in the sense of making it radically ambiguous in meaning and content is quite as much a narrative act as succeeding in doing so' [MacDonald] in relation to iTV? This is to directly question the emphasis placed on content or programmatic form, the search for the 'killer application' that appears to lie behind many usability studies of iTV. Rather we should question whether the iTV form contains within it the notion of the act of narration being an active participation between the content, form or story telling and the agent or individual structuring and restructuring new narrative discourses. If indeed this is the case, then the successful narration will require the seamless integration of the key agents, following Turkle's [1997] line, 'As players participate, they become authors not only of text but of themselves, constructing new selves through social interaction'. In other words, meaning is constructed by direct interaction, or narrative discourse arising from the extended environment.

Narrative is sense-making because it provides continuity, it is linear, structured, ordered in space

and time. We understand where we are through the milestones provided by the discourse. Narrative doesn't simply exist in, but can be said to actively create an environment. Environments need to have narrative characteristics for us to find meaning in them, or else we struggle to understand them. A useful source of literature against which to consider this emergent interactive screen environment is that of store environments and consumer or shopping behaviour. This literature readily acknowledges the relationship between the complexities of physical (or indeed virtual) store and behaviours of consumers. Of importance in considering iTV are notions, drawn from this source, of imagery, in which imagery is seen as 'a mental event involving visualisation of a concept or a relationship [Lutz & Lutz, 1978], and has also been defined as 'a process ... by which ... sensory information is represented in working memory' [MacInnis & Price, 1987]. In this manner consumers' moods have been found to influence how they perceive a given environment [Gardner, 1985]. However, this is a bi-directional relationship with the environment actively influencing mood and in turn facilitating learning, integration and acquisition of new incoming information [Isen, 1984]. Such positive effects (moods) result in new organisation of cognitive materials [Isen, 1987] to create stronger and more compelling narrative discourses. This line is taken further when considering wider notions of environment or space such that space can be said to be 'existential; we might just as well have said that existence is spatial' [Merleau-Ponty, 1962] and further by David Canter [1977] when he suggests that 'an individual's perception of place has three constituents, physical components, the activities that occur there and the individual's thoughts, meanings and understandings' so returning us to our central argument around the creation of interactive discourse. This discourse is directly affected by the environment which provides cues about the expected level of service and crucially,

the actual delivery of the service [Rust, Zahorik & Keiningham, 1995]. For example, 'process technology and layout may decrease customer search time, improve processing efficiency, increase service consistency and reliability and facilitate customer orientation within the service delivery system' [Bitner, 1992; Chase & Hayes, 1991; Chase & Bowen, 1991].

Reidenbach and Sandifer-Smallwood [1990] have identified a strong correlation between 'components of facility (physical appearance and functions) and customer satisfaction. In the case of iTV the components of facility can be understood as not only the physical appearance of the environment, but also the means by which interaction is facilitated. If any element of this environment is not present a satisfactory discursive narrative becomes problematic. To take three examples, firstly, if the agent or user is unfamiliar with the 'conventions' prevailing within the environment discourse will break down, this can be readily observed in new, unfamiliar users. Secondly, if the content is not compatible with the environmental framework, again discourse will prove difficult and require too great an effort on behalf of the agent or user. Thirdly, if the means by which the narrative is developed, (the story is told or in the case of iTV the interactive functions) is itself difficult to use or conspicuous the act of telling the story will gain prominence over the narrative and again the opportunity for discourse will be lost. The foregoing represent the basic requirements to facilitate a strong narrative or discursive environment, however these in themselves whilst facilitating may not be compelling or addictive.

It should be understood here that by briefly examining narratives of addictive behaviour we are taking an extreme position to emphasise the requirements for a high level of consistent involvement. Firstly, addictive behaviour is not

usually instantaneously acquired. It is 'the result of a long stream of choices', [Herrnstein & Prelec, 1992] but once acquired is difficult to break. Secondly, it is normally regarded in one form or another as harmful or a bad habit. Thirdly, the user becomes to an extensive degree dependent, such that it controls the centre of their existence [Peele, 1985]. Fourthly, addiction involves some notion of craving or obsessive desire and finally, deprivation of the commodity results in some symptoms of withdrawal. To incite someone to become an addict will generally be regarded as morally reprehensible, yet to a lower level retail stores, gaming houses and casinos all develop propositions designed to develop some form of dependence or at the very least, highly positive emotional reaction to the environment. In some instances, addiction is seen as some form of imbalance in the ability to create meaning. Schwartz, [1995] sees this as a 'spiritual illness that emerges when people's inborn need to find meaning in their lives is thwarted'. Perhaps it is here that the line is drawn between helping to create and sustain environments in which the user returns precisely because they provide compelling meaning and environments of addiction where the 'act' becomes everything and the user or agent's life becomes meaningless.

In this manner addicts who can be said to be 'lacking a stable, authentic self-identity use addictive commodities to escape themselves, their minds and their thoughts', [Hirschman, 1992]. Interestingly, the academic literature relating to television is full of references of subjects stating they watch television as a means of escape [Bryant & Zillmann, 1984; Rubin, 1985; Frisby, 2002]. The issue is one of degree. ITV appears to provide the opportunity for the agent or user to directly participate in meaning-making through the creation of discursive narrative. This would imply that intense experiences may be available without the harmful connotations of extreme addiction.

BSkyB/Pilotime Analysis

The authors were asked to undertake a critical examination of the BSkyB EPG and Sky+ system, particularly in relation to the newly launched Pilotime PVR system from Canal+. The following represents a brief account of this examination, based on an interpretation of the sites derived from

notions of discursive narrative and environment. This particular piece is highly subjective and points to further research.

BSkyB is primarily a text based system. Since its initial launch it has been augmented on several occasions (with Sky+ the Sky PVR system being the most recent). Figure 1. represents the main master menu with Figure 2. being the standard programme selection menu from the EPG.



Figure 1.



Figure 2.

Practically, the system is easy to use, moving through a series of tiered menus. The overtly interactive elements of the system can be accessed either through the menu, the red button appearing on the screen and through the interactive option on the remote control. In addition to interactivity beneath programmes, there is a 'bounded' interactive area entitled 'Sky Active'. In general, the system consists of a series of modular menus, these facilitate relative ease of use, however they create a fragmented environment within which it is difficult to sustain an active, meaningful discourse. Whilst it is obvious that considerable usability research (the authors have been directly involved in this) has taken place at both individual screen level and within modules, despite relative ease of navigation the system fails at the level of EPG to

create an environment, rather it appears to offer a series of channel lists with relatively simple search facilities. This over-arching structure leads to difficulties at a lower level with the user or agent creating any 'relationship' beyond the functional. There is very little narrative form with relatively little opportunity to create a discursive meaning-making narrative.

By contrast, Pilotime has a more interlinked concept and begins a dialogue with the user based on programme or subject rather than channel, thus immediately drawing the agent or user into a deeper narrative. Fig. 3 illustrates the main Pilotime menu. Fig. 4 demonstrates the Pilotime Guide, in effect the main EPG.



Figure 3.

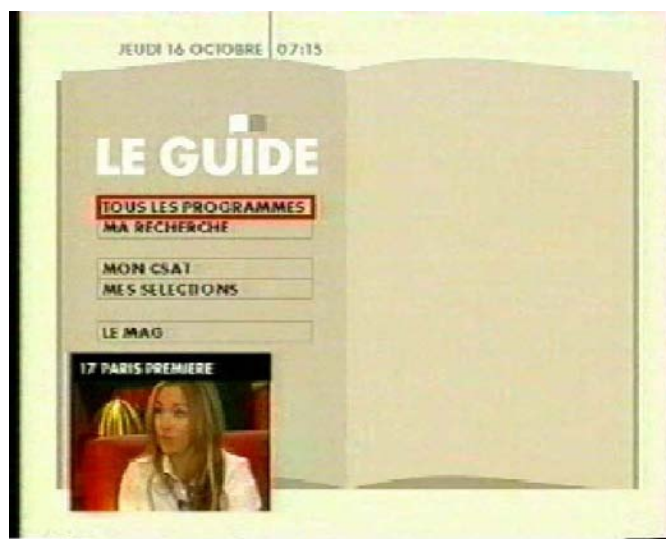


Figure 4.

The most obvious and immediately noticeable characteristic is firstly, 'The Guide' takes the form of a book, therefore seeking to engage the user or agent in a more imaginative manner. We have already drawn attention to the importance of imagery to the creation of compelling retail environments. This is taken further with Pilotime

which makes very heavy use of visual cues in addition to text-based formats. Additionally, the language, such as 'The Guide' and 'The Magazine' (see Fig. 5) has the effect of linking this virtual world to the physical world which, of course, will be represented and interpreted on screen.



Figure 5.

'The Magazine' is particularly interesting as it draws together various programmatic elements of the site around the story of a space (the Magazine

space) which is interesting, compelling and in which things are subject to change and therefore

demands the presence of the user or agent. In other words, a content and time-based narrative.

Essentially these two systems have at their core two differing central narratives. BSkyB is the narrative of the channel provider in which prominence is given to the ease of channel display, channel search and selection. Pilotime has a central narrative

based around a dialogue with the agent or user in which users interact with programmes (not channels) and these programmes are interlinked with PVR options and interactive depth. Based on the analysis in this paper, Pilotime represents an early attempt to build a compelling, discursive environment, whereas BSkyB represents mechanistic efficiency.

Conclusion

We believe there is a compelling explanatory case for pursuing the methodological tool of narrative discourses both in general terms and in specific application to social and psychological environmental models as a means by which the processes and content of iTV can be understood. Failure to consider interaction with users in this way does, we believe, lie behind an inability to build compelling interactive environments and experiences. Our limited examination of the

BSkyB and Pilotime formats has, we believe, identified areas for further research. There is a need for a larger qualitative research programme to examine comparative interactive formats using theories drawn from narrative discourse, social and psychological environmentalism. We believe this work has considerable value and merit alongside more traditional psychological and psychometric research into user behaviour and usability.

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