

“To the Spice Islands”: Interactive Process Drama

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ABSTRACT: This paper describes the strategies employed to produce a learning experience combining role-based improvisational drama and digital interactivity. The “To the Spice Islands” project draws on the distinct yet parallel traditions of Interactive Drama and Process Drama, attempting to match levels of dramatic engagement with levels of digital interactivity. This hybrid approach allows action and narrative to develop simultaneously.

KEYWORDS: interactive drama, process drama, interactivity, improvisation, narrative, performance

INTRODUCTION

‘Excuse me. Do you know where there are any personages of historical significance around here?’ [7]

In the film *Bill & Ted’s Excellent Adventure*, two teenagers travel through time to collect historical figures for a class presentation to prevent them failing their history assignment ‘most heinously.’ Bill & Ted’s comic interaction with various characters during their ‘excellent adventure’ builds new contemporary narratives around historical figures such as Abraham Lincoln, Joan of Arc and Socrates.

This paper describes a school-based project that allows interaction with people and events from a time long since past. “To the Spice Islands” is a computer-mediated learning experience that brings together Dutch tertiary drama students and primary school children to generate a collective dramatic narrative about early European explorations of Australia’s coastline. While Bill & Ted had access to a time-traveling telephone booth, this project combines role-based drama and online historical research to develop two intertwining dramatic narrative streams – one set in the present of the fictitious Australian Netherlands Marine Research Centre (ANMRC), and one in the past of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) of the 17th century.

The aim of the research project is to explore the connectivity, interactivity and dramatic forms available within a digital framework. These digital forms are designed to actively engage the participants in contextual learning of curriculum content about the shipwreck of the VOC ship *Batavia* off the Western Australian coast in

1629. The research also attempted to progressively match levels of dramatic engagement with levels of digital interactivity.

The project uses a Website, e-mail, hypertext, Weblogs, QuickTime video clips, edited digital video and live performance to develop a consensual virtual world that allows the interactors to occupy two frames of reference at the same time. The use of Web-based communication deliberately blurs traditional boundaries between participant and spectator, actor and character, interactor and viewer – thus establishing a setting for Interactive Process Drama to occur.

INTERACTIVE PROCESS DRAMA

The term “Interactive Process Drama” draws on two separate but in many ways parallel traditions. The term “Interactive Drama” introduced by Joseph Bates to describe the Oz Project at Carnegie Mellon University and picked up by Marie-Laure Ryan [11], Brenda Laurel [9], Margaret Kelso [8] and others is well known in the field of the digital arts. “Process Drama” draws on the drama work of Dorothy Heathcote [6], Gavin Bolton [2], Cecily O’Neill [10] and Augusto Boal [1], and with its role based improvisational performance conventions is perhaps less well known within the digital performance area.

It is ironic that the city of Bergen provided the venue for both the 2000 DAC and the 2001 International Drama/Theatre and Education Association (IDEA) conference, occurring within some months of each other. If there had been some overlap between the conferences it may have produced new forms of creative hybridism for both fields.

Both Interactive Drama and Process Drama:

- abolish the difference between author, spectator, actor and character [11];
- allow both the participant and spectator to be present at the same time [4]; and
- permit the holding of two worlds in mind at the same time [1].

The dramatically framed context using Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief” that both dramatic forms use has been interpreted by many observers from both fields of study. Probably the best definition available is that of Augusto Boal [1] where he calls it “Metaxis” – the

state of belonging completely and simultaneously to two different autonomous worlds: the image of reality and the reality of the image (43).

In this sense both Interactive Drama and Process Drama can be seen as a framed activity where role taking allows the participants to behave “as if” they are in a different context and to respond “as if” they are involved in a different set of interpersonal relationships. So for both fields role performance is seen as a mental attitude, a way of holding two worlds in mind, the world of real life (RL) and the world of the dramatic fiction simultaneously. The meaning and value of the drama lies in the interplay between these two worlds: the real and the enacted; the spectator and the participant; the actor and the audience. The meaning is held in the tension of being both in the event and distanced from it. Performance is not seen as simply showing but showing to oneself as a viewer.

THE “SPICE ISLANDS” PROJECT

The project was specifically designed as an experiment in digital multi-platform dramatic learning. It used the power of small-scale social connectivity and the narrative interactivity inherent in the Process Drama form to play to the strengths of the digital interface with young people. The methodology was designed to increase the levels of interactivity as levels of dramatic involvement in the project increased. Thus the project developed from a simple text-heavy Website to include e-mail, Weblog entries, video clips and ultimately live performance.

The participants were two classes of Dutch upper primary pupils (10-12 years) and a group of Dutch tertiary drama students. The project coordinators were two Australian teachers with backgrounds in drama and Web based design.

The online element of the project was built around a Website for a fictional organisation, the Australian/Netherlands Maritime Research Centre (ANMRC). Construction started with a simple page template incorporating a mock logo and internal navigation links. The site is hosted on Charles Sturt University's public Web server and can be accessed at www.csu.edu.au/newmedia/batavia.

The dramatic frame was established for the school pupils by a short visit by two tertiary drama students to the school in dramatic role as ANMRC representatives. These characters introduced the tension necessary for dramatic engagement in the project, in this case a request for help to solve the mystery behind a recently discovered letter. It was made clear to the pupils that this was a drama project and the letter was a dramatic construct, but that it was based on similar historically accurate documents.

The letter concerned the fate of a child on board a Dutch

East India ship. This historical document had been found in an archive in Australia. The Drama students in role as marine archaeologists enlisted the aid of the pupils as researchers on the Website in their quest to uncover the mystery surrounding the letter. This engaged the pupils with the basic “script” behind the project and co-opted their assistance to develop the narrative, which Ryan [1] notes is important to the success of an interactively generated dramatic work (679).

The Website originally consisted of a template of sub-sections based on topics or research areas related to the project, such as marine archaeology, the Dutch spice trade, and Dutch shipwrecks on the Australian coast. A basic Webpage was created for each of these topics, and some links to existing related online resources were added to provide initial content. An e-mail account was opened at the free Web-based service Hotmail to provide an initial point of contact between the drama students in role as ANMRC archaeologists, and the school students in their new role as assistants. The e-mail also added to the functionality of the fictional site, increasing its credibility as a prop in the developing dramatic narrative.

The aim of the Website was to create a context and an environment for the drama to operate within. This was designed for the participants and not for an external audience. As Kelso [8] points out, the performance of the users within the fictional world being created is not directed towards an audience in the real world but towards the users themselves: Interactive Drama is staged “solely for the benefit of the interactor[s]” (9). This merging of dramatic functions has been claimed as an accomplishment of Interactive Drama by Ryan and others, yet the strategies already developed by Cecily O’Neill within Process Drama have not been recognised in the literature surrounding Interactive Drama.

For example in *Drama worlds: a framework for Process Drama* [10] O’Neill defines the notion of “pre-text” which she classifies as the occasion which initiates dramatic action, in this case the ANMRC Website, as providing a firm base for the dramatic encounter. She writes:

“the function of the pre-text is to activate the weaving of the text of the Process Drama. As well as indicating that it not only exists prior to the text but also relates to it, the term is valuable because it carries the further meaning of an excuse, a reason” (20).

The concept of pre-text was applied as a guiding principle to the ANMRC project, which as well as setting up the Website adopted the following Process Drama features outlined by Taylor [12] as part of the overall design:

- separate scenic units linked in an organic manner;
- thematic exploration;

- an experience that does not depend upon a written script;
- a concern with participants change in outlook;
- improvisational activity;
- outcomes not predetermined but discovered in process;
- a script generated through action; and
- the project leader actively working within and outside the drama.

MATCHING LEVELS OF DRAMATIC ENGAGEMENT AND DIGITAL INTERACTIVITY

To establish the pre-text the students were introduced to the Website and provided with email access as well as encouraged to post their thoughts and research on the possible background and meaning of the letter. Their digital photographs were added to the Website as were their initial contributions as trainee researchers. As dramatic engagement and commitment built up QuickTime videos of the drama students explaining their specialisations in marine archaeology were added and the children were encouraged to contact them.

While the Website was taking shape, a Weblog, was created using the service provided by Blogger (www.blogger.com) to enable this dialogue to happen. This interactivity was used by the Dutch drama students to personally communicate in role as marine archaeologists with the pupils. The Weblog was framed in the present as a diary created by the trainee archaeologists that built up a lively record of speculation and research ideas between the pupil "trainees" and the drama student "experts".

When the dramatic conventions and techniques of using the Weblog between the ANMRC and the trainee marine archaeologists had been firmly established a further dramatic convention of the "Timescope" was introduced. This dramatic device, instantly understood and appropriated by the children as a way to see into the past, through a "time telescope", started to produce historical moments in QuickTime format. The pupils had established by research that the ship was the *Batavia* and were deeply involved in the historical research of the pre-text and emotionally involved in the dangerous plight of a child onboard the ship

A second Weblog allowed passengers and crew on board the *Batavia* to communicate with the school pupils via the conventions of the fictional "Timescope" technology. The tertiary drama students were provided with the passwords and access privileges that would allow them to create and edit the Weblogs themselves, using the Web-based interface provided by Blogger. To preserve the element of realism, and because of the educational nature of the project, it was decided to pay a small fee to remove advertising from the two Weblogs that would otherwise have been included as part of the "free" service. Links to

the Weblogs were added to the main site as appropriate during the course of the project/performance.

Further original project content was added to Website topic pages as the Dutch drama students and the school pupils began to provide their own research material. Text and images were emailed to the Web designer as Microsoft Word documents, and these were converted to HTML and incorporated into the basic site template pages. This ensured consistent design and navigational links throughout the site. Some of the material sent by the students came in both Dutch and English language versions, some in Dutch only. The Web designer relied on the students and Dutch teaching staff to check the non-English content, and some spelling and grammatical corrections were later forwarded via email.

The first visual contribution to the site by the school children was in the form of a digital photo gallery. Portrait shots of each student were emailed to the Web designer, who used Adobe PhotoShop's automatic image gallery tool to create a simple online gallery. The content was added to the project site with a link to "meet our latest assistants", and the pupils were labeled "ANMRC trainees", thus helping to further establish their role in the project/performance.



Figure 1: Drama students visited a replica *Batavia* to shoot digital video footage

At the same time, short digital movies were being shot in the Netherlands and transferred electronically to the Web designer as Apple QuickTime files. The first batch featured the drama students introducing themselves in role as ANMRC trainee marine archaeologists and highlighting their specialisations. These were added to the site in both QuickTime and Windows Media format using Media Cleaner Pro software.

A link to the Timescope Weblog was added to the homepage. The Dutch drama students provided the

MelbourneDAC 2003

content, based on their role performances in response to questions and warnings from the school students. Garbled and fragmented text entries added to the illusion that the material was being drawn from the past via experimental technology.

As the Timescope element was progressively built into the project, further video footage was added to the site showing the drama students performing in character as the passengers and crew of the doomed *Batavia* expedition. This edited digital video was shot naturalistically on a full scale replica of the "*Batavia*" in period costume. The resulting online video was dramatically framed as a top secret experimental technology, the results of which were being made available to the trainee archaeologists via the Website and the Timescope. The children were then able to participate in an unfolding narrative partly based on their own research and interests.

The final element and culmination to the project added to the Website was a longer video segment edited from footage of the live performance at the school. This was framed as surveillance footage from the timescope experiments, showing the *Batavia* passengers and crew (drama students) interacting with the trainee archaeologists (school pupils) in real-time. This in role dialogic structure between the ANMRC "trainees" and the crew and passengers of the *Batavia* brought the drama to a climax in a devised live performance of the events leading to the shipwreck. The pupils and trainee researchers were able to "logon" individual historical characters and question their motives and behaviour.

The barrier between the past and present became permeable until they merged in a final dramatic moment. The pupils who had truly become trainee marine archaeologists through their online research were able to question, from within the protection of the drama, the historical characters, brought to life by the drama students. Ultimately the fate of the young passenger along with many of those on board the *Batavia* was revealed in the improvised dramatic reproduction of the shipwreck and its aftermath.

Thus the narrative development of the drama fuelled by the Website research was paralleled by an increasing complexity in the interactivity and connectivity of the interface.

CONCLUSION

The process of using various forms of digital connectivity as well as live performance echoes the Process Drama structures outlined by Taylor [12] and O'Neill [10] used to establish a pretext and conduct a successful drama. The pre-text and drama in this case included:

- Website
- an in-role presentation;

- email;
- digital still images;
- Weblogs;
- QuickTime video;
- edited digital video; and
- dialectic role-based RL performance.

The project chose to use both interactivity and narrativity, and deliberately attempted to use hybrid performance forms to provide freedom for action as well as provide a narrative through pretext and digital improvisation. The structure of the project attempted to deal with one of the central paradoxes of interactive art: that action is usually prospective but story narrative largely retrospective. RL is never a story except in retrospect when we re-edit our experience to construct a coherent narrative for our actions. By changing the digital form used to suit the levels of commitment generated within the drama the narrative structure was built within the dramatic frame so that action and narrative were developed simultaneously.

The essential element is that all participants were allocated an "attitudinal" [3] role in the fictional world of the ANMRC Website by symbolic, linguistic and drama references. The interactors were projected into the experience by the interface and their role designations as trainees or historical characters. This dramatic protection then gave them the power to engage with the Web content and create the narrative from within the dramatic frame. The historical improvisational work of the drama students was shaped by their research and reaction to the dialogue between their ANMRC role personas as marine archaeologists, and their engagement with the pupil trainees.

Both groups of interactors were engaged with the Website of the fictional world of the ANMRC which contained historically accurate information. Their analysis and input from these sources then drove the developing narrative of the dramatic reproduction of the world of the *Batavia*.

This process occurred over a period of four weeks and produced the episodic structure that is typical of the form. Within the episodic structure there was in-role negotiation and drama and out of role research and discussion. These role switches are part of the ludic [5] ability expressed in all drama and provide no barrier to online dramatic engagement.

As the drama is concerned with the participant's involvement, learning and change of outlook, to the outside spectator the outcome may appear undramatic. However as demonstrated in the project the internal experience of the drama can be profound for the participants.

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