

Interactive Documentary: The Hybridisation of Genre and the Epistemological Indexicality Conflict.

The documentary can be simply defined as an objective conveyance of facts, void of emotional interference, and inclusion of the fictional or editorialised. This essay aims to untangle the stigmas associated with documentary; the rules associated with the documentation of truth and present an argument for the adoption of documentary into the interactive digital medium. Within documentaries I shall explore the recent surge in the hybridisation of medium, the epistemological complications that arise and the social stigmas that surround the associations between digital surrogation, entertainment and conveyance of truth.

In order to successfully investigate the documentary as a cross-medium blanket-genre it is first perspicacious to begin with the popularised and most widely touted medium of film. John Grierson was the first theorist to apply the term 'documentary' to a specific form of filmmaking, which he popularly described as 'the creative treatment of actuality' (John Grierson, 1946). The concept of a *creative actuality* is somewhat oxymoronic, in that creativity is the 'ability to invent and develop original ideas' (Collins English Dictionary, 2003) and actuality is the 'the state of really existing rather than being' (Collins English Dictionary, 2003). This statement in itself may appear to be contradictory, though what bears the heaviest relevance is that it's described as the 'creative *treatment*' [my italicisation]. This is theorised further and more comprehensively by Jaques Derrida in *Le Facteur de la Verite*:

"Once one has distinguished, as does the entire philosophical tradition, between truth and reality, it immediately follows that the truth 'declares itself in a structure of fiction'."(Derrida, 1980)

However, whilst this explanation coherently and conveniently accommodates the filmic documentary, through the utilisation of fiction or construct to convey a truth, it is still argued that the medium and genre are in direct conflict. In contrast to Renov, Bruzzi argues that:

Documentary is predicated upon a dialectical relationship between aspiration and potential, that the text itself reveals the tensions between the documentary pursuit of the most authentic mode of factual representation and the impossibility of this aim. (Bruzzi, 2000, p.4)

These two conflicting statements seem to omit the definition of the documentary in a broader sense accommodating the filmic medium they are discussing. Focusing much more on the epistemological and indexical content of the medium, taking little consideration of its wider goals that lie outside of documentation, they fail to address the effect the medium has on the genre. Michael Renov in *Theorizing Documentary* proposes four key codes which are much more successful at embracing the medium as a whole. He calls these "rhetorical/aesthetic functions attributable to documentary practice" and they are: 1) to record, reveal or preserve;

2) to persuade or promote; 3) to analyze or interrogate; and 4) to express (Renov, 1993, 21-25). These codes are objective and can be constructively applied to different mediums so that we can start to analyse what constitutes documentary and what doesn't.

Four key contemporary mediums are considered as containing documentaries or works of truth: documentary film, radio, photography and stage (Renov, 1990, p1-5). Renov's key conventions of the documentary can neatly be applied across these mediums, and can therefore presumably be applied to post-photographic examples like computer games and animation.

If we were to apply Renov's rules to the contemporary self-labelled animated documentary *Waltz With Bashir* (Folman, 2008), we would indeed establish that it constitutes as a documentary, despite the lack of photographic documentation. There is a clear audio recording of actuality, there is the revealing of personal accounts, a clear anti-conflict agenda that's intended to persuade and a comprehensive analysis and interrogation into the motivations and meanings behind the characters aggressors. This lack of photographic evidence doesn't stop at animation however; it's clearly present across radio and stage as well, with radio being entirely audio and stage primarily live action.

Stage is particularly interesting in this instance because often there is little actual evidence presented to the audience: no documented footage, photography or audio. Through this complete re-enactment of truth is still considered to be a legitimate medium through which to express actuality. Stage still abides by the rules that Renov laid out and this either highlights the abstractedness of Renov's statements, or that the documentary genre is accessible to any audio/visual medium.

Another popular documentary theorist that supports this claim is Bill Nichols whom identified four key modes which appropriately categorise the documentary film:

"In documentary film, four modes of representation stand out as the dominant organizational patterns around which most texts are structured: expository, observational, interactive and reflexive." (Nichols, 1998, p.32)

The expository mode is the assemblance of fragments of evidence from the real world into something more rhetorical. The expository mode suggests that the imagery that accompanies the documentary is subservient to the voice-over narrative. The observational documentary is that which is the attempt to record and convey actuality as it happens. The interactive mode is supposed to engage the viewer more through a direct relationship with interviewees, the avoidance of re-enactments and the anchoring of interviews with archival footage. Finally, the reflexive mode centres the focus of the documentary on the viewer, in the bid to challenge preconceptions and readjust assumptions. (Nichols, 1998, p.22-28)

These different modes tie in with Renov's rules which we previously discussed, allowing a greater scope for which the term documentary applies. This in turn lays

the foundation on which we can begin to discuss the possibilities of documentaries breaching the passive relationship that viewers have with the medium and the idea of interaction being introduced as an element that enhances rather than detracts.

There are numerous examples of games that lay claim to being of the documentary genre or at least in part being documentary. There are also multimedia examples of interactive documentaries that lack the game element in the traditional sense and are utilised as a more engaging way to present information. For the purposes of this essay I am going to focus on the game instances of interactive documentary, though, as has been argued before but exceeds the breadth of this essay, the concept of interactivity can indeed constitute as game.

A controversial title, JFK Reloaded, is a game in which the player is invited to accurately recreate the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the late American president, through the eyes of his killer Lee Harvey Oswald. It contains audio from the actual event and is a realistic recreation of the scenario, including accurate depictions of the event, people and environment. The only thing that lacks actuality is the event itself, as this is left to the player's discretion and is core to the gameplay. This problematises the documentary claim implicit to JFK: Reloaded when Renov states that:

"[...]the documentary sign may be considered as a piece of the world plucked from its everyday context rather than fabricated for the screen." (Renov, 1993, p.7)

It's clear that the truth claim within JFK: Reloaded is somewhat compromised by the player choices that arise through interactivity. However, the core mechanic of the gameplay is to recreate the event as accurately as possible, so the goal of the game is to actually create a documentation of actuality through a creative outlet. This in turn fulfils the theory previously discussed in which 'truth declares itself in a structure of fiction' by Renov. Additionally it fits into Nichols' 'reflexive' category, in that it is acknowledging the viewer (more so than that of any film counterpart) and deals directly with the idea of representation (in this sense, digital recreation).

Another dilemma that the JFK: Reloaded game brings to the table, is the social stigma attached to games in regards to their immersion of the player and how this is in some way distasteful when applied to real events. It appears through the media controversy that followed the release of JFK: Reloaded is more concerned with the medium of game used in conjunction with serious topics of social relevance, than it is with the topics raised. The idea of games being somehow irresponsible irrespective of their handling of the subject matter is a very real obstacle that designers of interactive documentaries will have to navigate in order to win public approval.

Another documentary game that has yet to be released is called 'The Cat and the Coup'. Michael Cieply from the New York Times describes the game as follows:

“The game follows Mohammad Mosaddegh, the prime minister of Iran who was overthrown in the early 1950s. The player, in a metaphor for an outsider observer of a distant political process, can affect the play only indirectly — by controlling the former prime minister’s house cat.” (Cieply, 2010)

This, in contrast to that of JFK: Reloaded, is attempting to place the player in a situation where ultimately they cannot affect the outcome of the story. Instead they act as a bystander, an observer of a narrative that cannot be ultimately manipulated, but instead small segments that don’t construct the overarching message are free to be interacted with. This is an interesting compromise as it seems to introduce a direct conflict between interactivity and objectivity. It’s clear that the developers have struggled with reaching a balance that is mutually complimentary, choosing to sacrifice interactivity over representation of actuality. However, without being overtly pessimistic, I have reached this assumption on the basis of academic discussion and the reality, when it’s released, may indeed be different.

In conclusion it becomes apparent that there is a direct conflict between the interactivity present within games and the truth claim implicit to the documentary. However, we have deduced through the popular theories of Renov, Nichols and others that this truth claim can exist coherently when presented through a medium of fiction. This medium, of digital interactivity, or in the case of this essay, the digital game, has been utilised by games on the fringe of popular culture and mostly explored by the ludologist intelligentsia. It is clear from my research that the defining categories laid out by Nichols: expository, observational, interactive and reflexive; can just as easily categorise these games and that the growing trend of narrative driven, immersive game environments lends itself to the linearity and plot-driven structure of documentaries. Whilst the interactivity versus actuality complex initially appears to limit the medium of the documentary game, in reality it’s the same as balancing narrative and interactivity, or open-endedness and interactivity. It’s another core element that needs to be balanced effectively with the other elements in order to maintain a level of playability as well as the level of actuality required.

The paradigm shift in the definition of documentary through the evolution of film and its permeation into different mediums has lead many to question the status of documentary:

Traditionally, the word documentary has suggested fullness and completion, knowledge and fact, explanations of the social world and its motivating mechanisms. More recently, though, documentary has come to suggest incompleteness and uncertainty, recollection and impression, images of personal worlds and their subjective construction. A shift of epistemological proportions has occurred. (Nichols, 1994, p.1)

Overall it appears the epistemological indexicality conflict, is no longer an issue with the surge of sensationalist documentary film and that the construction present within games can actually, in some cases, be more objective. In fact, whilst it has been argued that documentary in its true sense is dead; it has in fact just evolved to

accommodate new modes of communication. The interactive digital documentary is a breaking and relatively unexplored phenomenon that looks to be fulfilled throughout the evolution of the interactive digital medium.

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