Nora Barry

Digital Shanachies

In a beautiful essay about storytelling, the writer A.S. Byatt talks about the story, "A Thousand and One Nights". And she points out that the underlying thesis of The Arabian Nights is that Shahrazad, the narrator of the tales, begins her first story the night before she is to be put to death. Her story is so enchanting that the Sultan keeps her alive until the next night so he can hear more of the story. The next night Shahrazad spins another engaging tale and her life, once again, is spared. She continues for 3 years—literally telling stories to keep herself alive. I love that essay because to me it underscores the inner drive that compels all of us to tell stories.

What's fascinating about storytelling is that the story changes, depending on how it's told. A bedtime story told by a parent to a child is different than the book a child may read on his own, and is different again from the film version of that same story. In many ways, then, the story is in the telling. The American writer/director John Sayles wrote that for him, stories arrive in a pre-destined form, in the form best suited to their telling. So ideas arrive as screenplays, or sitcoms, or theatrical plays. Each is a completely distinct form, shaped by the medium in which it is presented, and the technology of that medium.

This has been especially true in the cinema—technology has always shaped cinematic form, from the earliest days of silent films, through to the introduction of color, and continuing today with the emergence of digital filmmaking. At each step, the technology has helped to shape the story. It is equally true for Internet films. Their form is shaped by the fact that the Internet is a digital, interactive, upstream/downstream medium. And that makes Internet films completely different from cinematic films.

Fundamental Differences Between Web Cinema and Theatrical Cinema

Their are four fundamental ways in which the Internet interacts with storytelling to produce a new kind of cinema: 1. The Viewing Environment ⁄ 2. Aesthetics ⁄ 3. The Relationship of Storyteller to his/her story / 4. Narrative.

1. Viewing Environment

Internet films are viewed in a completely different environment than theatrical cinema and television. Instead of sitting in a large, darkened movie theater with 100 other people, or in an easy chair with a remote control, the viewer is seated at a desk, leaning forward, with his or her nose pressed to the screen. In that position, it's hard to remain engaged for 60 to 90 minutes, so Internet films are necessarily much shorter than even theatrical shorts. The visual proximity also results in a smaller, frequently more intimate story, creating new kinds of storylines.

2. Aesthetics

The subject of aesthetics bounces back to the issue of the size of the screen and the technology of the network, and is probably one of the reasons why Flash is such a popular format on the web. But for those who are working in DV or film, they need to compose the frames differently, and slow the physical action down somewhat. Epics such as

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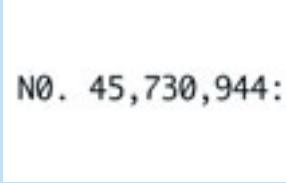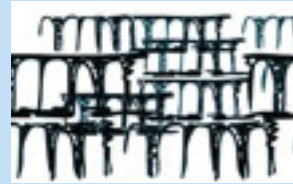
Young-Hae Chang: Heavy Industries

"Lawrence of Arabia" don't work—the screen drops out a lot of the information. Action-adventures don't work well, either, as the network can slow the action down to a painful crawl. Some of the most successful Internet films literally lock the camera into place and have the actors move within the frame.

3. Relationship of the teller to his story

What's most fascinating to me about storytelling on the web is that in many ways it resembles the ancient art of oral storytelling. Oral storytelling was a very fluid and interactive medium, offering the teller the ability to change both the shape and direction of the story, often in real time. Oral storytellers also had complete control over the outcome of their story—there were no layers—no editors, cameramen, publicists in between them and their audience. The same is true in many ways of web cinema makers. Digital Video and desktop editing enable web filmmakers to do it all on their own, without large crews, so there is a single voice in their work. Through the interactivity of the web, they can receive direct feedback from the audience, and can change the shape of the story based on audience reaction.

4. Narrative

Unlike traditional media, the Internet does not confine or limit storytellers to a single narrative structure. The technology allows for a number of narrative possibilities, including interactive, non-linear as well as the traditional classical narrative. Some say that the communication on the Internet itself is the narrative—that out of the interaction a new style of narrative is created, and that may well be.

New Forms of Narrative on the Web.

In the 3 years I've been working with web cinema, I've seen four predominant kinds of narrative emerge: a) Interactive / b) Database Narrative / c) Pass Along / d) Linear Shorts

a) Interactive

There are essentially two kinds of Interactive films: the first is where the story is presented in essentially a linear fashion—things either need to be accomplished before moving on to the next point, or the interactivity falls at the end of the equivalent of a chapter, and the viewer gets to decide whether the action proceeds along line A or line B. In either situation, the storyteller is giving the viewer a controlled number of choices to make, but

in essence all choices follow the story arc.

The other Interactive film is more like a framing story, where the viewer has total freedom about where to begin and end the story. Framing stories were often employed to group a number of sometimes disparate stories together. Boccaccio's "Decameron" is one example, and "1,001 Nights" is another. The frame story sets up the background or the context for the stories that are to follow. Then the stories that follow can be read in any order. What matters is that they are all connected by the frame. The Internet lends itself beautifully to this kind of frame storytelling. The filmmaker provides an "About The Film" section on the home page that sets up the context, and then provides a menu of short videos. The viewer can choose what he wants to see, and when—so the viewer has total freedom as to where and how to construct the beginning, middle, and end. In addition to giving greater freedom to the viewer, the frame story also offers greater freedom to the filmmaker because he or she can continue to add on to the film over an extended period of time, without having to go back in and re-cut the whole film each time.

b) Database Narrative

There is a popular literary theory that says there are only so many different stories in the world and it is the way the stories are told that makes them different. Folk tales and fairy tales are perfect examples of this. The plots of many fairytales are immediately—and enjoyably—recognizable. But each culture, each generation, adds a new element to the core story, which results in a new version of the story. Cocteau's famous "Belle et Bête" actually has its roots in the ancient Greek myth "Cupid and Psyche", as well as in the 19th century Norwegian tales, "East of the Sun, West of the Moon". It is the constant retelling of the story that keeps it fresh at the same time that it offers a new viewpoint. Database Narrative films do the same thing for us on the Internet.

c) Pass Along

Pass along web cinema is one of the most interesting outgrowths of the technology of the Internet. Pass-along cinema is an electronic version of the childhood game of "whisper down the lane," where one person starts a story, whispers it to the next, who in turn changes the story and whispers it to the next person in line and at the end, the final story is told aloud—frequently much different from the story with which the group started. Pass along cinema works in much the same way: a filmmaker creates the first episode or chapter of a film and then posts it on a site. Participants from around the world can either add to the story by creating their own video, or write in with suggested storylines for the filmmakers to use.

d) Shorts

Short linear net films are perhaps the closest to classic narrative. Employing a linear narrative, but delivering the story in a much shorter period of time, these web shorts tend to be moments, either dramatic or humorous, or they are silent films that rely on the moving image and a soundtrack to carry the story.

Genres of Web Cinema

As web cinema has grown more sophisticated, genres have begun to emerge, some of which reflect traditional cinema, and some of which are unique to the medium. Probably the most recognizable are the Joke Films. Frequently very short and usually created in Flash, joke films are the equivalent of a visual punch line or a "nonsense tale." They travel fast and furiously around the world via email because of their accessibility. Another identifiable genre is what I call the Impressionistic Film. Impressionistic films are like paint-

ings that have been set to music—they consist mostly of moving colors or images, set to original music. Sometimes the images are done in Flash, sometimes in Digital Video in a style that evokes experimental films. A third popular genre is Life Stories, which are like first person narrative short stories. In Life Stories, the person telling the story tends either to sit directly in front of the camera and speak directly to the viewer, or employs a voice over narrative. Because of the intimacy of the viewing environment, Life Stories can be highly intimate and very successful.

Why Web Cinema?

I started The Bit Screen as a lab for online cinematic storytelling. It was a personal experiment, one which I was not sure would attract that much attention. I launched the site by calling some friends who were filmmakers, screenwriters and animators and asking them if they wanted to see what kind of film they could make for this new medium - because streaming video was a very new medium when I launched the site. Most people were accessing the web via 19.2 modems on 486 class machines, and Real Video was in release 2.0. In three short years the Internet has morphed from a dial-up public telephone network medium, to a variety of media, ranging from low-speed wireless to satellite-delivered broadband. And each variation, each version of the Internet technology, has helped produce a new kind of storytelling.

But no matter how broad the Internet delivery spectrum is, it will still be a long time before anyone can actually receive a full-length feature film, in broadcast quality, over the net … much less watch that film on the computer monitor. And yet, unarguably, that is where web cinema is headed. So why would a filmmaker choose to tell stories on the web? Why not just use the Internet as a platform, however inadequate, for showcasing theatrical films and wait for the eventual roll-out of world-wide, highspeed broadband? In an interview a few years ago Bernardo Bertolucci said that he thought cinema was "très fatigué". I think maybe what he meant is that there was a lot of experimentation in the early days of filmmaking, and then we settled into a 90 minute linear format; that's pretty much how all movies have been made for the last 70 years or so. But the Internet gives us the ability to create new forms, new structure. And pushing beyond our current boundaries can only enhance the way we make films. How could it not? The more we experiment, the more we find out. Go back and look at the early films of the Lumière Brothers—there is such a sense of discovery, of excitement in them. I get that same sense of discovery and experimentation from the films streamed on The Bit Screen. And, as in the Lumière films, you can see a new language of film being created. A language that's already being spoken in theatrical films: "Time Code," "Run Lola Run" and even "The Pillow Book" are all films that use the language of web cinema, both visually and narratively. I think it's important to support new directions in cinema, and right now those directions are coming from web films and web filmmakers. Perhaps as importantly, the web offers the chance for individual voices to be heard. Folklorists have logged more than a thousand versions of Cinderella, but today most kids only know the Disney version because Disney dominates not just the output of children's movies, but also kids´ books and music. Corporations control our access to stories in newspapers, movies, television and books—but not yet the Internet. So our ability to freely receive thousands of stories and pass them along, or disseminate new ones is crucial to keeping cultural diversity alive … and maybe, like Shahrazad, ourselves too.