The Garden of Time: a Tangible Interactive Video Installation

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Abstract
In this paper we present the interactive video installation titled “The Garden of Time”: a tangible interface designed specifically to emphasize the conceptual nature of the project and to provide a different and entertaining filmic experience to its users.

Keywords
Interactive video, tangible interface, filmic narrative

ACM Classification Keywords
H.5.2 [Information Interfaces and Presentation I.7]: User Interfaces (D.2.2, H.1.2, I.3.6)

Introduction

In order to create an engaging and entertaining experience closely related to the concept of piece, which was based on the forking paths and on the occurrence of divergence and convergence of a story, we created a custom tangible object for video interaction in the form of a wooden labyrinth. The object is a 3d labyrinth built by stacking wooden cubes with differently shaped paths. Some of these cubes have forking paths that introduce a level of randomness. The labyrinth has one entry point and three exits and dropping a marble in the entry makes it go through one of the three paths and come out on the corresponding exit. Due to the forking elements, the marble can traverse any one of these three exits. A computer running the videos triggers different filmic segment based on which path the marble takes.
Concept - The Garden of the Forking Paths

This project is an homage to Borges’ short story and tries to emphasize the hyper-textual and interactive characteristics of the text. Borges’ story is a crime fiction about the murder of Dr. Stephen Albert, a man engaged in deciphering a mysterious book written by a Chinese governor Ts’ui Pên. The legend was that Ts’ui Pên wanted to undertake two tasks: to write a vast and intricate novel, and to build an equally vast and intricate labyrinth. He died before completing his novel and what he wrote made no sense and was seen as “contradictory jumble of irresolute drafts”. The labyrinth was never found either. Dr. Albert realized that the novel represented both tasks: it was written in the form of a labyrinth and that was why it seemed to make no sense. The novel was a labyrinth that forked in time, not space, describing a world where all possible outcomes of an event occur, creating diverging paths that can sometimes converge again.

Interactive narrative

“The Garden of Forking Paths” has been described as the invention of the hypertext novel [2] and has been the inspiration for many in the field of interactive fiction [3, 4]. Our interactive video installation “The Garden of Time” is a micro-story that proposes a journey in time to the multiple possibilities of a moment in our character’s life. The protagonist in our story faces a dilemma: to commit suicide or continue living. In one of those moments, he assumes his destiny, in another he tries to gain courage, in another still he gives up. It is up to the spectator/interactor of the installation to find out the possibilities of the filmic narrative (Figure 2). Interaction is accomplished simply by dropping a marble in the entry point of the wooden maze, symbolizing a decision point for our character. Through this interaction, and according to the paths traversed by the marble in the maze, he will be able to watch the unfolding of the multiple existing possibilities. The installation is neither completely deterministic nor completely random - just like in Ts’ui Pên’s book. At each point in the narrative, each path triggers a different video that moves the story forward but the random factors that exist in the paths allow a more open narrative and allow the participant to continually find slightly different versions of the story. The interaction object effectively constitutes a tangible user interface [5]: users don't interact with a computer, they interact with a story about forking paths by picking up and dropping physical marbles in a physical labyrinth with forking paths. The 3d labyrinth provides a very clear connection to the concept of the work and it serves two interconnected objectives: it helps understanding the artistic concept of the piece, and it provides cues about the interactive behaviour of the installation.

References