

The Unfinished Business of Marty Melnick:
An Artist Research Statement

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Abstract

This year I researched interactive film in order to create an interactive children's TV pilot that centers mature morals and LGBTQ representation. Through this research and finished product, I aimed to convey how interactive film can better teach nuanced themes to youth audiences in order to expand the potential of this medium and teach myself valuable professional skills in the process. The ambitious intended outcome of this research was a 10-minute film for children ages 10-16, entitled *The Unfinished Business of Marty Melnick*, that used point-and-click interaction to dictate the characters that the narrative focuses on. The actual outcome of this research was a nineteen page script, a two minute long demo live-action scene, and an approximately 15-minute working interactive animatic prototype of the television pilot. What drove the inspiration for this research was the fact that, despite interactive film's extensive history, this field lacks genre diversity and does not fulfill its educational potential for youth audiences. Therefore, even in its prototype form, this research project will hopefully act as a template for future researchers by demonstrating the potential of this genre as a powerful tool for emotional-intelligence based education. Researching and executing the process of creating meaningful interactive film will ideally provide a framework for teaching nuanced themes in children's media.

Inception

The foundation of this work had several beginnings which can be divided into motivations inspired by technicality, narrative, and interactive film's lackluster history. Considering both my longtime fascination with interactive film and how interactive film perfectly encapsulates the intersection between my Film, Art, and Game Design studies, I was deeply driven to explore this medium for my research project. There are many nuances that contribute to effective creation of interactive film throughout each step of the process; therefore, one can only receive an in-depth understanding of this process and the inevitable barriers through creating for the medium themselves. Since I wish to pursue a career in the, ideally interactive, film or television industry in the realm of producing, this research project offered both an incredible opportunity to learn about both the intricacies and skills needed to create in this medium and the skills needed to be a producer on the whole. This motivation highlights a specific theme that is emphasized throughout my process which is the prioritization of aspects of the project in line with producing over directing-oriented elements of the project, such as the creation of pre-production documents and team assembly.

Furthermore, this narrative had been a piece I had been contemplating on for a while, specifically in the way that the work emphasized thoughtful and respectful tackling of mature themes for a youth audience. With that, it is necessary to address that there were equal technical motivations to the pursuit of this project as well. Coding a filmmic work that was influenced by user input allowed me to combine all the areas of interest in my collegiate studies into one experimental project. The decision to combine these areas of personal interest was partially due to its connective thread through all the aspects of my major, but it was also driven by the gaps in the field of interactive film that I encountered in my personal explorations of the medium. These

gaps such as interactive film's lack of genre diversity and the field's current inability to reach its full educational potential became more glaring through my research and further motivated me to pursue this project.

Research

By researching interactive film and working towards a 10-minute, interactive TV pilot for children ages 10-16 that highlights challenging themes and LGBTQ representation, I intended to demonstrate the nuanced educational potential of this medium while honing my producorial skillset in the process. Interactive film has the potential to provide thoughtful lessons for viewers by facilitating powerful connections between the narrative and its audience; however, this moral aspect of the medium has historically been overlooked by projects that instead value technological novelty and shock value. To display this potential, this project aimed to use point-and-click interaction to shift character focus instead of narrative plot in order to engage the audience as an active participant and enrich their connection to the characters and themes. By addressing the gaps in this under-researched field, interactive film could serve as a powerful tool in promoting empathy-driven media, decentralized narratives, and emotional-intelligence based messages for youth audiences. Therefore, the objective of this research was to create an interactive film in order to hopefully demonstrate the educational potential of this medium for youth audiences.

Considering the lack of interactive films occupying this specific niche, there were a variety of creative influences for specific elements of this project which I encountered during my

research¹. Full Motion Videos (FMVs) primarily from the 1990s and Netflix's recent canon of point-and-click interactive films, such as *Black Mirror's Bandersnatch*, are typically the most accessible example of the interactive film style that heavily influenced my final product's interface and general user interaction. However, the media in Netflix's canon more aligned with this project are their interactive children's TV shows such as *Carmen Sandiego* and *The Last Kids on Earth*². The educational aspect of this project specifically is inspired by 1990s point-and-click CD-ROM games such as *Freddi Fish* and *Putt-Putt*. Other fields of media are similarly inspirational such as Choose Your Own Adventure novels, like *Give Yourself Goosebumps*, or indie, character-based video games, like *Night in the Woods*. Disjoint from the interactive element, the narrative nuanced themes of this project are shaped by the empathetic shifting of character perspectives in TV shows such as *Ramy* and *Freaks and Geeks*. Furthermore, creators who have thoughtfully approached sensitive themes and LGBTQ representation in children's media such as Noelle Stevenson, Owen Dennis, and Dana Terrace are all huge inspirations to this project as well.

The history of this medium that inspired these recent iterations of interactive film dates back to the 1980s; however, this underdeveloped field significantly lacks genre diversity and critical analysis. Historically dominated by the horror, thriller, and mystery genre, interactive films often place the novelty of their technology above the development of its narrative which is a serious gap in the existing body of work³. Children's media is one genre that is not only underutilized by interactive film but could significantly benefit from interactive implementation

¹ Kirke, Alexis, "Films That Watch You While You Watch Them: A Brief History of Interactive Movies," Medium, Startup It Up, April 24, 2020.

<https://medium.com/swlh/films-that-watch-you-while-you-watch-them-a-brief-history-of-interactive-movies-820fb5e2ee25>.

² Gladstone, Darren, "Netflix Interactive Movies Let You Control the Adventure," *SuperParent*, March 12, 2020.

<https://superparent.com/article/1129/netflix-interactive-movies-let-you-control-the-adventure>.

³ Yarwood, Jack, "Return of the Full Motion Video Game," *Variety*, May 7, 2018.

<https://variety.com/2018/gaming/features/full-motion-video-games-return-1202800967/>.

that emphasizes its emotional contribution over its novelty in order to support nuanced themes.

Studies have been conducted which show that incorporating experimental technology and interactive teaching methods among children can lead to improved retainment of knowledge⁴.

Creating this interactive film provides a novel contribution to this field as it ideally offers a framework for how thoughtful EQ-based morals and LGBTQ representation can be implemented in interactive children's media in the future. Though media related to my project exists, this project tackles the areas in which they are often lacking by not prioritizing novelty and instead emphasizing interactivity to approach challenging themes and foster empathy.

Process

Although the intended timeline for this project drastically shifted throughout the course of the year, the steps used to complete this project can generally be segmented into four stages: research, pre-production, production, and post-production. To assist with those segmented aspects of the project, I received guidance from my faculty mentors Sharon Dilworth and Nica Ross. Dilworth was my Screenwriting professor and advised the project's writing aspect on a weekly basis in the fall, ensuring that the script was cohesive, sensitive, and comprehensible. Ross was my Experimental Capture professor and advised the project's pre-production, on-set logistics, interactive implementation, as well as offering additional sensitivity writing advice. Despite the initial intention to complete these areas in distinct, clean blocks, the reality ended up being more continuously simultaneous throughout the course of the year.

An example of this shift in execution can be seen in the research portion of the project, for, although research was heavily concentrated in the spring of 2021, it bled into the fall and

⁴ Arcos, Claudia, et al, "Playful and Interactive Environment-Based Augmented Reality to Stimulate Learning of Children," *2016 18th Mediterranean Electrotechnical Conference (MELECON)*, June 23, 2016. <https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/abstract/document/7495421>.

continued throughout the course of the year. Research consisted of the findings outlined previously, further reading of interactive film analysis, and playtesting similar projects. Pre-production techniques consisted of primarily writing, budgeting, talent outreach, and scheduling. The script was always at the center of the work as writing for interactive film presents a myriad of challenging elements to navigate. Throughout the course of the fall, the pilot went through many drafts and received advice from both my faculty advisor Sharon Dilworth and peer writing assistant Madeline Elston who I met with periodically to offer an outside perspective. The other pre-production elements involved holding auditions for casting, acquiring funding from SURG and FRFAF for props and contract payments, and solidifying music to be used in the final product. Production encountered several hurdles for many reasons but primarily faced issues due to shifting COVID-19 related factors. Ultimately, production consisted of completing the live-action shoot for scene 6B, but due to complications, the majority of production work consisted of rescheduling shoots, shifting production documents, and storyboarding the entire script. Post-production consisted of video editing in Adobe Premiere by adding motion to the storyboard and implementing interactive elements later with EKO, an open-source application to make web-hosted interactive videos. Throughout this process, I was also working with the composer attached to this project, Claire Peck, in order to bring to life certain aspects of the film, primarily the live-action sequence. The final product is available for anyone to view and play online through the EKO link. Playtesting the project with different audiences was not intended to be directly tackled in this research, but this project lays the groundwork for others to survey those results in future continued research.

Completion of the Project

Through much rigorous planning and ambitious goal-setting, this project has shifted from its original intentions for the finished product but has remained true to its core values in the completion of the project. Considering the influence of outside factors on the initially anticipated timeline, this research project slightly veered from its intended final outcome of a 10-minute live-action interactive children's TV pilot. Instead, the end product is an approximately 15-minute interactive animatic prototype of the TV pilot. Specifically, this animatic includes a storyboard that is roughly animated through each scene of the script with voice overs from most of the original cast that was determined in the fall and was used during the filming of scene 6B. It is important to also include the nineteen-page script, the two-minute live-action demo clip of scene 6B, and the multitude of pre-production documents in these final research products, for they equally highlight the intended purpose of this project to both create a framework for future research interested in navigating this specific niche and to teach myself productorial skills in the process. By understanding the medium of interactive film's shortcomings and strengths, the outcome from this project still aims to offer a well-researched example on how interactive film can be used to teach children EQ-driven themes by bolstering one's investment and connection to characters in a narrative⁵.

Evolution

This project was initially founded on my personal fascination with a topic both technically, narratively, and in the areas in which it felt lacking. From this vague initial concept, months of research yielded a fully formed script for a children's television pilot. The narrative

⁵ "Technology and Interactive Media as Tools in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8," *National Association for the Education of Young Children*, January 2012.
https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/position-statements/ps_technology.pdf.

template transformed into many documents laying the groundwork for an intended fully filmed, live-action, interactive television pilot. From this, a two-minute section of the script was filmed to act as a demonstration of what the full film may look like, technically and stylistically. Plans were made to shoot the entirety of the pilot, but when the Coronavirus Omicron variant spiked, it drastically altered plans since I wanted to prioritize the health of the cast and crew, and I was unable to rent equipment from the closed resources on campus during this time. Challenges persisted as COVID-19 procedures remained unclear, actors moved away, scheduling conflicts increased, and positive cases among cast and crew came in waves. Therefore, this prompted me to shift my intentions for the project and forced me to reevaluate my core values for this project. Since the main questions I was tackling in my research revolved around the importance and implementation of what a nuanced interactive narrative meant for children, I focused my efforts into getting a fully working prototype that prioritized these areas as opposed to prioritizing the live-action style or cinematic intricacies of each shot. The filmed live-action scene, although it stands out in the playable final product created, offers a needed example of how this entire narrative could visually function if expanded upon in the future. Creating an animatic that was interactive in almost the exact way intended in the script took precedence over filming the entire nineteen pages. The voice overs from the mostly original cast was an important detail, however, as it brings to life the dialogue which carries the emotional nuance of the narrative. Therefore, although the form of this finished product is distinctly different from my originally anticipated final project, it is still a significant point of pride for me as it encapsulates the key takeaway I have been pursuing since the inception of the work.

Learning Outcomes

Throughout the course of working on this project, I learned a lot which can be generally divided into the camps of narrative, technical, and interactive. The research journey, the writing process, all stages of production, and the ongoing need to adapt were all challenges which sparked learning moments for me.

The writing process, especially while working with project advisors, taught me a lot about writing for this specific niche of interactive children's television. Narratively, I learned the essential need in this field for a writer to be able to adapt their mindset both for writing interactively and in a way which can be understood by children of a broad age range. This heavily involved needing to understand what children will take away from the images and lines of dialogue presented throughout the pilot. Nuance that an adult audience believes is obvious may not translate exactly to a youth audience; therefore, it is critical that the writer be attentive to this dissonance. Similarly, this is relevant to the choices in which the child must make when interacting with the narrative. If they are not clear or if the narrative has not offered the proper context for said decisions, the pilot loses all its meaning. Additionally, this writing process really taught me the importance of learning to let go of one's writing. Given the interactive nature of the work, the writer must learn that there will always be some element of the narrative that the user may never encounter. The purpose of this work and interactive film in general is not to squeeze as many possible plotlines and scenes in as possible, but rather to craft meaningful scenarios in which the impact of not seeing a scene is as important as experiencing a scene. However, this writing process also taught me the importance of crafting a world in which shifting contexts due to interactivity does not distort the messages, meaning, or representation of the pilot.

Technically, I also learned many lessons mainly around the idea of allowing for ample space and time. This lesson was vital in both a producing context and in a coding context throughout all stages of the project. During the pre-production stages that revolved around mass amounts of scheduling, it was necessary to account for buffer times and changing external factors. Creating multiple backup plans that allowed time for error and general room to breathe was essential to keeping the project afloat: a lesson I learned the hard way during January's unprecedented factors. This lesson also translates quite well into the coding and interactivity realm, as I learned the importance of allowing for buffer time within the decision period for all of my scenes. Since I had never coded in this medium to this extent before, I severely underestimated the amount of time needed for decision making and presentation of UI which affects the way shots are filmed and influences the overall pacing of the narrative. Therefore, I learned the importance of accounting for this in the initial stages of writing.

Finally, I learned what makes effective interactivity and how I would like to pursue my own personal interactive film style. In opposition to patterns presented in many pieces of media throughout the decades, the purpose of interactive storytelling for me means that every choice should be intentional. Moreover, this means that in order for something to be effectively interactive, it does not require everything in that work to be interactive. In fact, it is quite the opposite. To be a meaningful interactive film, one must limit the amount of interactive elements in order to curate emotional depth and avoid losing the narrative's meaning in a sea of gimmick-based interactive options. Using self-restraint when writing for interactive film is difficult but necessary in order for one to intentionally present one's narrative and effectively communicate with the audience.

Future

This project was an insightful opportunity to combine all the areas of my concentration into a piece that could be incredibly meaningful for future audiences. Being able to integrate the narrative film analysis I learned in my Film concentration with the technical production skills acquired through my Art concentration with the interactive elements I learned in my Game Design studies was a uniquely rewarding experience. Although I learned from the many aspects in which I faltered, in this combining process in particular I greatly learned from where I succeeded.

Specifically, I learned and proved to myself that the combination of these concentrations is not only possible but has a rich history which, with further intentional progress, could yield poignant and important work for future audiences, especially that which can influence younger generations. This also aided in personal and professional growth as I have become much more assured of my productorial pursuits through the course of this project. There are significant opportunities to grow this work in the future as the current final product serves as a framework for not only live-action development of *The Unfinished Business of Marty Melnick* if desired, but also as a framework for what can be done with future interactive films. Whether or not I pursue completing a live-action edit of this work, this pilot will unquestionably provide the foundation for the future work I intend to pursue in this medium and specific niche of interactive film and television for youth audiences.