Collaborative Design as Narrative

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ABSTRACT
Narrative theory or narratology is the systematic study of narrative and narrative structure [3]. It provides the necessary theoretical tools that can help scrutinize the various ways in which narrative is formed and is deciphered by an audience. In this paper, we suggest the use of narrative theory as: (a) a means to a detailed deconstruction or engineering of a collaborative design process, and (b) an analytical device for the in depth exploration of the design space.

Keywords
Collaborative design, narrative theory, interactive narrative

INTRODUCTION
The concepts of design and creativity are gradually reaching a state of substantial public discourse and propagation in almost all of our everyday activities. Design awareness and skills, either due to formal design studies, or common sense and intuition, are encountered all too often. As a consequence, critique and conscious debates over design issues occupy the discussions of an increasing number of people on a regular basis. Thus, it can be said that the idea of users’ participation in the design of everyday artifacts, both actual and digital, is more than a necessity.

To do that in a meaningful and productive way though, it is important that methodologies, which try to arouse users’ creativity and intuition, and, at the same time, engage them in the design problem at hand, be created. The We!Design methodology [12] works towards this objective. We!Design is a student-centered participatory design methodology that is based on iterations of the same, concise and highly structured, collaborative design process with different students. In such a context, matters of time manipulation, events’ organization, participants’ engagement and affective experience emerge as particularly noteworthy. Therefore, it is important that we find ways that can help us deconstruct and, eventually, be able to control such elements effectively and efficiently. In this paper we suggest the use of narrative theory as an adequate analytical tool that can help us achieve this goal.

Narrative has been defined in a variety of ways. Genette suggests that “narrative refer[s] to the narrative statement, the oral or written discourse that undertakes to tell of an event or series of events” [7]. Chatman defines narrative through his analysis of its structure and posits “a what and a way”, a story and its discourse respectively [3]. Meadows continues to say that “narrative exists to convey perspective” [10] while, Branigan considers it to be “a distinctive strategy for organizing data about the world, for making sense and significance” [2]. Undoubtedly, these are not the only definitions.

Our proposal is based on Chatman’s dualist and structuralist approach on narrative and narrative structure [3]. Chatman’s basic argument is that narrative and narrative structure is separate from any kind of its manifestations. In Chatman’s approach, the story of a narrative is separated from its discourse, allowing us to separate the content from its expression. This disentanglement becomes most relevant to design through two different narrative dualities: (a) the story of a collaborative design process and its ways or techniques of involving and empowering the participants in the process, and (b) the story that is built inside the ever-evolving design space of a design situation, either collaboratively or not, and the way in which the narrated, current or future, events are expressed and manipulated.

COLLABORATIVE DESIGN AS A DUAL NARRATIVE
Every design situation consists of two distinct, and occasionally overlapping, narratives. This is the distinction, as described earlier, between the design process and the design space. In the subsequent text, we will refer to these two narratives as the design narrative and the design space narrative respectively (Fig. 1). (Note: Except otherwise stated, all terms presented in italics are accredited to Chatman [3].)

The Design Narrative
Every design process says a story; the story of a group of people, working together, trying to solve a given problem. Whether they are experts – that is, designers – or not – that is, users or other stakeholders – makes no essential
difference. All of them play an active role in this particular story. The ways in which the story is recounted can vary considerably: designers and users can work together either in a well-structured (e.g. collaborative scenarios creation, cooperative prototyping, etc.) or more playful way (e.g. design games, forum theatre, etc.); users can inform on designers’ work before or during the design process (e.g. interviews, focus groups, etc.); designers can spend time and observe users’ situated practises (e.g. ethnography); designers can supply users with probes or prototypes and see what users can make out of them (e.g. provotyping, cultural or technology probes, etc.), and so on.

Collaborative design, in any form possible, is one of those diverse ways in which a design story or design “peripeteia” [10] (the Greek word for adventure) can be recounted or, in other words, narrated. Thus, it can be considered a kind of narrative and, as such, it could be described in terms of (a) its story, consisting of a chain of events and a number of existents (characters and items of setting), and (b) its discourse, that is “the expression, the means by which the content (story) is communicated” [3].

The Design Space Narrative
The second story in every design situation is the story of the actual artefact being designed, and the actual people that will eventually use it, affect it and, in return, be affected by its use. This is a story though that, as opposed to the story of the design process itself, is both created and read-out in an interactive way. The implications on the designers’ and participants’ roles as presumed on collaborative and other participatory design approaches, resemble those of the author and the reader, respectively, of hypertext or interactive narrative. The distance between designer and user diminishes, in the same way as it weakens, or sometimes dissolves entirely, between author and reader [4, 6 and 10]. Individual authorship of the suggested solutions and of the various traits of the designed artifacts is challenged, in the same way as ideas and information flow are challenged in hypertext [6]. Ultimately, the users are converted from spectators to actors and co-authors, like Boal’s spectators become emancipated directors and ultimately actors in their own “play” [1].

Thus, the design space, as the setting and, at the same time, the object where the designer-user hybrid builds upon, can be considered a nondeterministic, interactive narrative; or, in other words, a form of hypertext, or perhaps “hyper-artefact”, that engages its co-authors in a dialogue between the “inside-the-skull” – through its theme – and “outside-the-skull” – through its mediation tools – interactions [10]. As such, it aligns with the hypertext’s non-linear conceptualizations of time, space and plot, and the fluid notions of co-authorship and collective perspective.

Even though we distinguished the design process from the design space, describing the former as a, somewhat, static narrative and the latter as an interactive one, this is not exactly the case. Both narratives are fundamentally interactive ones. The essential difference lies in what Zimmerman would refer to as the “mode of narrative interactivity” [14]. While the design process can be thought of as demanding the participants’ “utilitarian participation” with its techniques, artifacts and mediation tools, thus entailing a series of “functional interactions” [14], the design space narrative demands the “explicit interaction” [14] of the participants with the whole narrative structure. This subtle but important distinction provides adequate direction for the author or creator of a collaborative design process as to the locus of attention on each narrative.

Figure 1. Collaborative design as a dual narrative

AUTHOR(S), AGENTS AND READERS
Thinking of a collaborative design process and design space as narratives implies a shift of the participants’ and the designer’s roles in the process. The participants’ role shifts from informants, evaluators and/or co-designers of the designed artefact, to readers and actors in the design process and co-authors of the design space narrative. At the same time, the designer’s role changes from initiator and facilitator of the process and, ultimately, constructor of the final artifact, to author or creator of the design narrative, active agent in both narratives, and, ultimately, critical reader of the final “text”.

The Designer as Author
The designer as author of the design process is asked to create a “context to be encountered by a participant, from which meaning emerges” (Salen, K. & Zimmerman, E. Rules of Play, as quoted in [13]). He is asked to manipulate a number of narrative elements such as characters, setting, and events, in order to construct a design “peripeteia” which will then be transmitted or, in other words, recounted and read-out during the design process.
Narrative transmission is concerned with the way in which each event is presented during the recounting of the narrative. The most important aspect of the narrative transmission is the order in which the story’s events, as presented by the characters’ actions, are organized; in other words, when the narrative begins, climaxes and ultimately ends, in Aristotelian terms. It is certain that a different order of events could eventually lead to a different design approach, and, most probably, to a different final product. In the end, the way in which the collaborative design discourse is manifested depends on the various techniques and physical or conceptual artefacts that these techniques utilize. This is actually the surface of every process; the point where they differentiate from one another. It is the medium that “actualizes the aesthetic object of the narrative – the story-as-discoursed – as a real object” [3]. The possibilities are numerous and, in the end, it all comes down to whether the selected approach manifests the design “peripeteia” in a way that maximizes participants productivity and enhances their “immersive” and “engaged” affective experience [5] throughout the limited duration of their participation.

Making an analogy with the construction of environmental storytelling and spatial exploration in computer games, the designer is asked to construct a “geography … (where) obstacles thwart and affordances facilitate the protagonist’s forward movement towards resolution” [8]. When it comes to collaborative design, this notion of “geography” could be expanded to that of an “ecosystem”, a context consisting of actors, tools and methods that, using story- and discourse-time and -space creatively, structure the participants’ experience and direct their interactions to a meaningful resolution [8, 13]. Overall, continuing the computer games’ design analogy, the designer’s responsibility is to find the appropriate boundaries between “performance and exposition” [8], that is, structure the process in such a way that maintains the design narrative discourse in its predefined trajectory, while allowing for participants’ playfulness and creativity.

It is this playfulness and creativity that helps the design space narrative’s progressions. However, when it comes to design space exploration, there is always the underlying risk of unconstrained and over-the-limits dissemination, away from the desired goals of the design situation. Thus, another important responsibility of the designer is to appropriately constraint the possibilities provided by the design process without restricting in-depth and/or in-breadth explorations of the design space. Eventually, it is important to plan for diverse perspectives to be projected, either as individual voices or as the result of collaborative and consensus reaching interactions, and, at the same time, give emphasis to the ways in which these perspectives intensify the participants’ feelings of agency [13].

The Designer as Active Agent

Whether the designer’s actions are important to the plot, hence making her a leading character of the story, or she poses as a supporting agent throughout the story, depends on the design process. It is usual for the designer/facilitator to hold a secondary, unobtrusive role for herself during the design process. Whichever part she is asked to perform though there is one specific role that stands as important both for the sound progression of the process and the participants’ immersion and engagement with it. This role is the one that could be referred to as the “narrator of the design group’s interior monologue”.

As a narrator, the designer/facilitator of the collaborative design process performs a kind of voice-over similar to that of a Greek chorus [5]. Asking clarifying questions, offering conclusions or making corrections and suggestions, the designer/facilitator performs a type of framing both of the participants’ overall affective experience and the design and design space narratives’ recounting. Essentially, her interventions could be considered, as previously described, as the narration of the design group’s interior monologue, or, otherwise stated, the design group’s collective subconscious and understanding. Evidently, this does not mean that this role can be performed solely by her. Throughout the process, the participants act as co-authors and, at the same time, readers of the design space narrative. However, it is certain that the role of the narrator can be performed by any participant, any given time in the process. It should be considered though more of the designer/facilitator’s responsibility to be the one who assures that, through her narrative involvement, the design process and the final result will be kept on track.

In addition, the way in which the design space exploration progresses also depends on the participants’ decisions on dilemmas imposed by the narrative itself when it reaches important, for the rest of the design process, events. Such kernel events are able to change the trajectory of the design process and eventually direct it to a completely different end result. It is the participants’ and, above all, the designer/facilitators’ responsibility, to allow or restrict such deviations, permitting further explorations of stories and anti-stories on one hand or limiting the design on more rigid rules and constrains on the other. Either case, her main concern should be that of helping the participants immerse into the design space as both readers and co-authors, and assist them in their quest for a final choice that is either inevitability [3] or necessity [9].

The Designer as Reader

Whenever the participating stakeholders decide to end the design space exploration – in a relatively subjective way admittedly – the designer is asked to detach himself from the process and read-out both narratives. He is burdened with the salient responsibility of deciphering all causal, temporal or contingent relationships inside each and between the two narratives. And through this process, he is
asked to assemble an artefact that is intended to be an amalgamation of everyone’s involved understanding and creativity, as perceived by him.

As previously stated, it is certain that each participant, as co-author of the design space, projects his own different perspective on the way that the design process and the design space are evolving. This perspective could either reflect his conceptual point of view or his interest point of view. The former refers to a participant’s attitudes and his way of thinking, while the latter refers to a character’s general or specific work-related interest, welfare and well-being [3]. In any case, it is important for the designer as a reader to understand each one’s diverse standpoint and how this affected his every decision and action.

DISCUSSION AND FUTURE WORK

There is an ongoing discourse concerning the relationship between narrative — and storytelling in general — and interactivity, computer use, games and design. This discourse has been manifested in several works such as those of Jenkins (2004), Laurel (1993), Meadows (2003), Murray (1997), Ward (2004), and others. This paper presented, admittedly in a concise way, the idea of using elements of narrative theory as an analytical tool to describe and organize a fairly different sort of medium from those already discussed; that of collaborative design.

Using the scheme of a collaborative design process we have showed how narrative theory can help the designers understand and (re-)organize the process in terms of characters, time, settings and design events on the one hand and narrative transmission and discourse on the other. As a result, designers are able to direct (to some extent) the participants’ experience in a way that augments their engagement with the process, facilitates their participation and supports their imagination. On the other hand, the design space as interactive narrative approach can direct the designers’ and the participants’ interactions so as to assist the collective formation, dissemination and in depth exploration of the design space. However, it is certain that a number of issues must be addressed.

In the end, the idea of interpreting collaborative design sessions as narratives is still underdeveloped. So, in order to answer to our lack of an actual example of application of the suggested narrative scheme, deepen our understanding and further examine the theoretical implications presented in this paper, we plan on applying them for the analysis and the restructuring of the We!Design methodology [12]. Our goal is to analyze the methodology using the suggested dual narrative scheme and “re-write” those parts of the narrative that need to be rewritten.

REFERENCES