Pelikan's Antidisambiguation-"The Role of Agency in Content to Come"

Michael P. Pelikan
Penn State University, mpp10@psu.edu

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I've just returned from a week at the Annual Convention of the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM)'s Special Interest Group (SIG) for Computer Graphics, known, when the initializations are taken together, as the ACM SIGGRAPH Conference. The ACM SIGGRAPH Conference is very large, rivaling the numbers in attendance of an AIA Annual Conference. It was held this year at the Los Angeles Convention Center.

What has the ACM SIGGRAPH Conference to do with Antidisambiguation?

Well, it's all about content: its authoring and creation, the management of collaboration and workflow in the production pipeline, the licensing and Intellectual Property (IP) facets, and the packaging, marketing, and distribution of the finalized created content to the targeted audience. Frankly, it's very much like the publishing world.

Exhibits, presentations, demonstrations, and exhibitions revealing the technologies behind the year's blockbusters such as "Toy Story 3," "The Last Airbender," or "How to Train Your Dragon."

But the single production that most dominated the landscape at SIGGRAPH this year, whose impact pervaded the entire week-long conference, was the creation of a world inhabited by ten-foot-tall blue humanoids and the telling of their story. James Cameron's "Avatar," presented in 3D, was a groundbreaking motion picture in a number of respects.

Let me hasten to stipulate that depth of plot, but not just that, is the introduction of Agency into media. But again, what has this to do with Antidisambiguation? Actually, "Virtual Reality" isn't too far different from what we've experienced in our cultural isolation. I suspect by the very insiders and aficionados who express dismay at their cultural isolation. I suspect these worlds — and soon — maybe much sooner than we might think. Not fifty years. Maybe twenty. And what if it were ten, or five?

The technology that will make this possible is already in or near the consumer marketplace. Watch the marketplace in the run-up to this coming Holiday Season. As it unfolds, be thinking about what all the newfangled stuff means for us a little further down the road.

We have motion and gesture sensing. We are about to be immersed in three-dimensional displays. We can combine photo-realistic synthetic characters with heuristic programming. Soon you'll be able to ask Lady Macbeth, "What are you thinking? Are you out of your mind?" I'm not kidding. And somebody'd better come up with something useful for her to reply to you. Plot forks, parallel and alternate story lines — these are just some of the possibilities. Think of hyperlinks in three dimensions, blurring the arbitrary boundaries we've drawn between the many media we've invented.

Now please, understand, I attest that a fine teacher of literature can guide students through a classic in a way that enables them to experience the narratives and the human truths there exposed with a vividness beyond Technicolor, surround sound, and 3D glasses. So books aren't going anywhere.

But the truth be told, we can probably also attest that there are teachers of literature whose approach to dragging their students through a classic virtually ensures that most of those students won't voluntarily go anywhere near that author, or maybe even that whole genre, ever again in their lives.

Live Theatre, Opera, the Orchestra — like books, these didn't go anywhere either. They're still there for those who seek them. But all too often these cultural worlds are curated, carefully guarded gardens — and some of them are walled by the very insiders and aficionados who express dismay at their cultural isolation. I suspect Wagner would have given Wotan's staff for a chance to employ some of the astonishingly intense and immersive technologies for storytelling we have today.

So perhaps we should anticipate a future in which authored content is really very, very different from what we've experienced in our shared past, perhaps even more different than we currently expect it might be.

Melville works just fine in an eBook reader. But I'm more convinced than ever that the day will come in which a medium will put you in the whaleboat with Ishmael and Queequeg. You'll get wet, and you'll get cold, too. You'll feel the wind, the boat tossing and surging. Your muscles will ache as you pull the oar. You'll smell the lines and experience the sheer power of the beast you've hooked into. And later, if you make it back to the Pequod alive, you'll be able to look Ahab in the eye, if you dare approach.

Will this replace the book in the classroom? Perhaps not, but it might fit nicely alongside it.