August 2014

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

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Recommended Citation

DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.5628

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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, rivalling the numbers in attendance of an ALA 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.

Each year, there are 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 is it? in their homes. will be receiving content in their classrooms and in their lives. It's very much like the publishing world.

For example, when the initializations are taken together, as the ACM SIGGRAPH Conference's keynote address given by Don Marinelli, who co-founded the Entertainment Technology Center (ETC) at Carnegie Mellon University (www.etc.cmu.edu) with the late Randy Pausch.

Randy Pausch was the man who gave what has come to be called, "The Last Lecture." To date, the video of Pausch's lecture has received well over eleven million viewings. The Last Lecture is about the fulfilling of dreams, and you can (and should) look for it on YouTube.

So Marinelli came from the Drama department, Pausch from the School of Computer Science. Their collaboration, beginning in 1998, produced an incredibly dynamic example of interdisciplinary education at its finest. In the Last Lecture, Pausch refers to Marinelli as "The Tornado." Marinelli, in his deeply moving memoir, decided that his sobriquet for Pausch would be "The Comet." Marinelli's, The Comet & The Tornado, is subtitled, "Reflections on the Legacy of Randy Pausch, The Last Lecture & The Creation of Our Carnegie Mellon Dream Fulfillment Factory."

As a person whose entire personal and professional life has centered on the marriage of the creative experience and technology — in Public Radio, Public Television, the University — but most personally in photography, and in multitrack audio production of my own music and the music of others, I have found Marinelli's book to have reached and touched me in ways I can't yet fully express. There is much of the best that is within us, within some of our colleagues, some of our students, the best of our teachers, to be found, instantly recognizable, in The Comet & The Tornado.

Marinelli is, to put it mildly, an energetic speaker. He had much to say about how learning happens, and the (in)ability of educational institutions (and the premises upon which their existing pedagogical models are based) to adapt to a dramatically altered, shifted environment.

What has changed? Marinelli says the fundamental, generational change occurring right now is the introduction of Agency into media. What does this mean? It means that our rising student classes have begun their life-long journey of learning in a world in which their most vivid, engaging encounters with narrative occur in an interactive, immersive environment. And, says Marinelli, this fact has changed, and will continue to change, how media teaches.

While many of us are scratching our heads trying to absorb the impact of eBooks on our learning environments, Marinelli says the underlying changes that our teachers, now so dear, more fundamental, and more transformative than we can keep up with by merely reformatting existing textual content into a salable electronic form.

By "Agency," Marinelli means the ability of a learner to engage in meaningful interaction with the learning object: to become an active agent in the knowledge-generating process itself.

Imagine the seamless marriage of Moby Dick or A Tale of Two Cities with an environment like the Holodeck from "Star Trek: the Next Generation." Imagine our students stepping into 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 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 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 disdain 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.