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

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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 in "Avatar" was not one of the groundbreaking aspects of the film. My fourteen-year-old son, who, like me, attended the film several times, referred to the story simply as "Pocahontas with Blue People."

But Pandora, its landscape, its creatures, its sounds, the entire world the digital artists created, was utterly compelling, internally consistent, and completely immersive, thanks to the quality and richness of the three-dimensional visual experience, combined with an audio soundscape so good you rarely even noticed it. I went to the film three times while it was in the theatres, just to spend a little more time on the planet.

There were other areas to explore during the nearly-week-long convention. There were juried exhibits of research and development work by graduate students, post-docs, and mighty corporations. Here one could get "hands-on" with prototypes — some early, some quite mature — examples of emerging technologies for the digital graphical artist. Some of these will never come to market. Some others might change the marketplace entirely.

Take a trip to http://www.siggraph.org/s2010/for_attendees/emerging_technologies, for a look at some of what was there. Then think about the Horseless Carriage, the Wright Flyer, the Phillips Norelco Compact Cassette, and the Commodore 64. And then tell me how you think our kids' kids will be receiving content in their classrooms and in their homes.

Actually, "Virtual Reality" isn't too far different a coined term than "Horseless Carriage," is it?

But again, what has this to do with Antidisambiguation? Well, I want to mention a few points raised in the 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 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 taking place right now are deeper, 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-conveying narrative 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 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.