

New stages, new narrative forms: The Web 2.0 and audiovisual language

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1. Introduction

Trying to capture an increasingly greater number of users, the internet is favouring the emergence of an entertainment industry with a unique set of characteristics. This new stage is actively driving the growing presence of on-line audiovisual content. Even though, as of now, the medium is essentially taking advantage of the capabilities derived from its intrinsic ability to distribute, it is in entertainment where new audiovisual products are being developed: through the hybrid of genres and consolidated formats, they shyly are adjusting to the medium's full capabilities.

The Internet finds itself at an early stage of development and still depends on genres derived from older technologies. The most revealing aspect of this open process is without a doubt the way of the future in which an abrupt change may be produced in the audiovisual field. For example, the creation of content conceived and created with the electronic medium's characteristics in mind - specifically: interactivity. From this we have witnessed the appearance of the Web 2.0 phenomena, which is reinforcing the application of new narrative models with audiovisual content often created collectively. This in turn, has generated a culture of "collective creation" or "collective intelligence" that offers new forms of expressions on the internet.

2. Web 2.0 and audiovisual contents

With the rise of the Web 2.0 movement, we have witnessed the Internet's capacity to mobilise groups. On the one hand, this is because new applications have allowed users to become content creators *and* consumers depending on their individual needs. But on the other hand, it also allows them to integrate into communities that share tastes, needs, dreams, feelings and experiences in a way that does not depend on spatial or temporal borders, generating the proper environment for the production and consumption of socially distributed knowledge. This also makes way for personal use for individual interests: this is not about communities where the collective dissolves the individuality, but communities that favour, legitimise and need each subject's growth as managed by each individual.

This new philosophy of collectivism is allowing for the internet to evolve as a means of communication that, despite the current limitations in terms of bandwidth, we are living a progressive and growingly important creative and dissemination process for audiovisual content on-line. The growing presence of this type of content requires us to reflect on the audiovisual formats and genres that are increasingly more often found in this medium. And above all, the new ways of digital narrative expression that allow for collective creations.

From the point of view of audiovisual contents, the concept of a genre is useful to guide us through the abundance of media production since it allows us to undertake their general descriptions and classifications with some sense of confidence. The term genre stands for any distinct category that presents its own identity and format. The identity refers to its purpose: information, entertainment or other auxiliary programmes, while the format makes reference to the extension, rhythm, structure and language. The Internet's genres constitute a classification system of the relations between receiver and content that fulfil a set of specific formulas, just like with any other communication medium.

3. Narrative expression in collaborative environments

According to Lévy (2002), the implementation of a socially distributed mode of production is being facilitated by information and communication technologies, which permit the consolidation of a “collective intelligence” that promotes collective action for analysing problems, the exchange of knowledge and decision making:

“Collective intelligence values technique, not through blind fascination, but because it opens the field of action. The technical abilities and devices are precious for two reasons: first as products, crystallisation and memory of human activity, and then as potential instruments to increase knowledge capabilities, to feel, act and communicate, as an interface between what is possible and feasible” (Lévy: 2002, p 138)

From this point of view, the philosophy of the Web 2.0 is the model that best fits this collective creative space. The term arises as an opposition to the Web 1.0, and suggests the passing of the Web's first stage. The expression Web 2.0 is used to cover a series of concepts, technologies and attitudes towards these technologies, application and services. These “second generation” applications hope to reduce the distance between those who access the Web and those who publish information on it, promoting the chance for any user to freely access content managers of any type (texts, images, audiovisual applications, searches), whose execution becomes increasingly independent from the operating system or bandwidth.

From this point of view, the generation of audiovisual contents through collective narration hopes to become part of that logic, and enter into that current, both from a technological point of view and a philosophic and aesthetic point of view, providing the user all the tools to be both broadcaster and receiver of the information generated.

As we'll see later on, the existing on-line audiovisual genres are mere copies of the existing analogical genres. But the “substitute” categories are not yet established, nor are the ways in which new “collective” products are generated.

Specifically, we still need answers to questions such as: Is collective narration possible? How is collective narration done? What difference is there between *collaboratively* and *collectively* narrating? And if these narrative models are not completely developed, how can we propose a new model of audiovisual narration?

Let us take the words of Casacuberta (2004: 60-61):

The centre of culture is not longer the author or artist but instead the viewer. The cultural works of digital culture are no longer built individually and solipstically, but rather collectively and organised. The artist stops being the strict creator and becomes a producer. The artist develops a tool that can then be used, developed and spread by the public depending on their interests, which do not have to coincide nor be influenced by the artist's original will... The artist's work is literally that of a medium: to offer a structure, tool and medium in which the spectator is the one who creates...to provide access to the whole world, and not just computer scientists, to the tools that allow for our integral development within the information society.

4. The diffusion of audiovisual contents

One of the most deeply rooted trends is the presentation of audiovisual contents from other mediums for which internet is beginning to become an alternative broadcasting system. So that currently we find ourselves with a large number of products that have been created without thinking of the intrinsic capabilities of the internet, instead, of the other channels like the television or cinema. Upon coming in contact with this medium they find themselves obligated to adapt to the form and content of the on-line imperatives. This is about content that, while proceeding from other environments of production and distribution, are evolving so as to fit into the media logic of the internet.

The entertainment industry is starting to realise that the internet is not just a new distribution channel that takes their content reserves into other markets. The industry knows that the medium's own dynamic does not allow for conservative stances and that to be competitive it must know what the internaut demands of an on-line environment when accessing audiovisual content-with the aim of being able to design customised products capable of causing a strong impact on the audience.

The Internet's future evolution as a means of communication and entertainment must pass through the knowledge and loyalty of the current audience and through the analysis of its behaviour and needs.

In this sense, the entertainment industry must create and develop on-line products aimed at various segments of the population to maintain and ensure their future loyalty. So that the audiovisual contents must develop strategies in accordance with the profile of the new audiences: on the one hand young and trained in interaction and computer culture, and the other hand older and looking on-line for information and entertainment, along with all types of other large or small groups that can interact on-line

In terms of a dissemination model, something which would require a much wider space for analysis than this brief article, we would have to take a stance on YouTube, currently the space par excellence for on-line audiovisual content distribution. As seen from the perspective of distribution, this is the perfect tool since it permits user interaction as previously mentioned, with the protagonist, broadcaster, evaluator and receptor all-in-one. But if we focus on this platform as a tool to create new forms of audiovisual narration, we can see that it does not offer anything new not already seen in the analogical environment; its strong point is its capacity to be disseminated as a collective, but it does not offer tools to create the collective.

From the perspective of broadcaster, we are dealing with a more democratic dissemination system for audiovisual products since a possible audience can be reached which with analogical formats would be impossible. Without giving importance to the system, we can

ensure that this is dealing with a first and very important step towards new ways of on-line audiovisual expression, but a greater analysis is still necessary to offer the tools allowing for a greater collaborative interaction in terms of an audiovisual aspect.

However, the audiovisual production sector tries to suit its contents to the interactive medium, unfolding a wide array of products that include feature films and shorts, and all those other formats derived as a result of the technological demands like flash fiction and web series, to genres that have properly been integrated like video clips and trailers, along with comics and digital radio series. Below we provide a brief summary of the current state of these on-line genres.

5. Narrative genres and their introduction on-line

5.1. Feature films

The main problem the film and television industry and distributors face is the impossibility of passing this content on-line. The difficulties arising from the video's large file size and the lack of speed in transmitting them makes new strategies necessary to optimise the dissemination process of this content. Currently, downloading movies is often done as post-consumption with downloading software, and often illegally. In other cases, especially in television content, etc. the user can watch video on demand (VoD) in real time, just like YouTube, but legally.

For this, the content is stored on the server with video files that when requested by the user from their browser, a video server broadcasts the audiovisual content via streaming. So the user has the liberty of choosing from a list of alternatives on a menu, what content they want to consume, when, and the number of times they wish to do so. This service is known as Video on Demand (VoD).

As we discussed in the introduction, this is the main characteristic distinguishing between the video on demand and live broadcasting. So the internaut is free from the rigid structure of the television set where the content broadcast is organised by the established programming following mass audience criteria. Another advantage of this service in comparison to the typical television programming is the fact that the audiovisual content can be viewed as if watching a video player. The audiovisual genre whose distribution best suits the video on demand philosophy is film. So the internet, when the technological conditions allow it, will become a huge video club, accessible from any home, 24 hours a day. Without a doubt the entertainment of this on-line content requires broadband connections as the term describes: broadband internet distribution.

In 2001 the first movie pay-per-view was offered, following the formula of a *joint venture* (*Webnoize News*, August 2001), which involved five of the seven major studios. Initially the project was known as MovieFly, with the participation of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios (MGM), Paramount Pictures, Sony Pictures Entertainment, Universal Studios and Warner Bros.

According to Shapiro (2001), "the main motive for these companies to think of MovieFly was the privatisation of the on-line movie distribution business before it was completely absorbed by the illegal download services." This project was the start, but currently large companies are only looking at the on-line interactive movie merchandising distribution market along with the sale of videogames where the real business is generated for these companies.

The industry has not been able to provide the internaut with a better system for a small fee to watch a high quality feature film, rather than downloading a copy through current methods,

illegal, but very satisfying for the end user. So it is the audiovisual industry's responsibility to find an on-line distribution method for its feature films before the internet eliminates its business. Just like the music sector is being gobbled up by the internet without the sector having been transformed, the same is occurring with the audiovisual sector: it has not wanted to reinvent itself and recycle its business towards new ways, what can eventually lead to its own suicide.

5.2. Online shorts

In terms of fictional narratives, the short is without a doubt the star genre on-line. With acceptable downloading size and times, the audiovisual production of shorts has become the ideal genre for telling flash fiction on-line, all simply for logistical reasons. Condemned for viewing in circuits with small distributions and scopes, the short has traditionally been one of the most deeply rooted genres for young audiovisual creators, and not in vain, it continues to be the format par excellence where future audiovisual professionals gain their experience: Scriptwriters, producers, actors...

The internet has allowed the short to receive a well-deserved hegemonic status. The fact that so many on-line festivals have flourished is proof of its success. Just to name a few: "Second Film Festival," "Less Than 1 Minute," "The Sync on line Film Festival," "Salt Lake City Festival," and nationally: "Festival on-line Minuto y Medio," "Festival de Hispavista," "Festival de Cine Comprimido" from Notodofilmfest.com.

Meanwhile different spaces dedicated to the exhibition and promotion of shorts have emerged and have contributed to boosting the production of this audiovisual genre in youth. In general, they all present a similar structure: You can view shorts and search information on all events relative to the production of short audiovisual productions, premiers, files and technical characteristics, festivals, news, forums and chances for the internaut to evaluate the shorts viewed and give an opinion. However, the only interaction between the internaut and the author of these shorts is the page itself, through the forums. Collective creations are not possible, usually found in alternative net-art spaces. This snowball effect has contributed to the fact that some television channels are forced to also insert specific spaces dedicated to promoting shorts.

Without a doubt, the internet has shown its huge potential in terms of a presentation and promotional platform. It has also created a commercial framework around shorts which was unimaginable in the traditional audiovisual industry.

5.3. Flash fiction

Restricting the length of a short story as much as possible, we find ourselves with a sub-genre appearing because of and for the internet: flash fiction. Almost never surpassing a minute in length, along with advertising commercials, video clips or trailers, this is one of the most popular audiovisual genres amongst the majority of internauts. Arising because of the limitations of broadband, flash fiction has gone beyond the short at an attempt to take advantage of the narrative in a reduced format.

5.4. Web series

Under this section we have classified what is a namesake to the television series, but on the Internet's digital terrain. That is, fictional productions made and designed for the internet with a series structure, multiple narrative nuclei and an array of specific rhetorical resources that allow for the telling of fiction's vicissitudes with the aim of capturing and maintaining the viewer's attention one episode at a time.

The series constitute a sure value on the television programme, so it isn't strange that producers have considered exploring the genre's possibilities on the Internet. In fact, lately we are witnessing a proliferation of web series made both as videos and flash. They take characteristics of the genre and adjust to the on-line medium's context by changing the communication between the contents and viewers.

Assuming the current limits of the internet, and with a flash fictional structure, each episode lasts between one and five minutes. Web series are usually presented weekly, and aimed at a very specific target: young adolescents that visit entertainment sites. So the topics discussed and the characters involved present a set of specific resources that consolidate the expectations of this micro-audience.

Web series renew narrative strategies that have been already consolidated for some time on television. But they incorporate on-line resources like active participation from the audience in the story's progress and the ease which this interactive medium allows for the generation of virtual communities - something which is key to consolidate the series' fictional universe.

Hosted on entertainment sites or websites created ad hoc, web series extend the fictional universe through virtual on-line communities that constitute a significant meeting point for the series' followers. These are spaces where the user stops being a consumer of contents and becomes an active subject interacting with other members of the community concerning the plot, which sometimes goes on building it one episode at a time. The registered user has access to all the inherent advantages of the virtual community: viewing new episodes, accessing exclusive content for members of the community and detailed biographies of the stars, the making of, trailers, participating in debate forums concerning the characters and the story's development, access to exclusive chat zones, emails and list serves... This way virtual communities are a key part of the strategy to achieve greater audience indexes for web series, but at the same time actively boosting loyalty to the site hosting it.

The web series format is often used on YouTube by many users that couldn't possibly offer their ideas on conventional television, and provide a way of letting the public view them.

5.5. Flash Web Series

The use of Adobe Flash software created an on-line revolution, and is currently a basic tool to develop animated web series, many of which were well established off-line and whose quality has proven that high level animated products can be enjoyed on-line

Amongst the most important examples in this narrative genre include the "South Park" series, which was one of the pioneers in originally using this medium. This televised phenomena knew how to integrate itself on-line with the help of its creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone who developed special episodes in Flash for the web. While another pioneer, Tim Burton, created a beautiful animation produced by Flinch Animation Studios, "StainBoy," a small masterpiece converted into an animation series. Burton's aesthetics provide a unique environment making it different from everything imagined on-line at that time. Now it is a classic point of reference for many on-line animators. It also won best on-line animation series at the IFILM Online Awards.

5.6. Interactive Comics

Traditionally printed on paper, the comic is one of the products that most easily has migrated on-line. It has tried to explore the possibilities of its on-line distribution, and is also one of the genres that is most open to collective creation, with many examples of joint projects between various on-line authors. However, the use of these tools is not in the majority, and continues

to be more of a digital contribution to the physical format, almost original, even imitating the digital edition.

In our opinion this involves mere digital adaptations, far from taking advantage of the audiovisual and interactive possibilities the medium offers. They limit themselves to timidly incorporating some aspects that, while important, do not satisfy the expectations of a generation of users predisposed to actively interact with new information and communication technologies. However, we find some interesting proposals where comics try to explore the on-line media's environment more intensely. Among the most suggestive examples are two different but equally interesting proposals.

The first is McCloud's on-line comic at Scottmccloud.com. To the surprise of the genre's on-line fans, the author provides us with a non-interactive and linear structured comic, which does cleverly maximise the physical medium's specific characteristics, where it will be read, while adjusting the narrative elements typical of the comic through two basic concepts: expanded panels and trails. Both concepts are carried out by McCloud in the *Zot! Comic Online*.

The expanded panel is an enormous space where the author develops the story from a vertical scroll, enabling the reader a totally recognised browsing system, while marking a reading rhythm at will. With this the author literally can organise the composed space of the screen as if it were an infinite panel, opening up graphic elements that are impossible on paper. This resource's possibilities are especially interesting in terms of its formal aspects, allowing very suggestive visual effects that can delay or accelerate the narrative tempo of the story.

Another element used by McCloud is the trail. This consists of interconnecting lines between the different comic panels that show their reading order. But besides serving as a reading guide, it serves as a structural element in the story, cleverly guiding the reader between parallel actions developing at the same time. Without a doubt, the author has made serious attempts at creatively exploring the formal possibilities of the medium, trying to coherently develop a narrative comic adapted to the digital medium, without investigating its interactive possibilities.

The other, more daring model, would be marked by the story's interactivity and non-linearity, even though it leaves the exploration of all on-line audiovisual resources aside. Unfortunately, all attempts carried out tend to focus on one of these elements, while rejecting the rest.

5.7. Digital trailers

Internet has also supposed a complete restructuring and re-evaluation of the trailer genre. The attractiveness of being able to preview just shot movie images that will still take months to reach the movie theatres has not gone unnoticed in the movie industry. According to the Arbitron Webcast Ratings, 51% of video streaming on the Web is for viewing movie trailers, placing this audiovisual genre at the head of the list, above music videos (42%) and meteorological reports, that curiously enough take third place with 34% of the streaming. While also being one of the most implemented audiovisual genres on-line, the trailer is experiencing a strange mutation in terms of format and length. Besides fulfilling the function of anchor in the film's promotional chain, its duration is lengthened incorporating a serial structure that allows for the generation of new publicity strategies.

The trailer, traditionally conditioned to 30 second commercials, has passed on to become a totally new narrative structure, to the extent of becoming a short version of the film. It is not uncommon for many trailers now seen on-line to reach a duration of 4 minutes. This demands the producers for new narrative strategies, more so if we keep in mind that these new trailers

do not just pass by the television weeks previous to the premier, but are framed within an advertising campaign that starts on-line months before, and even often include two versions of the same: first a short one with key shots from the movie still being shot; second a longer trailer available once production is finished. This consolidates the trailer's function as an anchor and as an integral part of the movie's global promotional campaign. But besides all that previously mentioned, the internet is allowing the trailer genre to reach further and expand the movie's expectations.

5.8. Online video clips

Music videos are the second most streamed videos viewed on the web, according to Arbitron Inc. But the on-line medium allows video clips much more possibilities than mere distribution. The current video clip has introduced small details that allow for the Internet's interaction, manifesting that the companies dedicated to the production of video clips are rethinking the development of the genre in this medium.

Movie makers are making a clear attempt to take interactivity further by offering users a more creative participation, permitting self-production of the content. Using dialogue interfaces close to what we see in domestic digital video editors, users can produce what will later be shown.

6. Conclusions

The development of the Web 2.0 is indirectly provoking an avalanche of audiovisual content, and its capacity to create communities provides an extensive use of audiovisual formats. This stage has allowed for a review of the different contents that make up the on-line audiovisual universe, allowing us to see how the genres originally from other communication mediums are evolving to adapt to the Internet's logic. But as we have seen, the on-line audiovisual product is not varying too much in terms of narrative form. This change is what will really allow for the future exploration of the full extent of audiovisual contents. The creation of new narrative genres exclusive to the internet will allow for a new evolution towards other products and services that have yet to be explored. That is, to incorporate the set of rules and standards implicitly guiding the way in which content must be processed and presented, so as to take the most advantage of the medium's characteristics and adjust them to the audience's needs.

In this adaptation process, essentially an evolving process, we have seen that the contents derived from other technologies tend to naturally make the most of the abilities derived from the medium's intrinsic distributive capacity. But the strong conditions and specific interactivity are forced to make key changes that affect their form and content, supporting the creation of new on-line audiovisual formats.

From the hybrid of genres and formats, content is being developed with the characteristics of the Internet in mind, adjusting to the specific internaut group demands in an attempt to consolidate specific micro-audiences. We are convinced that the segmentation of the on-line audience will help reinvent genres and formats, allowing content to be created depending on their preferences and capacities. All may point towards an increasingly specialisation of contents, following the path television has taken. These specialised contents will increase in numbers and heterogeneity, designed by and for specific consumer groups.

But the genre's path of distribution and transformation is a return trip. The trend seems to indicate that those products that have successfully worked on-line, that is, deeply rooted in the audience, tend to migrate to other distribution channels. The entertainment industry is not disposed to let any business opportunity escape when dealing with reaching an audience. So

we are finding an increasing number of compilation of shorts and flash fiction in different supports like the CD or DVD, which allows for expansive commercialisation.

Something similar is occurring with web series, that are better received on-line: once consolidated, they jump to the television, being incorporated as members with a space in the programming. We are witnessing a total synergy in the media's panorama promoted by information and communication technologies, with a trend towards converging contents that may be produced on a low budget and easily distributed through more than one channel.

But, as of today, this trend towards convergence is limited, since the on-line medium's conditions for viewing clearly establish a difference between the different mediums, basically in terms of interactivity. So despite television's attempts to incorporate formats resulting from interactivity, Internet continues to be the interactive medium par excellence because it allows for different forms of audience participation with continued responses and motivated by the user. So even though specific on-line contents rebound back to the television, the on-line medium must continue assuming the leading role in recreating genres and formats that are customised to the internaut. Because in terms of audiovisual and narrative genres, there are still many things to be decided in the ever-changing map of the internet.

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