The Greek Chorus as a Model for Agents in Interactive Stories

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Abstract

This paper describes how the device of the chorus was used in plays from ancient Greece and posits ways in which these uses may translate as bases for interactions with computer-based stories.

In ancient Greek theater, the chorus mediated between the audience and the action. Now, chorus members can be seen as agents who are not directly part of the action, but who reflect or modulate it as the play unfolds. We are considering functions and structures of the chorus as models for roles and behaviors of agents in interactive stories. We see users of interactive story systems as participants in the narrative who are sometimes analogous to the chorus and sometimes analogous to the audience.

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What follows is a compendium of ideas that could fuel the design and implementation of story systems using the chorus as a paradigm for interaction. At this point, our goal is to inspire discussion of the idea and to begin fleshing out technical requirements.

Functions of the Chorus

The chorus may clarify, magnify, subdue, transpose, interpret, re-tell, frame, or give perspective to the narrative action. It may fill in "holes" in the narrative, offer commentary, foreshadow the action, and reflect the action (often amplifying it) by re-enacting it in other modalities. The chorus acts as an intervening layer that sometimes protects the audience. The chorus may report, for example, on incidents that may be too horrifying or dangerous for the audience to directly experience, such as a suicide or a multiple death.

With its range of functions and its position as buffer, the chorus creates a bounded space for the action. Oedipus and other characters can consult the chorus, just as audience members can attend to the chorus in order to heighten their awareness of narrative elements. The chorus is thus both part and not part of the action. Through it the audience becomes sufferers of the action - they can undergo it, but can't influence it.

In our discussion, we consider ways in which participants "suffer" the action but also sometimes create it through their interactions. Our considerations include situations in which the chorus may be comprised of one participant, many participants, one or many agents, one participant with several agents, or several participants with several agents.

Possible Forms of Interaction

The chorus in an interactive story system may be imagined as:
  - a set of perspectives that we choose for becoming privy to the action (and which we can change as we wish during the action).
  - a storyteller who we can interrogate and interrupt. ("Tell me more about that, less about that...why is he doing it?," etc.)
  - an intimate friend whispering in our ear about the story (like going to the movies with a good friend).
  - part of the action, but a part that is detachable or that turns to directly address the participant.
  - a deeper or alternate level of the action (like a character's subconscious or a subtext underlying the action).

- an elaborator that can respond to a chosen section of story by showing an amplification or another parallel story. (The system would contain a stock of primary "mythic" narratives and can show those in reaction to the narrative at hand.)

- a filter that reacts to events (perhaps randomly) generated by a program and constitutes them as a story according to its particular parameters (e.g., values, point of view, etc.).

- a narrative controller that keeps the story coherent by filling in areas where participant's choices result in key parts of the action being missed.

Structural Considerations

The frequency of interactions would no doubt be a function of the topic of the story and participants' engagement with it. However, as a point of reference, it may be interesting to note that the part of the chorus in the classic plays ranged from one-seventh to one-fourth of the total number of lines (Bates, p.28). One interesting experiment would be to modulate the timing or intensity of their interventions according to parts of the drama: perhaps the interventions are mild or sparse as the story opens but increase in frequency or variety as it approaches climax.

Those interested in language experiments may note the pertinence of rhyme and rhythm, particularly lyric verse, in utterances of the Greek chorus (see, for example, Barthes 1985 and Bates 1961).

Origin and Status of the Chorus

Participants may engage with a chorus that is already established or may choose between different types of chorus. (For example, different choruses may represent different moral points of view or may be comprised of different populations (e.g., men vs. women, townspeople vs. strangers, etc.). Alternatively, participants may create or collaborate with the system to create a chorus. (For example, one participant may comment through audio or graphics on the story, then the next participant (on a net for example) creates her commentary, and after a while there is a multi-threaded series of commentaries that participants can maneuver through; in this way, participants can be part of the chorus.)

Representation of the Chorus

The chorus may be:
- a set of "intelligent," representational graphic figures.
- a non-realistic set of sounds, images, texts.
- a voice or set of voices.
- a point of view or visual perspective (in a 3D space), like a camera angle giving a certain view of the action; or the POV of a particular character.
- the internal monologue of a particular character.

Possible Scenarios

Imagine an initial experiment in which the chorus consists of a group of agents whose individual functions are simple and clearly defined. One agent might simply repeat things. Another might strive to make rhymes from some intersection between the story script and a contextually defined vocabulary. Another, from time to time, might reveal pre-recorded snippets of plot events that are yet to occur. Now, enter the participant, who plays the role of yet another chorus-agent. In a system allowing for spoken interaction, the story script, the prepared vocabularies for each agent, and perhaps other sources could be stored and somehow organized as the potential stuff of what the participant might say as the story unfolds. When the participant happens to say something that the program is keyed for, a chorus-agent is activated to say some follow-on or related thing, and this triggers a remark from another chorus-agent, and another, and so on. Modulating the outcome is part of the implementation challenge: the result might range from lyric verse to cacophony, and getting the whole thing to stop so the story can go is not a trivial concern.

Or, imagine a situation where multiple users successively engage with the narrative. Each establishes, with the aid of an agent, a choric representative who embodies her or his emotional and conceptual reactions to the story. This representative has a certain amount of intelligence and can improvise reactions to the narrative following the general stated feelings of the user. Such representatives accumulate and begin to function as a chorus, layering the narrative with interpretation and comment, or even adding physical elements. Each new user thus receives a differently enriched version and is able to add new elements as well. The chorus members would have enough intelligence to perhaps negotiate certain reactions among themselves, or perhaps to form alliances, so that those who dislike a certain character could act together to strengthen the negative presentation of the character.

Uses

Implementations of a chorus could serve as accompaniment to a narrative, or as assistant to participants experiencing an interactive narrative. Such a system could also help to create a narrative or theater/film piece, or to organize a large set of narratives.

Summary

According to Nietzsche, "The process of the tragic chorus is the dramatic proto-phenomenon: to see oneself transformed before one's own eyes and to begin to act as if one had actually entered into another body, another character. This process stands at the beginning of the origin of drama." (p.64). This description strikes a note that resonates both with conceptions of characters-as-agents and capabilities of early interactive systems.

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