The Greek Chorus as a Model for Interaction with Stories

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Abstract

This paper describes an experiment with the theatrical device of the Greek chorus, which serves as a model for user interactions with a computer-based narrative. By interacting with the story, users can learn more and more about the early days of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Much of the information is supplied by chorus members who comment on the action or address the characters.

The software is designed to keep track of users' interactions and to use them as bases for controlling aspects of the presentation as the story unfolds. No matter how often or in what ways a user chooses to interact, the story remains intact. Interaction has to do with richness in detail rather than fundamental changes in story structure.

Although the initial prototype is on a single-user platform, we envision other versions, and other instantiations of the chorus model, on multi-user platforms.

Recent discussions with Larry Friedlander of Stanford University have resulted in the articulation of a model for multiuser interaction with stories.[1] We draw from the theatrical device of the Greek chorus, a collective which forms a kind of buffer between the audience and the narrative action. Chorus members may address the characters, the audience, or each other as they clarify, magnify, subdue, transpose, re-tell, or give perspective to the action. The functions and positioning of such an intervening layer suggest ways in which users could interact with computer-based stories.

A work-in-progress with Kevin Brooks of the MIT Media Lab applies this model to a particular story. *Tired of Giving In* is about an important moment in American history, the earliest days of the Civil Rights Movement. The story begins on December 1, 1955, when Rosa Parks was arrested on a segregated public bus for refusing to give her seat to a white man.[2] The black community of Montgomery, Alabama, spent the next three days organizing a boycott of the city buses for December 5, the day of Parks's trial. Remarkably, the buses were nearly empty on that day -- more than 40,000 people stayed off the buses. Our story culminates with the mass meeting that evening, when the young Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., gave his first historic speech and those gathered voted to continue the boycott.

As the story unfolds, the chorus comments from perspectives of the past, the present, and the future, relative to the time of the story. The chorus past are Africans taken as slaves to the American South in earlier centuries. The chorus present are people of Montgomery in 1955 who have a view on the city's racially segregated way of life. The chorus future are young Americans of today who try to understand the roots and prospects of their multicultural realities.

Users interact with the story through the chorus members. Activated chorus members comment on the action or address a character. One of the members of the chorus future has the special function of revealing sources of information and multimedia materials used in the program. Another member of chorus future enables users to add textual comments that other users may later choose to consult. These comments are represented as graffiti on various scenes. The program is designed to keep track of users' interactions and to use them as bases for controlling aspects of the presentation as the story proceeds, such as which chorus members are active at a given time.

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[1] See Friedlander, L., and Strohecker, C. 1995. "The Greek Chorus as a Model for Agents in Interactive Stories." Working notes, AAAI-95 Spring Symposium, "Interactive Story Systems: Plot and Character."
[2] Whereas current vernacular favors identification of groups by nationality or culture, our designations of racial groups reflect usage during the time of the Civil Rights Movement.

The chorus members introduce themselves as *Tired of Giving In* opens:[3]

Members of the chorus past have proud, mournful, and resigned attitudes toward their situation and that of their descendants in Montgomery.

There are six members of the chorus present. A black man and woman take issue with the segregation laws and customs. A black woman and a white woman are acquiescent, going along with whatever seems to be the prevalent view or behavior. A black man and a white man are "systemized" -- each has accepted the lore of white supremacy and black inferiority.

Members of the chorus future are urban dwellers who express themselves through graffiti. Their experience is integrated and multicultural, but each sees it differently. A black woman is optimistic; her voice carries us through the story as she looks back on events leading to the bus boycott. An Asian man is apathetic, finding it difficult to understand what the events of the story may have to do with him. A Hispanic woman is pessimistic; she sees less what has changed than what still needs changing.

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[3] Illustrations are by Steven Alexander.

The story unfolds through four main scenes: the town of Montgomery, the bus on which Rosa Parks is arrested, the jail cell in which she is incarcerated, and the church where people celebrate the success of the bus boycott's first day.

Users begin by exploring the town of Montgomery. This scene serves to introduce the story's setting and characters. Users can select an area of the screen to find out about goings-on in that part of town.

For example, if the user selects the Montgomery Fair department store, all but that part of the background fades...

...and characters appropriate to that part of the story appear. Tacky Gayle is the mayor of Montgomery. Rosa Parks is a seamstress in the store's tailor shop. Clantello Bagley is the manager of the City Bus Lines. Udo is the member of chorus past who comments on Parks's situation, amplifying a sense of being trapped. The other chorus members are of her time and place: acquiescent Beulah and Sally Jo, and systemized Bud and Jonah.

The characters begin their dialog: Gayle asks Parks to hem his pants and proceeds to ignore her while he talks with Bagley. They discuss the black community's growing dissatisfaction with the city bus service.

Users can intervene by querying a chorus member or character as the dialog proceeds.

Chorus members comment on the action from their individual perspectives. At the same time, images relating to the scene come and go, forming a moving mosaic that supplements the illustrations.

If a user queries a character, all but that character and a system-selected chorus member fade. The selection is based on patterns the user has demonstrated through previous interactions: the system strives to balance the presentation by choosing a chorus member whose perspective complements earlier remarks.

The character and chorus member converse briefly, and then the broader dialog resumes. Some of the dialog derives from reports of events of the time, and some is fictional, loosely based on facts and impressions.

After such excursions, the user returns to the main scene. Now the options are to explore other aspects of the scene or continue with the story.

Other possibilities in the town scene include the Parks home, where Rosa Parks prepares breakfast for her husband and mother while museing about conditions on the segregated buses. In the "whites only" park, the mayor practices a speech in which he extols Montgomery and Alabama, and insists on preserving the status quo. Black

citizens gather at the lunch counter of Dean's drug store and exchange stories about arrests and incidents on buses. People at the bus stop grumble when they see a driver with a reputation for being mean.

Between scenes, chorus members amplify key moments of the story through metaphor and lyrical speech.
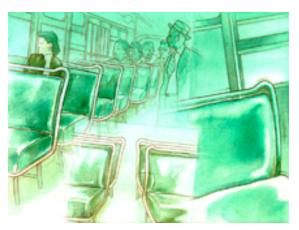
Refrain: Chorus members chant about the comfort of old shoes and the habits they can represent.

The bus gets crowded as it approaches Empire Theater. When the front seats fill up and a white man is left standing, the driver demands that the blacks in the first row of the back section give up their seats. All but Rosa Parks do. The driver has her arrested.

Refrain: Chorus members chant about mistreatment, endurance, fear, and the law.

One policeman grants permission for Rosa Parks to drink some water, but the other immediately denies permission. They repeatedly ignore her requests to make a phone call as she is photographed and fingerprinted. Voices of the chorus past offer comfort and support in the jail cell.

Refrain: Finally, Parks is allowed to use the telephone. Her call is the first of many during the next few days. Word of the arrest and planned boycott spreads by phone, mimeograph, newspaper, word of mouth, and preachers' sermons. The buses are empty on Monday morning, a far greater success than anyone expected. Parks is found guilty, but everyone feels triumphant about the show of community strength.

Rev. King encourages everyone to reach out for "the daybreak of freedom and justice and equality." No one knows it yet, but their actions will lead to a year-long bus boycott and ultimately to a Supreme Court ruling ending segregation on public transportation.

Without interaction, the program plays a set sequence including each of the four scenes and the refrains. One of the members of chorus future, Latisha, comes forward as narrator of the main events. Details of the story unfold through user interaction. Thus, no matter how often or in what ways the user chooses to interact, the story remains intact. Interaction has to do with richness in detail rather than fundamental changes in story structure.

The more users interact, the more they come to know about the story events and characters. And, the more users interact, the more information the program has to determine which chorus members will be available to comment and which visuals will supplement the dialog. The bank of visuals includes illustrations, photographs, and movies.

This is a work-in-progress. Although we are implementing the initial prototype on a single-user platform, we hope to the implement other versions, and other instantiations of the chorus model, on multi-user platforms.

We are addressing several problems relevant to the domain of interactive narrative: What happens to stories when computational processes assist in their development and presentation? What computational processes can meaningfully affect different presentations of a story, and therefore different experiences of it? How can user input feed into these processes? And, can structures and functions of the dramatic Greek chorus provide a generally useful model for agents and multiuser interaction?

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