



STORYmixer

STORYmixer
An audiovisual collaborative storytelling game

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Introduction

Studies on virtual role-playing games have shown that playing can become a daily artifact, a way of socializing through formation of familiar-stranger relationships (Duchenaud et al.). Players are engaged in a reciprocal process of (role-) playing, collaborating, and competing within a virtually constructed fantasy world. Recent efforts in the domain of serious games have demonstrated how games can be successfully applied to motivate learning, educate about health or even provide incentives for proactive behavior change (e.g. physical activity, smoking). Similar to popular video games, many of these attempts engage players in intrusive game experiences enriched by sophisticated graphics and animations. Approaches in the field of ubiquitous computing have demonstrated that game design can create enjoyable motivational experiences while incorporating notions of the game into the physical world (Bell et al., Lin et al.).

With our research we want to go one step further and answer questions such as “How can playful interactions be situated within daily settings?”, “How can we provide emotive rather than intrusive forms of experience through engagement in games?”, “Can less immersive collaborative games provide as enjoyable and long-lasting experiences as competitive structures?” Instead of motivating players to take actions for improvement or more efficient and productive behavior, we want to introduce games that provide artistic environments in everyday life and build a sense of collaborative awareness and connectedness between the players. Spectators should be transformed into actors, players into creators and competition into playful communication and interaction. Games, art, and interactive experiences intermingle to create less intrusive but richer emotional encounters.

Game Philosophy

Inspired by John Cage's *Ars Combinatoria* and Mozart's dice game, we wish to create a game experience where players themselves are part of a combinatorial art piece, collaboratively telling stories and simultaneously mixing a sound-collage. The STORYmixer hence constitutes an interface for playful collaborative art creation that combines literary and audio elements. By providing artifacts from stories and various sound elements as input for the game, the player need not have an understanding about writing or sound mixing. Art and collaboration are the main game elements and in applying these elements the player is involved in an interactive process to create an artistic piece.

John Cage talked about "the togetherness of differences" (Perloff et al.) when he combined texts from Wittgenstein, Thoreau, Emerson, McLuhan, Newspapers, and his own writings or when he created galleries in constant motion such as the museum exhibition *Rolywholyover A Circus*. In Mozart's dice game ("Musikalisches Würfelspiel") the usually passive audience could recombine a number of musical elements through the random function of throwing dice to select the elements (Zweig). In both examples randomness "calculated" by machines (computer and dices) contributed to the outcome of the creation. In the STORYmixer this randomness is substituted by individual choice and the willingness (or lack of willingness) of each player to collaborate. The amount of collaboration, and the speed and interactivity during the game is up to the player. While the experience of the game is centered on the two levels of interactive play, the story and the sound-collage, the outcome is highly dependent on the collaborative decision. This may take players into a negotiated space of dialogue outside of the game. The outcome of the game is up to the players; they can choose to focus on constructing a story, or a music piece, or both. The final creation may be absurd, inharmonious, dreamy, mysterious, or a coherent sound and story space.

Game Design



Fig 1 The game setting: 5 players with 5 joysticks distinguished by color pads on the floor and the associated colors of the game "avatars"

Basics

STORYXmixer involves 5 players in the collaborative design of a story. Stories will be constructed from images and text, henceforth referred to as story objects. These objects of image or text will each be associated to a sound. The sounds may include sound effects for the story like footsteps, whispers, or ambient sounds like rhythms or music. Each player chooses a story object and then navigates this story object into a collective game space, the STORYmixer gameBoard.

Players are able to conduct individual play but must also work collaboratively. Players who approach the STORYmixer with a competitive game mindset will choose story objects from their selection area (Fig.2) but then will find that their choice may not fit well with the selections of the other players. Through negotiation in real space outside the game as well as play within the gameBoard the players will come to an agreed upon story. If players choose to exchange their story object for another they return back to the selection area and pick a new one.

We have deliberately reinforced a notion from the typical game environment, that of the avatar. Once a player has chosen a story object, this object becomes the player's "avatar" in the gameBoard area. While players navigate their objects through the collective area they link their individually chosen game elements. In addition to navigating the visual object, the sound associated with that object will begin to play once it has joined the collective gameBoard area. The sounds of all players will thus intermingle creating an ambient sound space of the story. This sound space is inherently collective and thus reinforces the game as non-individual play. In the visual space of the gameBoard, there may exist a tension between the player as "avatar" and the player as contributor to the story, but with the collective sound space there will be little ability to ignore the collaborative nature of the game.

Navigation (the Slotmachine Idea)

Each player begins play in the story object selection area, henceforth called the composition frame (Fig.2). The composition frame will be divided into five selection menus, one for each player. In moving the joystick up and down, the player will scroll through his selection menu selecting from a range of story objects. Each player has a different list of possible story objects she can choose to incorporate into the story. The metaphor of a casino slot machine is used to literally describe the selection process of the players. Each player's selection menu represents a single scroll on a casino slot machine. When a player purposefully decides on an object, this choice becomes the "randomness" usually imparted by the slot machine's internal mechanism, because his independent choice affects the total success of the story. Spinning the scrolls to select a story object can be as collaborative as navigating in the gameBoard space, if the players experience this metaphor as we have intended. A story and sound space is created collaboratively inside the game (selecting and arranging story elements) and outside the game (collective audio-visual experience, interaction in physical world).

Selection

Once the player finds a story object he prefers he selects it by pushing his joystick to the right position. At this point the object will appear in the collaborative gameBoard. Players may individually or collectively decide to exchange one player's story object for a new one for a better fit with the other players' objects. When choosing to exchange an object the player will navigate his object down until it disappears from the gameBoard area and his composition frame scroll will light up showing that it is activated. He can then scroll and choose an object in the same manner as before.

Rounds & Gravity

Once a set of five story objects have been arranged on the gameBoard the players will agree that it is complete and this arrangement will become a set story segment. The players may then begin another round of selection, play, and arrangement. Three rounds will complete the story and at the end of the game the story will 'play back.' The selected images and text will show as a slide show with the sounds associated with each round playing for the duration of that story segment. In order to motivate coordination among the players, a gravity factor is incorporated into the game as soon as one player stops to move the joystick (in both, the gameBoard or the selection area). The gravity is directed to the top of the game screen (more like a helium effect than gravity) and will increase as more players finalize their position in the story. Hence it will become more difficult for the players to move their avatars around.

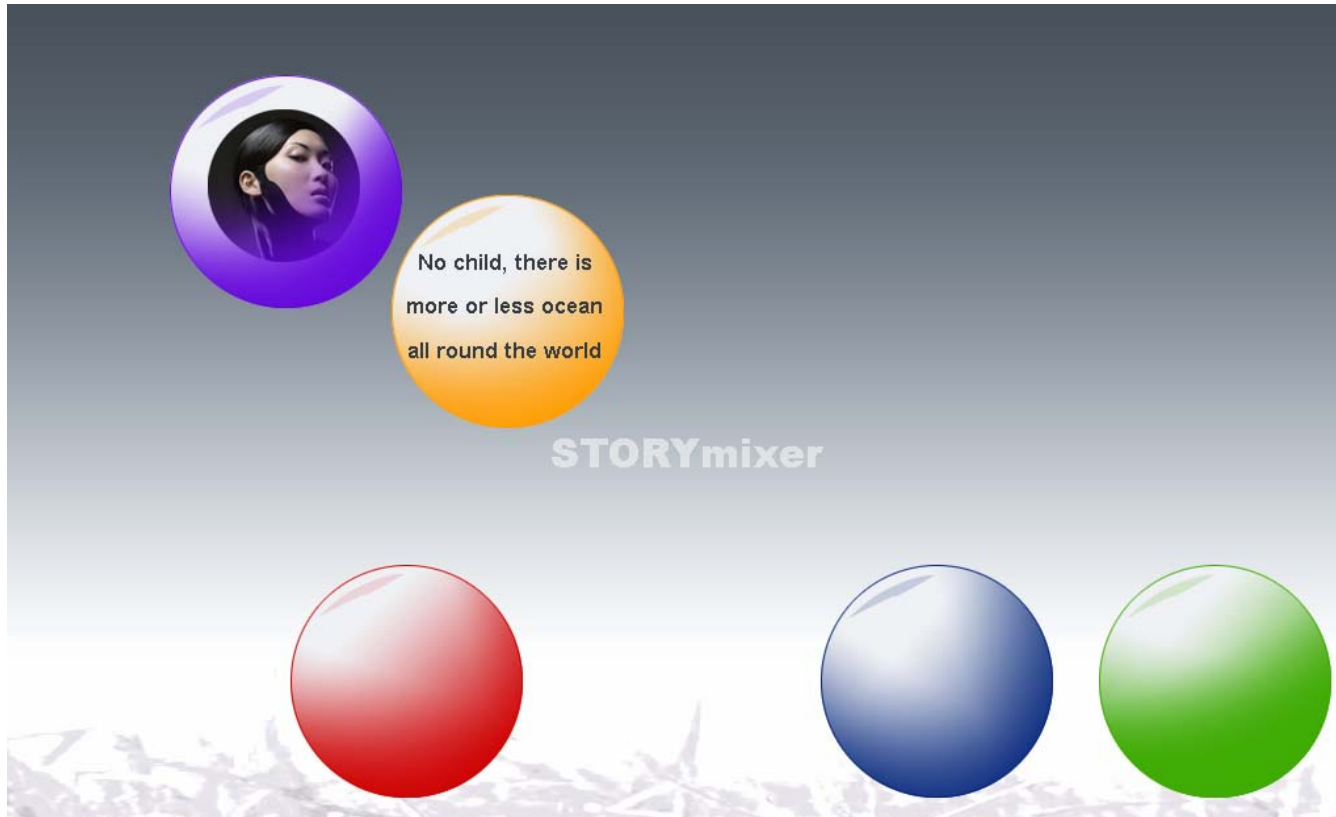
During the first round it is expected that players may return to the composition frame often, negotiating what kind of story they will build. The second and third rounds of play might be more focused, with greater discussion occurring while players are in the composition frame. The individual selection layout may appear at first to be a menu for each individual player, but on further investigation by the players will also resemble the slot machine where the best outcome is one that has a good fit across all the scrolls. More negotiation in the real space outside the game may occur and the selection of story objects will become collective. Then the movement into the gameBoard space will be simplified, merely arranging objects in the proper order.

Planned Features:

We intend to incorporate the following additional features into the final version of the game:

- **A larger story object library:** Texts and images will be taken from a wider variety of literature, philosophical texts, and our own creations, etc. A larger library has already been created but will be incorporated.
- **Addition of more rounds:** only one round is currently implemented; the game ends after one round. In the final version of the game, players will create a story in at least three rounds. Each round of five story objects will be saved while players continue constructing the story in subsequent rounds. During 'playback' all the rounds will be linked together as one story. The players may have the option of continuing for fewer or greater number of rounds
- **An opening menu** will provide instructions and introduce the game.
- **Improvement of 'Playback':** Speech will be added to the playback of the story at the end of the game. The story text will be spoken on top of the underlying sound collage. Images will be incorporated.

gameBoard



Selection area/composition frame

Fig 2 Screen Example

References

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