

Target BACRIM: Blurring Fact and Fiction to Create an Interactive Documentary Game

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Abstract. Target: BACRIM is an immersive and interactive documentary game that exposes the atrocities of Colombia's paramilitary forces in one of its most violent regions. The producers combine both non-fiction and fiction to create a game that places the user at the heart of the story. Through this *docufiction*, which is anchored in augmented reality, the user or participant experiences danger first-hand. For the user, this violence is a game. For the people who live in this region, it is a reality. Target: BACRIM wants to blur that distinction. We therefore create a world, where fiction and non-fiction are interrelated, where genres merge and where individual disciplines escape the shackles of tradition to converge and create an interactive documentary that places user experience at its core.

Keywords: interactive non-fiction · interactive documentary · augmented reality · journalism · games · newsgames

1 Introduction

Target: BACRIM¹ is an immersive and interactive documentary game that exposes the atrocities of Colombia's neo-paramilitary forces in one of its most violent regions. The producers combine both non-fiction and fiction to create a game that places the user at the heart of the story. Through this *docufiction*, which is anchored in augmented reality, the user or participant experiences danger first-hand. As a reporter, it is he or she who must decide how far they are willing to go for the story. How much risk will they expose themselves to? Are they prepared to endanger their lives or those of their friends and family in pursuit of the truth?

Target: BACRIM is more than a game. It is a journalistic project that unmasks organised crime, terrorising communities across the Colombian sub-region of the *Bajo Cauca*. The user unearths tales of social cleansing, extortion and murder. They uncover modern day slavery and police corruption, and reveal criminal networks engaged in illicit mining and trafficking. But only if they are brave enough to do so! For the user, this violence is a game. For the people who live in this region, it is a reality. Target: BACRIM wants to blur that distinction.

In essence, there are two interwoven stories and neither is the ultimate reality of the piece. One is a news story that gets to the hard truths about the actual conditions on the ground and the other is the fictional story that gets to truths about the human condition and what it is like to enter this world.

We therefore create a narrative, where fiction and non-fiction are interrelated, where genres merge and where individual disciplines escape the shackles of tradition to converge and create an interactive documentary that places user experience at its

¹ Target: BACRIM is a *Laboratory* production by Guerrilla Pictures with support from Bournemouth University and the Centre for Investigative Journalism in the UK and la Universidad de la Sabana and MIDBO in Colombia.

core. Indeed, as Aston and Gaudenzi note, ‘the most interesting work in i-docs often arises when genre is transcended and boundaries are blurred’ [1].

We intend to highlight some of the key challenges we continue to face in our production. Admittedly, the depth of analysis is somewhat limited within the confines of this poster. However, the aim is to provoke a discussion that can help contribute to ongoing debates about interactive storytelling and interactive documentary in particular, both in terms of theory and practice.

2 Changing Structures

Our principal intension is to transform the ‘watcher’ to ‘user’ and ‘doer’ [1]. This participation allows people to have a voice and to participate in the construction of reality [1], [4]. This is a reality the user can own. It involves an overhaul of both the ‘three-act structure’ and the 5Ws (who, what, where, why, when) of journalism. These give way to a narrative that lack the ‘neat beginnings, middles and ends required by Aristotelian drama’ [2]. The structure of Target: BACRIM builds on the nonlinear models defined by newsgame producer, Laurent Maurin [3] and constructs a narrative that we describe as a ‘thread of parallels’.

3 Competing Priorities: The Game vs the Journalism

Herein lies a central tension in constructing a nonlinear gaming narrative: is our project a game or is it a piece of journalism? Can it indeed be both, and if so, how? Games require users to look for content and rewards. Journalism seeks to include everyone, and so excluding users from particular content or stories could be seen as counter productive. However, this is still journalism, but ‘with a different logic’ [5]. It is no longer our story, but the user’s. We hope the result is a more meaningful journalism. This is a journalism that people feel; that they experience and not just read, see or hear.

4 ‘Fictioning’ Fact and ‘Pulling the Character’

Our documentary is not character-driven, but ‘character-pulled’: because the user plays the role of the protagonist, this fictional character is invested with his or her own traits, behaving in accord with that person's disposition, i.e. bold, meek, focused, erratic, etc. and so therefore, the protagonist does not actually ‘drive’ the story. Instead, this character is drawn into the story by compelling events and the actions of other supporting characters with more clearly defined traits. As Michael Mateas has noted, the characters in an interactive drama ‘should be rich enough that the player can infer a consistent model of the character’s thoughts. These thoughts become a material resource for player action’ [6].

These characters can also provide anchors within the open story world of a ‘mosaic narrative’ [7]. That is to say that fictional characters can also be a useful guide for the user. This open world can be daunting and so characters can serve not only as a device to enhance the overall experience by strengthening the user’s involvement, but also as a vehicle to help guide the user through the narrative with subtle hints, overt instructions or even to play tricks.

5 Augmented Reality: Interaction, Immersion and Personalization

The concept of augmented reality is central to our game. We want the user to feel threatened. We want them to live the story of the people they encounter. The aim is to immerse the user as much as we can in our storyline through the use of their personal email and telephone number. Augmented reality therefore allows us to take the user out of their comfort zone and place them directly in our story. For this to be effective, we must actually incorporate the user into the narrative. We must make their decisions impact on the story in front of them. Through ‘completely open’ interaction, we want the user and the documentary to constantly change and adapt to each other [7]. As Brenda Laurel notes, the player’s agency ‘must have real significance at the level of the plot’ [8].

6 Conclusion

Target: BACRIM creates an open world of danger and risk. By combining fact and fiction through the use of augmented reality, we believe the user is able not only to see or witness this world, but is also able to experience it.

The notion of experience is undoubtedly central to interactive documentary. It can be achieved and has been achieved in various innovative ways. Indeed Target: BACRIM is by no means the only project that is attempting to break new ground in the field of interactive documentary. This poster is simply an attempt to share our particular construction of *docufiction* through game design. We hope the observations we have made go some way towards providing guidance for fellow producers of similar projects. We also hope we have identified not only practical dilemmas through our brief observations, but that we have also drawn attention to key theoretical tensions within this ever-evolving genre; tensions, which undoubtedly warrant much further analysis and debate.

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