

Old industries and new opportunities

In this paper I would like to describe the interactive movie from a number of perspectives. First of all I would like to describe some of my own hopes for this category and its future development. This development does not take place in a political or economical vacuum, however, and therefore I would like to describe some of those actors that have an interest in the development of this concept; the game industry, the film industry and the television industry. A further look into these industries shows how different interests tend to shape the concept of the interactive movie differently. It also shows some very dissimilar ways of approaching the concept in practice and thus these industries possess diverse types of know-how that all point toward relevant aspects of the interactive movie

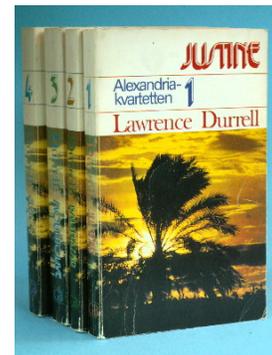
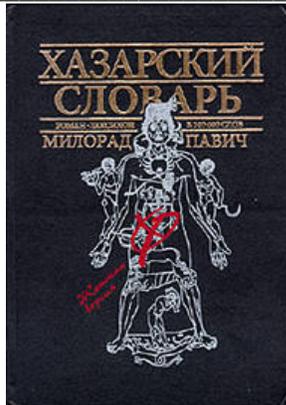
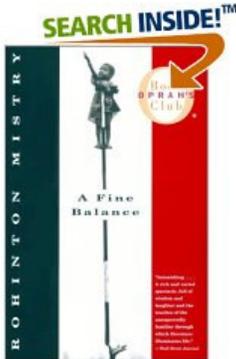
As follows I wish to broaden the field of interactive media rather than narrowing it. Not because I dislike precision but because interactive media are still in a state of development and require openness in our way of conceptualising it. New technologies keep turning up and with those new creative and artistic possibilities appear. If the concepts we use are too narrow they soon get useless. Hence, I prefer a broad definition of the field of interactive movies that include all sorts of audiovisual media that have storytelling and user interaction as their main qualities. This should leave enough room for the technologies of tomorrow.

Why is the interactive movie interesting at all?

My personal drive has always been that of the writer. Although I have been working in the field of computer games for many years I have also spent considerable time writing literary fiction and stage plays. What I find particularly interesting is the development of new ways of telling stories. Stories that discard traditional beginnings and endings like Pavic's *The Book of the Cazars* and stories that move around their subject and explain it in several ways like Durell's *The Alexandria Quartet*. Stories where more lines of action are brought together in a unified destiny like Rohinton Mistry does so gracefully in *A Fine Balance*. So many examples come to mind and they can be found in the movies as well. In *Memento* the story is told backwards and in *21 grams* it is told as fragments with no regard to any sort of chronology. In *Lost highway* and *12 monkeys* more universes exist simultaneously and create strange time-paradoxes and, finally, in films like *Short Cuts* and *Magnolia* we are confronted with a web of storylines. The film industry is packed with these kinds of films¹.

¹ *Crash, Groundhog Day, Mystery Train, Intermision, Pulp Fiction, Run Lola Run, Sliding Doors.*

Michael Valeur
“Old Industries and New Opportunities”
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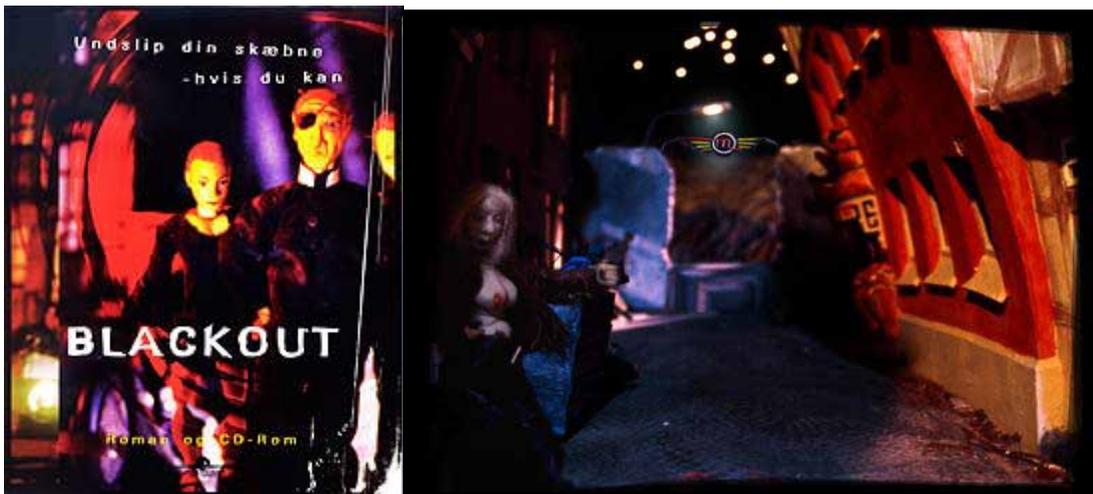
All those stories have one thing in common: They challenge the linearity of traditional scriptwriting. And this is exactly what the interactive story needs to do. The interactive script is difficult to carry out in a single chronological order and thus it is difficult to maintain timing in the traditional sense of the word. And why is that? Well, this is simply because the writer has invited an active user into his universe and the user would now like to move around in this universe as freely and unrestrained as possible. The whole exercise has to do with this user and how we give him a sense of freedom and control while we prevent the universe from collapsing entirely. Hence, we cannot use the old mantra of “the beginning, the middle and the end”. The user may just come up with something unexpected that distorts this arcane order. If a story is to cope with this it has, first of all, to be independent from concepts of timing and chronology. That is, the idea that one scene has to follow the other at a particular moment in the story. This independency is exactly what the literary titles and movies I just referred to have been playing with. The concepts of time and chronology have been challenged and this has not made the stories collapse. Quite the opposite it has created some of the most intense filmic and literary experiences I can think of. When such kinds of stories are combined the field of digital media we have a great potential: Open story structures come together with the calculating powers and vast memories of the computer. In this way, the computer may very well be the device that releases the hidden potential of these kinds of stories and points toward new ways of organising them. We are about to change the general notions about the way stories are made and presented. It is a big and interesting challenge.

The field of computer media has only partly recognised this challenge. The game industry – the dominating power in this field – has mainly been focusing on graphical and technological innovation. With regard to content it has primarily been resting upon Hollywood’s old surplus stock. A veritable excess of rip-offs from guaranteed successes and simple clichés that require no further specification. Action universes that build upon the same old traditional war-movies, science fiction, fantasy and thrillers. Simulations that build upon the same things as they have done for ages: cars and airplanes. Many of these productions are extremely aesthetic and well made with regard to the technological and graphical solutions. But with regard to the content their banality is almost overwhelming (with a few exceptions). Innovation within this domain has been totally neglected and the stories have not changed for a decade.

Like so many others I enjoy to watch action-movies together with my teenagers at home and we play computer games too. I have spent many hours hanging out in the world of *The Sims* or shooting madly in all directions in *Counterstrike* or *Battlefield*. I have been ruminating for hours in

Michael Valeur
“Old Industries and New Opportunities”
New Media Production: Production, Development and Distribution
Universidade Lusófona, Lisbon 2005

front of my strategy games or I have been snowboarding until the floor was swaying. But this does not prevent me from longing for the interactive media to reach a little further than “Cowboys and Indians” and the dollhouse. I would like to see the interactive media conquer other worlds than that of the action movie and this is basically why I have chosen to work in the field of the interactive movie and the interactive story. I want to open up this field for more than children and teenagers’ stuff. I have made a few attempts with productions like *Black Out* (1998) *The angel* (1999) and *Back Seat Cop* (2000)² – and I have been dealing in a very practical manner with the problems of resolving interaction and storytelling. In spite of all these problems I have sensed a great potential waiting for us – dramaturgical possibilities and challenges that are only waiting to be addressed. Hence, as I see the industry narrowing the stories and turning them into worn out clichés it becomes more and more obvious to me that storytelling is one of those great potentials that remains unexplored. It is difficult to understand why we have to go on with the lowest denominator when the medium has so much to offer?



There are many explanations for this and most of them require us to take into account the economical and structural factors that govern the media industries. In the section below I will describe a little further how the different media industries tend to approach the concept of the interactive movie in a way that serves their own interests.

The interactive movie as a contested field

The interactive movie is not a clear-cut category, and when it enters the field of media policies and commercial interests many actors are eager to define it in ways that suit their interests. In the game industry people are primarily focusing on the interactive part of the concept and prefer to forget the film part. On the other hand, in the film industry people tend to centre their attention at the film part and forget the interactive part. Finally, in the rest of the industry, particularly in the television industry, people may not even consider it to be an independent platform in its own right. They see it as an overlay to some existing media product – a film or a television show. Interaction is understood

² *Blackout* and *The Angel* was produced by Deadline games, *Back Seat Cop* was produced by DR – the danish public service TV station.

Michael Valeur
“Old Industries and New Opportunities”
New Media Production: Production, Development and Distribution
Universidade Lusófona, Lisbon 2005

as the phenomenon that occurs when people are communicating and cooperating within the framework of a particular media product.

These definitions represent quite different approaches to the concept of the interactive movie. As such they deal differently with such things as content and artistic qualities. However they also involve a good deal of technological and political considerations since the appearance of a new media field very often is followed by new investments, either from the industry or from the public authorities.

To start out with the game industry, it is very cautious and conservative. The 1990's gave us many new and interesting contributions to the development of computer games and their narrative and artistic potentials but more recently the products have become more alike. It becomes increasingly common to reproduce those same old ideas that already proved they have an audience – an audience that is most likely to consist of hardcore gamers in their teens. Of course, there is a very good reason for this. An average game production is costly – more than ten millions euros – and when you invest such amounts of money you probably do not want to take too many chances. You stay close to the mainstream content and relegate the experiments to the further development of technological and graphical solutions. You can be very confident that the teenage audience is going to respond positively to this and every year brings new technological and graphical progress about. A progress that makes the oversized production budgets expand even more. And the industry has a very particular interest in this continuous escalation of prices. When the newest instance of the *Unreal* series hits the market it is followed by the newest version of this or that graphic card and it is needless to say more or less indispensable if you want to play your new game. And when a new version of one of the leading consoles is introduced this happens in concert with another handful of games that can only be played on this particular console. Games sell hardware and they do this to an extent that would have been unthinkable before the computer. If someone back in the sixties or seventies had suggested that every home was going to have its own entertainment platform worth about 2 – 3000 euros people would have thought him to be mad. But this is actually the case. And this is why the development of games is so tied up with the development of new technologies. And economical investments too.

To this part of the industry the interactive movie is something to keep an eye with. They may even be willing to invest in this field if they consider the circumstances to be favourable. But they will probably prefer that the concept of the interactive film is developed in close concert with the technologies and economical framework (big investments – big profits) that characterise the game industry in general. It is doubtful that the interactive movie is ever going to meet with such kinds of expectations and for this reason they hesitate and invest in the safe titles in the game industry instead.

The film industry is hesitating too. It finds no reason to question the characteristics of the fiction film as it has developed to this day – the movie seems to have reached a form that most people can comply with. However, it is obvious that the game-industry manages to make much more money on the movie's spin-off than the film industry manages to make on the movie alone. There seems to be a considerable potential here. Furthermore a lot of experiments have taken place in the field of the fiction films with regard to new story structures and content in general and some of these may suit the interactive principle. Accordingly, small projects are set off to document the market – to make clear whether there is something in it for the film-industry or whether this is simply the domain of

Michael Valeur
“Old Industries and New Opportunities”
New Media Production: Production, Development and Distribution
Universidade Lusófona, Lisbon 2005

computer experts and game-designers. It is like seeing a big animal circling around a new and unfamiliar kind of prey – it does not know whether to go for it or whether to flee. If there are money to earn it would be a shame not to go and get them but the risk of burning oneself on an unprofitable project prevents any wholehearted venture into this field. As regards the artistic potentials of interactive media many people in the film-industry consider the concept of user-control to be highly inconvenient and detrimental to the creative process. Sometimes, however, an enthusiast takes the chance anyway – most often backed up by a national funding and thus on a very sparse budget. These are very often projects that focus on the development of the film medium but only reluctantly invite the player to interact and the extensive expertise that have been built up by the game-industry with regard to user-interaction is utterly ignored. The main focus is put upon the filmic experience and the experiments that take place have to do with traditional chronology and how this may be challenged.

Whereas the development in the game-industry is closely tied up with the development of technological components the filmic experiments are of a more dramaturgical kind. This means that the technological solutions in the film-industry often group around formats that can be played on an ordinary DVD-player. And no matter how radical the dramaturgical experiments may seem to be the filmmakers still insist on the role of the director and the audience. They do not dare, or maybe they do not manage, to imagine the development of powerful content without these particular roles and relations.

The final actor is the television industry. People in this field are already quite familiar with integrating television programmes and different sorts of interactive features. Some years ago set-top boxes were the big hit but they turned out to be a little more difficult to use than expected. Hence, the focus was turned toward the Internet and the mobile technologies. For instance, the Internet may provide a debate forum for a television programme or the viewers may participate more directly through different sorts of text messaging options. Accordingly people in the television industry tend to understand the concept of “interactive movies” much broader – it is the sum of all the interaction that takes place around a given programme or product. And considerable time and money are invested in order to be up front in this development. In particular because the young audiences seem to spend much more time in front of the computer than before – and because this time seems to be taken away from the hours spent in front of the television. In other words the television industry is busy winning back their customers. In this field narrative concepts are not given much attention – the focus is rather centred on genres like music programmes, quiz shows and sports events. That is, genres where the addition of features that boost communication and thus the interest of the young audiences is obvious.

This leaves us with a television industry that focuses on the communication around a given film or programme, a film industry that rather tend to experiment with content matters within the frame of a given film or programme and a game industry that posses and immense amount of know-how with regard to technological aspects and user interaction but prefer to stay where they are: in the field of games. What happens to the concept of interactive movies in the intersections between those industries? Which possibilities are left open to the development of interactive content? A more exhaustive look into the actual ideas and creations of these industries can provide us with some answers to these questions.

Michael Valeur
“Old Industries and New Opportunities”
New Media Production: Production, Development and Distribution
Universidade Lusófona, Lisbon 2005

Possible prototypes of the interactive movie seen from the industries

In the conventional computergame interaction is about control. This is one of the reasons why first person shooters and simulations are so popular: they require the player to interact constantly and the feedback is instant and evident. You shoot or get shot, turn the wheel or end up in the ditch. If you stop acting the game will end. The conventional game is competitive, hard paced and tailored for the teenager’s way of thinking. The filmic aspects are reduced to the cut-scenes that open each level, cut-scenes that most players skip if possible.

In the nineties, however, the public was introduced to a variety of new and experimental game concepts that combined the audiovisual and narrative formats of the film medium with the concept of interactivity. Some of these titles may serve as a source of inspiration in our attempt to define the concept of the interactive movie, most importantly the group of “aesthetic adventure games” that appeared in this decade. Aesthetic adventures like *Myst*; *Ceremony of Innocence* and *Grim Fandango* established an alternative to the conventional way of understanding the computer game. They were pensive games made for aesthetic contemplation. The filmic aspects were not reduced to the intro they were integrated with the general gameplay. And the interaction was not organised around frantic mouse clicking it appealed to alternative mental registers like reflection and identification. These games you could actually leave for some minutes to make another cup of coffee while you were pondering about the mysteries and how they were to be solved.

Myst is a classical example. The centre of its gameplay is the solving of mysteries and the uncovering of the central plot and thus it turns away from the traditional competitive gameplay and toward the more reflective kind. *Myst* brings us closer to the principle of storytelling but this does not turn it into an interactive movie. This is also the case with *Ceremony of Innocence* that builds heavily on film aesthetics as regards its soundtrack and choice of actors: Ben Kingsley and Isabella Rossellini. (You only hear their voices, though). Its interaction, however, is still focused on a playful exploration with the mouse very much like a traditional puzzle. It is just carried out with an artistic ambition with regard to visual aesthetics and poetical dialogue. Thus, *Ceremony of Innocence* makes it obvious that it is possible to address another audience to mature the content of interactive media just like the content of films has been matured over the years. A more significant step toward the interactive movie, however, is taken with *Grim Fandango* – a very stylish title from Lucas Arts. *Grim Fandango* builds upon a rather traditional kind of adventure-dynamics, that of the puzzle, but the content is very distinctive. It is a very unusual story about the limbo between life and death and the graphics are very imaginative: We find ourselves in a world of well-dressed skeletons. The references to film history are obvious too and the film noir genre serves as an important inspiration. But, most importantly, *Grim Fandango* introduces the concept of filmic montage in the computer game. The game displays how the user’s navigation may be integrated with skilful changes in camera-angle and soundtrack so that they blend together as seamlessly as in the traditional fiction film. The outcome is convincing and tells us that it is possible to combine the concept of user interaction with filmic aesthetics.



The traditional puzzle-structure has its drawbacks, though. It is almost impossible not to get stuck somewhere in the game and this is a feature of the adventure genre in general I find less intriguing. The main function of the puzzle in this genre seems to be the obstruction of the player's intentions. You spend hours and hours figuring out the most impossible and bizarre solutions instead of truly identifying with the story and the story-world. Why don't the puzzles support the story structure instead? Why does puzzle not take the story ahead instead of making it stop? We investigated this alternative a little further with *Black Out* at Deadline Games in 1997. The user interface in this production is cut down to a minimum and centred on a shape-shifting cursor. Whenever it passes over something that can be activated it changes shape accordingly and else it serves as a tool for navigation. If the user comes across a character in the game and initiates a conversation a few words of the conversation will “freeze” at the screen and trigger a new response if chosen. The user interface consists on this alone – traditional game features like, for instance, a character inventory are not included in this game. Accordingly, attention is directed toward the fictional world of the game. This is built up as a city the user can explore in the same way as in ordinary adventure games. Only, the player will not be obstructed by irrelevant puzzles as he walks around. Every person in the world will possess some specific information, hints or clues with regard to the general plot – but there will not be a specific sequence or order for the player to figure out. Every choice will be a good choice but lead to different aspects of the world. Thus, the metaphor of the city: It may contain some blind alleys but mainly a web of small streets and a few principal roads that it is difficult to avoid. In this way the obstructive features of the traditional adventure game is replaced by the principle of free exploration. If this had been combined with the exceptional graphics and montage principles of *Grim Fandango* I believe we would have been close to the interactive movie – an audiovisual fictional world with an open story-structure that allowed the player to move around and interact.

In the film industry, there have been numerous experiments with such kinds of story structures as I mentioned earlier on. Nevertheless, stories like *Ground Hog Day*, *Short Cuts* and *Memento* all depend on the traditional film medium. Some years ago the Danish Film Institute decided to go a little further and fund three film-projects that would integrate the principle of interactivity more directly: A production for children, a production for adults and a documentary. Most obviously these attempts are highly relevant to a discussion about the characteristics of the interactive movie.

The interactive documentary was called *Notions* and presented a portrait of the controversial ultra-right wing politician Mogens Glistrup. The director, Flemming Lyngse, did not share his political views, quite the opposite, but he was fascinated by Glistrup's multifaceted personality. He started out to make a traditional documentary but there were so many scenes that could not be included and they all conveyed different and contradictory versions of this old man. Lyngse never knew if he had chosen the right scenes: “*The problem was, that if two scenes were interchanged he could change entirely from being a nice old uncle to be a racist speaking all sorts of nonsense*”³ Thus, Lyngse

³ From the article “Mennesket er en labyrint” by Ralf Christensen. DFI (Danish Film Institute) homepage.

Michael Valeur
“Old Industries and New Opportunities”
New Media Production: Production, Development and Distribution
Universidade Lusófona, Lisabon 2005

organised all of his scenes (53 hours of recording) thematically – a considerable job – and reduced it to about 15 hours of material. Apart from his own recordings he would collect scenes from the television programmes Glistrup had taken part in since the seventies. This material the user could enter and explore as a kind of labyrinth – a model of Glistrups own labyrinthic personality available on the Internet. Thus, this was the first film about Glistrup that he as well as his political opponents was able to accept as a contrasted and multifarious truth.



Flemming Lyngse chose the interactive format in order to allow people to follow that specific track they found particularly interesting. With *Switching* Morten Schiodt approached the concept a little differently. He chose to make an interactive fiction on DVD about a dysfunctional relationship. As the story starts out, our two main characters are not getting along very well and the female part has taken herself a lover. How the story develops from this point depends on the user. The film consists of a number of scenes that are organised and as loops. Each time the user push a particular button on the remote control the story will continue to a new loop. Thus, there is no interface, no cursor, and no menus, just the film-pictures, as we would experience them in a film theatre. The changes between scenes are sometimes very discontinuous and require the user to reflect on the relation between the former and the current scene, to take part in the creation of story-coherence. Also, these abrupt changes in time and space point toward the fragmentary storytelling in films like *21 Grams*. Only, this film has no ending as the user can keep traversing the material as long as he wants discovering new scenes or seeing old ones in a new context. Schiodt himself calls *Switching* a filmic jigsaw puzzle the user has to put together. He does this by navigating through the loop-structure and depending on the time he pushes the button during a loop he will be taken to a specific scene. Hence, the navigation may be compared to a sort of “zapping” and the user never knows the exact consequences of his choice. Hence, the user does trigger some action but he does not know which action he triggers because he never knows where his choice will bring him. It is an interaction without any horizon of expectations.

We find a little more user-control in the interactive children’s production *Washing day*. This is also a DVD title and with regard to navigation it is much closer to traditional computer games than *Notions* and *Switching*. However, its filmic qualities are outstanding as compared to the games that are usually produced for this target-group. Obviously a person who knows her metier has made it. The action unfolds in a washing machine. Here clothes meet at different washing programmes and have lively and sweet conversations. Each wash develops into intense dramas the children can recognise from their own everyday life. The interaction is built into the dialogue and does not require the child to figure out a specific interface or read pop-up menus. The characters simply make the child’s choices obvious by addressing him directly in spoken words.

In this little selection of interactive experiments we find different technological solutions and user positions. As regards the technological solutions the Internet as well as the DVD have been used as platforms. As regards the user positions there is a great difference between *Notion’s* topic-ordered materials where the user chooses between traditional film-clips on the basis of different headlines

Michael Valeur
“Old Industries and New Opportunities”
New Media Production: Production, Development and Distribution
Universidade Lusófona, Lisbon 2005

and *Switching's* film-loops where we can interact at any time but never know the implications of our choices. Finally, in *Washing day*, the interaction and user position imply a rather direct dialogue-based relation between the user and the game-characters that is often found in children's productions.

In the section about the game-industry it became clear that the game-producers are eager to integrate filmic principles into their games with regard to the graphical depiction of action. The primary focus just has to remain on the game-part. It is quite much the same in the film-industry. Filmmakers are attracted by the principle of interaction but they are not willing to give up basic concepts like the director, the audience and their respective roles. Both industries seem to have taken a step toward the other but they are still not willing to hold each other's hands. The game-people will not give up things like rules, obstacles and goals whereas the film-people will not give up their control over the story and let the user participate. In spite of this I find the efforts above very innovative and interesting. And if the interactive movie still lacks something with regard to the understanding of the user position it brings forth some clear novelties with regard to dramaturgical writing. In this way the interactive movie has already taken a step away from the Hollywood-recipes.

Whereas the game-industry and the film-industry have been experimenting with different combinations of games and movies the television industry has chosen quite another approach. In this field the traditional programme-concept has for the main part been kept intact. Interactivity is understood as an addition to an existing television-concept. This addition may take the form of small applications that enable different sorts of interaction. In its most simple form this could be an online debate-forum where dedicated fans comment on and discuss a given film or television programme⁴The film or television programme retains its traditional form and the interactive part is understood as all the things that take place around it. It is also possible to establish a more direct interaction between user and programme; for instance, viewers can be allowed to send text in messages that are shown directly on the screen⁵. Sometimes a direct dialogue between programme hosts and specific users may even be established (viewer to host) but most often the television screen serves as a channel where viewers can communicate with each other in more or less anonymous ways (viewer to viewer). This addition of communicative features is crucial to the most recent integration of Internet applications with programme-concepts. Whereas Internet activities and mobile add-ons used to be fairly insignificant options for the user to take or leave they are becoming essential features of the programme. That is, the television programme and its net-based and mobile features become part of a more general communicative strategy.

These strategies may go beyond the simple addition of chitchat features to music video programmes and alter in more profound manners the way television is made. In some of the more ambitious experiments the Internet and mobile technologies are used as a bridge between the television screen and public space. Not many of these experiments have been realised at a larger scale but the ideas are interesting as they suggest new ways of breaking down the border between fiction and mundane reality. For instance, a thriller series may involve a number of hints and clues hidden on obscure

⁴ Choose just about any television series with a Website.

⁵ Several Danish youth programmes like *Boogie* and *The Voice television* have integrated this feature with great success.

Michael Valeur
“Old Industries and New Opportunities”
New Media Production: Production, Development and Distribution
Universidade Lusófona, Lisbon 2005

websites or perhaps even in physical space for the viewers to discover. It could be a secret code that gives access to a crucial Website or perhaps a message on an answering machine that suggests a possible answer to an unsolved mystery. Anyway, dedicated viewers can take part in the solving of mysteries by searching for information and sharing it with other viewers at the programme-website. These activities may even serve as a resource and inspiration for further the development of the storyline. However, it is difficult to get any funding for such kinds of experiments and some of the most interesting concepts tend to end their lives on the writing desk. I have been involved in an unrealised project where some of the ideas above were integrated in a children’s television series meant to be shown during Christmas time. Here, the children would be able to build traps on the programme Website in order to harass the arrogant programme host. Furthermore small happenings connected to the story-content would take place in public space. There is an obvious potential in such kinds of concepts and the future will hopefully bring us more of that.

But no one really knows what the future will bring – it depends on a number of factors. Some of those factors we can influence others we cannot. In my conclusion I would like to address what I consider to be the main barrier to the further development of those obvious potentials that have been described in this section.

The main barrier

To sum up, the media industries employ several different approaches to the concept of the interactive movie. Is it a game with exceptional filmic qualities? Is it an avant-garde film that lets it viewer flip through fragments of a story? Or is it a traditional television programme with an interactive environment? It would be stupid to restrict the concept of the interactive movie to only one of those approaches – the truth is they all point toward relevant aspects of this concept. Actually, if we could bring some of these expertises into dialogue it may even give way to new ideas and development in this field. As the media industries have specialised themselves in different domains of the production process: technological solutions, content development and reception context it will most probably bring about a valuable synergy effect to make their know-how meet. This, however, requires that we think in more unconventional ways the media industries usually tend to do

One thing that the industries have in common is their basic motive. They find the interactive movie interesting only as long as it is profitable. This prevents some of the most innovative concepts from being produced as such kinds of project are seldom very lucrative in their first incarnations. Million dollar industries require innovation but it is not all innovation that leads to million dollar industries. We need this innovation, however, to boost the development and dynamics in the field and this is an inherent paradox of the large-scale media industries. The sheer size of the production costs makes safe ventures into well-known mainstream categories the only reasonable way to go. Anything else is just too risky. But when everyone struggles to stay within the same well-known categories the whole field starts to stagnate at a certain point and interesting new concept like the interactive movie or anything else will definitely not emerge. Genuine innovation just won’t appear within this sort of economical logic.

If we really want to develop some of the artistic potentials that seem to stay hidden in the different media industries’ approaches we have to get beyond this economical logic. Our governments will have to accept that this kind of innovation presupposes some initial funding and the further development depends on their will to support it. No matter how relevant and abundant the

Michael Valeur
“Old Industries and New Opportunities”
New Media Production: Production, Development and Distribution
Universidade Lusófona, Lisbon 2005

knowledge and experience the industries possess they still are not able to bring it any further than that within their current economical framework. If we really want the interactive movie to do more than sell another update of this or that console, graphic card or mobile gadget we should stop waiting for the industries to do something about it and start looking for other ways of supporting the development of artistic potentials from the outside.

Pictures:

Page 1: Book covers: *A fine Balance*, *Book of the Kazars* and *The Alexandria Quartet*

Page 3: Cover and screenshot from *Blackout*

Page 6: Screenshots from *Ceremony of Innocence* and *Grim Fandango*

Page 7: Frame grab from *Notions*, *Switching* and *Washing Day*