

5 Story Building

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1. Abstract

A mischievous Monster, a naive Sidekick, ten shallow Girls, a retired Villain, an apathetic Robot, and a Megalomaniac from outer space live under one roof in the “5 Story Building”. Five simultaneous stories tell the lives of the singular occupants of this confining building. These neighbors carry on with their own ambitions and inherited craziness without realizing that their stories are intertwined in this episodic interactive fiction.

Jean Paul Sartre and “Sleep No More” inspire this experience for digital tablets that explores the nuances and opportunities enabled by the introduction of interactivity in storytelling.

“5 Story Building” is intentionally crafted to show off things that traditional media cannot. This project explores the possibility of multiple simultaneous stories that are part of a bigger plot. These stories develop regardless if they are seen or not: the users’ decisions are not only about what they see but also, and maybe most importantly, what they decide not to see.

Multiple readings are necessary and voyeurism is encouraged.

CR Categories: I.3.8 [Computer Graphics]: Applications.

Keywords: interactive storybook, nonlinear, immersive.

2. Inspiration

This project finds its inspiration in nonlinear narrative, character-driven storytelling, Gestalt psychology, game theory, and graphic novels. These territories merge in a worldview that reflects Jean-Paul Sartre’s [1958] famous and often misunderstood phrase “Hell is other people”.

The challenge of the storyteller is to provide a vehicle for the story to go beyond the pages of the writer and live in the receptor’s mind and heart. Most stories found in traditional media have a linear structure. Even if the content is nonlinear, the way of telling and reading stories in such formats is linear. On the other hand, in an interactive story there are multiple paths that the story can take, depending on the actions of the users.

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2.1. Concept distillation

The project starts with a very simple question about a curiosity in the English language, why are the floors of a building also called stories? There are a number of reasonable answers but perhaps the most convincing, as explained by Cecil Adams [1987] in an article for the online newspaper column “The Straight Dope”, is that, “Historia in Roman times meant history or story, and by the Middle Ages had acquired the meaning of ‘picture.’ So the charming notion arose that medieval folk were in the habit of installing rows of windows in their buildings called ‘stories’ that were decorated with paintings or sculpture. The theory is that these stories, which for all anybody knows may actually have told a story, eventually came to signify a level of a building.”

This etymological rarity sparked a chain of thoughts that ended up with the very first concept of The “5 Story Building”, a fictional place where characters with odd personalities live their own stories towards their own goals. However inadvertently, their actions affect their neighbors’ stories thus giving birth to a bigger narrative that becomes visible as the audience discovers it.

2.2. Adaptation vs. Creation

A meaningful project starts with a powerful idea. However, the way content is delivered is crucial and not all content is suitable for all platforms. Alan Moore addressed this matter when talking about a film version of his comic book “Watchmen”, “There are things that we did with Watchmen that could only work in a comic, and were indeed designed to show off things that other media can’t” [Gopalan 2008].

Adaptation alone is limited if it doesn’t consider the nuances and opportunities of the medium the content is adapted to. The introduction of interactivity in stories creates possibilities that have been, to some degree, explored by content creators. Soon after the introduction of tablets, great apps with stunning visuals and interactivity have been developed. The intuitive use of touch user interface through gestures as the primary means of control and navigation enables a new level of user agency. However, most times the interaction is reduced to turning digital pages because the content is still linear.

In the making of “5 Story Building”, the format is considered as a foundation for the act of creating stories. The result aspires to be entertaining, delightful, and a game changer on its own right.

3. Domains

3.1. Character Development

Characters are integral to the project and they are the vehicle that takes the narrative into the world. To build characters with real depth that can incite reactions in the audience, both visual aesthetics and inner psychology are considered.

The “5 Story Building” characters share a peculiarity: they all have generic names, i.e. MONSTER, SIDEKICK, FEMMES, WOLF, ROBOT, and MARTIAN. There is an ironic statement about the generic treatment given to iconic characters that come from well-established genres, i.e. scary stories, superhero comic books, reality shows, folk stories, and science fiction. This decision reflects the way people interact with whom are not pivotal in their lives and the intention is to push “The realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as [one’s] own—populated with their own ambitions, friends, routines, worries and inherited craziness” [Koening 2012].

One factor remains true to any storytelling effort, the final engagement of the audience will depend on the emotional connection with the characters and their transformation.



Figure 1: The “5 Story Building” residents

3.2. Art Direction

The choice of black and white serves two purposes. First, it unifies all the characters while creating an “Eye-catching exploration of moods that range from the joyous to the melancholy” [Traps 2012] in the line of the Quay Brothers’ work. And second, inspired by Pablo Picasso when he claimed that “Color weakens” and “Purged it from his work in order to highlight the formal structure and autonomy of form inherent in his art” [Guggenheim Foundation 2011], the monochromatic universe of “5 Story Building” concentrates in line, form, light, and tonal values.

The aesthetics in “5 Story Building” are informed by film-noir’s “chiaroscuro”. This contrasting use of light and shade in scenes with roots in German Expressionism is used to achieve a moody, dark, and dramatic effect. The contrast between the bright nature of the characters and the gloomy tone of this building’s mimesis is intentional as it creates discomfort between the characters and the setting.

3.3. Nonlinear Narrative

The “5 Story Building” is an exercise in nonlinearity, fragmentation, and hidden narratives. These subdomains have been a great guide for experimentation in terms of writing and character development. It is important to differentiate plot-driven, where actions leads to plot points, and character-driven narrative,

when a character’s essential self provokes events in the story. In this story, the characters are the driving force; they make the decisions based on their traits and ambitions. However, a plot is important to create change, both inside the characters as well as in the bigger story arc.

The fragmented nature of the narrative in “5 Story Building” demands a structure determined by what kind of choices are available to the reader. A branching story is interactive and responds believably to the user’s decisions because “At various points in the story a decision is made that sends the telling of the story down one path or another” [St. Hippolyte 1995]. However, the alternate branches quickly explode.

To keep control over the story arc, the story construction is based on parallel paths. Game designer Chris Bateman [2005] explains, “When branching narratives recombine to form a set of parallel paths (or rails), it is more manageable than a strict branching narrative” since it avoids the combinatorial explosion. Player’s decisions are still present while the amount of story is manageable.

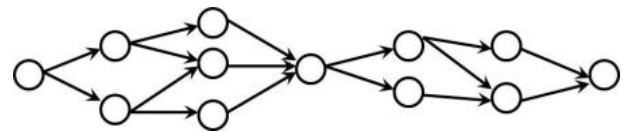


Figure 2: A parallel path narrative structure

The introduction of interactivity allows the users to create a number of stories starting with any given media collection. Brad Johnson [n.d], Creative Director of the interactive studio Second Story explains, “The evolution of interactive media means the story no longer flows in one direction, from the one to the many. (...) The narrative is only visible in hindsight—when their path is revealed—the path that was their history, their story—that is the second story.”

4. Precedents

One the first triggers for “5 Story Building” appear in the very first page of “Black and White” by David Macaulay [2005], “This book appears to contain a number of stories that do not necessarily occur at the same time. Then again, it may contain only one story. In any event, careful inspection of both words and pictures is recommended.” Another great example of nonlinear exploration in a traditional format is “13, Rue del Percebe” by Francisco Ibáñez, a single panel that represents a humorous view of a building and its inhabitants. Also in traditional print media, Edward Packard wrote “Sugarcane Island” in 1969 and later became one of the pioneering authors of the second-person fiction style made famous by the Choose Your Own Adventure series of children’s books, a series of gamebooks that allows the reader to participate in the story by making effective choices. The narrative branches through the use of numbered paragraphs or pages.

Furthermore, when completed, “5 Story Building” will share the realm of interactive storybooks such as Moonbot Studios’ [2012] “The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore”, an interactive storybook where users “Can repair books, tumble through a storm, learn the piano and even get ‘lost in a book’ flying through a magical world of words”. From the same studio, “Numberlys” is an app for the iPad that is regarded as an

adventure, a mystery, a game, and a story. Another influential project is Play Creatividad's "iPoe Collection", designed to "Enhance the experience of reading the works of Edgar Allan Poe, not replace it" [Hiner 2013]. These examples are linear in nature and the interactivity, while compelling and contagious, is not applied to the narrative structure.

"5 Story Building" is also informed by movies that playfully deconstruct linearity. "Amores Perros" by Alejandro González Iñárritu contains three separate stories that are connected by a car accident in Mexico City. "New York, I Love You" consists of eleven short films from different directors that clash in the city of New York. "Four Rooms", a collaboration of directors Anders, Rockwell, Rodríguez, and Tarantino, tells the story of a hotel bellhop and his encounters with various guests of a fictional hotel in Los Angeles. The importance of Akira Kurosawa's "Rashomon" is irrefutable as its plot device involves various characters providing alternative versions of the same incident, with the city gate of Kyoto as witness.

Other film references have to do with interactions in limited spaces. In the Coen brothers' "Barton Fink", the sets were deliberately designed to show a harsh contrast between Fink's residence and the refined localities of Hollywood. Álex de la Iglesia's "La Comunidad" is a black comedy that portrays the bizarre dynamic among neighbors in a fictitious building in Madrid, Spain. In addition, "5 Story Building" shares a similar concern with the 1991 French film "Delicatessen", generally a character-based film, with deep interest in each tenant's own particular idiosyncrasies and their relationships to each other.

Finally, the similarities of "5 Story Building" and the immersive theater installation "Sleep No More" have been recurrently noted. This breathtaking production by the British theatre company Punchdrunk, "Leads its audience on a merry, macabre chase up and down stairs, and through minimally illuminated, furniture-cluttered rooms and corridors" [Brantley 2011].

5. Methodology

5.1. Art

The illustration techniques are mainly digital. For drafting and sketching the immediacy of plain pencil and paper is preferred while for final resolution assets, software like Photoshop, After Effects, and Maya were chosen. To give the final piece a less digital look, real media textures, i.e. watercolor, oils, and chalk, were used

Set design is vital in the process, as the space not only contains the events within the limits of a physical structure; it also informs the audience about the character. Every stage was carefully designed in terms of lighting, decoration, and props distribution. Each apartment convincingly shows the personality of the characters without the use of words. This is a powerful tool of visual storytelling and "5 Story Building" relies heavily on conveying tone and mood through images and sound.

5.2. Plot

After having a singular set of characters ready for some action, possible plots appeared. Since "5 Story Building" is a combination of comic books and video games, it was tricky to tackle the script as if it were a film and an interactive script was

preferred. Besides one-to-one connections between the building tenants, there are also a number of events that affect all the occupants equally. Considered occurrences include an earthquake, a black-out, a storm, a flood, new tenants moving in, a quarantine provoked by an unknown virus, and so on. These are great opportunities of character interaction.

5.3. Implementation

For the first working prototype of "5 Story Building", InteractBuilder (IB) was chosen due to its rapid workflow. The software proved to be a reliable tool for quick prototyping with the option of direct publishing in app stores. Although its most recent version still shows some limitations, a careful organization of the linkage between pages enhances the capabilities of the software.

IB reminds of pseudo-code, an informal description of the operating principle of an algorithm that is intended for human reading. IB omits details, like variable declaration, system-specific code, among others. Clear knowledge on programming structure is beneficial in designing the app architecture.



Figure 3: Home screen

Every page in "5 Story Building" was carefully designed externally to IB, using Photoshop. Since IB allows importing PSD files directly to the main interface and preserves layers' names, order, size and location, it is important to be organized when compositing the scenes. IB converts any layer into transparent PNGs; this allows working with high resolution smart objects during the scene assembling without worrying the about the size of the objects becoming unmanageable.

Animation can be handled in different ways. One approach is to import a sequence of images and adding an animation behavior targeted to itself. For certain effects, like the rain in the home screen or the film dust in most scenes, the animation is set to start on page load and loop at 30 fps. A second way to add animation is to import a video element. All the video elements were created using After Effects and exported as Quicktime movie files.

Adding intuitive interactions, behaviors, and conditions to the scene is crucial. The range of interactions is quite comprehensive and it considers gestures in tablets and smartphones and includes

tapping, dragging, pinching, swiping, rotating and shaking the device, and others. After setting interactions, behaviors like playing audio and/or animations, moving objects, jumping to a different page can be triggered, and so on. Also, some behavior options like delayed action or execute on page load, and conditions can help the action to be precise. One important function of the text element is to carry page or global counters. These counters are useful when implementing choices that affect the path of the story. Since behaviors accept conditions, counters are especially useful to activate different actions.

Also, audio is the piece that completes the immersive mood puzzle. Whether an ambient sound or a proper soundtrack, this project benefits from audio design to set a varied palette of emotions. Audio elements can be accessed when interacting with certain objects or when a page loads or unloads.

From the home screen, which features the façade of the “5 Story Building” with its blinking neon sign in a rainy night, users can access any of the floors, including the basement, to start their adventure by simply tapping a window. The next screen is a set of instructions that shows visitors how to navigate within stories, between floors, and in-and-out the building.



Figure 4: *User interaction*

Next is the title card of the story that corresponds to the chosen floor. From here, users can change to another floor or start the story. Special icons, previously seen in the instructions page, show the elements that are interactive. Some of them reveal important information while others move the story to the next scene. Due to the nonlinear structure of “5 Story Building”, deciding what to explore may lead to a different path of the story.

To navigate between floors in the building, both swiping and tapping were implemented. When swiping down from the top of the screen, the upper floor is accessed and the opposite action, i.e. swiping up from the bottom of the screen, users reach the floor immediately below the current one. By tapping the help button in the upper left corner, additional controls appear: tapping the “upstairs” and “downstairs” icons serve the same function as the swiping actions previously explained. A “home” button is also accessible by tapping and it takes users to the exterior of the building, where they can once again decide which floor to visit.

Not all stories have the same length and once one is finished, the floor is still accessible but a message will alert the readers that that specific story has ended and they should move along.

6. Final Thoughts

While nonlinear storytelling has been successfully achieved in films, books, and videogames, “5 Story Building” brings to the table an interesting narrative concept that deals with multiple simultaneous storylines contained and affected by an enclosing structure. Interactive storybooks are an emerging domain and there is a latent possibility of generating products with witty narrative strategies and fresh points of view. This project combines unexpected references from different media, i.e. comic books, folk tales, nonlinear films and books, immersive theatre, videogames, film noir, among others.

The strength of “5 Story Building” is its branching of possibilities, which guides the reader/interactor through many pathways, allowing her/him to unravel stories during the navigational process. This is definitely another major step forward in the direction of a solid corpus of non-linear stories.

A trailer that shows my artistic vision of the project can be found at <https://vimeo.com/65244430>.

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