

The little grey cat engine: telling small stories (Demo)

truna aka j.turner

The Australasian CRC for Interaction Design Pty Ltd. (ACID)
Animation, Interactive & Visual Design, QUT (Brisbane, AU)

truna@acid.net.au

ABSTRACT

The little grey cat engine (*greyCat*) is part of a series of projects which explore software which can enable access to the potentially empowering nature of represented space and game design. *GreyCat* is the result of research into the culture of the software itself in order to provide participatory environments which enable the telling of ‘small stories’ – stories and experiences which are those of the everyday or those of a cultural perspective other than that prioritised by most world building softwares or game engines. *GreyCat* offers a simple framework which allows participants to use their own image materials (photographs for the most part) as a basis for spatial exploration of their own places.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

J.5 [Arts and Humanities], I.3.7 Three-Dimensional Graphics and Realism, I.6.8 Types of Simulation, K.4.2 Social Issues

Keywords

Spatiality, computer games, design, interaction design, participatory design, culture

1. INTRODUCTION: THE CHALLENGE OF SMALL STORIES

Stories fill our lives in the way that water fills the lives of fish – Stephen Denning

Stories belong in places; they are the stuff of places that make a space into a place, redolent with familiarity and memory [6]. The designing presented here endeavours to enable stories to be presented within representation of place. We take our cue from observations about the critical nature of the design metaphor and philosophical perspective [2] and research which recognises navigable space as a primary design metaphor in computer and video games worlds. The software, the little grey cat engine (*greyCat*) intends to enable the telling of ‘small stories’ – stories of the everyday and individual experience, stories of place and habitus. The challenge of this goal, the representation of experience, and its manifestations in the design process and product are thrown into sharp relief by insights arising from world building projects which use high-end commercial game engines in order to tell Australian Indigenous cultural stories and experiences which are not only located in place but effectively inscribed in the landscape itself (see [4]).

OZCHI 2008, December 8-12, 2008, Cairns, QLD, Australia.

Copyright the author(s) and CHISIG.

Additional copies are available at the ACM Digital Library (<http://portal.acm.org/dl.cfm>) or can be ordered from CHISIG(secretary@chisig.org)

OZCHI 2008 Proceedings ISBN: 0-9803063-4-5

Explorations in the use of immersive visualisations – game worlds – leave us asking questions about the nature of the inherited legacies of both code and representation within constructed worlds and the means to enable direct *interactive participation* on the part of the story-tellers themselves in the construction, where such interactive participation is distinguished in terms of agency and control in all aspects of the process (See [1]).

In the example of the Australian Indigenous Project, it became apparent that the originating story tellers, the indigenous communities, were only able to contribute their cultural stories to the world builders, that their input became indirect and constrained to informer roles by virtue of the tools required to build the world. High end Software development Kits (SDKs) require expertise in a range of fields, from programming to 3D modelling. In the current era of game design and its expectations, the biggest problem for participant as story teller, is that of visualization, the art of representation. A number of more accessible SDKs are available for players to make ‘mods’ but even with these, the construction of new assets, objects with which to populate the world, requires both skills and resources.

This issue is best typified by a personal story: ten years ago, we presented some case studies involving text-based world construction as a conduit for sharing cultures and constructing collaborative mundane stories. All the participants concerned were able to construct characters, locations and responsive objects within the world with less than a half hour introduction. A decade later we found ourselves presenting the issues and dilemmas arising from another project which also intended to share cultural and personal stories, in the same town and conference location. What was remarkable is that the desire for visual reality and the use of a high end SDK in the second instance had disenfranchised the participants from the process.

These observations inspired the *greyCat* project where the goals are to maintain the critical element of spatiality in game design and to strip down the game creation tools to essentials in order to limit the affects and expectations of the software itself while allowing story tellers to become, as Ricoeur would have it, people able to give an account of their experiences.

2. DESIGN PARAMETERS

The *Little Grey Cat engine* sets out to provide a simple interface for spatial story telling and sharing of experience based on the interactant’s own photographs. Its major point of difference is that it exploits a base design metaphor of space and subsequent interaction opportunities based in a principle of activity within space typical of game design. In order to do this, *greyCat* takes its inspiration from some earlier game worlds, those of Cyan’s *Myst* and the Lucas Art’s games such as *Loom*, *Monkey Island* and *Day of the Tentacle*. These traditional Adventure games are constructed of 2 dimensional images as spaces or “rooms”. Players are given pathways through these spaces and ability to

“use” objects layered on the image. It may seem stubbornly retro to return to the adventure game genre, often mentioned with the word “*vale*”, but while no longer associated with the commercial Hollywood type success of the current game titles, the adventure genre is alive and well and indeed very much taken up by the independent game maker. This is in part because the available adventure game development kits are typically simple to use, involve little scripting or programming and a single creator with a range of freely available software can produce a full game in a matter of days. The adventure game genre is also particularly adept for the telling of stories and for simple implementation of player activity within those stories. *GreyCat* strips typical functionality right back to an even simpler interface which allows emphasis on the image but which enables the spatial metaphor of the adventure game room and pathway.

3. NAVIGABLE PLACE

The challenge then is to both provide tools which are capable of creating worlds, to exploit a specifically spatial design metaphor and to provide a means of accessing navigable visual representation construction as simply as possible. Simple in the sense of allowing participation and direct showing by story tellers themselves but also in order to avoid the layers of design legacies evident in high end softwares. The *greyCat* engine exploits the functionality of Adobe’s Flex 3 and Adobe AIR in order to create a cross platform story telling engine.



Figure 1. Early design establishing spatial metaphor

A second project (see [5]) where participants are encouraged to explore their own localities and places by taking series of photographs and re-presenting them as animations, confirmed the access, the power of representation that we wanted participants to have in constructing with *greyCat* and participants, now world creators, are encouraged to use photographs as backgrounds. World or story builders can add these photographs as ‘rooms’ and create their own pathways through the images via use of a simple portal or hotspot tool which critically, can be placed on objects of importance to the story teller. Once a series of rooms has been made, the builder can export the whole work and it can be explored by others and uploaded to the web to share.

4. FUTURES

The current version consists of a world creation program and a separate player. It is being play tested with individuals as part of a wider project and while we have found the implementation does offer an attractive way of presenting place and experience, we feel that further implementations might usefully include options to add audio so that story tellers can narrate their pathways or, in the manner of the second project mentioned, overlay with the ambient sounds of the places they are re-presenting.

In part, an indicator of success for the *greyCat* project is that it actually gets used and that our participants do indeed take delight in producing their own spatial stories. During initial play testing, it became apparent that some story-tellers were indeed engaged enough to want to add notation to their world areas. In early testing, this was added onto the image itself with a simple graphics editor.

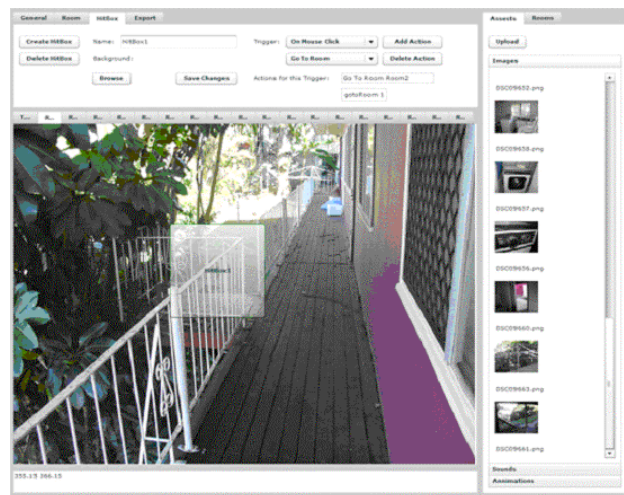


Figure 2. Building a spatial story in *greyCat* with participant’s own photo series and pathways

Other potential functionality remains under discussion but we are proud of our simple little engine. While there are a number of digital story telling softwares available, the tendency is to maintain the metaphor of the book or slideshow, but as game designers, we feel that finding a way of sharing the delight of constructing navigable space has more potential and resonance in terms of memory and experience.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Little Grey Cat Engine is produced by *pinkSofa* and is freely available for download and further experimentation. The first iteration development team consisted of Zac Fitz-Walter, Letitia Power, Hamish Lancaster, Rory Cartwright, Peter Riez and Craig Stewart. Website: <http://pinksofa.making-games.net/>

6. REFERENCES

- Adnan, S., Barren, A., Nurul Alam, S. M., & Brustinow, A. (1992). *People's participation: NGOs and the flood action plan*. Dhaka, Bangladesh, Research and Advisory Services
- Coyne, R. (1997) *Designing Information Technology in the Postmodern Age: From Method to Metaphor*, MIT Press
- Ricoeur, P. (2003) *Memory, History, Forgiveness: A Dialogue Between Paul Ricoeur and Sorin Antohi*, *Janus Head*, 8.1, Trivium Publications, Amherst, New York
- truna aka j.turner (2006) *Destination Space: Experiential Spatiality and Stories*, Special Session on Experiential Spatiality, In proc 2006 International conference on Game research and development, Perth, Australia
- truna aka j.turner & Browning, D. (2008) *Strolls*: <http://strolls.topository.org/>
- Tuan, Y-F. (1977). *Space and Place: the Perspective of Experience*. University of Minnesota