

Playing Games with Reality: *Only Fish Shall Visit* and Interactive Documentary

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Catalog essay for *Halfeti: Only Fish Shall Visit*, by Brogan Bunt. Exhibited at Artspace, Sydney, 19 September - 12 October 2002.

Interactive documentary? So far this is little more than a catchy tag and an open question. Yet it seems to be an increasingly current question: the ABC and the AFC have joined to fund and host a recently launched series of online interactive docos.¹ The DigiDocs event at this year's Adelaide Fringe focused on the relationship between documentary and the "new media." We might speculate about the reasons for this apparent swell of interest. Certainly it occurs in a context where independent documentary production is benefiting from the rise of digital desktop video — and it's a short conceptual leap from the video editor to the web browser. At the same time there is a slowly building momentum around broadband production, which brings with it the question of the forms and languages of broadband media. While the prospects of (meaningfully) interactive fiction seem to have dimmed, documentary might be a more suitable partner for interactivity; true stories may be the crucial "content" that makes for a compelling new media experience. Perhaps this interest also reflects the reality check that has swept the new media world in recent years, or simply the fact that the cultural novelty, and most of the hyperbolic rhetoric, has finally worn off the digital media. Many new media producers have themselves been caught up in a sense of the prospects for those forms, their expansive promises and latent technofutures. New media practice has by necessity been involved with testing possibilities, in form and content. It's as if as new media become unremarkable (and less new), they return to the present, and can be turned more readily to the "reality" of the present.

This is an exciting prospect, at least in theory. In practice, of course, the results are mixed. Of the recent flurry of interactive documentaries, many make only a very modest engagement with the potentials of interactive media. Very often they follow the path of remediation, reproducing the language of documentary film: cue music, fade in titles, cue voice of god narrator - all in 16:9 "widescreen." (See for example [producer's name?] *Long Journey, Young Lives*.²) The ABC frames these projects explicitly as an encounter between "the Australian documentary filmmaking tradition" and the new "platform" of the net; and indeed in general, the net operates here as little more than a functional platform for delivering bite-size chunks of quite traditional documentary.

New media forms pose a fundamental challenge to the principle of narrative coherence, which is at the core of traditional documentary. If we explode and open the structure, how can we be sure that the story is being conveyed? Other stories, or non-stories, may become possible. Many recent interactive documentaries react by ensuring that the content is always overdetermined, that each clip, each chunk of content points back to the unifying narrative. We may surf at will through its facets or aspects, but the "theme" is never more than a click away; the possibilities of other themes, other interpretations, other realities, are closed down.

¹ See <http://abc.net.au/docos>

If the new media are anything more than a delivery system for remediated content, and if interactivity means anything more than a menu selection, new media documentary can do much more than this. *Only Fish Shall Visit* bears this out: it demonstrates some of the more interesting possibilities of the form, and shows how the “native” forms of new media can work to reconfigure documentary.

Most immediately, *Only Fish* illustrates the pleasures of narrative underdetermination and redundancy. The narrative frame here — the impending flooding of the town of Halfeti — is strong, and crucially it motivates not only our interest, but also the production of the work itself. It greets us up front, in the opening block of narrative text, and is reinforced in the video interviews throughout the work. Yet because the central process here, of creating a visual and spatial record, is relatively open, that narrative is never overbearing. The stills move between cool observation and subjective engagement; the work is full of beautiful images of nothing much (masonry walls, cobbled streets) as well as points of more conventionally pictorial detail (a handsome rooster, a shopkeeper in a doorway). *Only Fish* reproduces the spatial process and the subjective mode of wandering: observing detail, being open to what appears, being curious about what’s up the hill, or around the corner. The narrative tension of the flood coexists with, but doesn’t override, this wandering, and the possible narratives and non-narratives that it contains.

Of course wandering around is a characteristically “new media” activity: web surfing, database browsing, game playing. In fact *Only Fish* borrows its exploratory navigation style directly from the world of computer games, and the genre of first-person immersive adventure games (of which the best known are Cyan’s *Myst* and its sequel *Riven*). On one level this is a functional appropriation: the games have developed a convention which uses still images to evoke a navigable three dimensional place; *Only Fish* seeks to do the same, so the convention works. There’s more to it, though: the navigational convention creates a reference to the game genre, and so sets up an interesting interplay between apparently disparate forms: game (fantasy) and documentary (reality).

In these games keeping track of space, mental mapping, is crucial; the player must constantly fit the still images into a coherent imaginary space. (This process is all the more important without the rich spatial reassurance of a real-time virtual environment, as in *Doom* or *Quake*.) This subjective process creates a heightened engagement with the space and its place/s, an intense keeping-in-mind of the space. Of course in game forms, this evocation is pure fantasy: an imaginary map of a synthetic space. Here it’s even more powerful since this is a real space, or more poignantly, it was a real space. As the work evokes the place, both in structure and visual texture, it has us reconstruct the flooded town.

The virtual environments of immersive gaming are geared towards stability and coherence; they operate as functional settings for the formal and narrative structures of the gameplay. Thus they tend to be static, frozen in a perpetual present, always awaiting the player’s next move. Change, when it does occur, is generally instantaneous, and linked to the action in the gameworld (this is narrative overdetermination inscribed into a virtual environment). Once again *Only Fish* presents a contrast which renews its power to evoke a real place. Here, the environment isn’t static; light and weather conditions change. Take a step and snow appears underfoot; take another and it’s nighttime. Figures appear and disappear. These changes are unbidden, and what’s more, they are embedded in the image content itself. They are temporal anchors: they link each image to a specific moment, and show up the gaps and slips in time which traverse this spatialised network of images. This isn’t a homogeneous, perpetual present, but a discontinuous array of times. Where the form primes us for a frozen virtual (narrative) world, we find instead a dynamic, unstable, autonomous world — or rather a record of one, a set of moments and points within it.

Moreover, those specific moments are the heterogenous moments of documentation; their times are the times of production. Their heterogeneity inescapably points to the making of the work. The adventure game genre is never so reflexive, nor are most other forms of virtual environment; in fact nor is new media production in general. The result here is that the documentary process is embedded in the same dynamic, unfreezable world that it images (though the production of the "back end" - the coding behind the screen and interface, is not disclosed in the same way).

This project came from a modest, apparently straightforward impulse, to document the town of Halfeti before its inundation. It works through that brief pragmatically; this isn't a self-conscious experiment in form or genre. Nonetheless what unfolds is striking both in itself, and for what it suggests about the possibilities for new media forms which address the idea of documentary. New media doco need not replay the conventions of traditional, linear documentary storytelling; it offers its own ways of playing with reality.