

***The Interactive Village:* Ethnography and Narrative**

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“...since the inception of the telegraph and radio, the globe has contracted, spatially, into a single large village” Marshall McLuhan (1964:5)

The Interactive Village is an ethnographic multimedia production that aims to evolve a human-interest documentary style viewing space through which users can navigate routes of their choice through village material: scenes, interviews, activities and commentary. The production, based on everyday life in a small village in the Czech Republic, was enabled by the NM2, New Media for a New Millennium¹ interdisciplinary research project which had the main goal of creating new production tools for the media industry, in addition to the more ambitious aim of creating a new media genre. The tools were designed for the easy production of non-linear, personalised media genres suitable for transmission over broadband networks.

The village of Dolní Roveň was visited on a regular basis over a period of two years and in order to identify, shoot and collect relevant information. Rather than shooting a definitive storyline (or storylines), we found ourselves looking for “story potentials” in the style of the early stages of investigative journalism — bearing in mind it is a “story” that does not have to be finally “written-up” in a definitive manner. Ultimately it becomes up to the user to develop the narrative building blocks provided by the media tools into the “story” of his or her own choice.

Research and production

An initial structure for the production was based on Gustav Freytag’s analysis of dramatic structure. With its origins in Aristotle’s *Poetics* and adaptation for interactivity by Laurel (1990:82), it provided a useful scheme for addressing narrative frameworks. Another important influence was ethnographic film which also helped to form the rationale and strategy for the production (Wright 1992 & 2003, Loizos 1993). A more historic source of inspiration was Humphrey Jennings’

documentary film *Spare Time* (1939). His approach to filmmaking was characterised by a locative episodic structure with a loose ‘dawn to dusk’ storyline. Also, in the planning of *The Interactive Village* production attention was paid to the particular style and humour of the Czech *New Wave* cinema of the 1960s.

The production method was also informed by studies of ecological theories of perception (e.g. Heft, 2001). The video material was gathered in such a way that aimed to anticipate and mirror the user’s viewing and active exploration of *The Interactive Village* programme and website. Consequently we abandoned the traditions of the carefully planned documentary and threw ourselves into an exploratory process which entailed the immediate gathering audio-visual material. This rapid assemblage of footage provided a loose collection of material from which loose narrative structures could be organised and built in a “hands on” manner. Working in this way (akin to the methodology of the anthropologist), the material was gathered to form an organic cell-like structure.

Village Structure

In the context of the theory of visual anthropology, *The Interactive Village* takes the three central approaches traditionally taken by ethnographic filmmakers. According to Henley (1985) these are: Didactic, Journalistic, Observational. Didactic, the most prevalent model, usually involves a presenter who acts as a guide for the viewers explaining and contextualising what they are seeing. The Journalistic mode provides a specific point of view: “typically built up around a particularly dramatic story or issue” (Henley 1985:7). The Observational approach has the superficial appearance of the filmmakers taking a ‘back seat’. It attempts to allow the viewer direct access to the filmed material with as little ‘third-party’ intervention as possible. For *The Interactive Village*, we re-ordered the modes into Observational — Didactic — Journalistic. However, rather than being the sub-genres presented to the viewer, the user can now decide whether to: watch



Figure 1: *The Interactive Village* interface enables the user to select 'stories' by location or image.

& listen in Observational mode; access the Didactic anthropologist's commentary explaining, guiding and informing; or to "take issue" by accessing a particular point of view on a subject or issue e.g. threat to rural transport issues — viability of train service, village communication. The *Interactive Village Journalistic* mode re-models Henley's concept of *journalistic* away from the film director/journalist to the user becoming the journalist: piecing together programme material into a narrative structure that reflects his/her own interests.

As a result, *The Interactive Village* interface has been designed to give the end-user access to these three modes. The production format offers a range of unique interactive experiences on a sliding scale from 'High/Low Information' from news headline presentation to in-depth documentary to user-explored/contributed to ethnography. Each configuration provides a personalised

interactive experience, where the source sequences are configured seamlessly in real time to suit the personal wishes and needs of engagers. The 'Observational' mode comprises loosely ordered video-clips linked through personal, topical or locational associations and presented as an endless loop. When the user, watching the programme, running uninterrupted in default 'observational' mode, engages (e.g. via a single click) to select, explore or play, the system registers the clip currently being played back, and chooses a property of that clip to engage with a new loop of associated clips. If the user does not interact, the system will automatically engage a new loop when media files satisfying the current criteria have been exhausted. *The Interactive Village* employs a 'nuclear' structure that enables the user to access material along a variety of classified thematic (topic) threads and at a number of graded levels, within the three main modes Observational (view), Didactic

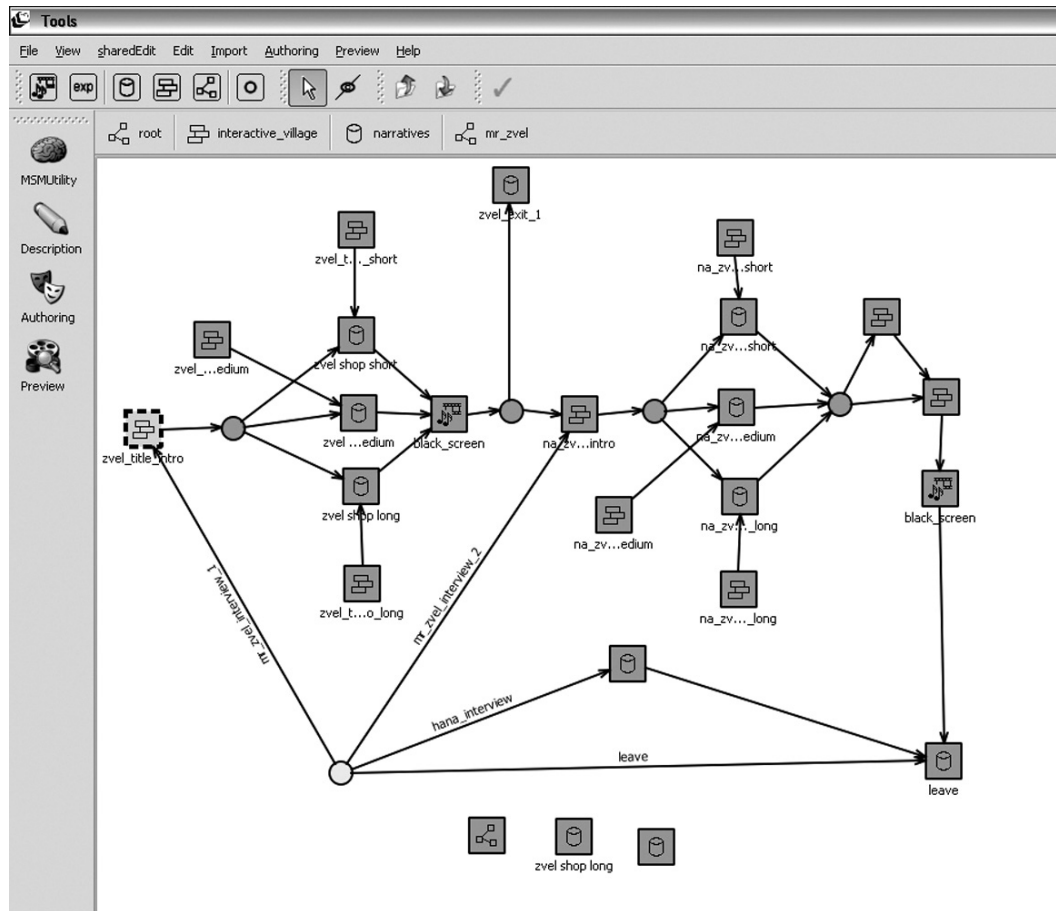


Figure 2: *The Interactive Village* in the NM2 media tool.

(select), Journalistic (search and compile). Configuration of individual programmes is seamless, through sensitive dependence on initial conditions set by the engager via direct interaction with the moving image material or via a topical graphical interface. The tool enables the user to switch between modes as s/he engages with the material. So if the user is in 'observational' mode s/he can change to 'didactic' if/when contextualising information/voice-over narration is required. Or, at any stage, the user may

decide to 'take an issue' and gather information about a particular subject. *The Interactive Village* aims to present the unique character of Dolní Rožná and issues specific to that village, while maintaining a sense of village universality. The production has developed a format that could be applied to other locations. In some senses *The Interactive Village* could also be Marshall McLuhan's 'global village' — *Any Village Anywhere*.

1 an Integrated Project under the European 6th Framework Programme.

References

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