An Interview with Vincent Morisset, interactive film director

M. Cecilia Reyes
Universidad del Norte

Introduction

Vincent Morisset[1] is a rare type of author: he is an interactive film director (Hales, 2015). His work travels across a wide spectrum of media, genres, and formats, moving from web-based music videoclips to physical interactive installations and collaborative mobile application poetry. In collaboration with his colleagues at Studio AATOAA, his work has been showcased and honored at some of the world's most prestigious film festivals and new media art exhibitions. In an ever-changing media landscape, the role of the interactive author has been difficult to decipher as we still find ourselves in a terminological babel (Koetniz et al, 2020) due to the multimodality and intermediality of digital interactive art (Elleström, 2010). It is through the voices of the interactive authors that we can gain insight into the nature of these artworks (Kitromili and Reyes, 2023). In the following interview, Morisset reflects on the author's role, the nature of the interactive work, and the relationship between the author and with the interactors of the work.

Interview

María Cecilia Reyes (M.C.R.): How do you define your practice?
Vincent Morisset (V.M.): I have difficulty to define myself, to define my practice. It is a field where words loose meaning quickly because buzzwords star to lose sense, vocabulary in this field is volatile. So it is challenging to define myself, I know that in mid-2000 I started to define myself as a director, and that was a game changer. When I was in university, I was defining myself as a coder or programmer. But then I started to create a bridge with creativity, and my role was kind of a "Capitan" role, and at that time saying that you direct a website was completely ridiculous but for me I was bold, but it was something that I wanted to change the perception of this medium. It was not about my ego, I just wanted to change the mindset of how people see this platform or medium and to say you can be an author in this medium. You can someone having a vision and bring this vision to reality, so at the moment that I proclaimed myself as a director was a gamechanger because just a word changed the way the people was looking at what I was doing. They were looking at the projects through a different lens. I own a little studio called AATOAA[2], where I am also a producer, I don't code anymore, so when people ask me what you do and you say I do interactive stuff, I feel awkward when I have to explain what I do.

M.C.R.: How to define the artwork itself?
V.M.: My practice is broader and broader, but I think my main field is still that kind of bridge between film and digital. So, interactive films are mostly what I do, and I wanted to go to the cinema in university, that's where I'm coming from. I think most of the things I have done in the past have this kind of DNA. So I guess like that would kind of define what I do: interactive films.

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[1] http://vincentmorisset.com
[2] http://aatoaa.com/

M.C.R.: What was the first interactive project that you created? Specifically, did you have a sort of epiphany moment, in which you decided to take this this way?

V.M.: When I finished university, I had two lives. I was a programmer doing CD-ROMs in the corporate world - boring stuff-, and on the other side I was doing short films with the collective. Like Dr. Jekill and Mr. Hyde. With the Kino movement, where I was doing my short films, we were doing films in 48 hours and my first interactive film was made in that context. It is called *Colorblind Clyde*[3] and it is in bicolorama technique. Basically, it is a movie where you have a blue video on a red video superimposed, and everyone in the cinema had like little gels blue and red, but instead of looking the two together as in 3D, you're looking through one or the other. So you are basically doing your own edit and it is super basic because there is no computer. It was just about flipping between two channels, but the room exploded, it was so full of energy, and you could hear people giggle and laugh and it was just kind of collective mindfuck. People still talk to me about this evening and that is when I understood how participation or connection between participants/spectators and a piece would channel a different emotional window. I was like, "wow, okay, there is something promising there". The fact that it was like so ghetto and just done in 24 hours with five dollars made me realize that it is not about tech, it is about a mindset and how to write a story. And *Colorblind Clyde* is a linear story, a short film with a beginning, middle, end.

After that, I would say doing *Neon Bible*[4] was also an "aha" moment. I had been working with Arcade Fire for a while and they asked me to do a music video. It was a specific context when MTV was kind of dying and it was also the beginning of YouTube blogs. For me, it was just this pragmatic thought of knowing that kids will watch that on a computer, so why not to take advantage of it. I didn't have the sensation that it was the *future* or ground-breaking, but the "aha" was about how it impacted. That was eye-opening and it was also the first time that I could bridge those two passions and I built on that vocabulary.

M.C.R.: How do you define the person that is enjoying/receiving your art?

V.M.: I don't know, it is one of those I will never know. I use participants but sometimes I flip. If I write a text, I will alternate between terms. I will say spectator at some point and when I refer to the interaction, I will say participant, and if it is in a physical context, I will say visitor. But I don't like "player". I stay away from the videogame vocabulary, because what I do is so close to the game world, but at the same time it is not the mindset I want the people to be in. It is not about the performance or the goal, it is about storytelling. So, if you use game words, then it shifts and people would wonder what they need to do, and it ruins the mindset. That is another reason why I always cheat a bit and use words that feel either weird or goofy on purpose, because I really want people to approach the piece with that spectrum.

M.C.R.: In that sense "user" it is not okay either.

V.M.: User is more software, and again, I try to be away from software and games. And also marketing. Most of the good interactive works online in the late 90s and 2000 were mainly advertising. All the people that were doing interesting stuff because the money was there, and people in the advertising industry love this kind of cutting-edge terminology. A lot of the vocabulary around our practice is based on advertising, like "creative director". "Creative director" is something you say when you work in an agency and you do advertising for yogurt but saying "creative director" for an art piece sounds weird, and yet it is often how people define themselves in the interactive world. I try to stay away from that and to bring the perception that online works can also be another idiom.

M.C.R.: As a very new practice, where do you go for inspiration?

V.M.: Graphic novel. What else? I think just real-life experience of things that feel not banal. Often, the starting point of a project is trying to transpose a feeling or an emotion, or a mindset that you get in another context, like dancing by yourself in the shower, walking in the woods, reading a book, looking at yourself in the mirror, playing with a kite, or goofing around on Google Maps. Often, the starting point is just a sensation. I have always been fascinated by the early cinema. I don't know why. Maybe the experimental low tech, that was high tech at the time, and this magical feeling of moving images is something that has been a recurring aspect in a couple of projects. Also music.

M.C.R.: How do you translate that inspiration from simple things in life into technology? How do you choose which technology, medium, and format you will use to transmit that feeling?

V.M.: It is a mix of different things, often there is either a context where you would say it is going to be an online project, or it is going to be an installation. The way I work with Caroline and Édouard, my two colleagues, is that we start with this little seed and then we try to crack it in different ways, a kind of fast prototype all over the place. Or we just say "okay, I want to put people in a state of ultra-lucidity". *Way-to-go*[5] was about just looking differently, to look at small beauty around. This meditative state brought the intuition of using a first-player game view in that context. And then we asked ourselves "How can you start from there and translate that into a web experience? Where do we go from there? We need to go from one place to another, so we need to film. But how can you film in 360° (that was pre-VR). And if I have a camera, I'll be in the in the shot, so

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3   https://vincentmorisset.com/bicolorama.html
4   https://conifer.rhizome.org/vmorisset/default-collection/list/aatoaa/b3/20180831193659$br:firefox:49/http://beonlineb.com/
5   a-way-to-go.com

it changed my role as kind of a cameraman, director, and protagonist. So then, we can imagine you as some kind of character."

MOTTO was similar, I wanted to do something where we ask people to give or to harvest, exploring a different kind of participation, but what does that imply? It needs to work in New Delhi, in Brazil, in Paris. What are these universal premises? How do we connect the dots between those things? What is fun? What is meaningful? So it never really starts from a specific vision, often the seed and the end result are connected but we follow this weird path, where the start intuition ends up in the final incarnation, but never imagining what it would be at the end and that's what is exciting about it: "What is this thing?". It is about being openminded and with no rigidity. You lose some stuff, you throw in the garbage some of the other things, and then it goes in its own direction.

M.C.R.: There are not a lot of interactive digital narratives that are purely author, most of them had a purpose, education for example. But in my opinion, *MOTTO* was pure poetry. I wonder which is the space for this kind of product, do you feel that people are consuming this type of experience? Do you know other interactive artefacts as authorial as yours?

V.M.: There are others, I don't know if there is a lot, though. To be honest, I am surprised that there are no more, these are the things that we look at all the time and people is not taking advantage of. I think it is also a field where a lot of people have "amazing" promised stuff and 90% of it is terrible, and I think that people now it is suspicious about. If I have heard the pitch of *MOTTO*, "this contribution with people making stories", I'd have been like "Oh this will be terrible", and that kind of pitch of *MOTTO* was hype in mid 2000s with buzzwords like "mobile and contribution" and nothing great came up from there. I think some people do great work but when you think on the screens and the possibilities, the author and the non-linear project is still a rare breed, and it is not fashionable. 10-15 years ago it was overhyped and sold as "future" and "interactivity", to a point in which they did not mean anything. Now it still has a bit of a mystique, but people are not necessarily driven to it.

Bla Bla[6] and *Way-to-go* were two weirdos. *Way-to-go* reached 750000 people, a lot of individuals that tried this little character in the wood. Sometimes a specific niche proposition can find different little groups in different countries, and it gets to resonate with an audience. But is there a place for it? I don't know. I think, I hope. I really believe in it and that's why I put so many energies. I wanted to make a case and *MOTTO* was that I wanted to do something ambitious and bigger, something like a feature film, something that is generous, not a little "oh it's cool". That was one of the ambitions: there can be propositions of slow web.

M.C.R.: We spend a lot of time in our phones and computers, and yet people are not consuming narratives that are not legacy media on a screen, as films or series.

V.M: Or it works on a dedicated platform, like Instagram and TikTok where people will stay in that platform. And if you do stuff in that ecosystem, you might resonate but then it is a parasite with limited possibilities.

M.C.R: How do you think that the relationship between author and participant/interactor change through this practice?

V.M.: I think there are different ways of approaching in interactivity. For me, I have always avoided the tree structure, or an interactivity that is driven by choice. As a kid, I read a lot of Choose-Your-Own-Adventure literature and I loved it, but there was also something really frustrating about it because I wanted to see what was behind the left door. This interaction drives you somewhere, but I was cheating and reading the other path. For me, the interaction is something that elevates the narrative as a wind pushing, instead of a deceptive kind of interaction. My love for traditional narrative also kept that idea of controlling a timeline and narrative arc. I have always liked the strength of timing and curves. It helps me control where I bring people. Yet, I also like to give a sense of freedom: do whatever you like. I think the beauty of interactivity is that you can project your own personality in it.

I like to imagine projects that leave room for that projection of yourself, and it is a mirror effect. It has to do with avoiding the need to be good or to perform well. I imagine a project that always reflects that. I also like projects that can talk to a broad audience, that you get a five-year-old or a baby boomer or someone with a disability to do it. It is coming back often to reflection on human beings and how people deal with stuff that they don't know. In most of my projects, I take people by the hand at the beginning while they are introduced to the mythology of the world.

M.C.R.: Do you have a way to track what your interactors are doing? How do they interact with the storyworld?

V.M.: No, I don't do a lot of user testing. We did it more with MOTTO, just to know more about what people like, how much do they want to share personal matters. But even after that, I don't analyse the behaviours of people. I don't want to track people.

M.C.R.: What do you think are the characteristics of a meaningful interactive experience? What are the components that you don't compromise, that need to be there?

V.M.: That's a difficult question. I don't know how to answer that. I think one of the dangers is to be too fascinated by the shiny new thing. I think, our communities are often homogenized. A whole community see this new VR (virtual reality) headset and then they end up forgetting what they learned earlier. We are a

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6   https://conifer.rhizome.org/vmorisset/vincent-morisset-2000-2018/20180908182945$br:firefox:49/http://blabla.nfb.ca/

caricature as an industry and a community, about being obsessed with something and then throwing it away, and then obsessed with another thing and squeeze it to the bone until it is sick and then throw it away again.

M.C.R.: It has happened with VR, for example, or the "transmedia" concept.
V.M.: Yeah, transmedia, multimedia, hyper media and so on. I think technology should just be tools and layers and ways to get there. I think it is important to have a voice of signature and develop your own thing as authors and not follow "the style or what we should do for that kind of medium". We need to stay relevant and do pieces that will age well, because that's another thing: the digital medium is difficult to archive, or that might age differently or faster. So, again, a way to just do your own thing and view it outside of that ecosystem can be positive. And then you can find a microsite, a one-page thing can be meaningful and touching.

M.C.R: You mentioned the importance of keeping dramatic consistency to lead the participant through the experience. How do you balance narrative and interactivity?
V.M.: I see them in a similar way, they serve as a way of pacing interactivity. The kind of interactivity that I ask people is like a heartbeat, a way to make them focus, aware or involved in its intensity, like seeing it as colours or volume. I really see narrative and interactivity as curves, I try to unite them hand-to-hand and see how I can build a journey with them.

M.C.R.: In terms of technology, what do you envision as the next platform for interactive narratives?
V.M.: I get often that question and I'm not really interested in the crystal ball. I preserve myself from it and I think it makes me a better artist not to read about the newest thing, because you get sucked into that collective obsession. I just do the project and by being surrounded by smart and curious people, we ask "how can we achieve this now?", and for example, maybe the machine learning world could be interesting. For MOTTO, we just experimented and started to code in Python, and integrate computer vision. But it happened during the project. At that time, this new field was not democratized yet and it snapped with our intention and the field of research, but it did not start as "let's do a project about artificial intelligence".

M.C.R.: Technology comes after...
V.M.: ... Or together. The minute we start is when we do the research and experiment. We plant the seeds together and then we figure it out. It is really integrated but it is not the starting point. And looking into the future, I protect myself in a weird way and maybe that is how I navigate through these hype cycles.

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