Navigating Context for Nonlinear Narrative\textsuperscript{1}
Kevin Brooks, Ph.D.

Summary
Nonlinear narrative in general and interactive television in particular is a mix of multiple media and technologies that have developed independently over a long period of time. This paper suggests a conceptual lineage of interactive TV. It then discusses the trust required to make ITV functional, and lastly suggests story context as a framework in which that trust can exist. The relationship and implicit contract between storyteller and audience is the pivot point on which all narrative, and particularly ITV narrative, hangs. Story actually happens somewhere in the nexus of storyteller and audience. Navigating an interactive or nonlinear narrative requires all three of these components fit together into a cohesive whole. It is like piecing together a puzzle. In fact, designing an interactive narrative could be described as designing a puzzle. While there is a lot of attention given to the technology of interactive narrative, story context is a powerful tool for providing a complex and interesting landscape that allows the relationship and contract to build. This paper addresses three components of story context: time, space and point of view.

Interactive TV
Interactive television is a mix of apparent opposites. It is a blend of old and new technology, of game and story, and of linear and nonlinear experience. It must satisfy viewer/participant expectation as well as deliver surprise through the user’s interactive involvement. It is a complex and evolving amalgam of elements that, when well constructed, provide an experience unlike any of its components alone. Interactive TV does not exist in a vacuum, but in the context of the user’s experience with the various media components of television, film, and computers. While the components are familiar, it is the media created by this amalgam that is so new.

\textsuperscript{1} Originally published in M. Damásio (Ed.), Interactive Television Authoring and Production 2003. Lisbon: Universidade Lusófona de Humanidades e Tecnologias.
**Mix of Game and Story**

Computer games make a clear contribution to interactive television. The shooting, driving, investigative, and manipulative nature of electronic games contributes greatly to the design thinking of ITV and in general to nonlinear narrative. More games are being produced with stronger story components and use story to draw participants into a deeper involvement with the characters. Some examples of popular contemporary games with heavy story content are: *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* by Ubisoft, *Eternal Darkness: Sanity’s Requiem* by Silicon Knights, and *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* by Electronic Arts. Games often have a single or limited set of goals and those goals are communicated from the outset. Generally speaking, games have only one of two endings; either you win or you lose. There may be infinite paths to either of these two endings, and there may be many versions of the losing ending, but what usually accompanies completing a game is a statement that one has either won or lost.

Story is a little more complex, in part because it is so much a part of our lives. Story is so deeply familiar because we see parts of our lives as stories. When we retell episodes of our childhood, episodes of our children’s lives, events from our love lives, successes in our work or play, we access ancient models storytelling as naturally as breathing. Story requires background, establishment and growth of a character or multiple characters, structure and (more often than not) plot. Stories are typically experienced linearly, since nature holds us to a linear time experience. While we as audience often like jumping around in a nonlinear fashion in our minds, re-sorting and reconnecting plot points, facts and relationship details in order to better understand a story, we need to be coaxed into that state, led there gently by a guide – a guide we quickly learn to trust.

The guide is the storyteller and it is the storyteller’s job to bring the audience into a narrative participatory state. There is an implicit contract formed between the storyteller and audience that defines the responsibility of the storyteller to the audience, and to the story characters. That contract states that the storyteller will lead the audience safely through an entertaining set of twists and turns in the narrative landscape and will never abandon them. The storyteller will give the audience their best efforts as a guide and in return the audience will give the storyteller
their trust, attention and in the commercial world, their money. Together all will have a pleasurable narrative experience.

![Diagram](image)

**Fig 1. The storyteller establishes an implicit contract with the audience that creates trust, such that both parties get what they came for.**

It seems much less likely that an audience would willingly make their own paths when dropped in a strange narrative landscape. It is the storyteller that provides a structure and style of navigation. If dropped in Oz without the benefit of the Yellow Brick Road, Dorothy would not have found the Emerald City, but instead wandered aimlessly, hoping to find a really good map store. Dorothy would have sought guidance. She would have found or even created a storyteller to help make sense out of the characters and events in Oz. Fortunately she had not only the Yellow Brick Road, and thereby also the three friends she met along the way, but also the surviving witch sisters and the wizard to provide her with multiple levels of guidance.

**Mix of Linear and Non-linear Storytelling**
Interactive television blends the traditional linear experience of television with a sense of nonlinear control. This power balance between watching and controlling, between being a passenger and a driver, forms one of the core challenges for ITV producers. A number of historically traditional linear media forms have contributed to that balance.

Television was born when the most powerful and accessible aural and visual media influences were cinema and radio. So great were the influences of these two media forms in the early twentieth century that television can be thought of as the child of cinema and radio.
Television inherits a visual language from cinema. The camera movements, shot framing and editing language we see in TV today were defined by the steady stream of late nineteenth and early twentieth century cinematic pioneers like Eisenstien, Edison, the Lumiere brothers, Melies and Griffith.² Theater could be considered the grandparent of television, along with the concurrent stream of industrial age scientific discovery. In theater multiple events can happen on the stage at once and it is left to the audience to do the necessary work to follow the story in time as well as in space – a space not nearly as constrained as in film. Once film came along, audiences had to be trained to digest a steady stream of visual images aimed directly at them. There is a big difference between focusing on the emotions on an actor’s face on the left side of the stage, and suddenly seeing the actor’s emotional face ten times larger than life in front of you. While the film audience must still work to construct and understand the images before them, it is not the same spatial work as in theater.

² See http://www.filmsite.org/
Television inherits a rich aural language from radio. Although film also offers a richness in aural presentation, radio was first to be really good at it. From the early days of radio, especially with dramatic productions, radio presented a constant linear flow of sounds, often layered in complex ways. Technically and stylistically, television can offer this as well. However, radio has the advantage of being unable to rely on a visual representation. Radio must convey the characters, relationships between characters, emotions, events, even imagery all through sound.

Also from radio, television inherits an experience that is both simultaneous or live, and yet remote. The old American coast to coast\(^3\) broadcasts in the first half of the twentieth century were special because at that time it would take the average person one to two weeks to travel from Boston to San Francisco over land. Yet through these broadcasts it was possible to experience important news and cultural events at the same time as tens of millions of others experienced them. And, like a solar eclipse or some other major astrological event, there was an awareness by each individual that they were part of a large dispersed community experiencing the same thing at the same time.

The next branch point in this family tree shows Interactive TV as the child of television and personal computers. Television has helped us come to expect familiar characters in our living rooms on a regular basis (soap operas, talk shows, reality shows, dramatic and comedic series, etc). We expect and largely tolerate commercial interruptions to our visits with these characters, and expect those interruptions to provide a minimal level of entertainment themselves. We expect a certain level of choice in the form of different channels, although cable and satellite systems are showing us that there would appear to be a soft upper limit to the number of useful channels (500 cable channels and nothing’s on!). We want choice and TV provides it with minimal user effort. A single remote control button changes the channel and immediately provides a different entertainment experience. Continuous interaction is not required in order to drastically change one’s television viewing experience.

Computers, on the other hand, require constant interaction and attention by their nature. Data

---

\(^3\) Coast to coast refers to American broadcasts transmitted simultaneously from the coast of the Atlantic Ocean to the coast of the Pacific ocean, potentially covering all 48 contiguous states.
entry, programming, data output, data processing, adjustments to the processing, data storage and organization all require a user or set of users to interactively shape the end experience. There is also a steady drive to find new ways to do ever more powerful and diverse things with our computers, which is one reason why computer interface design is such a critical issue in computer science. We strive to interact with our computers in much more sophisticated ways and those ways are rarely linear.

Interactive TV is both linear and nonlinear. It must satisfy our need to experience a linear flow of images and sounds, as well as satisfy our desire to control and contribute to our own entertainment. It has inherited tools and methods from its predecessors (cinema, radio, television and computers), but must now use those tools in innovative ways.

**Mix of Satisfying Expectation and Surprise**

Interactive experiences blend surprise with the satisfaction of audience expectation. Surprise is different from juxtaposition. Juxtaposition is the placement of one thing next to another in order to emphasize contrast. In a temporal medium such as film, it is a quickly delivered violation of audience expectation. *Surprise* in the sense referred to here has more to do with the narrative direction established over a longer period of time. Surprise requires a buildup to the violation of expectation, softening the negative ramifications of the violation, providing more enjoyment. It is not as simple as the classic silent film shot of a man opening a door to find a locomotive
barreling toward him. Instead it is planning for years to climb Mount Everest, saving every penny for supplies and the flight to Nepal, hiring the sherpas in town, climbing for a couple of days to establish a base camp, climbing for two more days to establish an ascent camp, having two team members get sick, resting for a day so that you don’t get sick yet with the peak almost in sight, calling your spouse and children from a satellite phone to tell them that in the morning you are headed to the peak, working your way hand over hand, foot hold over foot hold, until finally with your last ounce of adrenaline you pull yourself over the final ledge of ice and rock, only to find a taxi stand… and a queue.

When the audience has some level of control (perhaps any level of control) over the story, including control over what might be a narrative buildup to a surprise, is it possible to design an experience that still delivers a satisfying surprise? Here again lies one of the core challenges of interactive TV, and nonlinear narrative in general. This challenge is like designing a jigsaw puzzle that is interesting to solve, without being too easy or too impossibly difficult.

**Puzzle Example**

In fact, navigating a nonlinear narrative is similar to putting together a jigsaw puzzle. Even though a puzzle is more like a game than a narrative, with a clearly identifiable end goal, which an interactive narrative may not have, there are still interesting similarities. The process of assembling a puzzle, of seeing and following a strategy, of making choices that turn a chaotic pile of pieces into a coherent whole, can be carried over from puzzle assembly to the nonlinear narrative domain.

Imagine that you have been handed the box for a wonderful 500-piece puzzle and are asked to solve it. As a jigsaw devotee, you have a number of strategy decisions to make.

1. Decide how much of a challenge you want by choosing where you put the cover of the box. Will you:
• Empty all the puzzle pieces on the table and prop up the puzzle box cover where you will be able to view the picture at any point during the assembly process?
• Put the box cover down so that you cannot constantly see it, but at any point during assembly could easily reach over and turn the top over to view the picture?
• Leave the box cover face down, relying entirely on your memory from your initial encounter with the box?

Fig 4. Puzzle picture on the box cover and the pile of pieces on the table.

Each choice effects the experience to follow. Each choice relies differently on your memory. Each choice will dictate a different strategy for navigating the various objects and color blotches in the picture. The next couple of tasks are more mechanical than actual strategy. Still, deciding to follow these steps helps to quickly assemble a portion of the puzzle.

Fig 5. Puzzle corners.

---

4 Puzzle generating software: JiXii, by Trollin.
2. Find the corners of the puzzle. Given a rectangular puzzle, the four corners can be characterized as having two straight edges that meet at a 90-degree angle. They will not be hard to orient on the work surface and corrections to the orientation are easily made. Plus, this task has the nice added advantage of providing a small but early success in the process, drawing you further on into the puzzle project.

3. Find the edges of the puzzle – the edges of the world, as it were. The edges of a rectangular puzzle are characterized by having a single straight edge. If you group the edge pieces by color, being aware of pieces that show a color shift, it is possible to quickly put the edges of the puzzle together. Once the corners and edges are assembled, then the frame of the puzzle is defined, providing another fairly quick success in the overall process. At this point, staring at the framed puzzle, you may feel an even stronger emotional commitment to finishing, to drive onward toward seeing the coherent whole.

4. Remember the picture. With the frame together (and possibly the box cover out of sight), this is the time to remember the details of the picture. Was it a red flower, a purple flower or both? Was the just the center of the flower purple or what there purple all over the flower? Did the flower have any green leaves showing? How big was the flower in the picture? Was the sky in the background blue or white? Left with a frame and 80 percent of the puzzle lumped in a pile, it is important to mentally envision the detail of the picture. Assembling the puzzle is not just about finding edges of pieces that fit together. Instead it is about seeing the tiny images in the
pieces, that fit memory, that fit edges, which fit together. Color blotches form disconnected petals, individual white pieces form larger sections of open sky, and the more pieces that fit together, the easier it is to see how to finish the whole.

Aside from the very beginning, the clearest and fastest part of the puzzle to assemble is the very end. One’s memory of the picture is reinforced by what is already completed. Because the puzzle picture will not change during assembly, the more one assembles, the easier assembly becomes. Assembling a puzzle is reassembling a microworld [1], using the rules and strategies you bring to the effort and discovering new ones based on the specific experience.

Such rules and strategies are brought into a nonlinear narrative experience as well. Nonlinear narrative, and specifically interactive television are not just about branching pathways, but about using the rules and strategies that an audience is likely to bring into the experience and helping them discover new strategies based on the specific instance of that experience. Branching pathways is only one mechanism for delivering a nonlinear narrative experience. Its strengths and weaknesses are well documented and beyond the scope of this document. Here are some examples of the strategies brought into the nonlinear narrative experience that correspond with the four puzzle strategies above.

1. Seeing the ending: How much does the nonlinear narrative foretell its own ending or endings by presenting an obvious or eventually discernable structure? Does the narrative telegraph its own ending through the use of predictable linear narrative mechanisms? For example, does the story begin at its own ending and is presented entirely in flashback? This is probably the most obvious way of foretelling the ending. Is the narrator or storyteller one of the characters in the story? If so, this story style declares that the narrating character survives. Does the story begin and continually reinforce that it is a romance? If so, even with dramatic twists, turns and apparent disaster near the end, a romance usually has the two main characters end up living happily ever after. To wave the flag of romance, then at the last moment deny the romantic ending, is to leave the audience unsatisfied. How much of the puzzle box cover will the audience be shown before and during their experience?
In most of its media forms, technology allows nonlinear narrative to not be held to a static picture of a story, as the jigsaw puzzle is held to a static picture. There may be a choice by the producers to present a somewhat complex static picture or structure, such as branching pathways. But technologically, the picture or story of the nonlinear narrative puzzle can endlessly change. Imagine assembling the puzzle pieces of a moving video image, where each piece displayed the appropriate section of the video screen for that piece’s place in the 2D puzzle. The puzzle pieces would exist only for the length of the video story playing and then would disappear. It would be a puzzle of 2D space and time. Now instead of imagining a 2D puzzle, imagine a 3D puzzle where the final puzzle shape is a cube or a sphere. All the pieces would be of slightly differing sizes and each individual piece would have multiple sides. Each side of each piece could have a different appearance over the course of story time, depending on the story and on what piece adjoins it. Now imagine each 3D puzzle piece is in the shape of a person. All the pieces are slightly different sizes (adults and child), with different appearances over time (various character point of views). Now it would make sense if each piece exhibited different behaviors based on their proximity to certain other pieces. Some pieces attract, some repel, and some attract when they should not. Perhaps you have been given a preview glimpse of what this puzzle looks like completed, and perhaps not. Using the puzzle model, nonlinear narrative can be anything from a simple 2D assembly process, to a complex world where narrative guidance and craftsmanship is absolutely necessary.

2. Establishing reference boundaries: Reference boundaries are the simple hard limiting factors of the experience. Those limiting factors may have to do with the technological limitations of the medium, such as digital cable television, high-speed broadband connection, or mobile phone text interface. The limiting factors may have to do with the intended audience, such as children under 17 or men between the ages of 18 and 35. Given these audiences, certain kinds of story material are either directly prohibited or highly unlikely. There remains an enormous amount of possible narrative inside these boundaries, but establishing these boundaries helps reduce the feeling in the audience of wide-open aimless interaction. Finding the corners of the story means understanding the
extreme boundaries that define the story space.

3. Establishing soft boundaries: Soft boundaries are limitations woven into the fabric of the narrative that may be removed at some point in the experience. They are or can be temporary to the extent that removing them provides some advantage to the overall experience. For instance, a soft boundary may be a boundary of complexity – the story or interaction with the story may be simplistic at first until the audience/participant successfully completes a certain portion, after which character relationships or interaction methods get more intense and complex. Boundaries of complexity relay how crazy the story is likely to become to navigate, understand, and mentally reassemble.

4. Constructing the personal narrative⁵: Personal narrative here refers to the narrative created in the mind of the user. It is the product of the contract between the storyteller and the audience, and exists almost as a separate entity from both. It involves imagining the world, reevaluating and then re–imagining or rebuilding the world based on new information, new connections, and new understandings of those connections. This is where story actually happens [2] and is the work that the storyteller designs for.

We see the different parts of our lives as little stories – the episodes of our childhood, episodes of our children’s lives, events from our love lives, and successes in our work or play. We often see the connections between these parts as a multi-dimensional nonlinear web of stories. Because of these dimensions, nonlinear narrative can offer many journeys toward a resolution or ending, to the extent that there is a resolution. The nonlinear narrative experience is about having the audience perceive the chaos of the pile of pieces on the table and helping them work through making that pile navigable and eventually coherent. Narrative brings order to life. We see that especially in popular genres such as soap operas. While our personal lives may have unsolvable problems, we enjoy living vicariously through the lives of characters whose problems we can easily solve.

⁵ The term personal narrative can also refer to a personal first-person story recounting events of the past. But here the intention is to refer to the work of mentally constructing a personal understanding of relationships and events from information revealed in the narrative experience.
Karen Tate shouldn’t trust that guy. Come on, anyone can see he can’t be trusted – the guy’s a dog. And Tad should realize that Rachel is just trying to get his money. She doesn’t actually care about him. Tad should just go back to his old girlfriend. And just because his old girlfriend still has amnesia after that long coma and doesn’t remember that he saved her from the burning building, is no reason for him to end the relationship. Grow up, man!

It is so clear what the characters should and should not do. We get to watch like passive deities, unable to act, but absolutely certain of the nature of their maladies. Because of their flexibility, nonlinear narratives should be capable of providing a more complex and interesting representation of life than linear stories. While this is not often realized in the marketplace, it is up to nonlinear narrative producers to bear out the full potential of the medium. Nonlinear narratives are capable of providing a multi-dimensional journey from chaos to coherency – and provide that journey through different routes again, and again, and again.

Context

There are many elements of nonlinear narrative and therefore interactive television that contribute to this full potential. The elements that usually draw the most attention from producers are technological: the computer systems, interaction methodologies, graphics, data bandwidth, data compression, networking protocols, edit/design applications, and so on. What tend to get less attention are elements that have always been a part of stories, such as story context.

Story context\(^6\) is the environment or atmosphere around the key story elements such as characters, relationships and events. Story context is that which provides significance and meaning to the elements, binding them together such that an audience member can do the

\(^6\) For a discussion about the role of context with regards to the relationship between storyteller and audience, see an essay by Laura Simms: http://www.laurasimms.com/EssayContext.html
personal narrative work mentioned earlier. While the key story elements bring their own significance to the story – their own individual atmosphere of context – the overall context provides the substrate on which the elements live. As just three examples, story context is a representation of the significance of date/time, location, and story point of view.

Story date and time represent historical significance and place the key elements, like characters, within a specific realm of understanding. A story character in London with a strange illness may be understood based on that character’s relationships to other characters, their occupation, their level of education, their travels, etc. Add the context of London in the 1300’s and the mysterious illness may take on similarities to the bubonic plague or Black Death, that swept through Europe. With the added (and perhaps not specifically mentioned) context of the bubonic plague, the character’s relationships, occupation and recent personal travels take on new significance. Thus, context includes a representation of date and time, but also can be represented by what is specifically and overtly expressed, or by what is not expressed. Sometimes context is the crucial stuff that remains unsaid.7

More recent time context can provide as much significance as distant time in the previous example. Mystery stories rely on both distant and recent time to build context, establish soft boundaries and mis-directions, re-establish new boundaries, etc. When did the murder take place, just before or after the prime suspect appeared at the party? What events in the past may constitute a motive? Usually in the end, a resolution is painstakingly constructed by making a number of mental connections and reconnections of contextual and key element material, as is suggested by [2]. And while a satisfactory resolution may be found, it may not be the only possible resolution, and there may still be some unanswered questions.

Story location represents spatial significance and literally places the key elements within a specific realm of understanding. Is the place of a story event a place typically of serenity, of danger, of activity, of change? In a sense, location context is more than just what spot on the

7 Family stories are a good for providing unspecified context. All families have things they hide or don’t talk about, the “skeletons in the closet,” so to speak. Some good family stories have these unsaid things palpably hovering over the events and characters for much of the story.
globe something takes place. It is an interpretation of the significance of that spot, with some acceptance that multiple interpretations by different characters and audience members are possible, if not likely.

For instance, in the movie *Into the West*, directed by Mike Newell and screenplay by Jim Sheridan [3], the city of Dublin and its surroundings take on multiple meanings and interpretations. When a present day gypsy father takes his two young sons and leaves his Travelers clan to live in the city following the death of his wife, Dublin becomes a place of refuge for the father and a place of banishment for the gypsy clan. Dublin is shown as a place of opportunity and wealth for some, and a place of poverty and desperation for others. There are scenes where the same busy streets of opportunity are shown as a desperate escape route on horseback. The same governmental institutions of public safety are also depicted as institutions of repression for the gypsy clan. The lovely green hills and meadows of the Irish countryside outside of Dublin form a place of danger and potential starvation for the two young boys. Dublin brings with it a certain set of contextual meanings and understandings, and these meanings become enlarged as the movie progresses, due to the developed gypsy Traveler point of view. The location provides a focus point for multiple cultural points of view. This is a common role for story locations – to provide appropriate context for a surface plot to make sense, but also to provide a means or justification for introducing other cultural points of view and culturally specific information.

The nature or worldview of the storyteller represents another level of significance for interpreting the story’s key elements. The storyteller is never neutral. While the physical design of the story experience can be an expression of the storyteller’s nature, so too is the story itself. It is common to know something about the politics of a world news information source (left-wing, right-wing, center) so one can judge how much it should be believed or how it should be interpreted. A conservative right-wing storyteller will place a particular spin on world events. We may agree with this worldview, we may disagree with it. Most certainly this worldview will present what other types will not. The project Terminal Time demonstrated this well. [4] If the storyteller is fearful, angry, joyous or in pain, those emotions will be expressed in the story. It is important for producers to know what “baggage” they are bringing to a story to better craft it.
The goal of production is not to find a neutral position on the story, but instead to make good informed choices. Similar to how an actor makes choices about their character to improve a scene, the producer must also make choices about the story that include considerations of their worldview.

Example Story
Story context is a powerful tool for providing a complex and interesting narrative landscape. If treated well, context can supply new dimensions to a nonlinear narrative production, without adding much in the way of time and production costs. The example that follows is a simple story treatment of a nonlinear narrative. Since specific production decisions are beyond the scope of this document, the story treatment is purposefully general and tries not to specify a particular medium or set of delivery channel technologies.

Story Introduction
Carol, an artist, asked her teenage son, Michael, to model for a face mask that she wanted to make. The process involved sitting still for about an hour or more while she covered her son’s face with petroleum jelly, then slowly apply a plaster mixture and gauze bandages. She told him that during this time, Michael would not be able to see, since his eyes would need to be closed and covered with plaster, nor would he be able to breath through his mouth, as his mouth would also be covered. She said that he would be able to breathe through his nose for the hour or so of modeling, with the help of two straws she would insert in his nostrils. Reluctant, but being the good son, Michael agreed.

The following Sunday morning, Michael sat in a kitchen chair while Carol prepared her materials. Michael had been up late the night before and really would have preferred to still be in bed. But the chair was comfortable, the music playing was relaxing, the sunshine through the window felt warm on his arms, and he didn’t have any place better to be anyway. Carol smeared his face with petroleum jelly, inserted two short straws in his nostrils and told him to relax. Relax with straws up my nose? It was a good thing he was still tired from the night before. Slowly the plaster went on, starting at the top of his forehead. It felt warm and soothing
as it covered his eyebrows, then his eyelids, and around his nose. He breathed slowly and deeply to help himself relax, until he felt his mother’s hand on his shoulder and heard her voice soft and close to his ear. “Michael, we’re done. I’m going to pull the mask off you now. So wiggle your face a little to loosen the plaster.” Done? Michael thought. Isn’t she going to cover my mouth, too? As he wiggled and she gently pulled, he realized that his mouth was covered with plaster. “Michael, it looks great! I’ll clean it up a bit once it hardens more. You know, sometimes they call these things death masks because the face looks lifeless with its eyes closed. But I think we’ll have to call this one a Dream Mask, because you fell asleep soon after I began. I’m sorry it took two hours instead of one.”

Once the mask hardened and was cleaned, Carol used it as a mold to make a replica of Michael’s face. She painted the face with lots of wild colors and flames leaking out of the its gently closed eyes. When Michael asked why she had painted it that way, his mother replied, “I don’t know. It’s what I saw there.”

**Contextual Assumptions**

Nowhere in the story introduction is there any mention of time or place. We can assume that the story takes place during a time recent enough for plaster to be used for face molding and for petroleum to be processed into a jelly – though that could cover a hundred years or more. What time (or times) can this story be placed in? Also, nowhere in the story introduction is there any mention of location. The story could take place anywhere in the world, so a choice can also be made for where this story happens. Setting time and place would establish a basic level of context, but there is more that can be done with time and place.

**Sample Direction #1**

While the story introduction could continue on in a linear fashion, detailing either Carol’s or Michael’s life after the mask, or even telling the story of the mask itself, there is an entire world available to investigate in just the introduction. There are lots of little details that can be latched on, like the significance of the music playing, of the kitchen chair if any, of the sunshine on Michael’s arms, etc. Then there is time itself [5]. If after this introduction the story were to
travel backwards in time, it could include something about why Carol was drawn to make a mask of her son in the first place. Was this the first mask she had ever made? What did Michael do that kept him up so late the Saturday night before the mask making? Is there any cultural significance to making the mask on a Sunday morning, the day of the Christian Sabbath, the day after the Jewish Sabbath? What happened when Michael fell asleep and why was he not aware that he fell asleep? Each of these questions and many more are doorways into a world beneath the surface, like Alice’s rabbit hole to Wonderland. By going back in time, we layer new context with old. We can continue to layer context by going further back in time, by going more in-depth on a particular detail, or by going further out into the abstract regarding a particular concept or philosophy. There are many choices, but let us look at just two backward-in-time and one forward-in-time. The audience/participant would get to experience some of these three choices, perhaps a little of all or all of one, but never all three in their entirety.

- Why did Carol make the mask of her son?
- Why was Michael unaware that he fell asleep?
- What happened to the mask?

Carol
Carol remembered from reading during her art training that some cultures regard making a mask of a loved one a very high honor. Usually children or younger members of the culture made masks of their parents or elders as a way of guaranteeing their eternal longevity. The mask would automatically hold the elder’s soul when they died, so that a young person would never have to be without the wisdom of their parents and elders. Carol wanted to make a mask of Michael, but without telling him the reason, because he would think it was silly or stupid. Teenagers can be like that. And even though both Carol and Michael knew that it was still weeks before the progressive disease would reach his brain, Carol wanted to preserve Michael’s soul now, while there was still plenty of time.

Michael
As Michael took deep slow breaths and as the plaster covered his forehead, he closed his eyes. When he opened them a moment later, he was looking out into the backyard behind his house. There stood a strange man, who somehow also looked familiar. He gave Michael a warm
penetrating smile. “Come to me when you are ready,” said the man. “When you want to know.” Know what? said Michael. “You’ll know the time and I’ll be here. Your place is being prepared with love.” Although the man was some distance away, Michael saw that he had the warmest eyes he had ever seen. It was like looking into a warm fire on a cold night. Michael stared into his smiling eyes until his mother put her hand on his shoulder.

The Mask
The mask sat on a shelf until that day when Carol came back from the hospital. She was drawn to it. On the entire trip home she could think of nothing else. It was time for the mask to have a place of honor in her home. And later, once she hung it on the wall, she felt a familiar warmth in the room that until then she had only before felt when with her son.

New Assumptions
A lot of new information is available from this second level of story segments. But remember that the audience/participant would not experience all of this second level of the story – only a selected portion. Exactly how much they would experience would still need to be determined based on the production details. But no one will have experienced all three sections in their entirety. From the Carol section we have learned that Michael is dying and Carol wants to participate in a foreign culture’s practice of storing the soul of a dying person in a mask. From Michael’s section we learned that during the time he was asleep, he met a strange yet familiar man in his backyard who invited him back at some time in the future. The backyard element narrows the cultural context a bit. And from the mask section we have learned that the mask does not immediately get a place of honor in the house, but does eventually at some undetermined amount of time later. From reading all three sections, one might be able to see the directions the story is going. Are there any other directions to take it?

Sample Direction #2
From the Carol section we can assume that her art training brought her in contact with the idea of soul storage. But the ingredients she mentioned to Michael in the introduction are rather mundane. Surely if one were to store a soul in a mask, some special ingredient would be
necessary. Was there any sort of ritual associated with the mask processes? Was there some extraordinary reason for preserving her son’s soul, other than the power of a mother’s love? For Michael, was that his first meeting with this man? Was it his last? Why the backyard? What else of significance is in the backyard? For the mask, where in the house is it hanging? What is it facing and who sees it there? There are still many more choices that can be made. The next section of the story will investigate location context – what can place bring to the story. Again, the audience/participant would not experience all three.

- What additional ingredients are required for soul storage?
- What is the significance of the back yard?
- Where is the mask hanging in the house?

Carol

“Close your eyes,” he said. Carol closed her eyes and felt the heat close in around her. The air was thick and heavy in her lungs. “In the jungles were I was a child, we were taught to hunt for this flower. It is as prized as meat.” Still with her eyes closed, Carol could hear tropical birds in the trees and the distant groans and chatter of the jungle. “This flower,” he said, “holds the life of the jungle. Our elders say the world is in this flower. Take it and use it when you need it to hold a life close to you.” She held the petals in her hand and had a sudden rush of feeling that she was very small and surrounded by teeming life.

Michael

Michael knew the back yard better than the palm of his hand. He knew every insect that crawled, every plant that grew, and every animal that wandered through his backyard. He played out there, lay in the sun out there and watched the stars out there. On days when his body would not let him go to school, he had school out there. And when he needed to send his mind someplace warm and safe, someplace were nothing would cause him pain and where he could fly, he went to the backyard.

The Mask

Carol hung the mask next to the front door. The mask was not the first thing people saw when they entered the house, but it was the last thing they laid eyes on when leaving. And from that
place of honor the mask could see every person who came in and every person who left. But more importantly, from that place of honor it faced the window on the far side of the house, with a view into the backyard.

**New Contextual Assumptions**

From Carol’s story we know that there was a man who gave her a special flower and who exuded his jungle habitat of birth. There is some contextual narrowing with the jungle element (though it is not specified on which continent), but we are not told who this man is. Was he merely a messenger or was he something more? Could he be Michael’s father? From Michael’s story we know that the backyard is a very important place. It was where his spirit flew, even when his body could not. The backyard was, in a sense, Michael’s jungle. From the mask’s story we get a sense that it watches everyone who enters and leaves the house. We are also told that it is significant that the mask be able to see through to the backyard. So the backyard is an important place for the mask as well. Why is that?

There are many directions to take this story, many ways to add characters, storylines, and events in the past and in the future – simultaneously. This, like many other stories, does not start in one place and end in another, but instead grows organically from the center. During the story experience some parts may blossom, while other parts lie relatively fallow. The fun of nonlinear narrative is that many things can be happening at once. We are telling the story of an entire garden, not just a single seedling. Thinking about story context as much as the delivery technology can help us tell that story better and better, and help nonlinear narrative live up to its full potential.

**Conclusions**

We live lives of story collections. The pieces from here and there, work and play, home and travel. We remember our lives as stories, as children, as teenagers, as young and old adults, the holidays, the important events, the moments of great change. We are made of stories and these stories can be expressed in many different ways. This paper has outlined only a few ways in which nonlinear narrative approaches can inform and inspire better story experiences. The
experience itself is much like a puzzle, yet a puzzle that can have a dynamic picture and still draw the participant into a rewarding experience. Story context is the atmosphere around story elements. It gives them breath and helps them stand, even when they are not specifically mentioned. As we experience story, we so deftly fill in context spaces left by the story creator that we are hardly aware there were spaces at all. What we might be aware of (or have our attention drawn to) is how familiar the story looks. A story about something a world away looks like our world. This is part of the magic of good storytelling.

References

Figures
[1] The relationship between the storyteller and the audience
[2] The conceptual lineage of Interactive Television
[3] Television’s simple interaction model vs. the computer
[4] The completed puzzle and the pile of pieces
[5] The four puzzle corners
[6] The framed puzzle