

The DuSable Project: Hypertext Narrative Strategies in Live Performance

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Abstract

This paper examines the convergence of hypertextuality and theatre praxis. It begins with an overview *The DuSable Project*, a collaborative, media-intensive event that combined Chicago-style comedic improv with interactive computer-based technologies to tell the story of Jean Baptiste Pointe du Sable, the City's first non-native settler. In describing the event, I look closely at the work's narrative goals, structure and operational dynamics in a live performance setting. Next, in order to frame the project within a theoretical context, I explore concepts of hypertext that most directly apply to this type of endeavor. The paper concludes with suggestions for possible future directions in hypertext study.

1. Introduction

1.1 Preface

In the original version of this paper, I attempted to apply general concepts of hypertext to specific multimedia theatre practices in order to compare the similarities between hybridized literary and performance genres. I found, though, that the models of study did not fit so neatly together. Further, as pointed out by one *LEA* reviewer, I was operating within a constrictive binary-one that set "traditional" theatre against more emergent practices. Finally, my understanding of hypertext theory was itself problematic, relying on narrow generalizations and a restrictive sample of material in the field of literary studies. In the reviewer's estimation, "this sort of approach reproduces, alas, the theoretical narrowness that beleaguered hypertext theory during the 1990's". Thus, a thorough re-examination of the paper's theoretical foundation and organizational structure was in order.

To this end, I begin by introducing *The DuSable Project* and its interactive narrative components. Then, moving outward from this central focal point, I locate and explore hypertext theories that most directly relate to the participatory dimensions of the play's text. In the paper, I reference hypertext theory to locate my research within an interdisciplinary context-one in which literary modes of inquiry have proven to be the most useful and appropriate.

1.2 Description of *The DuSable Project*

The DuSable Project celebrates City's rich and varied cultural heritage and is intended for young audiences (grades nine through twelve). The story of the play follows the life of Jean Baptiste Pointe du Sable (1745? -1818) from his departure from Haiti to the sale of his Chicago homestead.

The production presents the adventures of Chicago's first settler in a classic Second City style. An ensemble of six actors assumes multiple characters in the story, while both live and recorded music help to set the tone for each dramatic sequence. In utilizing comedic improvisational forms *The DuSable Project* approaches the subject of Chicago's origins in a humorous, forthright and revealing manner, allowing the story to be accessible to a young audience, yet containing more sophisticated references for all ages.

The improv comedy techniques employed in the production represent a theatrical tradition indigenous to Chicago—one notable for promoting a high level of audience/performer interactivity. In Second City revues, the audience is called upon to suggest the subject matter of a sketch. *The DuSable Project* adhered to this practice, by allowing the audience to choose various narrative options in order move the plotline forward (these options are discussed at greater length in Section Two below).

Like Second City revues, a majority of the action and dialogue in *The DuSable Project* was scripted, but performers were encouraged to add-lib lines and spontaneously respond to each other on stage, as well as to improvise reactions to the projected visual texts, as illustrated by this image.



Figure 1: A student participant improvises responses to projected images of contemporary Chicago during a *DuSable Project* rehearsal. Photo courtesy of Kathryn Farley.

1.3 Play's History

The DuSable Project was drawn from *DuSable*, a script written by Chicago playwright Dan Zellner and developed in collaboration with Red Path Theater (Illinois' only Native American performance organization). Readings of the play have occurred at various local venues, including: The Chicago Historical Society and Truman College. In addition, the script was presented as part of the first annual Juneteenth Festival of African-American theatre at the University of Louisville. The text was subsequently developed for presentation in 3-D format through consultation with members of University of Illinois' Electronic Visualization Laboratory.

In late spring of 2003 a multidisciplinary group of doctoral candidates, staff and faculty received funding from the Northwestern University's Center for Interdisciplinary Research in the Arts to present a reconfigured version the play [1]. This version would alter the text from a 3-D format to a more mobile, accessible and cost efficient model of production [2].

The DuSable Project sought to enhance university support of art and technology endeavors and compliment human/computer interface design initiatives. To realize these goals, the project brought together practitioners from the disciplines of Theatre, Computer Science, Performance Studies, and Digital Media to actively experiment with concepts of design for a digital stage, to test and modify implementation processes and to coalesce individual approaches to the creation of digital art works for a live audience. Most important, the production provided Northwestern undergraduate and graduate students the opportunity to participate in the conception, design and presentation of an original multimedia work, and to receive hands-on training in improvisational comedy techniques and digital media stage applications in the process.

When the collaborative group convened in the fall of 2003, we decided to involve the various Chicago cultural groups that held vested stakes in preserving DuSable's legacy in the project. These included: Friends of DuSable and The DuSable League, as well as members of the Haitian, Catholic and Native American communities. We met with representatives from these organizations throughout the autumn in order to discuss the numerous historical and scholarly accounts of DuSable's life presented in the story. Based largely upon feedback obtained from the cultural groups, Zellner began to revise the play's text.

Originally we intended to perform a complete version of the play during the month of February 2004 in conjunction with Black History Month celebrations on campus. However, this was not a realistic (or achievable) goal, given our commitment to working with the Chicago-based cultural groups to revise the script. We decided, instead, to present a staged reading of one scene that had undergone extensive modification to members of the Northwestern community.

On April 28, 2004 we hosted *The DuSable Project Community Colloquium* in the Clarence L. Ver Steeg Faculty Lounge of the University Library. The night's events consisted of the stage presentation of one scene from the play, followed by a roundtable exchange of ideas led by the collaborative team members and cultural group participants.

To realize the scene, we assembled a group of student actors (both undergraduate and graduates) to begin working on the text in late March, allowing us one month of rehearsal time before the presentation. The performers possessed varying levels of acting experience and represented departments as diverse as Radio/Television/Film, Performance Studies and Mechanical Engineering. From the start, the project's participants shared a great enthusiasm for the interdisciplinary thrust, experimental nature and collaborative spirit of the endeavor.



Figure 2: Student performers present the opening scene of *The DuSable Project* during the *Community Colloquium* on April 28, 2004. Photo courtesy of Kathryn Farley.

2. Storytelling Concepts and Execution

2.1 Narrative Goals

The DuSable Project sought to present history as an evolving process, or living entity, rather than a linear succession of past events. One of its primary aims was to encourage audience members to participate in the making and presenting of DuSable's story on stage. Instead of merely observing the past from a safe distance, *The DuSable Project* invited audience members to assume the role of historians themselves-by selecting options pertaining to the visual material presented, and in doing so, to directly intervene in the narrative. By interacting so heavily in DuSable's story, it was hoped that audience would experience history differently, hopefully in a more accessible, relevant and compelling manner. In sum, *The DuSable Project* experimented with a hands-on approach to historical study.

Another goal concerned new directions in playwriting. Zellner was committed to exploring non-traditional approaches to theatrical storytelling-particularly ones that integrated improv comedy traditions, or an audience's direct involvement in storytelling processes. In addition he wanted to test how humor might be used as an educational tool. The interactive features of the narrative were devised, in part, to help foster a dynamic and fun learning environment. Like a Second City show, the play was meant to be as entertaining as it was provocative.

2.2 Audience Interventions

In *The DuSable Project* the audience was called upon to pilot the text, or navigate through the various narrative selections in order to advance the plotline forward. These options corresponded to absences in the historical recordation of DuSable's life. There are, for example, various (sometimes contradictory) scholarly explanations of DuSable's origins, in addition to speculation concerning the reasons why he might have traveled to Chicago and why he decided to leave. The script cleverly allowed for the articulation of these separate theories, and positioned the audience as the authority on which course of action to pursue.

In keeping with Second City improv traditions, *The DuSable Project's* storyline was configured by audience suggestion. The scene dramatized for the *Colloquium*, for instance, focused on DuSable's family origins and route to Chicago. Performers offered the audience the ability to choose between competing explanations pertaining to his background and journey to the Midwest region. The selections, in keeping with the democratic nature of improv comedy, were decided by a majority vote (either by hand or vocally) during the live performance.

Regarding authorship of the work, it must be noted that audience members of *The DuSable Project* possessed the ability to direct the plot spontaneously in live performance. They did not, however, function as co-authors of the story. Zellner carefully controlled what options were available for selection and in what sequence they appeared in the text. Unlike improv comedy situations, then, audience members could not randomly suggest ideas that have not been included in the script. The reason was that each plot point corresponded to a set of pre-configured computer-generated images that placed the actors in certain time periods and locations. While it might have been possible to develop more options pertaining to the plot (possibly by including non-scholarly viewpoints), it was not have been feasible to build more digital scenery given our production schedule or budget. Thus, the audience's spontaneous suggestions pertaining to plot could not be absorbed into the story.

2.3 Narrative Operations in Live Performance

The DuSable Project contained a braided narrative, meaning once the audience selected an option that was then pursued by the actors, the plot returned back to a central point. This structure allowed for material introduced by alternative options to be shared with the audience.

Narrative branching, while opening up storytelling possibilities on stage, presented certain challenges to the actors in live performance. Let us consider an example from *The Community Colloquium* presentation.

As stated above, the scene presented in the *Colloquium* concerned DuSable's origins. The play offered two viable explanations for his place of birth and journey to Chicago. These options focused on: Canada or Haiti. The Canadian option represented the viewpoints of the many scholars who contend that DuSable was the son of a French noblemen, who after being enslaved for a period of his life obtained his freedom and traveled to America. Another group of historians held that he journeyed from his birthplace of Haiti to the Midwest in order to expand his trading business. The actress playing Kittihawa, DuSable's Native-American wife, acts as the narrator of this section. She presents the audience plotline options in the following way (as scripted):

Scene 2. ORIGINS

KITTIHAWA

Let's begin. Chicago – the city you know now - had to start somewhere. How did it begin? My husband, Jean Baptiste Pointe DuSable was there at the beginning. In

fact, he was the one who got it all started. You wouldn't believe how many accounts and stories and legends there are about DuSable. Some more accurate than others but all told for a reason. All of them have a special meaning. Tonight you will choose which one you would like to see. Think about your choice and about the meaning of what you see. When you think about these things you will see things in a new light. In the light of what's come before, what is, and what will be. Everyone ready?

(KITTIHAWA looks at ENSEMBLE, COMPUTER OPERATORS and AUDIENCE)

Let's go.

<CUE> fade to question mode design

KITTIHAWA

Here's your first choice. We are told that DuSable could have come from a number of different places. You choose - HAITI or CANADA

<CUE> Image for each option pop up

KITTIHAWA

So what will it be?

<CUE> After audience has made selection - system "boots up"

2A. Haiti

<CUE> Images of Haiti

KITTIHAWA

Haiti. Excellent choice. Let's take a look at Haiti. There we are [3].

As this excerpt indicates the audience was provided various visual data (maps, charts, photos, illustrations) in which to make a selection regarding plot. To determine the majority's preference, the actress playing Kittihawa, functioning as narrator, would come forward to ask for a show of hands or ascertain this information based on what she heard. In rehearsal, the actors practiced receiving loud responses from the audience pertaining to the selection process (much like the boisterous antics associated with an improv comedy selection). Figure 3 depicts the position of the actress playing Kittihawa-a location intended to maximize her ability to perceive and respond to audience selections.



Figure 3: Actors rehearse the action of offering the audience narrative options pertaining to DuSable’s origins. The actress playing Kittihawa is wearing glasses. Photo courtesy of Kathryn Farley.

Unfortunately, rehearsal scenarios did not address the full range of possible audience reactions to plot options. What the actors had not prepared for was no response at all. In fact, during the *Colloquium* performance someone affiliated with the production had to call out a selection (in this case it was “Haiti”) because no one else responded. Audience apathy (or perhaps surprise) served to throw the actors slightly off balance.

Further, since plotline options were linked to the central story, a gap between selections meant that potentially the plotline could not advance. The branched structure proved that if any link in the chain came unhinged the entire storyline would be affected. Also, unscripted elements in an otherwise scripted narrative could potentially cause problems, especially to novice performers.

3. Contextualizing Hypertext

3.1 Theory-based Perspectives

In my view, the plotline of *The DuSable Project*’s exemplifies a multiform model of theatrical storytelling. What I mean by this is that, in accordance with Janet Murray’s definition, the story served as a “... dramatic narrative that presents a single situation or plotline in multiple versions, versions that would be mutually exclusive in our ordinary experience” [4]. The scene performed in the *Community Colloquium*, for example, presented two possible narrative pathways. Each route contained distinct terrain and topography, but led back to a central part of the story (in this case to information about DuSable’s methods of travel).

Given the prevalence of multiform devices in the plot of *The DuSable Project* I would contend that the play qualifies for consideration as cyberdramatic text. Murray utilizes the term “cyberdrama” to denote a digital story mode which encompasses many narrative formats and styles, all containing strong participatory dimensions. The play’s text is

cyberdramatic in its reinvention of theatrical storytelling forms for digital application- the discovery of narrative devices which embrace multiple possible worlds and world views that audiences not only experience, but also in some ways control.

The significance of multiform storytelling in a theatrical context is that it permits audiences to actively engage in narrative formulation. Murray remarks, in reference to literature, that “This can be unsettling to the reader, but it can also be experienced as an invitation to join the creative process” [5]. She goes on to cite improvisational theatre as one example of a multiform medium that invites a heightened level of audience involvement.

As a type of digital narrative, *The DuSable Project* most closely resembles Espen Aarseth’s concept of “ergodic” literature, in which “... nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text” [6]. According to this view, a reader must do something (take significant action) in order to navigate through and make sense of the story. Similarly, *The DuSable Project* called upon the audience to move through and make meaning of the plot. Audiences determined what pathways were pursued at each juncture, helping to fill in the details and direction of the storyline.

Aarseth’s approach to hypertext study is particularly relevant to the focus of my paper, as it is situated, in part, outside of literary studies traditions. He claims, for example, “Cybertext is a *perspective* on all forms of textuality, a way to expand the scope of literary studies to include phenomena that today are perceived as outside of, or marginalized by the field of literature” [7]. In other words, his notions of the ergodic nature of hypertext may help to bridge the divide between literary modes of hypertext study and hypertextual practices in non-text-based fields.

Other scholars/artists have written about hypertext in relation to storytelling within hybrid, time-based media performance. Such perspectives can be found works such as *New Screen Media: Cinema/Art/Narrative* in which various authors “... look closely at issues of audience engagement in recognized works of various genres” [8]. Although the book mostly addresses film studies concerns and genealogies, the discussions regarding theorizing hypertext within new media frameworks are especially useful. One author, for instance, posits an intriguing alternative to current methods of study. He suggests a spatial analysis of narrative (“narrative as space rather than a succession of events”) [9]. This type of inquiry might be particularly relevant to experiments such as *The DuSable Project* as it represents a way to understand storytelling as an exploration of a hypertextual environment, such as the one fostered by this work.

3.2 Practice-oriented Modes of Study

It has been argued that print-bound experimental writing laid the foundation for many of hypertext’s principal models. The works of James Joyce, Raymond Queneau and Vladimir Nabokov, among others, are often cited as antecedents of current hypertext formats. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze these authors individual contributions in greater detail, suffice it to say that their writings have influenced the nonlinear, nonsequential and multiform properties of digital literary genres in significant ways. To these works Aarseth

has added a detailed analysis of specific ergodic texts which might also serve as models of hypertext study [10].

In relation to theatre practice, *The DuSable Project* is by no means the only endeavor that has attempted to integrate hypertext with live performance. There have been numerous events in the past few years which have experimented with hypertext formats, as well as other digital narrative strategies on stage. Rather than attempting to summarize all of them, it would be more productive to speak about one in greater detail in order to establish a basis of comparison for *The DuSable Project*.

Demotic, a theatre work conceived and directed by Antoinette LaFarge and Robert Allen this past July at the University of California-Irvine combined live performance and internet technologies to examine the multiplicity underlying the American experience [11]. Like *DuSable*, the production integrated improv storytelling practices. In this instance, though, live actors interacted with a group of online players spread across many different time zones and physical locations. The live and virtual players could respond to each other, they can see each other; and most importantly, they can speak to one another. Together they forged an imagined space-a performance environment containing real and virtual features.

Demotic's text focused on language, specifically linguistic utterances. Words, phrases, speeches and lines formed the content of the players' interactions. Unlike *DuSable*, dialogue was predominately spontaneously produced (unscripted). Also, different from *DuSable*, the audience was not allowed to re-direct the show's storyline. Rather, the players themselves possessed this ability.

In other words, hypertext narrative strategies functioned somewhat differently in each performance environment. In *DuSable* because the goal was to encourage audiences to direct historical processes first-hand the storyline was dependant on their input. In *Demotic* branching structures wove players' responses into a cohesive whole, resembling a political debate or community forum in which multiple voices and perspectives can be heard. The players determined the storyline and narrative arc. Both productions were alike, though, in engaging non-traditional storytelling methods towards interactive ends.

5. Conclusion: Future Directions in Hypertext Research

The role of the audience in *The DuSable Project* differed from more traditional presentational formats due to the participatory dimensions of the text. Granted it was an experimental undertaking, but one that might, in a very small way, serve to shape future directions in theatrical storytelling.

In exploring the hypertext features of *The DuSable Project* a number of important questions arise. These include: what does it mean for a playwright (as opposed to an author) to cede power to an audience? How might digital formats reconfigure the role of the playwright? Further, is theatre ready for such revolutionary change? Are such changes even possible? Time will surely tell.

Like Murray, I remain optimistic that multiform narrative devices such as those employed in *The DuSable Project*, as well as other features of digital storytelling formats, when successfully employed in live performance settings, will take participatory engagement one step further. As she puts it, “As a new generation grows up, it will take participatory form for granted and will look for new ways to participate in even more subtle and expressive stories” [12].

In terms of future directions in hypertext research, I would suggest that scholars adopt transdisciplinary (as opposed to interdisciplinary) methods of analysis. This process might begin by developing theories about digital media that move across the disciplinary spectrum (not just between two complimentary fields of study). The focus should be on evaluating the unique characteristics of computerized technologies, then applying those understandings to various disciplines and areas of study. This important endeavor would undoubtedly involve transdisciplinary collaboration on every level.

In order for hypertext models to more effectively integrate theatre and performance studies perspectives more attention must be paid to the performative aspects of a dramatic text. In other words, scholars/artists need to explore the ways in which a play represents a hybrid literary text, and its performance a temporal event.

To understand what hypertext means within a theatrical context a greater commitment on the part of artists currently working with computer-based technologies in live performance to document, present and publish their findings is needed. Without such recordation and evaluation, future generations of students will be forced to rely on theoretical perspectives concerning digital art making for a live audience which cannot replace the value of practical experience.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. To learn more about the mission and activities of The Center for Interdisciplinary Research in the Arts, please refer to their Web site at <http://www.northwestern.edu/cira>.
2. This new version of the play utilized a portable stage apparatus that included the following equipment pre-configured for digital theatre production by Dan Zellner and members of his Chicago-based theatre company, Studio Z:
 - 3 InFocus LP350 DLP projectors
 - 1 Disney Rear Projection screen outfitted for theatre use
 - A personal computer configured for digital theatre (dockable hard drive and dual head video card installed)
 - An AV/Projector cart with configurable mirror to cut projector throw distance
 - A Boss JS-5 JamStation sequencer
 - A Fender P-250 portable audio system with speaker stands
 - Commercial Software (Macromedia Suite and other media editing software)

-Multimedia Presentation Software (Arkaos Program)

3. This excerpt is taken from Dan Zellner's draft version of *DuSable* dated 10 April 2004, pp.3-4. The script is a work-in-progress.
4. Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: the Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2000) p. 30.
5. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, p. 38.
6. Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997) p. 1.
7. Aarseth, *Cybertext*, p. 18.
8. Martin Rieser and Andrea Zapp, eds., *New Screen Media: Cinema/Art/Narrative* (London, British Film Institute, 2002) p. xxv of the forward.
9. Jon Dovey, *New Screen Media*, p. 140.
10. Aarseth, *Cybertext*, pp. 65-75.
11. For more information about *Demotic*, please refer to <<http://yin.arts.uci.edu/~players/demotic/about.html>>
12. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, p. 271.

Bio of Author

Kathryn Farley (Stage Director of *The DuSable Project*) is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Performance Studies at Northwestern University where she is completing a dissertation titled, *Teaching Performance in the Digital Age: Computerized Technologies, Improvisational Play Techniques and Interactive Learning Processes*. At Northwestern Kathryn has taught undergraduate courses which focused on the performance of contemporary drama, the adaptation of fiction and the integration of technology into live theatre. Kathryn is the 2004-2005 recipient of the *Northwestern Alumnae Association Dissertation Recognition Award*. Her work has been published in such interdisciplinary periodicals as *Body, Space and Technology* and *Crossings: Electronic Journal of Art and Technology*. A digital portfolio of Kathryn's artistic and academic work can be found at <<http://www.kathrynfarley.org>>.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the anonymous *LEA* reviewers who provided such helpful and detailed commentary on this paper. I greatly appreciate their thoughtfulness and guidance. I am also

grateful to Dan Zellner for his permission to reference portions of a draft copy of the *DuSable* script—a version that was given presentation pending further rewrites.

NOTE: This paper will appear the January 2005 edition (13.1) of *Leonardo Electronic Almanac*, a peer-review journal focusing on the intersection between art, technology and science that is published by The MIT Press. The journals' site is located at <http://mitpress2.mit.edu/e-journals/LEA>.

The piece is targeted to scholars/teachers/practitioners who are actively engaged in exploring art and technology integration from multidisciplinary perspectives.