The Interactive Documentary. Definition Proposal and Basic Features of the New Emerging Genre.

Arnau Gifreu Castells
Universitat de Vic, Spain

Abstract. The purpose of this paper is to explore some topics regarding the convergence between the fields of the audiovisual documentary and the interactive documentary. A new definition proposal for the new emerging genre, the so-called “interactive documentary”, is argued, compared with the logic of creating and producing linear documentaries. A taxonomy of the main characteristics of the new genre is also established from three points of view: the director, the text and the interactor. At the end, some considerations about evolving perspectives of the new genre are presented.

Keywords: Documentary, digital media, interactive digital communication, interactive multimedia documentary, web documentary, new technologies, Internet, 2.0, nonlinear modes of navigation, digital modes of interaction

1. Introduction

This article focuses on the study of the process of converging between two communication fields, which are, apparently, very different: the documentary genre and digital media. Although the history of the documentary started half a century before that of the digital media, both processes have progressed and, nowadays, they have reached a very interesting point of convergence. Towards the end of the 20th century and, above all, at the beginning of the 21st century, the two genres have taken different paths, overcoming their own trials, surviving in a changing environment and reaching a noteworthy degree of maturity. From this first contact, each genre adopted a series of properties and characteristics typical of the other. In some ways, a fusion begins from mutual attraction: the documentary genre contributes with its several modes of representing reality, and the digital media genre contributes with its new navigating and interacting modes.

These modes can be found in interactive applications, which use different supports to display and navigate: on one hand, the offline media; on the other, the online medium per excellence: the web or Internet. By the end of last century, offline media –such as CD-ROM or DVD-ROM– were barely used, therefore, the Internet started to incorporate some key factors, which allowed a progressive abandonment of off-line media and a massive emigration towards the Internet as the only media. The most important factors were: infrastructures and technologies, which allowed accessibility never experienced before with regard to the information and
content, quick navigation, other technical features and the interaction between users.

This setting has favoured the development of different formats and the creation of new genres, such as the *interactive documentary*, which is a result of a double fusion of, on one hand, the audiovisual (documentary genre) and interaction (interactive digital media), and, on the other hand, between information (content) and entertainment (interactive interfaces).

### 2. Difference between linear and interactive documentaries

The documentary genre is *one of the most powerful tools used to explain non-fictional stories about reality*. Its multiple applications have helped the documentary to become a key device within the cinema industry even since the first documentary movie, *Nanook of the North* (1922), which demonstrates this genre’s power to immerse the audience in other places and people’s lives. Nowadays, the documentary continues providing the public with unique experiences, representing life and offering fundamental observations and thoughts about culture, politics, ideologies and people.

For their part, *the interactive media, virtual worlds and videogames have started to redefine documentary experiences* outside the traditional film context. We could say that these experiences are documentary, in the sense that they provide information and knowledge about real-life subjects and individuals. Although, unlike traditional documentaries, these allow the users to enjoy a unique experience, as well as offering options and control of the documentary itself (Britain, 2009:2).

The concepts of choice and control were considered the documentary maker’s property. When this power is delivered to the user, as is the case of interactive media, the author’s role as a narrator –and, consequently, approaching the story from the same standpoint is either questioned or removed. In traditional documentaries, the author’s ability to influence the audience is taken for granted, and this influence is exercised through filming and the discursive structure coordinated via editing and staging. But, what happens when this ability is given, at least, partly, to the documentary audience? What happens when the audience is not only audience but the creator of their own documentary experience?

The proposals about the genre do not usually differentiate the traditional audiovisual documentary from the interactive documentary, as they consider the latter as the evolution of the former, in the same way that Web 1.0 naturally became Web 2.0. This evolutionary criterion seems insufficient to frame and define such a complex and varied genre.

The first feature defining both fields is obvious: In the first case, the traditional documentary presents a principle of linearity, i.e., we go from a start point to an end point (A to B) and we follow the route established by the author. The limits of the authorship and the control of the discourse are perfectly defined. In the second case, we start at a point proposed by the author (or indeed, chosen by us), to then find branches and alternative ways to the route we follow. The final decision is not for the director but the interactor. Therefore, we do not refer to a sole discourse, but different displays and, by extension, different possible stories. In the second case, *the limits of authorship and control over the discourse lose influence*, which is the main question we tackle more deeply in the next section.

In short, the key element which differentiates the audiovisual field from the interactive one is clear: The traditional narrative is linear and the discourse order cannot be changed, whereas with the interactive field, this order can be affected and modified. As Berenguer explains (2004), there are “reactive behaviours in the automatisms, as well as participative behav-
iours in certain communicative and expressive works, but, according to this definition, none of them can be considered as interactive behaviours”.

Therefore, delimiting this first idea, with linear documentaries we can find reactive components (activities based on the DVD control, such as watching scenes, subtitles, extras, etc.), whereas with interactive documentaries, interactive components are found, i.e., the system must be understood and decisions must be taken in order to progress. In the first case, the interaction type is weak, whereas in the second one, it is medium or strong (in the case of linear documentaries, only by pressing play on the DVD or using the mouse, the user can see the documentary. Whereas in the interactive case, we need to perform different actions in order to achieve different goals: link it to the application, choose language and navigation and interaction modality, know the system, progress on each branch we find, etc.).

Linking the previous point with the idea of physical participation in Gaudenzi’s interactive documentary, and as a second big and differentiating idea from a mental and physical point of view, it can be said that both linear and interactive documentaries try to document reality. Nevertheless, the type of material in terms of media and the preferences of authors and participants end up creating a very different final product. Linear documentary requests only one type of cognitive (mental) participation, which results in a mental interpretation and reflection of what has been seen, whereas in the second case, the interactive documentary requires, apart from cognitive interpreting, some type of physical participation related to decision making, which results in having to use the mouse, having to move around the virtual setting, using the keyboard to write, talking, etc.

This physical response required of the interactor is carried out in response to elements suggested by the interactive documentary: navigation and interaction modalities. Bill Nichols’ representation modalities were appropriate in the case of linear documentaries, but in the case of analysing interactive documentaries, the key elements are navigation and interaction modes. This perspective readresses focus of the documentary study as a finished product that can be analysed through conventions and styles (camera position, voice over presence, edition style, political role, etc.) towards the study of the documentary as a dynamic means of expression, as a system composed by its relationships with different realities (people that have been interviewed, camera intervention, author’s intimate thoughts, user participation, cultural and economic context, etc.).

Finally, the fact that an interactive documentary is analysed based on its navigation and interaction modalities marks the fourth difference between both documentary types: during the entire production process, a linear documentary can constantly change, but once it is edited, this process of change stops. The production process and the visualisation process are kept separate within the analog media. This is not the case for interactive digital media. The process does not stop in the case of interactive documentaries, which can be considered “adaptive systems”, which keep changing until the collaboration and participation is sustainable or desired by the users or systems in it.

3. Interactive documentary: A definition proposal

If the definition of documentary is blurred and still under construction, the definition of interactive documentary is at an even earlier stage. Below we propose an approximation to
the concept and a possible definition of interactive documentaries based on the proposals of
the aforementioned study by Sandra Gaudenzi, who states:
“If documentary is a fuzzy concept, digital interactive documentary is a concept yet to be
defined. This comes with no surprise, since it is an emergent field, but the lack of writing
on digital interactive documentary has also to do with the fact that new media artists do not
consider themselves documentary makers, and therefore they call their work anything but
interactive documentaries. In 2002 artist and academic Mitchell Whitelaw was noticing the
rise of the terminology “interactive documentary” (Gaudenzi, 2009:6).

The issue when defining what an interactive documentary is does not emerge simply due
to a lack of acceptance, or the under specification of an overall trend. According to Gaudenzi,
this is clearly manifested because there are many film and documentary critics, who doubt if an
interactive documentary can be considered as such, due to the lack of a strong narrative voice.
Those who tried to define the term have treated the digital interactive documentary as an evolu-
tion of the linear documentary framed within the predominance of digital convergence. They
have also assumed that the interactive documentary is basically video and that the associated
interactivity is only a way to navigate within its visual content. Some of those who have tried to
describe the genre are Xavier Berenguer, Carolyn Handler Miller and Katherine Goodnow.

Xavier Berenguer (2004) considers the interactive documentary as a type of interactive
narrative, which emerged separated from the hypertexts and games from the 80’s. According
to Berenguer, when the narrative becomes interactive through the use of digital media, it can
spread in three main directions: interactive narrative, interactive documentary and games.
Carolyn Handler Miller, author of the book Digital Storytelling (2004), also considers the in-
teractive documentary as a type of non-fictional interactive film. The author says that the
audience “can be given the opportunity of choosing what material to see and in what order.
They might also get to choose among several audio tracks” (Handler Miller, 2004:345). From
the point of view of Katherine Goodnow, interactive documentaries arise from the initial
experimentation with interactive films, where physical, rather than cognitive activity is used
to navigate live within the existing material (video or film). Gaudenzi values the basic distinc-
tion between physical function and cognitive functions carried out by Goodnow: “Goodnow
makes a distinction between cognitive function (the act of understanding and interpreting)
and physical activity (where the ‘audience must do something in order to fulfil the desire to
know how the story will end or to explore alternative storylines’)” (Goodnow, 2004:2). But
Gaudenzi disagrees with Goodnow when the latter tries to expose the interactive documen-
tary phenomenon from the point of view of an evolution from other genres or tendencies.
With this, she approximates Whitelaw’s position (2002:3):

“By tying linear and interactive documentaries together the tendency would be to expect
them to be somehow similar or, at least, in a clear evolving relation. I personally disagree with
this vision and join artist and new media theorist Mitchell Whitelaw when he says that ‘new
media doco [documentaries] need not to replay the conventions of traditional, linear docu-
mentary storytelling; it offers its own ways of playing with reality’ (Gaudenzi, 2009:7).

Whitelaw finally gives us a clue that will be crucial in our approach, which Gaudenzi also
adopts: the interactive documentary offers its own ways or resources to play with reality and,
by extension, to represent it. This researcher highlights the fact that her historical approach is
too concise and not deep enough, and that plenty of information is found to be subjected to
constant thought and reformulation. Specifically, Whitelaw refers to a series of key assumptions
that remain unsolved. According to her, if the interactive documentary is considered as an in-
teractive narrative subcategory, the weight lies with the definition of interactive narrative.

According to this author, we believe that a useful approach would be to start assuming that both linear and interactive documentaries want to document reality, but the type of material in terms of the media and the preferences of authors and participants end up creating a very different final product. Gaudenzi continues with the approach, expressing a basic premise in her work and analysis in order to differentiate the linear documentary from the interactive documentary:

“If linear documentary demands a cognitive participation from its viewers (often seen as interpretation) the interactive documentary adds the demand of some physical participation (decisions that translate in a physical act such as clicking, moving, speaking, tapping etc...). If linear documentary is video, of film, based, interactive documentary can use any existing media. And if linear documentary depends on the decisions of its filmmaker (both while filming and editing), interactive documentary does not necessarily have a clear demarcation between those two roles [...]” (Gaudenzi, 2009:8).

In short, it seems obvious that a possible definition of “interactive documentary” will assume the open and complex character of this specific genre (always undergoing changes and variations), its ambivalence between interactive and cinematic fields, and, finally, its identification as a discourse that tries to transmit a certain type of knowledge linked to reality.

Summing up some of the ideas put forward with the aim of focusing this approach to the concept, we are in a position to provisionally define the interactive documentary as interactive online/offline applications, carried out with the intention to represent reality with their own mechanisms, which we will call navigation and interaction modalities, depending on the degree of participation under consideration.

The interactive documentaries try both to represent and to interact with reality, for which a series of techniques or methods must be considered and used (navigation and interaction modalities), which become, in this new form of communication, the key element to achieve the documentary objectives. The structure of the interactive documentary can be based on one or multiple perspectives and can end at any point determined by the author, but it can also admit multiple displays with different trajectories and endings.

4. Basic features of the interactive documentary

We have considered it appropriate to group the most defining features which characterise the interactive documentary in relation to the three definitions offered by Nichols (1991), defined in the second point. In this new scenario, we will substitute the director figure (more associated with the audiovisual and film genre) for the author figure (as the authorship concept is one of the key points in the current discourse); the text (understood as a linear audiovisual script and discourse) by the term narration or discourse (non-linear or multi-linear interactive) and the concept of audience (passive audiovisual) for that of the interactor (with active, contributory and generative attributes).
a. Features from the author's point of view (sender)

1.a. Loss of control by the director and system regeneration

In the new genre and the new navigation and interaction modalities resulting from it, the user has generative features and, at this point, the author loses control of the flow of their work and the genre acquires unknown connotations. The final result of the documentary (what is said) and the discursive order (how it is said) can end up adopting a very different appearance from that captured, at an initial stage, in the script by the author.

1.b. Author's role as assistant

The loss of control places the author in an assisting scenario in relation to the interactor. At the beginning it could be considered as a personal authorship but, as it is not a closed product, authorship becomes shared and the director of the work transfers the control of (the) linear and non-linear flow. As Berenguer states (2004), instead of learning from the author – a basic premise of linear discourses in traditional media – , in interactive documentaries the author takes a more assistant’s role and the relationship with the audience lets itself to be discovered. Therefore, control of the discourse is solely the responsibility of the author of the piece but rather the interactor must learn certain guidelines and mechanisms without which they will not be able to progress through the story. Ignasi Ribas (2000) stresses:

“A very important point to study is the relationship established between the author and the reader, the ways of sharing the control between them and the chances the author has to establish, through this control transfer, the conditions for the receiver to fully enjoy and interact with the experience of interacting with the application, so that the planned knowledge transmission objectives are reached. [...] This particular relationship regarding the authorship suffers a marked change from the advent and evolution of the so-called collaborative web and, as a result of this transformation, all genres depending on it, have also suffered profound changes” (Ribas, 2000:8).

b. Features from the discourse or narrative (text) point of view

2.a. Varied terminology to refer to similar projects

Projects of this nature can take on different names: multimedia applications, hypermedia applications, hyper-documents, interactive multimedia applications or, simply, interactive or hypertext. Gaudenzi proposes other terminologies, far removed from the original concept, because the industry considers these projects not to be greatly related with the documentary field:

“Since the digital interactive documentary is still an emerging field (it barely started thirty years ago), it is difficult to find such examples, mainly because people refer to themselves with various terminologies: new media documentaries, digital documentaries, interactive film, database narrative etc... Most of the time what I would consider an interactive documentary is not linked by the industry with the “documentary family” and is called an online forum, a digital art piece, a locative game, and educational product, a 3D world, an emotional map, etc., making my search for examples particularly difficult.” (Gaudenzi, 2009:6)
2.b. Documentary and informative interactive multimedia applications

Interactive documentaries can be framed within a more general interactive genre, which could be defined as *documentary and informative interactive multimedia applications*. According to Ribas (2000:7), there are “specific networks of interconnected information, brought about by an author or, more specifically, by a team of authors, addressed to a specific audience within a specific context and with the basic purpose of transmitting specific cultural or knowledge content, without an explicit educational purpose.” More specifically, they are hypermedia applications (or interactive multimedia applications or interactive multimedia), i.e., specific networks of interconnected multimedia information. If we delimit the field even more, we can focus on “those with a specific purpose and, therefore, a structural and navigation constrictions knowingly chosen by an author with the intention of reaching the application objectives according to the mechanism of the interactive media.” (Ribas, 2000: 94).

2.c. Format type linked to non-fictional genres

The interactive documentary is a format type related to *non-fictional genres*. *This non-fiction is interactive* and it is artificated from the perspective of wishing to transmit knowledge in an informal, educational setting, i.e., the focus falls on the projects showing a clear informational intention but, in no case, on the need for the interactor to learn the lesson. In these projects there is, at least, one specific way to interact with the system (the user needs to make decisions in order to progress), and said projects are to be found on the Internet.

Both formal and informal education corresponds to all systematised and even institutionised activities, which follow a specific exhaustive curriculum. Informal education is a set of permanent processes through which people acquire and accumulate discernment knowledge, abilities, attitudes and modes based on everyday experiences and their relationship with the environment. As Ribas explains in his article *Difusión Cultural y Comunicación Audiovisual Interactiva* (“Cultural diffusion and Interactive audiovisual Communication”), in 2001:

“We will place cultural diffusion in this last field of informal education, together with TV and film documentaries, books, magazines or information TV programs. Although borders are not always clear, we will analyse products characterised by the lack of explicit educative intention, by the asystematisation of the process from the didactic point of view and because they seek to find within the receptor some inherent intentions, i.e., only motivated by the own personal interests.” (Ribas, 2001: 182)

2.d. Documentation of a specific reality

One of the application *sine qua non* requirements to belong to the genre is that it has to show a desire to represent reality with the intent of documenting a situation in a specific way.

2.e. Hypertext, nodes and links

From an analytic perspective, the interactive documentary structure corresponds to a hypertext skeleton constituted of nodes, links and anchors. What varies is the type of manipulated media, which goes from being purely textual to a mixture of different formats (image, sound, text, etc.). According to Ribas (2000:36), hypertext can be defined as a “network of interconnected pieces of textual information”. It is a system of organising information based on the possibility of moving within a text and visiting different text using keywords. Nodes are nuclear elements of hypertext, semantic units expressing a unique idea or concept from the point of view characteristic of the content. The links are the elements of the network
connecting nodes between them, allowing the user to move from one node to another. Usually, there is a small portion of the source node to which the link is connected. This small part, which can be a word, a sentence or an image fragment, is called, the anchor of the link (Ribas, 2000:37).

2.f. Nodal outline and branches of narrative discourse

All interactive systems must anticipate more than one display at a time and, the more varied, the better. The key element that distinguishes the audiovisual and interactive fields is the linearity of the former, which does not allow alteration of the discourse order, whereas in the latter, this order can be affected and even modified. The example of the pattern poetry perfectly shows the idea that we want to convey: its structure is configured as a very elemental show of a diversified work, which admits multiple readings. For Berenguer (1998) there are four models to suit different possible non-linear narrative structures: non-linear branched narrative, interrupted narrative, object-orientated narrative and conservative narrative.

2.h. Non-linear narrative

The non-linear narrative (similar for an author to the loss of control on the discourse) is seen as a problem in the traditional documentary world. Whitelaw (2002:1) explains: “New media forms pose a fundamental challenge to the principle of narrative coherence, which is at the core of traditional documentary. If we explode and open the structure, how can we be sure that the story is being conveyed?”. Whitelaw reflects on the open structure of the works and the type of information being transmitted. Giving autonomy to the user, many questions arise regarding the transfer of control and how it can begin to acquire the original discourse from its constant regeneration and reorganisation.

c. Features from the interactor’s point of view (receiver)

3.a. Online or offline reception

The two major differences between online and offline applications are that offline applications are located in hardware, whereas online applications use a virtual media such as the network. In terms of transferring the control, online genres are more flexible and open to user participation. Offline genres are associated with Web 1.0 type media through media closed to the user’s contribution, whereas online applications are associated nowadays with a network of collaborative and generative attributes from the interactor. As Gaudenzi states (2009: 1), when we talk about interactive documentaries located on the network, we refer to interactive digital documentaries that “not only use a digital media –which could be any existing media, from digital video to mobiles or the network–, but that also requires some type of physical interaction (body interaction) of the user-participant”. This goes beyond the mental act or interpretation, “with the objective of identifying different ways of documenting reality and possible new subjectivity models”.

3.b. Interaction based on the decision making in order to progress

As Gaudenzi comments (2009: 1), the concept of interaction is present in products presenting any type of physical interaction: body interaction, through the mouse or other devices (gloves, sensors, microcontrollers, etc.) encouraging the user-participant-interactor (more
than just a spectator who interprets what is being observed) to participate and generate a specific type of content. According to Berenguer’s approach, we have divided the interaction into three categories: strong, medium and weak. In this case, one of the requirements when establishing a categorisation proposal is that the application must use digital technology from the point of view of medium or strong interaction (it must involve the user to provide some sort of physical response, in the strong sense of the term). Therefore, decision making is considered a basic requirement in order to progress within the story.

3.c. New receivers becoming a new audience type
These receivers, to whom we can apply the parameters proposed by Alejandro Piscitelli (2009) within the environment of his concept of digital natives, constitute a new audience with two attributes portraying and defining it: it is trained to interact in front of the computer screen, rather than the television. According to Berenguer (1998), interactive narrative can make this new public feel emotions the same way as a traditional narrative would do so. This occurs thanks to a “digitally native” generational emphasis, a Technologies evolution and an interactive culture, i.e., a culture of communications with the computer as the medium.

3.d. Generative and open system: active system that adapts to the environment
We adopt Gaudenzi’s main contribution when considering the interactive documentary as an “autopoietic” mechanism or living organism, which is connected with the environment through different interaction modes. This is the main difference between the linear narrative and the digital interactive:

“This is one of the differences between linear and interactive documentaries: digital interactive documentaries can be seen as “living systems” that continue to change themselves until collaboration and participation is sustainable, or wished by the users, or by the systems that compose it. In order to see the documentary as a system in constant relation with its environment, and to see it as “a living system” I propose in this research to use a Cybernetic approach, more precisely a Second Order Cybernetic approach, and to see the documentary as an autopoietic entity with different possible levels of openness, or closure, with its environment” (Gaudenzi, 2009:3).

3.e. The rules are changed by the spectator: an active user-interactor-participant-contributor
Interactive media is potentially suited to help the interactor to discover, choose, think about, participate and even create. The audience of this new medium, now converted not into passive spectators but active interactors, gain presence and identification, are involved in the audiovisual experience and, at the same time, they share it with others. They include user conditions to become part of a preset system, and then use them to their advantage; interactor conditions, because it interacts with modular interactive modes and systems in order to progress within the proposed displayed; participant conditions, because it is actively involved in the display, choosing the route that seems most appropriate; and contributor conditions, as it contributes to the system generation by providing knowledge based on contents or subjective impressions.
Conclusion

Non-linear narrative (similar to the loss of control over the discourse by the author), is seen as a problem within the traditional documentary world, but in this new genre is considered a big opportunity. This kind of narrative allows audiovisual projects to provide elements to complement and enrich it, providing several added values to the global experience of the audience, so that it is more varied, complete and immersive. The role of the documentary cinema director is to find the midpoint where the meaning can be maximised and the audience is most committed, and it is in this midpoint where the documentary film and interactive media can coexist. By combining the power of the film to provide a perspective and the ability to interact in order to improve the participation of the users with the material, the interactive documentary film can provide with more meaningful documentaries. The idea that interactive media can shorten the gap between the producer and the user is promising for any documentary filmmaker looking to increase participation in their narrative. But, at the other end of the scale, if this difference is shortened too much, the documentary may lose interest and value, precisely because of the lack of a strong narrative voice and a particular narrative program (this is exactly what most of the traditional authors fear).

One of the essential premises of the traditional documentary is the desire to organise a story that is both informative and entertaining. And, in this sense, the interactive format should continue with the tradition to try to offer similar experiences that mix a recreational (entertainment) proposal with an educational one (knowledge), in the most efficient, original and attractive possible way. And this is mainly possible thanks to the combination of different navigational and interactive modalities, which enable a multiple exchange between the work and the interactor. Firstly, navigating and visiting different proposals and structuring the content (information and knowledge) means the use of strategies and resources of the games. This way, from the structure of the interactive, and through the navigation modalities, the user, in a certain sense, “plays” with the possibilities offered by the work and can satisfy their first necessity: amusement and entertainment. Secondly, this strategy close to the game experience usually gives the user a sensation of deep immersion and stops their learning from being boring and that their need of being informed or need or learning ends up fading. Therefore, the didactic proposal offered is attractive and dynamic, beyond that present in most classical hypertexts. Already at this stage, the interactor “learns through playing” and once they have “learnt the lesson” in a fun, original and light-hearted way, they can share it with other interactors, in real time or whenever they deem it appropriate. Therefore, we see how an interactive documentary can satisfy three needs or desires: that of the player (recreational), that of the student or anyone with cultural interests (educational or formative) and that of the communicator (communication level with other participants). Through the correct mixture of these three aspects, non-fictional multimedia applications can be equated in terms of attractiveness with proposals close to fiction.

The production and circulation of the interactive documentary seem to be at a standstill. Filmakers have little incentive to turn a movie into an interactive project, as doing it so would limit its distribution to the Internet, giving up control over authorship and reducing the impact of the film due to the experience of the small screen.
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