

# **Lost Cause: An Interactive Film Project**

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### Abstract

The paper describes the design, the aesthetics, and the experience of the interactive film *Lost Cause*. The film is examined from several theoretical perspectives: cinematic roots, narrative construction, interface design, and new media artifact. *Lost Cause* extends the complex plot structure used by filmmakers such as Altman or Tarentino into an explicitly interactive format. The plot has three inter-related and synchronous threads which are represented in a multi-screen user interface. It culminates in an ending determined by the history of user navigation choices. The paper analyzes the work to reveal critical insights into database narrative, expressive interface design, user agency, and the construction of micro-narrative.

Certain contemporary filmmakers engage in cinematic constructions that complicate the experience of film and the pleasure of story. One common form of complication is the design of narrative which relies on the presentation of complex plot structures. A second form is visual—the fragmentation of the frame into multiple split-screen windows, and the channeling of story across these multiple windows. The audience's pleasure in both these forms of cinematic complication is enhanced by contemporary technology. Large screens and high-definition video standards support the display of more complicated visual storytelling. DVD players free viewers to review and replay the film text many times in order to fully appreciate complexities of the narrative or the visuals. As a next step, these two directions—plot complexity and multi-window storytelling—can be integrated within fully interactive cinematic systems that make explicit viewer choice a central component of the design and the experience. The film *Lost Cause*<sup>1</sup> does exactly that—offering user choice for the navigation between separate visual windows and between distinct but intimately interrelated narrative threads.

### Alternative Narratives

Some directors and screenwriters choose to design alternative plot structures that make it more challenging, and more interesting, for viewers to decode the story. Berg categorizes films that complicate the standard Hollywood narrative paradigm into a taxonomy of alternative plot structures.<sup>2</sup> Berg characterizes the polyphonic "ensemble plot" formation as a plot that joins multiple protagonists within one narrative web to

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<sup>1</sup> *Lost Cause*, Desktop Media, directed and produced by Kirsten Johnson. (Canada, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Charles Ramirez Berg, "A taxonomy of alternative plots in recent films: classifying the "Tarantino effect"." *Film Criticism* (2006-2007): 31-1:2.

emphasize an overall theme. He also identifies a "repeated event" plot formation one which has some characteristics of an ensemble plot, but reveals each character's storyline sequentially. This type of plot construction can help the viewer compare and interpret all perspectives of the same incident by emphasizing and repeating key plot points. Berg suggests that the film *Jackie Brown*<sup>3</sup> has "three views of the same action to clarify an important plot point"<sup>4</sup>. This type of plot formation can be used to reveal different characters' interpretations of the same event. The film *Rashomon*<sup>5</sup> "establishes the Repeated Event Plot, using it to argue that since events are interpreted subjectively, truth is elusive"<sup>6</sup>

#### Micro-narratives

Jenkins defines a micro-narrative as a short yet coherent narrative unit.<sup>7</sup> Jenkins claims the Odessa Steps sequence in Sergei Eisenstein's montage film *The Battleship Potemkin* is constructed of many micro-narratives. He states "Eisenstein intensifies our emotional engagement with this large-scale conflict through a series of short narrative units. Each of these units builds upon stock characters or situations drawn from the repertoire of melodrama."<sup>8</sup>

The film *Short Cuts*<sup>9</sup> is an exemplar for micro-narrative construction. The film has twenty two main characters and nine constantly interweaving storylines. Balcom

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<sup>3</sup> *Jackie Brown*, DVD, directed by Quentin Tarantino (USA: Miramax Films, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Berg, *Film Criticism*, 31-1:2.

<sup>5</sup> *Rashomon*, DVD, directed by Akira Kurosawa (Japan: Daiei Motion Picture Company, 1950).

<sup>6</sup> Berg, *Film Criticism*, 31-1:2.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2004). 125.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>9</sup> *Short Cuts*, DVD, directed by Robert Altman. (USA: Avenue Pictures Productions, 1993).

suggests the association in *Short Cuts* between characters and micro-narratives creates richness in the narrative through its linking of themes.<sup>10</sup> Betty comes out of the shower to find the television left on. As she turns it off and turns around, she is startled to find her son left behind by his father. A similar event occurs with Ann, when she returns home to find the television is on and after turning it off, is surprised to find her son lying on the couch, after being hit by a car. Balcom states, "this sequence establishes a thematic relationship between the two little boys whose situations are different, but resonate all the same. Here a major theme of *Short Cuts* is revealed: The 'What if...?' decisions that are made every day, the decisions that have put the characters in *Short Cuts* together..." He compares the viewers experience with *Short Cuts* to be similar to interacting with Michael Joyce's hypertext narrative *Afternoon*.<sup>11</sup> "The text the viewer had visited was exactly the same, but the context surrounded them had changed. This experience is similar to Pudovkin's experiment with the Kuleshov effect."<sup>12</sup>

### Database Narratives

Manovich claims that narratives and databases are opposites, but he also recognizes that some films can be regarded as both a database and a narrative.<sup>13</sup>

Bizzocchi suggests that *Run Lola Run*<sup>14</sup> is such a database narrative film<sup>15</sup>. Lola's three

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<sup>10</sup> David Balcom, "Short Cuts, Narrative Film and Hypertext"

[http://www.mindspring.com/~dbalcom/short\\_cuts.html](http://www.mindspring.com/~dbalcom/short_cuts.html), 1996. (accessed October 15, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Michael Joyce, *Afternoon, a story*. Hypertext fiction. (Cambridge, MA: The Eastgate Press, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> The "Kuleshov Effect" refers to a famous experiment from early cinema. The audience was shown identical close-ups of an actor's face, juxtaposed with shots of a happy baby, a bowl of soup, and a dead woman. The audience interpreted that his (actually expressionless) face showed deep and appropriate emotional responses to each of the three shots with which it was juxtaposed.

<sup>13</sup> Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2001) 225.

<sup>14</sup> *Run Lola Run*, DVD, directed by Tom Tykwer (Germany: X-Filme Creative Pool, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> Jim Bizzocchi, "Run, Lola, Run: Film as a Narrative Database." (paper presented at MIT4: The Work of

separate runs across the city of Berlin string together narrative events that are rigorously parallel. Viewers are therefore highly motivated to compare parallel events across the three threads of the plot. This is a sophisticated example of Eric Zimmerman's first level of interactivity—cognitive interaction with the text.<sup>16</sup> Bizzocchi argues that modern technology such as VHS, DVD, or computer file versions of the film support this cognitive interaction with interface functionality.<sup>17</sup> During repeated viewing, the viewer can rewind, fast-forward, or jump across plot threads in order to more fully understand the film's parallel plot threads. This is an example of Zimmerman's level two interactivity—functional interaction with a media artifact. Bizzocchi further argues that the combination of complex plots and sophisticated technologies not only support robust first and second level interactions, but is also a partial step towards the design of an interactive cinema that instantiates Zimmerman's third level of interactivity—explicitly designed choice.<sup>18</sup>

### Cinematic Techniques and Narrative Effects

Continuity, cross-cutting, and montage editing are standard techniques used to produce narrative in film. Continuity editing joins separate shots so they appear to happen in the same space at the same time and sequence. Crosscutting is used to show parallel action happening between two scenes in different spaces at the same time. This technique can build suspense in the narrative by cutting back and forth between two locations to

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Stories, Cambridge, Massachusetts: May 6-8, 2005). <http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/mit4/papers/bizzocchi.pdf> (accessed March 28, 2008) 4.

<sup>16</sup> Eric Zimmerman, "Narrative, Interactivity, Play, and Games: Four Naughty Concepts in Need of Discipline," in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2004). 158.

<sup>17</sup> Bizzocchi, "Run, Lola, Run"

<sup>18</sup> Zimmerman, "Narrative, Interactivity, Play, and Games" 158.

anticipate future events. Montage editing constructs meaning through the juxtaposition of different shots. Eisenstein maintains that a film viewer combines these juxtaposed individual shots to form higher order connections and threads.<sup>19</sup>

### Split-screen effects

The use of split screens can be seen as a spatialized variation of temporal montage. Viewers cognitively interact to choose which window to observe throughout their viewing of a split-screen film. *Time Code*<sup>20</sup> uses split screen effects as an important visual structure to emphasize the connections between time, space and characters. Figgis uses sound in *Time Code* to focus viewers' attention to particular screens and narrative elements. However other variables such as size of screen windows, lighting, motion, or intensity of action can attract viewer attention to one split-screen window over others. In interactive works, the split screen can be integrated into the design of the interface.

### Interactive Cinema Interface

A central challenge in interactive cinema is the design of an interface that can maintain viewer immersion within the experience while actively making choices. Murray describes immersion as transporting a viewer to another place.<sup>21</sup> In cinema viewers can feel immersed if they are in a state of suspension of disbelief and are lost within the

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<sup>19</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1949). 29-30

<sup>20</sup> *Time Code*, DVD, directed by Mike Figgis (USA: Red Mullet Productions, 2000).

<sup>21</sup> Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (New York: The Free Press, 1997). 98.

viewing experience. Bolter and Grusin describe this phenomenon as immediacy, where the medium and the interface become invisible to the viewer.<sup>22</sup>

Murray defines agency as the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of choices.<sup>23</sup> When the viewer has a strong sense of agency while interacting with a medium, it is more likely that the viewer will feel immersed within the experience. When a viewer is aware of the interface Bolter and Grusin describe, this as a hypermediated experience. Bolter and Grusin maintain that during a well-designed mediated experience, viewers can oscillate between a state of immediacy and a state of hypermediacy.<sup>24</sup>

#### The Interface of Lost Cause

The interactive film *Lost Cause* requires viewers to navigate with a computer mouse. The interface of *Lost Cause* has one large screen in the center to display the main video and three thumbnail screens which function as interactive buttons (see Figure 1 Interface of *Lost Cause*).

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<sup>22</sup> David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2000). 21-31.

<sup>23</sup> Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck* 126.

<sup>24</sup> Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. 41.





Figure 1 Interface of *Lost Cause*

Each of the thumbnail screens represents one of the three characters' perspectives or storylines. When the cursor is rolled over a thumbnail screen, the video from that small screen will be mirrored onto the large screen. The three small screens play simultaneously and a viewer can select any one (but only one) of the three storylines at any time. Time can be paused or played but not retraced for the duration of the film. Neither the main screen nor the thumbnails can be rewound or played in reverse. The interface functionality is similar to a picture-in-picture method of channel surfing on a television, which allows viewers to see multiple channels at the same time and flip back and forth between these channels at any time.

#### Narrative Perspectives in *Lost Cause*

The story in *Lost Cause* takes place in an apartment complex and focuses around three characters and their relationship with Chloe, the young woman who links the three other characters. Colin is Chloe's husband. The couple lives on the second floor. He tries

to fix their rocky relationship and spends a majority of his time in the film searching for her. Arie is Chloe's lover. He works as a maintenance worker at the apartment complex and is convinced that Chloe should leave her husband for him. Tina is Chloe's elderly mother. She lives on the third floor and questions why her daughter has grown distant from her. Although the viewers never see the story from Chloe's perspective, the three stories together suggest what Chloe's story might be.

### *Lost Cause* as Narrative Database

*Lost Cause* is structured as a narrative database of the three characters in space and time (see Figure 2 Narrative Database Structure of *Lost Cause*). The dark grey areas represent the time that two characters intersect in the same location. Each character has its own ending.

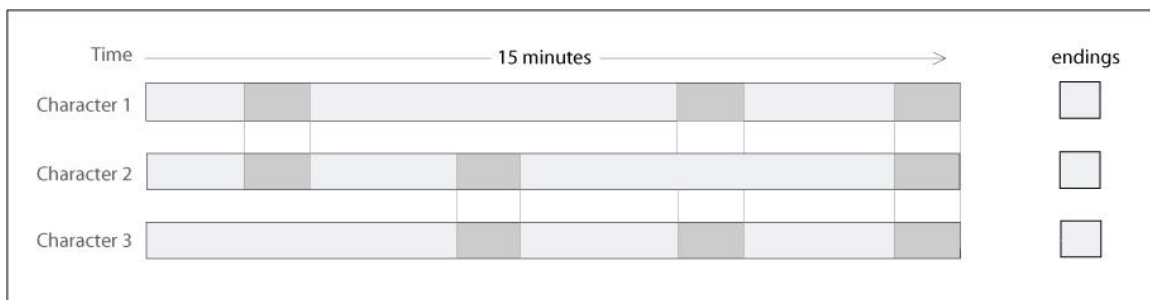


Figure 2 Narrative Database Structure of *Lost Cause*

The database consists of a series of micro-narratives in the timeline for each character. The plot is structured dynamically, depending on the events chosen by the viewer.

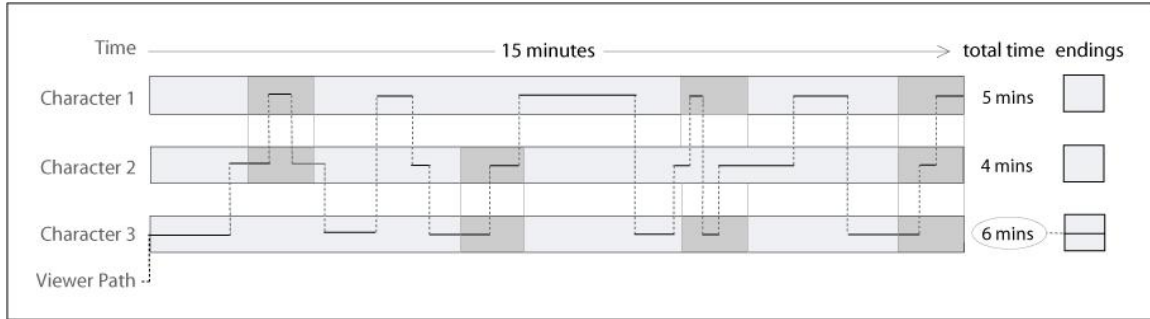


Figure 3 Sample Viewer Path through *Lost Cause*

Figure 3 Sample Viewer Path through *Lost Cause* demonstrates one path a viewer might take while navigating between the three characters' perspectives. At the end, one of three possible conclusions will be played, depending on which thread has been selected most often by the viewer.

#### Experience of the Interface in *Lost Cause*

The interface provides viewers with random access across the database narrative as the film plays. This can generate an immersive experience as they discover narrative information and narrative relationships connecting the three thumbnail screens.

Immersion is generated in the interface through a combination of hypermediation and agency. The viewer constantly oscillates between states of engaging hypermediation (instant navigation to the desired story thread) and immediacy (the pleasure of narrative).<sup>25</sup>

Agency is manifest at these moments of viewer choice; however agency is limited by the work's temporal structure. Since rewinding is not possible, choice is irrevocable. This temporal constraint generates motivation for viewers to make wiser choices in

<sup>25</sup> Manovich, *The Language of New Media*. 210.

selecting narrative sequences. This restriction in the kind and number of decisions the viewer can make leaves them freer to enjoy the experience of the story as it unfolds.

However, this experience is complicated by the content. Specific split screen events can attract a viewer's attention and motivate them to interact. For example a screen with a lot of action, detail in the composition, or a conversation between two people would attract a viewer's attention. When combinations of these contents are displayed at the same time on multiple screens, viewers are forced to decide which screen is more important. At one point in *Lost Cause* there is a close up of a letter being written by Tina on one screen and on the other screens there is a lot of action. The viewer is left to decide if they prefer to read detail or follow action.

### Interactive Design in Lost Cause

The ease of selection supports oscillation, allowing the viewer to seamlessly switch between threads and experience the unfolding story. The database and the interface are designed for viewers to discover narrative connections and narrative themes. However, as viewers navigate the database narrative and the film continues to play forward, they will indeed miss some information. This will lead viewers to subjectively interpret the events by connecting the scenes they did see. Viewers develop a goal in their navigation: to figure out the causality in the story between the three characters. Exploration becomes more pleasurable as viewers discover character connections and begin to piece together relationships, histories, and chains of causality.

The scenes a viewer chooses create subjective content to be interpreted by the viewers. For example, a fight scene occurs between Colin and Arie. This sequence has

similarities and differences across the two perspectives. In Colin's perspective (see Figure 4 Colin's Perspective), Colin is surprised to find Chloe cutting her wrist with a knife and he struggles with her to drop the knife. He is suddenly attacked from behind by Arie. In Arie's perspective (see Figure 5 Arie's Perspective), Arie falls into the room from the balcony and discovers Colin slapping Chloe. In this version Colin attacks Arie.



Figure 4 Colin's Perspective



Figure 5 Arie's Perspective

In the two perspectives the fight starts off differently but becomes parallel in both perspectives once Colin elbows Arie in the stomach. Whichever perspective the viewer privileges will sway the perception of the events and judgment about the characters. Perception of the narrative events is therefore subjective. Any resultant viewer construction of narrative will reflect the cumulative combination of different elements selected from the three perspectives.

Multiple storylines occur in *Lost Cause*, creating a dense weave the viewer can try to solve. Chloe's plot can be constructed by piecing together the scenes in which she is present. Viewing all possible storylines in the film will develop a deeper understanding of the story. In Arie's perspective, Chloe can be seen entering the elevator on the third floor. Minutes later, in Colin's perspective, a viewer can observe his argument with Chloe in the

staircase as she carries a laundry basket. Seconds later, Chloe is seen in Tina's perspective as she drops off a laundry basket. The conclusion is that Chloe took the elevator to the laundry room, then the stairs to drop the laundry basket to her mother's apartment.

### Cinematic Technique and Narrative Effect in *Lost Cause*

By navigating between the thumbnail screens, the viewer creates her own edit of the film on the larger screen. The viewer can use a cross-cutting technique to actively cut back and forth between the parallel stories in real time. This effect can reveal spatial relationships between the two smaller screens and build suspense. At one point, Colin chases Arie into the storage room. The viewer can navigate back and forth between the two characters' parallel perspectives and build tension for the events to come.

Further, as viewers navigate between sequences an unanticipated montage effect can occur when two sequences are juxtaposed on the larger screen and together create a narrative theme. For example, at the beginning of *Lost Cause* there is a sequence in Colin's thread where he pulls out a gun. If this sequence is juxtaposed with a shot of Arie, subjective meaning can be created suggesting Colin's urge to kill Arie. If however, Colin's sequence is juxtaposed with a sequence of Tina, it foreshadows the film's ultimate conclusion.

### Micro-narrative Textures within the Broader Narrative

The overall narrative structure has been enriched through the inclusion of micro-narratives. Some micro-narratives occur in the course of each character's main thread, and

others are glimpsed in passing in the background. Like individual shots, micro-narratives can be connected through the montage effect and thus can support broader narrative themes. This is similar to what Balcom describes in *Short Cuts*, where narrative themes are built through the combination of events from different characters.<sup>26</sup>

As Colin wanders around the apartment complex in search of Chloe, ancillary characters form micro-narratives in the background of his path. Colin enters the lobby and a man is saying: "She never calls me. I think I lost her. What can I do?". A few seconds later Colin walks in the courtyard and overhears a man on the phone asking for directions and he also sees another man who lost his change to the vending machine. These sequences in combination support a shared narrative theme of loss. Similar micro-narratives drawn from other combinations can support a variety of themes. Arie also encounters a Spanish couple in the elevator. The man says, "You must know, you're a woman. I always ask and you always tell me, I don't know". This chance fragment is reflected in Arie's own thread when he argues with Chloe in the staircase. He asks what has happened between Chloe and her husband she suggests that she doesn't know, "Nothing. We can't see each other anymore." Like the Spanish couple, Chloe finds emptiness in her own relationships.

### The Pleasures of Repeated Viewing

For a short film, *Lost Cause* is a complicated mixture of four main characters, three separate viewing perspectives, and a number of primary and subsidiary actions—all to be understood within the context of a single larger narrative web. Initial viewing will tease out a sense of character and an understanding of action. However, multiple

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<sup>26</sup> David Balcom, "Short Cuts, Narrative Film and Hypertext."

screenings can reveal even deeper pleasures. Repeated viewing of the work supports a *Rashomon*-like effect of cumulative discovery of each character's unique perspective and their relation to each other and to the whole. Although the parallel threads have many similarities, the viewer will detect subtle differences in actions or conversations. The multiple perspectives define character traits and relationships. Similarities across threads can be interpreted by the viewer as an indication of what really happened. Differences across threads can be interpreted as specific character perceptions. The combination yields a deeper understanding of the entire narrative constellation.



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