INSIDE STORY

Playful designs pull audiences into the narrative. Read about 3 creatives who have turned interactive storytelling into a contact sport.

by Karli Petrovic

STORYTELLING HAS LONG BEEN an essential component of design work. This oft-used tool is just as likely to incite a warm and fuzzy feeling in consumers who pick up your packaging design as it is to turn a simple illustration into a clever conversation piece. In fact, many great designs begin as stories just waiting to be told.

But it is one thing for a designer to construct a narrative for the audience; it is quite another to create something that enables (and encourages) the audience to add to the narrative. From a web project that aggregates data to report on human emotions to a larger-than-life digital exhibition of an interactive ecosystem, Jonathan Harris and Design I/O's Theodore Watson and Emily Gobeille are producing some mindblowing sagas. Here's the tale of how these three creatives structure stories, overcome obstacles and foresee the future of interactive design.

JONATHAN HARRIS: TELL ME YOUR LIFE STORY
Jonathan Harris is the man behind powerful works such as "Cowbird" (www.cowbird.com), "a small community of storytellers interested in telling deeper, longer-lasting, more nourishing stories than you're likely to find anywhere else on the web," and "We Feel Fine" (www.wefeelfine.org), the aforementioned
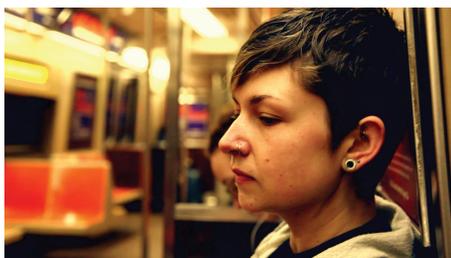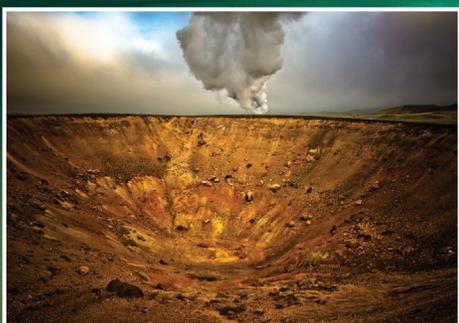
Opening spread and above: "I Love Your Work" shows "the realities of those who make fantasies" in a collection of 10-second teaser videos shot in New York City.

Right page: Although it isn't a magnet for viral content sharing, "Cowbird" allows people to upload a photo and write a story about what happened in the image or led people to it.

digital feelings calculator that was a collaborative effort with Sep Kamvar. Harris has a knack for creating connections between users around the world. Princeton educated in the disciplines of computer science and photography, Harris' odd medley of specialties helps him engage audiences through visual and interactive art and shared experiences.

"Computer science taught me how to break down problems systematically into smaller, more manageable chunks," he says. "Photography taught me how to look at things and how to notice things most people don't see. My photography teacher at Princeton was Emmet Gowin, and he taught me to see the beauty in everyday life, right at home, without the need for exotic travel or melodrama." Harris, who got into art through comic books, later experi-

mented with oil painting and composing travel journals before dabbling with digital media. "It seemed like the most interesting frontier," he says.

And Harris uses the interactive frontier to share stories among strangers as well as to share his own personal stories with audiences across the globe. For example, at the outset of his 30th birthday, the designer embarked on a personal project called "Today." A series of daily photographs and accompanying short stories posted online, "Today" continued for 440 consecutive days and gave viewers a glimpse of Harris' life story, from witnessing a strange encounter on the subway one Halloween to a car trip to deliver a book of poems to an octogenarian sheep farmer with the soul of a poet.

"My favorite project is probably 'Today' because it's the most personal thing I've made," he says. "A lot of people do 365 projects—the idea is not new—but it's one of those ideas that's all about execution, and I put a lot of myself into each day's entry. Some nights I would spend four-plus hours writing the story, and I tried to make sure that each entry would give something to people."
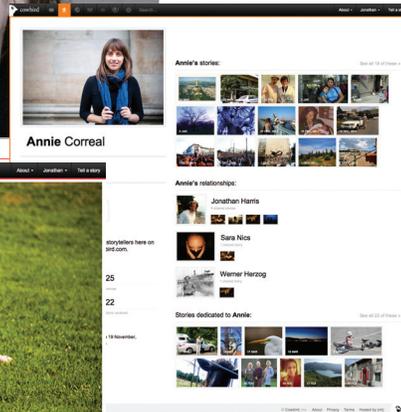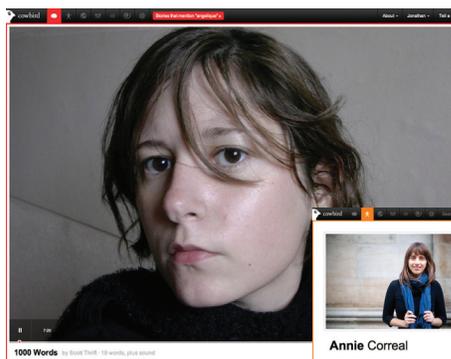
Harris also cites a David Foster Wallace essay that differentiates art from advertising as an influence in how he saw the project. While ads require something from the audience, art is simply a gift. "My 'Today' project was definitely a gift, and it was a tremendous instrument of personal growth," Harris says. "In the end, it started to take over my life—I started to feel like a spectator to my own life—so I stopped it abruptly. When I look back on the 440 photographs now, they seem really beautiful to me."

Similar in form, Harris' "Cowbird" project looks to audiences to contribute their own photos and stories. Some stories are extensive and some are no more than a sentence or two long, but each has a photo and a label, such as "diplomacy" or "need," a date and a short clarification like "a drive with a diplomat" or "what do you need?" The photos range from the professional to the Instagram-filtered, the camera-phone selfie to the worn, black-and-white shot from more than a few years ago. Stories of heartache, suffering, joy and perseverance fill the site in an addictive format that begs you to read them all, even though some leave you guessing at the conclusion. "I wanted to create a space for a slower, deeper, contemplative kind of self-expression," Harris says. "I wanted to create a space for the kind of content that would still resonate 50 years from now. It's designed with a lot of sensitivity and care. At the same time, it violates just about every principle of viral content strategy, which means that its growth has been slow. By web standards, 'Cowbird' has a small community of 30,000 authors who use it and love it, but it hasn't blown up into something truly mainstream like Tumblr or Twitter."

In his most recent undertaking, "I Love Your Work," however, Harris sought to engage audiences in a new way—by setting up a pay-to-watch model. This was his first experiment creating "financially sustainable digital art." In this case, the economic model served as a means of funding his passion projects while still donating 10% to the Sex Workers Project, a charity that offers social and legal services to those who engage in sex work. If successful, Harris sees this model as a way of funding future projects from all creatives who use the digital medium to produce and share art.

"I Love Your Work" turns the camera on nine women (Jincey Lumpkin, Dylan Ryan, Ela Darling, Ryan Keely, Jett Bleu, Dolores Haze, Luna Londyn, Nic Switch and Joy Sauvage) who labor in the lesbian porn industry. Through 2,202 10-second movie clips, encompassing approximately six hours of film, the women's lives become a narrative exploring "the realities of those who produce fantasies." In this case, the fantasy was "Therapy," a 10-part series from Juicy Pink Box Productions about a woman who explores her sexual fantasies and experiences by having a conversation with seven different women, who all play parts of the main character. "Therapy" predominantly showcases self-pleasure scenes.

Featured in "The New York Times," "The Huffington Post" and more, "I Love Your Work" has gained some remarkable praise. Greg Stefano, video editorial director of online publication "Cool Hunting," touts the project's storytelling aspects, saying, "The resulting patchwork videos create nine different stories that are, at times, very mundane but also completely and utterly addictive." "Slate's" Amanda Hess commented on the overall experience: "The interactivity of the project reflects how we consume porn on the internet—jumping from clip to clip, catching glimpses of video in between mundane e-mail replies and, sometimes, visits to performers' own blogs."

And aside from the content and digital platform, there are other interesting concepts at work. For example, Harris shot the 10-second clips during 10 consecutive days (Lumpkin was filmed

> ## "When a new technology arrives, we immediately find ways to use it to connect to each other. That's what humans do. We're empathetic animals."
> – Jonathan Harris

twice) at five-minute intervals for 24 hours, taking in whatever was happening at the time. Each $10 ticket affords a viewer access to the interactive documentary for 24 hours, but there is a catch: Only 10 viewers are permitted to sign up and reserve a time on a particular day. Assuming the tickets sell quickly, the project delays the ticketholder's instant gratification, something that porn is poised to provide readily. The 10-second stories are also modeled after the 10-second visual teasers the industry uses to entice people to buy the entire pornographic film. An "I Love Your Work" guest page continues the interactivity of the stories beyond the videos by listing the names of those who watched the documentary, building a community of people who have participated in a singular experience.

"NO MEDIUM HAS A MONOPOLY ON STORIES"

While quite different, these three projects share an underlying theme: They tell stories. But that's not necessarily how Harris sees it. "What are stories? Everything is a story. Nothing is a story. It depends on your perspective," he says. "'Storytelling' has become such a cliché in the past few years as to be nearly meaningless—like 'sustainability' or 'innovation.' Every ad campaign is now a 'storytelling' endeavor, and every kind of communication seems to be called 'storytelling.' I actually find that word pretty boring now. I just make stuff that feels interesting to me. Call it whatever you want."

Semantics aside, Harris' preferred online medium can be a tough one through which to share experiences. As with many forms of design work, there will always be challenges when it comes to execution, but Harris has encountered a different hiccup when attempting to construct an interactive narrative: "Mainly holding people's attention [presents a problem], although that's a challenge in any medium," he says. "Human attention might be the only truly finite resource, but people don't realize how valuable it is. People are always 'killing time' and allowing their time to be consumed by products and companies that are designed to monopolize and monetize it."

There are other challenges as well. Despite advancements in the digital age, some critics tend to be leery of interactive designs where meaning can get lost in translation. Others dismiss online forums, arguing that the internet and social media could potentially lead to the demise of true, personal connections. In a controversial Flash on the Beach lecture in 2008, Harris himself argued that interactive design often goes too far and that "there have been no masterpieces" in the digital realm.

Today, Harris dismisses these objections. "Of course it is possible to tell stories online. No medium has a monopoly on stories," he says. "People find all sorts of ways to transmit meaning. The ways in which humans connect are always evolving. When a new technology arrives, we immediately find ways to use it to connect to each other. That's what humans do. We're empathetic animals."

Of his own comments, Harris has taken on a different perspective. While he still isn't sure that a digital masterpiece has been produced (his own work included), his priorities have definitely changed. "That was something I said when I was young and brash and critical," Harris says. "I try to be less critical now. There's something good in everything, even if it's simply the process of doing it. I don't want to be a critic. I prefer to be a creator. I'll let the critics decide the masterpiece question. I'm just focused on making my work and living a good, simple, creative life. And being kind. That's more important to me now."

A leafy welcome

aves goodbye,

As we fall away.

DESIGN I/O: TELLING THE TALE

When it comes to constructing stories that encourage audiences to play, Emily Gobeille and Theodore Watson, principals of Design I/O, a Cambridge, MA-based creative studio specializing in digital design, are at the top of their game. Gobeille and Watson have an enthusiasm for storytelling, from "Terrarium," an interactive ecosystem that uses participants' voices to fuel and sustain the environment and living things within it, to "Puppet Parade," an installation that allowed children to perform alongside large-scale puppets by enabling them to "step into the environment and interact with the puppets directly, petting them or creating food for them to eat." "We tell stories through a combination of design and interaction," Gobeille says. "We are passionate about creating dynamic stories, where people are not just observers, but can become part of the story. Stories are also the foundation on which many of our projects are created. We start with a story and then figure out the best way to tell it."

And while technology can aid in this process, sometimes an interactive format is not ideal. According to Gobeille and Watson, the trick is knowing which medium to use in each unique circumstance. "Some stories are well-suited to being told digitally; however, it is important not to try and force a story into a technological approach that it isn't suited for," Gobeille says. "In our view, it is always better to design the medium and interaction around the content of the story, so that a digital, technological approach contributes something meaningful to the experience."
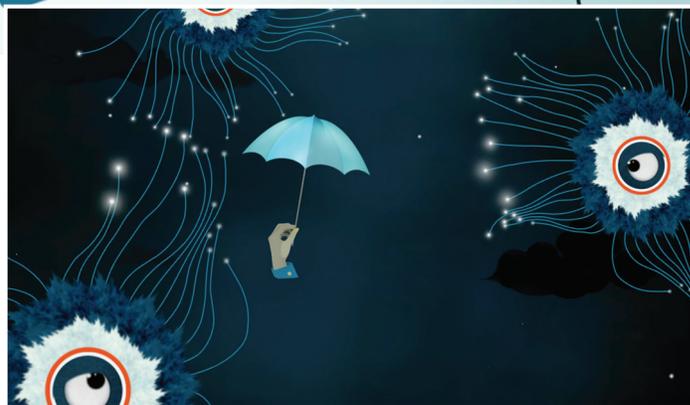
Two projects that flourished in the interactive format were "Funky Forest" and "Rise and Fall," which also happen to be the designers' favorites. Like "Terrarium," "Funky Forest" is based around an interactive ecosystem. Instead of using sound-activated elements, however, children at the Cinekid festival in Amsterdam, and later at the Singapore Art Museum, were able to grow trees using their bodies. Once the trees were created, participants could then redirect water from the digital waterfall to allow the trees to thrive in the environment. "Rise and Fall" was a project for the March 2010 issue of Boards

"Rise and Fall" allows audiences to navigate an interactive world by rotating the covers of Boards Magazine. Right side up, the journey is light and skyward; upside down, the world falls into darkness.

Left: Kids flocked to the "Funky Forest" exhibit, which empowered them to create trees using their bodies.

Right: Much like "Funky Forest," "Puppet Parade" encourages kids to interact with life-size puppets using their hands and arms.

Magazine in which Gobeille and Watson developed an interactive story for the front and back covers. The tale of "Rise and Fall" is revealed to viewers through story nodes created by holding the cover right side up (rise) or upside down (fall) in front of a web camera. Turning the magazine slightly changes the perspective in which the viewer sees the story world.

"These are two projects that were immensely satisfying to bring to life, and they are also two projects that we don't feel like we are finished with and are looking forward to revisiting and taking even further," Gobeille says. "Both projects involved a balanced combination of designed and programmatic elements, and there was a real back and forth between the two of us during the development process." Watson's experiences with each project were also positive. "'Rise and Fall' was interesting as we were trying to figure out how to tell a story from two perspectives—positive or negative—and 'Funky Forest' was just such an audacious idea that at the time felt like a complete impossibility," he says. "Seeing children playing with it the first day it was installed at the Cinekid festival was one of the most rewarding experiences we have ever had."

Play is an important aspect in getting the audience interested in the project, and Gobeille and Watson work hard to ensure people enjoy the interactive adventure. "In a sense, a key part of an interactive experience is to hand over control to the audience," Watson says. "So it makes sense that they play a part in the storytelling and the outcome of the experience. Technology also allows us to develop tools for people to tell their own stories." Gobeille agrees that putting the storytelling components in the hands of the audience is a great method for increasing overall engagement. "When we worked together on 'Funky Forest,' we came up with an immersive, interactive environment that encouraged people to tell their own stories though experimentation and open play. Technology allows people to jump into the story, become immersed in it and play a part in the story that unfolds around them," she says, noting that each project is designed to help facilitate this sort of connection. "We design our projects to engage people with varying levels of interaction. There are those that provide direct and immediate feedback, and then we layer more subtle interactions that reward exploration and longer feedback loops where people can discover deeper connections between things. The immediate reaction pulls people in, and the more subtle interaction sustains interest and allows the audience to make a deeper connection with the experience."

AVOIDING THE SAME OLD STORY

Although the Design I/O principals consistently "have too many ideas and not enough time to make them," their biggest challenge is finding the best way to bring a particular project to life. "We often struggle to find the most appropriate and intuitive way to tell a story and ask ourselves the question, 'Why are we doing it this way?'" Watson says. "We want to make sure our approach doesn't hinder the experience and that it matches the type of story we are trying to tell."

This challenge can often extend into finding the best way to engage the audience at their level. While starring in a digital puppet show is sure to wow children, adults may be less impressed. Likewise, "Faces," an outdoor installation for San Francisco Art Commission's "Lights on Market St." initiative that captured and sketched people's portraits before projecting them larger-than-life onto the side of a building, is much more fascinating for adults. "We find that different ages respond differently, and we target interaction that is appropriate for the age group," Watson says.

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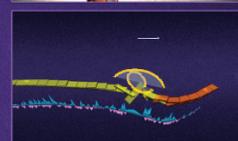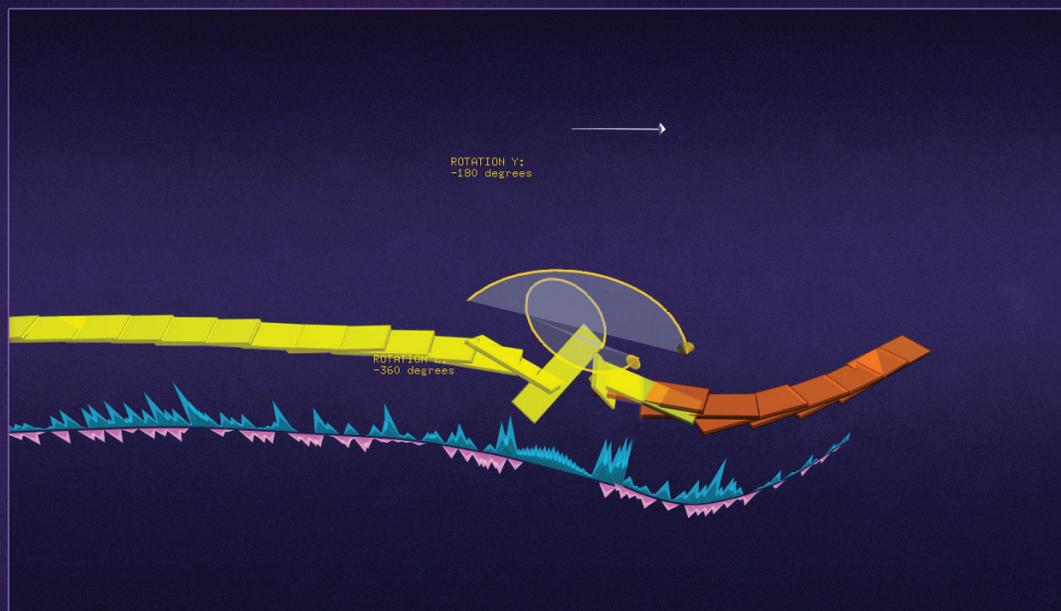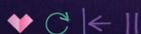
"Often, the environment, scale and space has a big impact on engagement, and we spend a good amount of time adjusting parameters until the experience has the right feel. Sometimes changing the timing of something by one-tenth of a second can make a huge difference in how people engage with the work."

Occasionally, however, there are technological difficulties to consider. In one of their most recent projects, "Skataviz," which allows skateboarders to record their movements by attaching an iPhone or iPod Touch to the board and see their runs and tricks visually displayed on screen, Gobeille and Watson were limited by the capabilities of the equipment. "The 'Skataviz' project came about in a funny moment of inspiration. We saw a friend's project online that we thought was 'Skataviz' but after watching the video discovered it was something completely different," Watson says of the project's inception. "This triggered the idea for the project, and we decided to see if we could make what we thought it was. The biggest challenge with the project has been dealing with the pitfalls of iPod sensors. Some sensors are really accurate and others require us to add some intelligent guessing to the data that is being output."

Despite the hurdles that accompany many digital projects, the Design I/O team continues to push the boundaries of the medium, striving to develop pieces people have never seen before. "[Our projects] seem to be a mix of big ideas that we can't get out of our heads and have been thinking about for ages and quick projects that come from seeing something while we are outside or at a bar and then go straight to the studio to make a prototype," Gobeille says. Watson also explains that a major source of inspiration comes from collaboration. "We are constantly pushing each other out of our comfort zones, which results in something that is far beyond what either of us could have imagined," he says. "Often the ideas that pop into our heads feel impossible. These are the ideas that we have the most fun trying to turn into a reality."

And both designers continue to be excited by the future of interactive design and the role storytelling will play. "When we first started, interactive design mediums were intriguing to people almost regardless of content," Watson says. "Now as it becomes more mainstream, with interactive walls and floors commonplace, what will differentiate them is the quality of the stories being told and the marriage of interaction and storytelling." Gobeille also finds that narrative-oriented designs have a distinct form of longevity. "Storytelling is what grounds an interactive experience," she says. "It sets the context for the experience the audience is about to engage in; it encourages curiosity and discovery and also allows the experience to live on, creating a never-ending story." ∎

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The inspiration for "Skataviz" came from a friend who had completed a project that Design I/O first thought was this prototype, but turned out to be something else.