Storytelling Into Life: Avatars of the Anthropocene

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Abstract

This artist talk will discuss the methodology and outcomes of an experimental artistic project exploring themes of community and collaborative storytelling, archetypal characters, role-playing, and the catastrophic effects of the Anthropocene. Here I will explain the background behind the project and introduce the characters (artistic alter egos used by the artist in other projects). This project concept centers around placing archetypal characters into a context connected to the main themes and issues facing humanity in the future, and explores how community storytelling can serve as a spark for finding innovative pathways through and out.

Keywords

Collaborative Storytelling. Community Storytelling. Role-Playing Games. Archetypes. Anthropocene. Artistic Alter Egos.

Introduction

This work was originally conceived as an interactive performance-lecture/artistic intervention to take place as part of ISEA2024's Online Creative Works Showcase. I envisioned guiding conference-goers through a brainstorming exercise, the outputs of which would be fed into an improvisatory movement performance similar to other such improvisation performances I've conducted.[1] However, with the move to Styly I was unable to envision how to create such an interactive environment and how to capture my own movement, and as such, I opted to change instead to an artist talk.

As the artist talk format does not necessarily allow for a performance-lecture setup, I have modified the original concept. The below presents the current version of that on which I will be presenting at the artist talk. Note that, between the time of submission and the time of the talk, the project will be executed – as such, here I only outline the background and methodology of the project. The results will be presented at the conference.

The work will center around the 4 characters that I have developed and branded as my 'artistic alter egos,' drawing inspiration from artists like David Bowie who often performed as characters.[2] These characters are: The Sad Clown, Woman in Red, Man in the Suit, and Monster. The Sad Clown and Monster each have 1 variation, and the other two have two variations. Along with a 3D designer, I created a set of digital 'trading cards' for the characters and their variations based on character/card-based games such as

Magic The Gathering.[3] Each card has basic character information, suggestions on their archetypal roles, and 'storytelling instructions.' Using the cards, I will design a storytelling-based game which will be conducted in small groups of 3-4 people. Drawing on a similar structure as popular role-playing games such as Dungeons & Dragons, I will guide participants through a storytelling experience using the cards and characters by first providing a narrative description of a situation which is then explored and expanded.[4] These situations will be connected to the main issues of the Anthropocene - not necessarily as geographic epoch but as representative of the philosophical and historical patterns of human domination and control over the environment, other people, and technology.[5] They may touch on aspects of consumerism and wealth, environmental destruction, technological advancement, or social inequality. The goal of the experience will be to find some sort of resolution for the characters struggling within the Anthropocene.

Following the experience, participants will be asked reflection questions about their experience. The driving questions for this project for me as both artist and humanist are:

1. How does the act of sharing the characters with other people and giving them agency to change or add to their stories enrich or diminish them? Does the act of community storytelling enhance or diminish their archetypal characteristics?
2. How do the outside participants relate to or with the characters, and does the act of telling their stories allow them to relate more or less to the characters?
3. In placing the characters in a specific context, do they become avatars of the Anthropocene? Can they be used as modern or future archetypes?
4. Through the act of storytelling, can the group or individuals find some kind of resolution or innovation in their own experience of the modern age and the struggles of the Anthropocene?

In this short paper I will introduce the characters and how they were developed, outline the proposed format for the game in connection with the trading cards, and explain briefly the methodology for conducting the game/experience.

The Characters

Throughout my career I have created narrative-based work which often revolves around certain characters; however, in 2022 I decided to 'brand' four of these characters into my own stock characters, ala Commedia dell'Arte.[6] The four chosen were characters I had already worked with and had appeared in performances or short films that I had created. They are: Girl in the Red Dress, Man in the Suit, the Sad Clown, and Monster.

Also known as the lady in red, the woman in the red dress, or the woman in red, this character is a symbol of the femme fatale, but she is also cunning, clever, and ruthless. Her motives are always hidden and she never really shows her full hand. She might be a social climber, a pretender, a symbol of powerful women, a sex symbol, or more, however, whatever she is, she is not there by accident. Everything she does is calculated, and she is a very powerful and very wealthy person. This character has 2 variations: The girl with balloons, representing the innocence of the girl in a red dress, before she became what she is today, and the girl in the black dress, representing what happens when the girl in the red dress loses her wealth, status, and power.

The Man in the Suit character represents The Man, the man in power, the hero of every story. Like the girl in the red dress, he is a powerful person, but he hasn't necessarily had to do any work to be so – and rather than finding his way to the top, he just assumes he's there already. He is blustering, loud, rude, misogynist, and brimming with confidence. Everyone knows a man in the suit – this character represents them all. This character has 2 variations: the faceless man, representing the loss of identity in corporate slavery, and the man in the dress, representing the hypocrisy of toxic masculinity.

The Sad Clown is based off the famous sad clown mime character "Pierrot," who was a stock character of the classical French and Italian comedy. In these classical comedies, he is in love with Columbine, but Columbine is together with another character, Harlequin. Therefore, Pierrot is a symbol of unrequited love. He is tragic because no matter what he does, he never gets the girl, he is always broken hearted, but he is a clown, so his antics are meant to be funny. He represents innocence, purity, love, longing, foolishness, hope, and despair. The Sad Clown character has 1 variation, which is "Jean-Claude," a character I invented. He is the actor who plays the clown. They act as foils to each other.

Finally, Monster represents the unknown. We can never know anything about Monster – not where it comes from, what it wants, what it feels, if it feels, if it is friendly or not, if it is dangerous or not. It is and it isn't, it just there, a mirror, a reflection of whatever we place upon it. It is a symbol of the Other, and its characteristics are not is own, but rather what it instills in the viewer. This character has 1 variation: the chained monster, representing oppression of the Other by the dominant.

In 2022, I worked with a stylist, makeup artist, and photographer to define looks for each character which were then photographed. Since then I have used the characters in a variety of creative endeavors. All of them appear in my 1-person play, *Searching for Pierrot,* and Monster appeared in a performance art installation in a gallery entitled *Breaker Maker Dreamtaker.* I created a multimedia stage production investigating the story of Pierrot and Jean-Claude, *The Clown & His Shadow,* and in February 2024 conceptualized a gallery exhibition centered around all the characters.

The Cards

I designed the trading cards in collaboration with a 3D designer. They were originally intended to be sold as NFTs as part of the merchandising campaign; however, following the collapse of the NFT market I never released them. I had always wanted to explore community storytelling with the characters and envisioned some kind of online program based on this. I was unable to enact this, but I did take the step to have the cards designed. I first thought to include all the characters I've ever developed or performed. Eventually this was too ambitious and I stayed with the four main stock characters. The cards are primarily digital assets and in their pure form are a looped mp4 video of a 3D animation of the card spinning, showing both front and back (see Figure 1 for example).
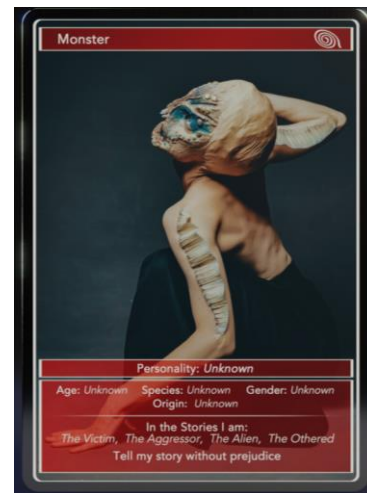

Figure 1. A still render of the front of the Monster Red card.

There are four main levels of cards: red, bronze, silver, and gold. The red cards are the main versions of each character. The bronze cards are the variations. The silver cards have each character and their variations – on each spin, the next version appears. The singular gold card has all four main characters on the card, each one appearing in succession with each spin.

Each card has three personality traits of the character (except in the case of Monster as seen above), their age, species, gender, and origin, as well as a list of the typical roles the character plays in stories. At the bottom are "storytelling instructions" for how to approach their story. In the silver and gold cards, the characteristics are connected to the character

or their version, but the roles and instructions are generalized to all of them together (see figure 2).

Figure 2. Still render of the first character of the Man in the Suit silver card.

Methodology for the Experience

As mentioned previously, I have adjusted my plan for conducting the experience, and rather than an interactive performance-lecture using audience input, I will instead conduct an experimental interactive experience with volunteers in the time before the conference, the results of which will be presented during the talk. Because this experience will take place most likely in April, it is possible that the exact methodology will change.

The plan is to use the trading cards to create a sort of roleplaying/storytelling game. The game will begin with a narrative scenario setting the scene and outlining the main challenges. The scenario will be based on the particular themes of the Anthropocene but taken to an extreme, somewhat apocalyptic extent. Following the reading of the scenario, participants will be invited to play a trading card and explain how the character fits in that scenario, what role they play, and any other relevant narrative details. One by one the players will continue to add characters and stories. According to the rules, which will be designed beforehand, some cards can modify or change characters rather than introducing new ones. As the story develops and grows in depth and detail, I will guide the participants towards some kind of resolution for the character(s) within the scenario.

I expect this session to take place remotely on a video conferencing software. In order to source participants, I placed a call for volunteers on my social media, and then then emailed interested parties to explain more in depth. Eventually I will finalize a group of 3-4 people – if there are more, they will be divided into smaller groups.

Due to the experimental, innovative nature of this project, I can't predict at this point if the output with be a consistent story or more of a brainstorming session, and as I lead the session, I feel it is important to be flexible and responsive to where the participants are going, so that it is a genuine collaborative effort, rather than a singular endeavor.

Conclusion

This project represents a genuine experiment, and will venture into new realms of collaborative storytelling in connection with the artistic body of work that I am building around the four archetypal characters. During the artist talk, I will briefly outline the background but mostly discuss the outcomes and results once the experience has been conducted. I hope and expect that the learnings and reflections pave the way for future research papers and artistic projects.

References

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Author Biography

Gillian Rhodes is an American performer and storyteller who has lived and worked globally since 2012. She graduated from Columbia University with a degree in dance, and since then has crafted an interdisciplinary practice blending dance, mime, theatre, storytelling, writing, and multimedia. She has lived in Cambodia and South Korea before shifting to Pakistan in 2018, where she has

taught, choreographed, and performed for most of Lahore's top arts universities and schools, as well as modeling and creating her own productions. In addition to her performing arts work, Gillian writes both fiction and content. She moonlights as a research assistant and has published two academic papers on the digital humanities. At the time of the conference she will have just shifted to Dubai to explore further opportunities.