

...

The Implied Code: The Riddle of Reading Interactive Fiction

2005-04-09 1:30 PM (dis)junctions 2005: theory reloaded
UC Riverside Humanities Conference

...

My Background and Angle

- My dissertation is titled "Command Lines," and my work focuses on the command line as an art genre and as a site where meaning occurs. Objects of study include systems of typed interaction such as turing test chatbots, instant messaging, and interactive fiction.

2005-04-09 1:30 PM (dis)junctions 2005: theory reloaded
UC Riverside Humanities Conference

The Implied Code

...

Abstract

- The "Implied Code" is a reader's mental model of the operational logic of an interactive text. This paper proposes the critical term "Implied Code," defines it, and discusses potential uses in new media discourse. When applied to a specific case, such as recent writing in Interactive Fiction (IF), we see the reader-protagonist's understanding of and ability to interact with the story are parallel developments which conclude at the same time.

2005-04-09 1:30 PM (dis)junctions 2005: theory reloaded
UC Riverside Humanities Conference

The Implied Code

...

Defining Implied Code

- Implied code: a reader's mental model of the operational logic of an interactive text.

2005-04-09 1:30 PM (dis)junctions 2005: theory reloaded
UC Riverside Humanities Conference

The Implied Code

...

Contexts for Implied Code

- Fields
 - Literature
 - New Media (eliterature, digital fiction)
 - Games Studies
- Theoretical Areas
 - Narrative Theory (the Implied Author-Reader)
 - Reader Response Theory

2005-04-09 1:30 PM (dis)junctions 2005: theory reloaded
UC Riverside Humanities Conference

The Implied Code

...

Expanding the Definition

- A reader's implied code models operational logic - not the precompiled code syntax
 - The reader need not be a programmer
 - Any interactor forms some such model (small child, computer illerate, etc.)
- It is a behavioral-predictive model, a system of expectation:
 - "if I do X, Y will happen"
 - General: "my action will be understood in this way, and elicit this kind of response"

2005-04-09 1:30 PM (dis)junctions 2005: theory reloaded
UC Riverside Humanities Conference

The Implied Code

Assessing Implied Code

- A given reader's implied code may be more or less accurate
 - Better or worse at predicting what the response will be - or rather of what kind
 - Better or worse at inferring how input was understood / processed
- YET Inaccuracy is just a different metric of aesthetic effect
 - the deceptive or unreliable code (like the unreliable narrator)
 - the de(con)structive code (tradition in net art / flash poetics)
 - the tradition of Turing's "imitation game" - maximize the illusion of perceived complexity

2005-04-09 1:30 PM (dis)junctions 2005: theory reloaded UC Riverside Humanities Conference

The Implied Code

Unimplied: Specific content

- In general implied code predicts structures and syntax of interaction rather than content.
 - "if I do A, it will be understood as input of type X, and a response of type Y will occur"
 - Not: "if I do A, B will happen"
- Example: > TALK TO CLAUDIUS
 - Strong expectation that the system will understand the action expressed
 - Weak expectation that the system will respond with speech from the character addressed
 - What will Claudius say specifically? Unknown - this expectation (if any) is not implied code

2005-04-09 1:30 PM (dis)junctions 2005: theory reloaded UC Riverside Humanities Conference

The Implied Code

2005-04-09 1:30 PM (dis)junctions 2005: theory reloaded UC Riverside Humanities Conference

The Implied Code

Unimplied: Unknown Modes

- Some untried modes of interaction are relatively free of expectations
 - "What does this button do?"
 - Originates outside the interaction model, but the results refine the model
 - Button-mashing
 - Originates outside the interaction model, and the results **do not** refine the model
 - if one can "read" an interaction model, then button-mashing is the limit on reading

2005-04-09 1:30 PM (dis)junctions 2005: theory reloaded UC Riverside Humanities Conference

The Implied Code

Implied Even for Authors

- Is the programmer / author an exception, having the "actual" code as their model? It is all implied code, so long as there is some (potential) gap:
 - Between design intention and compiled code (bugs and beta testing!)
 - Between platform specification and behavior (changing delivery layer)
 - Between memory and artifact - even authors forget!
 - Etc.

2005-04-09 1:30 PM (dis)junctions 2005: theory reloaded UC Riverside Humanities Conference

The Implied Code

A Terminology Proposal

- "Implied Code" isn't a close reading or a even strictly speaking a theory.
 - Not claiming that a certain interactive oeuvre can be modeled better than others
 - Not attempting to explain **why** predictive mental modeling occurs - except to defer to psychology and assert that it is pervasive, for "virtual" as well as physical interactions of all kinds.
- Descriptive: Naming the predictive models of individual interactive readers may help us talk quickly and easily about them.

2005-04-09 1:30 PM (dis)junctions 2005: theory reloaded UC Riverside Humanities Conference

The Implied Code

Projection vs. Reception

- Implied code is the product of a negotiation between interactor and system. It could be described in general or in specific, although my interest tends towards the specific.
 - Projection (general): Representation A in a digital text projects this kind of "implied code" outward into the minds of unspecified readers
 - Reception (specific): Implied code occurs in the mind of a specific reader, at a specific moment, during a specific reading. It is a particular and changing formation during the experience of an interactive work - indeed, the way it changes is a large part of the interest.

2005-04-09 1:30 PM (dis)junctions 2005: theory reloaded UC Riverside Humanities Conference

The Implied Code

So What? Areas of Use

- Origins of Impressions:
 - "The Author"
 - "The Narrator"
 - "The Implied Code"
- Systems of Experience:
 - "The Text"
 - "The (instance of) Gameplay"
 - "The Traversal" (Montfort)

2005-04-09 1:30 PM (dis)junctions 2005: theory reloaded UC Riverside Humanities Conference

The Implied Code

So What? Critical Issues

- Talking about implied code tends to emphasize the similarity or difference between the interactive work as designed and received.
- This emphasis highlights conditions under which most interactive texts are currently written and read
 - Experimentalism: the text struggles to educate (or refuses to educate) its reader operationally
 - Literacy: even if the text is not uniquely experimental, it IS probably unique in the experience of a given reader due to the lack of widespread literacy in the genre (IF, chatbot fiction, CYOA hypertext etc.)

2005-04-09 1:30 PM (dis)junctions 2005: theory reloaded UC Riverside Humanities Conference

The Implied Code

Other Potential Applications

- Interactive systems of all kinds (not just text / narrative) - particularly discrete or turn-based
 - Installation art
 - Games
- Some other fields may have parallel vocabularies for talking about similar issues...?

2005-04-09 1:30 PM (dis)junctions 2005: theory reloaded UC Riverside Humanities Conference

The Implied Code

Part II: Implied Code and IF

A specific application

2005-04-09 1:30 PM (dis)junctions 2005: theory reloaded UC Riverside Humanities Conference

The Implied Code

What is IF?

- [Video Clip: Strongbad on Thy Dungeonman]

2005-04-09 1:30 PM (dis)junctions 2005: theory reloaded UC Riverside Humanities Conference

The Implied Code

Theoretical Background

- Graham Nelson
 - essays for author-theorists, artist-programmers - 'implementors'
- Nick Montfort, "Twisty Little Passages"
 - The riddle as art - "literary riddles"
 - "giving a new perspective on something already familiar in certain ways by reorganizing our thinking"
- IFTheory (forthcoming) and IFMUD writings
- SPAG and Baf's Guide - review culture

2005-04-09 1:30 PM (dis)junctions 2005: theory reloaded
UC Riverside Humanities Conference

The Implied Code

IF History in a Nutshell

- simulated environments
- folk art
- puzzle environments
- birth of game industry
- death of IF game industry
- rebirth as art community
- art of the puzzle
- art of the short story

2005-04-09 1:30 PM (dis)junctions 2005: theory reloaded
UC Riverside Humanities Conference

The Implied Code

Implied Code and Late IF

- Much late IF is characterized by a concealed game concept / mechanic
- Reading the story is the the process of coming to understand how the story must be read (interacted with, manipulated)
- The 'story' ends at the moment the interactor understands the concept and thus gains mastery over the interface

2005-04-09 1:30 PM (dis)junctions 2005: theory reloaded
UC Riverside Humanities Conference

The Implied Code

The Story Is the Implied Code

- Thesis: In late IF, the progress of the reader's implied code mimics their progress of understanding the themes / motifs / or moral of the story

2005-04-09 1:30 PM (dis)junctions 2005: theory reloaded
UC Riverside Humanities Conference

The Implied Code

Implied Code, Redux

- Definition: "The Implied Code is a reader's mental model of the operational logic of an interactive text."

2005-04-09 1:30 PM (dis)junctions 2005: theory reloaded
UC Riverside Humanities Conference