

The Many Voices of St. Caterina of Pedemonte: An Experiment in Non-Linear Digital Narrative

Alison Walker

University of California, Riverside
alison@lasr.cs.ucla.edu

Silvia Rigon

University of California, Los Angeles
silvia@silviarigon.com

ABSTRACT: Saint Caterina of Pedemonte is a digital narrative published on CD-ROM, which attempts to answer questions regarding the nature of interactive participation, and its role in unveiling non-linear storytelling and meta-commentary. The story is comprised of a multitude of voices that compete and compliment each other to form a cacophonous narrative. This project aspires to illustrate the many voices, which shape our perceptions of past events and people. In this case, the authors focus on mystic saints who use starvation as a way to illustrate their devotion.

KEYWORDS: Interactive, medieval, electronic literature, non-linear, saints

INTRODUCTION

Mapping the Mystical and Interactivity

The Many Voices of Saint Caterina of Pedemonte is an interactive CD-ROM, created with Macromedia Director, that attempts to fully integrate the user into mystical studies by focusing on the problematics of authorship that are inherent in many mystical texts, and electronic and web-based literature. *Saint Caterina of Pedemonte* is created to explore the possibilities of scholarly discourse in a fully interactive digital narrative. Our main objective is not to simply provide theoretical musings with attached hyperlinks, but to immerse the reader in a unique experience – arriving at a theoretical conversation through words, sound, images, and an interactive interface to tell a large part of Saint Caterina’s story. Ultimately, this project is an attempt to illustrate the many voices, which shape our perceptions of past events and people using an interactive interface that endeavors to answer questions regarding the nature of interactive participation itself, and its role in unveiling non-linear storytelling. Many differing perspectives, both modern and me-

dieval, have formed the countless ways mystics are received on the Internet, by the scholarly community and popular culture. Originally, we had decided to use a real, and extremely popular, female saint in place of Saint Caterina, mainly Saint Catherine of Sienna. After almost completing the entire written project with the “real” saint in mind, we realized that the richness of her life was being diluted by our cursory account of her existence. Even including many different voices, illustrating different facets of her life, we felt as if we were doing the saint an injustice by being just another voice that tries to subsume and retell her experiences instead of letting her story speak for itself. Saint Catherine of Siena is intellectualized in so many different circles that it became hard to distinguish our retelling of her story from the many that came before us. So, in light of these factors, we created Saint Caterina, who is a conglomeration of women that we came across in our research. We have used elements of many medieval saints as a basis for Caterina; their experiences give her shape and form. Caterina is neither entirely real, nor is she simply a figment of our imagination. Ultimately, she is meant to be a fictional saint that, we feel, still remains true to the many women who have shaped her existence.

COMPETING VOICES

Saint Caterina is comprised of various sections, dubbed ‘voices,’ that compete and compliment each other, together forming the user’s view of her life.

The Church’s Voice

The first voice the viewer encounters is that of the Catholic Church. Modeled after a hagiographic retelling of a saint’s life, this section illustrates the miracles and church-related happenings in the life of Caterina. Hagiography becomes a powerful tool used by the Church to not only record the lives of saints, but also becomes

the first voice that constructs our idea of saints' holiness and piety. Iconographic images of Saint Caterina, which serve as visual hagiographies, further demonstrate the Church's voice. As words scroll on Saint Caterina's body, they are nearly impossible to read because of the distortion that occurs when the words pass through the image of Saint Caterina. One must listen to the narrative, much like listening to a sermon, instead of attempting to read the passage.

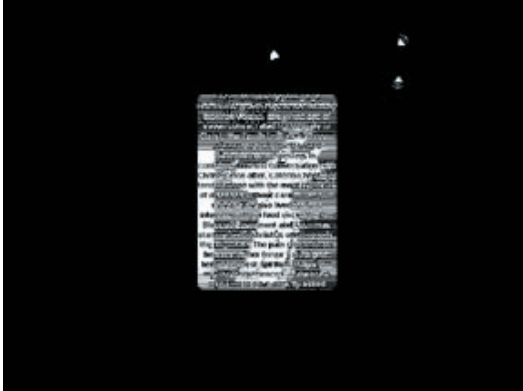


Figure 1: Words passing through Caterina

The words blend and redefine the iconographic image of Saint Caterina, as the Church rewrites her history.

The Academic Voice

The second voice that the viewer encounters is the Academic voice. Whether scholars will admit this or not, we refashion whatever we study with modern verbiage and theoretical constructions. One such text that posits a very modern answer to a medieval quandary is *Holy Anorexia*, by Rudolph Bell [1], who compares fasting saints to the modern anorexic. Caroline Walker Bynum also examines the relationship between food and medieval women, but does not automatically assume that the women she studies had eating disorders. As Bynum notes [3], her approach

clearly assumes that the practices and symbols of any culture are so embedded in that culture as to be inseparable from it. [...] the notion of anorexia nervosa [...] should not be wrenched from its modern context and applied to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. (299)

Bynum discourages scholarly approaches to mystic studies that rely on the application of modern terminology and culture to the medieval, as it cannot be separated from the culture from which it came. In *Saint*

Caterina, we play with this notion by giving a separate 'voice' to scholars. It is this rescripting of the medieval voice by modern audiences, which Bynum argues against that becomes important in the reconstitution of the identity of the mystic.



Figure 2: Peeling off the Church's voice

In this section, the viewer is presented with another canonical image of a saint and must manipulate the picture by lifting it with the mouse button to view a shadowy photograph of an anorexic woman. As the user lifts up the first image, symptoms of anorexia nervosa are displayed on the screen. This play between painted and photographic representations further emphasizes the blending of past technologies with more modern applications. It is only when the viewer is manipulating the image that one can hear the academic voice speak. Intoned in much the same way a scholarly paper would be delivered, there is no written text for the use to scan, only the voice calling on modern theory as it applies to the mystical saint.

The Autobiographical Voice

The third voice that is illustrated in *Saint Caterina* is the autobiographical voice. Many mystics used an amanuensis to produce a retelling of their life. In some extreme cases, mystics were forced to write down their stories as penance to ensure their canonization after their deaths. For these mystics and saints, autobiography becomes both a way to speak on their own terms but also a chance for the church to attempt to speak for them. Kate Greenspan [4] claims that a better term for medieval saints' autobiographies is "autohagiography" (218). Even in autobiography, true authorship becomes questionable because of the threat of the Church and

because many saints used amanuenses to write their stories for them.

This section of *Saint Caterina* is divided up into two parts, as we attempt to describe the process of writing as penance and begin to introduce the voice that appears within the saint's body. Writing can be both a freeing tool and a punishment. The lack of vocal sound in both parts of this section illustrate the tie that is present between the church's dictation of an autobiography and the saint's true voice. In the first part of the autobiographical voice, the viewer encounters a disorganized array of images. As she attempts to read the autobiography by scrolling down, the words become distorted and unreadable until the viewer takes the cursor (appearing with the word "lick") and licks the spiders from the screen, just as the first sentence of the autobiography stated: "They make me lick the spiders from the walls." (Licking spiders was an actual punishment for one of the saints that we researched for this project.) Using "lick" where the user once would have "clicked" also brings the interface into the foreground of the user's experience. The viewer takes part in the autobiographical experience as well as retains an insight to the difficult nature of the autobiographical voice.



Figure 3: "Licking" over the spiders revealing the text

The second part of the autobiographical voice, examines the mystic's body in relation to her position in society and within the church. The viewer sees an image of flesh-like links forming a wall that cannot be passed. No matter where the viewer points the cursor, the prison remains, illustrating how St. Caterina's body, and other mystics' bodies as well, becomes a prison. There is no interruption in viewing the text, in what we

see as one of the most personal narratives in the piece.

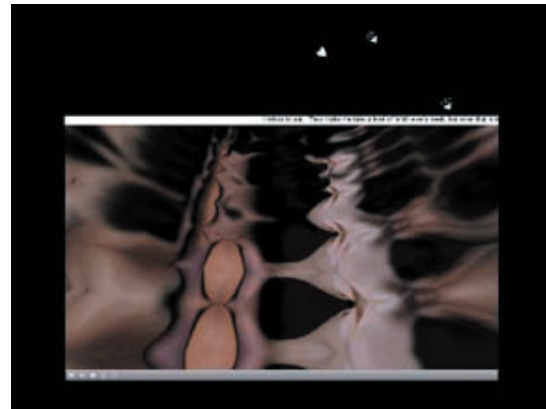


Figure 4: A bodily prison

In examining other mystic saints' stories and literature written for and about anchorites, a common theme represented in each is the ways in which their bodies became prisons. The imagery of a fleshy prison is also very prevalent in saints' autobiographies because it is the body that separates the human from the divine. The body also becomes the only autonomous voice that the mystic saint possesses because the church has the ability to appropriate all other means of expression.

The Mystic Voice

The mystic voice explores the concepts of *l'écriture féminine* that Kristeva [6] and Irigaray [7] introduce in their respective texts, "Stabat Mater" and *Speculum of the Other Woman*. In this section, we attempt to forfeit words altogether and illustrate the corporeal nature of Saint Caterina's visions. Visions for most of the mystic saints were not passive experiences, but were gut-wrenching times of both pain and joy combined. The body becomes a powerful metaphor to resist the church's doctrines for Caterina. The body is the one place the church cannot sanction worship. Surprisingly, we found a simple prayer for Saint Catherine of Siena called "Prayer of Saint Catherine of Siena to the Precious Blood of Jesus," [8] which illustrates remarkably the powerful and visceral nature of the mystic's vision. Four blocks with images of blood and the body are placed horizontally on the screen. Depending on which image the viewer clicks on, the prayer can be said in many different orders. Worship, especially with the mystic voice, becomes a prayer - a direct communication with Christ through speech.



Figure 5: Four panels of prayer

The last voice, which is unnamed, is perhaps the most visceral of all that have come before. A beating human heart appears on the page. A simple story is related to the viewer about Caterina exchanging her heart for Christ's, a trope that appears throughout mystical literature. The image of the heart takes Caterina back to her own body, and also brings the viewer and Caterina to a common point in the narrative. It seems the simplest and most direct image to portray the corporeality of the person Caterina. The human heart becomes an image of the sacred heart, illustrating how a simple body-part becomes immortalized by society. Then, a narrative is read about the reappropriation of Caterina's heart back into the church, literally explaining how the mystic's voice and body are subsumed by the many different voices that describe her story.

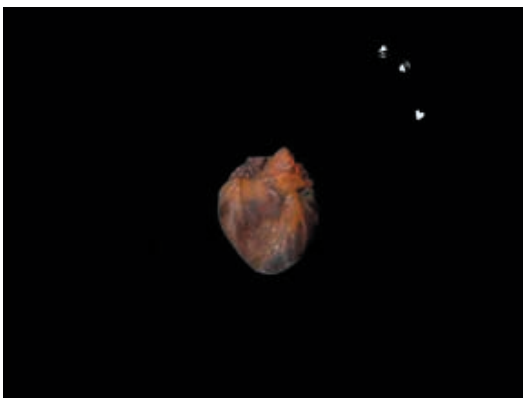


Figure 6: The heart of Caterina as a relic

Caterina's heart, which is the part of the body that fought so diligently against the church's dictations, becomes part of a church once again. As a relic, Caterina's heart serves both as a reminder that her bodily voice lives on, and also of the circular nature of the

voice itself.

At both the beginning and end of the project, the user is presented with the image of the sacred heart with spokes, which lead to each of the different voices, surrounding it. Representative of the human heart, and the appropriation of the body as an icon, a smaller version of the heart floats through every voice in *Saint Caterina*.

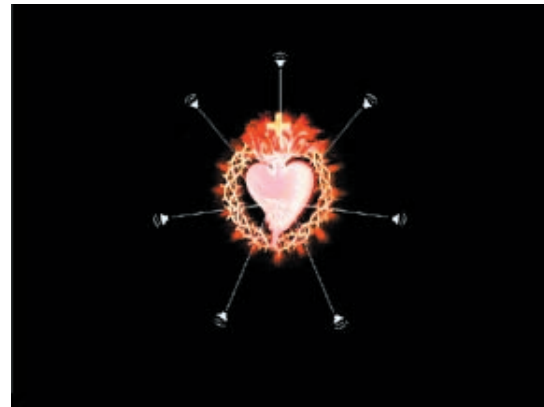


Figure 7: Menu featuring a heart with spokes illustrating the various voices.

If the user clicks on the heart, she is taken back to the 'menu' page and can view the voices in whatever order she wishes. The story, then, becomes broken apart and interwoven with the user's manipulations. This menu function gives the user ultimate control over the narrative.

The Authorial Voice

Finally, the Authorial voice is our attempt to bring in our voice as one of the many that construct saints such as Caterina. We have included, voice by voice, a narrative that explains in some sense the reasoning behind the images and text. Not only does the authorial voice bring to the foreground once again that Saint Caterina is both a creation and conglomeration of voices and attitudes, it also reminds us that, as authors, we are not the final voice, as it is the viewer who always gets the final word and interpretation of Saint Caterina's life.

INTERACTIVITY AND NON-LINEAR NARRATIVE

Utilizing interactivity to illustrate the different voices within the project seems like a natural choice given the tremendous possibilities that a digital interface can provide. As we have illustrated in the previous section, every voice has intrinsic characteristics that are mani-

fested through the direct participation of the viewer. Using the authoring software of Macromedia Director, we attempt to answer questions regarding the nature of interactive participation itself, and its role in unveiling storytelling and narration. Lev Manovich [9], when considering the myth of interactivity suggests:

when we use the concept of ‘interactive media’ exclusively in relation to computer-based media, there is the danger that we will interpret ‘interaction’ literally, equating it with physical interaction between a user and a media object (pressing a button, choosing a link, moving the body), at the expense of psychological interaction. The psychological processes of filling-in, hypothesis formation, recall, and identification, which are required for us to comprehend any text or image at all, are mistakenly identified with an objectively existing structure of interactive links. (57)

The reader or user always ‘fills in’ pieces of images, texts and stories based on their own experiences. “We all see differently,” Trinh Min Ha [10] notes; “How can it be otherwise when images no longer illustrate words and words no longer explain images?” (56). As different voices seek to give life to *Saint Caterina*, so do competing theoretical and ideological structures provide new layers to any person or text that is studied. Interactivity is not then, a simple ‘point-and-click’ interface; interactivity is an emotional and metaphorical process of interaction, which are frequently undermined in favor of more literal translations.

Reflecting upon these considerations, *Saint Caterina* is particularly concerned with the appropriateness of the interaction in relation to the content of the narrative. In other words, we are interested in exploring interactive participation that not only reveals the various media (text, images, sound, etc.) but also works as meta-commentary, reinforcing the significance of the user’s experience as a whole. The combination of text, images, and sound is fully integrated as a unity by the intentional or unintentional interactive mechanism, which not only activates the different components, but also more importantly, creates a relationship between these components. “An interface is not simply the means whereby a person and a computer represent themselves to one another” posits Brenda Laurel [7], “rather it is a shared context for action in which both are agents (4). In this

shared context, the interaction draws mental and literal links, and also activates resonance and reminiscence that hold together separate parts of the narrative. It is this personal series of links that users build themselves that is the true interactive experience.

Especially relevant to a discussion of the medieval and interactivity is Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s [2] theory of “remediation.” Informing our methodological strategy, the notion of “remediation” explores how new media “refashion[s] older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media” (15). In *Saint Caterina*, “remediation” is not only applied to different media elements within the design, but also as a strategy of questioning arbitrary or unidirectional point of views expressed by the single voices. The particular and the discretionary inform the whole through participatory intervention that activates correspondences encoded in the design. As every single voice of the story possesses its own identity and spatial position that is altered in relation to the others voices, similarly, different media components in a single screen possess a specific identity and discretionary value that assumes different connotation when they are “remediated” through the interactive process. Single positions are “refashioned” by the idea of complexity implied in multi-perspective, interchangeable viewpoints expressed by the constitutive collage-like, multimedia structure of the project. In other words, “remediation” represents a way of challenging formulations of control, authority and transmission of knowledge.

IN CONCLUSION

The Many Voices of Saint Caterina of Pedemonte is meant to experiment with the possibilities of non-linear narrative mediated by an interactive graphical interface, which ultimately encourages theoretical meta-commentary within the narrative itself. Through the usage of many differing interfaces with numerous voices, the retellings of *Saint Caterina*’s life are countless. By interacting with the story on multiple levels, the user must actively become a part, and construct pieces, of the narrative; thus, *Caterina*’s story is constantly changing. It is our sincere hope that *Saint Caterina* is able to bridge the divide between theory and artistic practice,

medieval and modern, and most of all staticity and interactivity.

1. Bell, Rudolph. *Holy Anorexia*. U. of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1985
2. Bolter, Jay David, and Grusin, Richard. *Remediation*. MIT Press, Cambridge, 1999
3. Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Holy Feast, Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. Univ. California Press, Los Angeles, 1987
4. Greenspan, Kate. "Autohagiography and Medieval Women's Spiritual Autobiography" in *Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Jane Chance. Univ. Florida Press, Tampa, Florida, 1996
5. Irigaray, Luce, *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Tr. Gillian Gill. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1985
6. Julie Kristeva, *Stabat Mater* in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi. Columbia University Press, New York 1982
7. Laurel, Brenda. *Computers as Theatre*. Addison Wesley, New York, 1993
8. <http://www.catholicforum.com/saints/pray0346.htm> Access: January 21, 2003
9. Manovitch, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. MIT Press, Cambridge, 2001
10. Minh-Ha, Trinh. *When the Moon Wakes Red: Representation, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. Routledge, New York 1991