Women with Wings: The Romantic Ballerina Then and Now
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Audience
This presentation will appeal to those interested in game development--both in terms of narrative construction, and the technical aspects of AI planners--along with academics studying the roles and depictions of gender in gaming and gaming communities.

Introduction

“Women With Wings: The Romantic Ballerina Then and Now” is a research project that examines the 19th-century Romantic ballerina, an icon and symbol of the Golden Age of Romantic ballet, 1830-1890. Together the aesthetic, musical, and narrative combination builds the trope of the pure and liminal Romantic ballerina and the cultural impacts of the trope resonate in today’s society. Critique of the Romantic ballerina addresses relevant cultural issues: psychology and folklore, gender and sexuality, dance and the body, fashion and femininity, literature and film, as well as video games.

Ballet, one of the oldest forms of modern entertainment, remains an unexplored territory in the field of gaming. Investigating the tropes and characteristics of works from Romantic ballet’s Golden Age (1830-1890), however, allows us to draw insights on the visual, kinetic, and narrative tropes associated with Romantic ballet and gender roles--particularly those available for women. Many of the balletic gender conventions that arose during this period have deeply influenced contemporary notions of femininity, and ballet as a genre itself - the conception of the distressed female, as a sexualized and passive object that must be saved by a heroic male player-character, has arguably left an indelible mark on the tradition of video games and gaming culture.

Our topic of presentation is a subset of this interdisciplinary project; an interactive game inspired by the ballet Giselle, ou Les Wilis (1841) that challenges conventional ballet narratives and mobilizes new storytelling methods and game interfaces to observe and interact with players’ emotional trajectories. The game, iGiselle, employs a user-responsive narrative structure, and uses emotion modelling techniques developed at the University of Alberta to give each player a unique story experience while remaining on the same emotional path. iGiselle is
unique in three ways: the level of content (ballet), software/code (the emotional model-based, interactive narrative planner), and hardware (Microsoft Kinect).

This project seeks to validate the importance of egalitarian representations of gender in game, as well as explore a traditionally feminine domain in the forum of interactive narratives. Our project is not only unique conceptually, but also aesthetically, as we are working with real ballerinas, in studio, photographing poses to represent technical skill and realistic dance within the game itself. Our objective is to create a game in which the player is able to subvert the tragic narrative that befalls the titular heroine Giselle and cast her in a narrative that allows for agency and exploration through narrative choice and movement.

We are very lucky to have a widely interdisciplinary team on board for this project and prior research in interactive narratives to build on. Our project will be elaborating on the research of Alejandro Ramirez Sanabria and David Thue who developed the PAST and PaSSAGE systems. Both systems allow a user to progress through an interactive narrative while the story dynamically adjusts to suit the player. iGiselle uses PACE, a system that implements emotional modelling, rupturing and repairing interactive narratives, as well as player types. For example, events are annotated with emotional affective states, such as hope, joy, despair and fear based on the EMA model. The goal of PACE is to guide the user on a specific emotion trajectory through the narrative by adjusting the delivery of events according to the player's emotional curve. This expands on the concept of pacing, which attempts to manage the player's stress levels in order to optimize enjoyment during a game.¹

As mentioned earlier the project plans to utilize the Microsoft Kinect to provide the mechanic for the game. Our interface uses still photographs of dancers in various settings to tell our story, this is accompanied by voice acting and text to complete the interface. The user will be performing ballet poses in order to advance into certain branches in the narrative. Our goal is to use pose recognition to incorporate ballet, dance and movement into the game itself so that the player’s immersion is enhanced by their active involvement.

In order to determine the success of this project we will be measuring player feedback after a user study. The degree of success will be measured based on the user’s rating of various facets of the game through a survey. Questions will include rating the level of fun experienced throughout the game; inquiring as to how the user’s emotional state was influenced by decisions in the game; and investigating the player’s sense of agency. This will help us gauge the influence on the player, and assess the success of the system.

Outcomes and Conclusion

iGiselle is an interdisciplinary project aiming to build a videogame based on Romantic ballet, using dynamic narratives to allow the player to explore their own feminist interpretation of the story. The desired outcomes of this presentation are to show participants that alternative game design and development occur within an academic sphere and highlight the feminist aspects of the methodology and conceptualization of the iGiselle project. Framing these issues through a technical lens will show young women who desire to work in an interdisciplinary field that projects of this nature are available, and encourage women to create games with feminine content and explore women’s issues within gaming.

Bio
Emilie St.Hilaire
Emilie is an intermedia artist and MFA candidate currently working in photo, video and installation to present some of the ways digital technology and social media influence interpersonal relationships and self-perception. She is researching the ways in which technological tools became naturalized with the body.