Stories of Stigma and Acceptance
Using the *Chimeria* Platform

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People categorize each other in many avenues of our lives; these categories also play out in our fictions and games. For example, within role-playing games (RPGs), racial categorization is often used to trigger reactions when conversing with non-player characters (NPCs). However, in most such narratives, category membership is determined in a simplistic fashion in which members are slotted into boxes with no possibility for identities moving between the center or the margins of social groups. These deficiencies are particularly visible when trying to create expressive stories that can evoke nuanced phenomena such as social stigma. This paper presents our steps toward enabling interactive narratives more aligned with the social critiques by writers such as Octavia Butler or Samuel R. Delany than the uncritical play of identity in many mainstream computer role-playing games.

We implemented the *Chimeria*[1] platform to model social categorization phenomena including the movement of members within and across social categories [1]. By implementing a system based on a theoretical framework encompassing sociology [2-4], cognitive science [5, 6], and computing [7-9], we provide a platform for modeling social group membership with greater critical awareness.

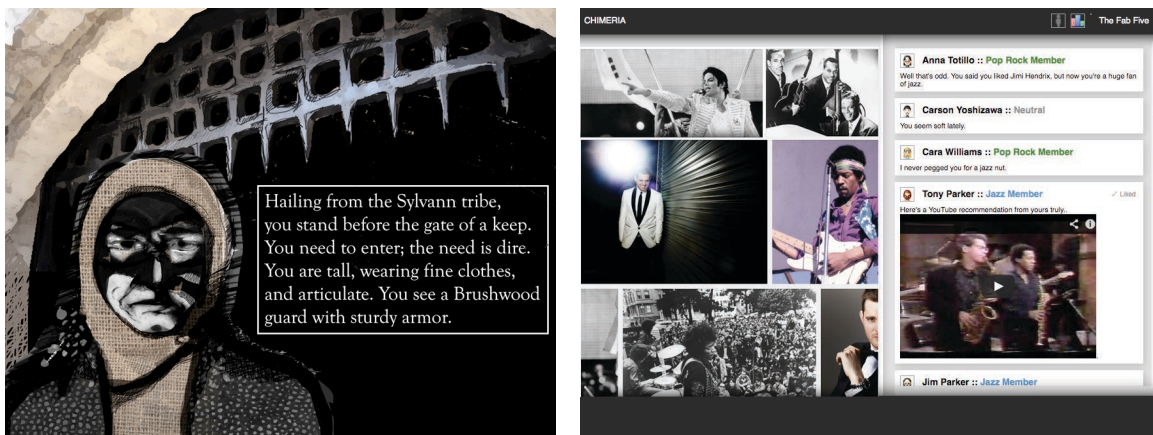Here, we focus on two Chimeria-built applications called *Chimeria:Gatekeeper* and *Chimeria:Music-Social-Network*.

Figure 1: Screenshots from *Chimeria:Gatekeeper* (left) and *Chimeria:Music-Social-Network* (right).

The *Chimeria:Gatekeeper* scenario is designed as follows. The player wants to gain access to the inside of a castle. To do so, it is necessary to convince a guard NPC that she or he can "pass" as a member of an accepted social category. The PC is a "stigmatized" category member and the guard is an "accepted" category member. The stigmatized category is defined as a race stereotyped as tall, well-spoken, wearers of fine clothing. The accepted category is defined as a race stereotyped as short, plain-spoken, wearers of rough-spun clothing. Player choices within the conversation shift the NPCs internal model of the PCs membership with respect to the two categories, bringing the player closer to or further from gaining access. However, rather than simply encouraging players to "pass" as accepted in order to win, the game narrates the internal thoughts of the PC to emphasize trade-offs between gaining access and the loss of self that can occur in trying to pass. *Chimeria:Music-Social-Network* narrates a similar tale of movement between social groups, however rather than a fantasy setting, the story takes place on a social network for music sharing. The system is tied into Facebook, Youtube, and RoviCorp Services (the All Music Guide engine,) drawing upon real user preferences, musical clips, and descriptors of genres, themes, and mood associated with musicians at runtime.
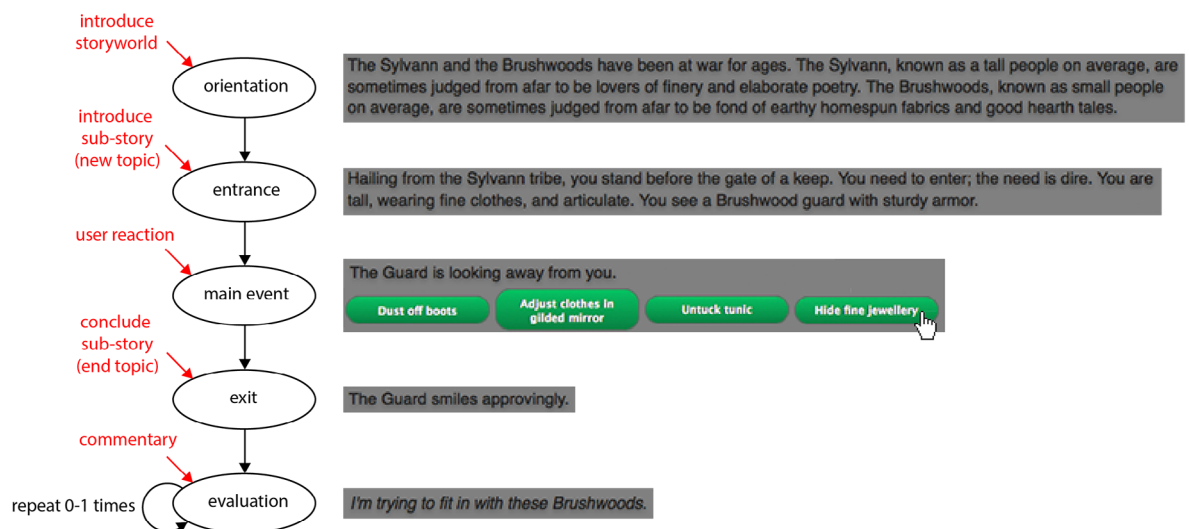

Figure 2: A sample narrative in *Chimeria:Gatekeeper* is structured as a conversation with menu options for the player to choose between.

The narratives above demonstrate ways that *Chimeria* enables more expressive and socially nuanced conversations related to social identity in games. We do so seeking to develop more expressive forms of computational narrative capable of evoking pleasures and pains associated with social identity and all of its associated illusions.

Works Cited

[1]   D. F. Harrell, D. Kao, and C.-U. Lim, "Computationally Modeling Narratives of Social Group Membership with the Chimeria System," in *Workshop on Computational Models of Narrative – a satellite workshop of CogSci 2013: The 35th meeting of the Cognitive Science Society*, Berlin, Germany, 2013 (submitted).

[2]   E. Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Englewood Cliffs:NJ: Prentice Hall, 1963.

[3]   E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Books, 1959.

[4]   G. C. Bowker and S. L. Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999.

[5]   G. Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

[6]   E. Rosch, "Cognitive representations of semantic categories," *Journal of Experimental Psychology,* vol. 104, pp. 192-233, 1975.

[7]   J. McCoy, M. Treanor, B. Samuel, B. Tearse, M. Mateas, and N. Wardrip-Fruin, "Authoring game-based interactive narrative using social games and comme il faut," in *4th International Conference & Festival of the Electronic Literature Organization: Archive & Innovate.* 2010.

[8]   J. Orkin and D. Roy, "The restaurant game: Learning social behavior and language from thousands of players online," *Journal of Game Development,* vol. 3, pp. 39-60, 2007.

[9]   N. Yee and J. Bailenson, "The Proteus Effect: The Effect of Transformed Self-Representation on Behavior," *Human Communication Research,* pp. 271–290, 2007.

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[1] The conversation engine for the scenario called *Chimeria:Gatekeeper* is accessible for testing here: http://groups.csail.mit.edu/icelab/chimeria-gatekeeper/conv.html

The scenario called *Chimeria:Music-Social-Network*, also built using the *Chimeria* platform, is accessible for testing here (click the "Launch Application" button to run it): http://groups.csail.mit.edu/icelab/content/chimeria