

Digital Narrative and Interactive Design

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Private: Presidente Pedro: Social Segregation in Napoleon Dynamite

February 26, 2021 Max Phillips Edit

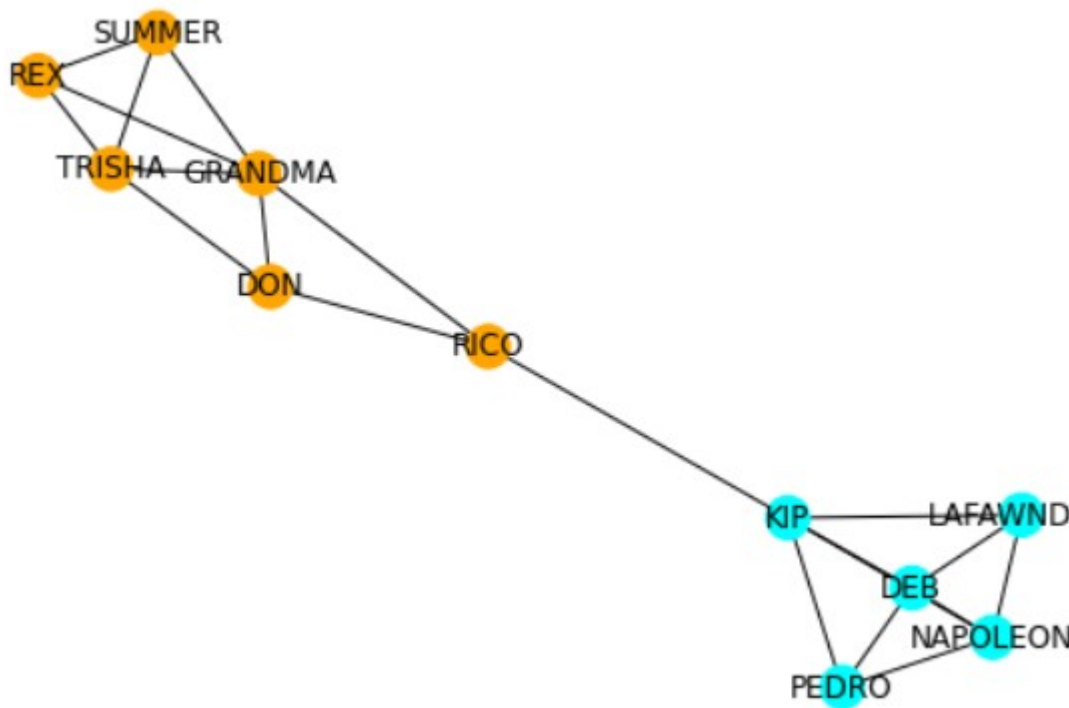


Pedro Sanchez wins the school's presidential election, overcoming middle American social barriers in the Bush era with a little help from his friends.

Jared Hess's 2004 film *Napoleon Dynamite* is not the type of film usually brought up in the world of serious analysis: its humor is low-brow and its influence is minimal. Despite this, the film presents a

compelling image of mid-2000's Idaho and the implications of social and racial relations in the United States at the time. Through Pedro's ultimate success in the school's presidential election, the film demonstrates the trope of underdogs rising up against oppressors; in this case Napoleon, Pedro, and Deb (and by extension Kip and LaFawnduh) are relegated to the outer circles of social life due to lower socioeconomic status and/or race. In this lens, Schelling's model of segregation is the best option for representing the relationships between characters of different castes.

Much of the film relies on character actions to drive the narrative. Thus, the film transcript used shows only part of the narrative. Unlike a stage play, the transcript also features little stage directions (besides the characteristic sighs and groans from the titular character). Thus, much of the narrative discourse is lost in translation. Despite this, an simple application of the Schelling implementation on the transcript, with characters as agents divided into protagonists and antagonists, presents an interesting insight into the character relations:

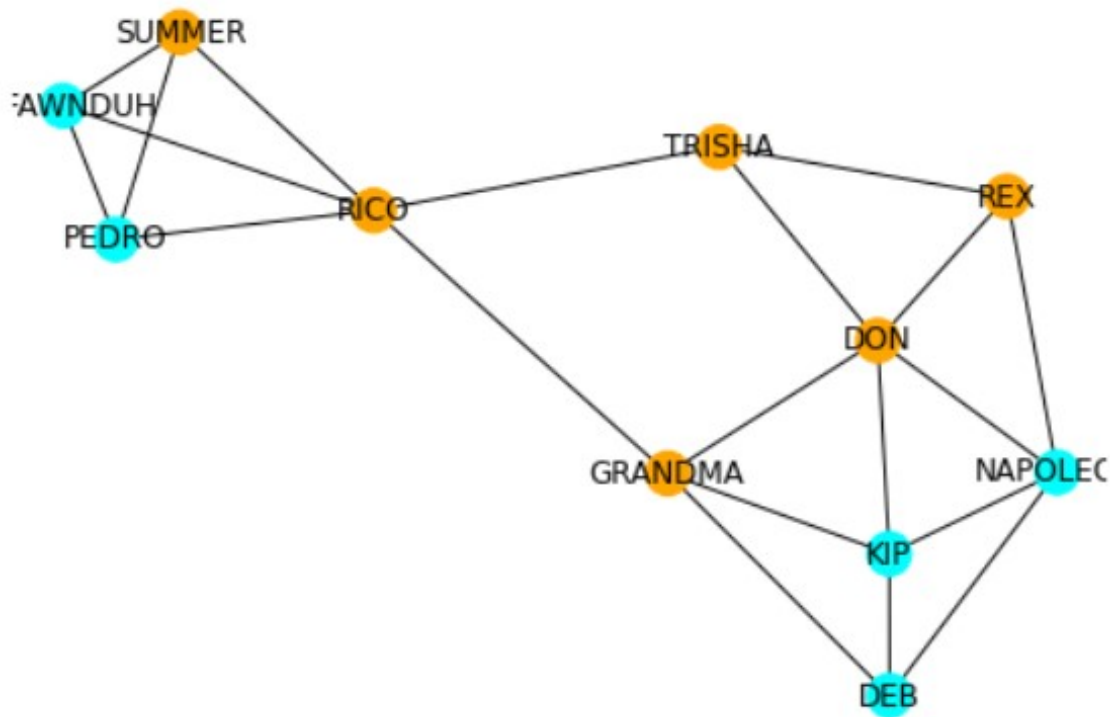


Unmodified Schelling model trial. Rico connects the two worlds.

In every generation of the graph, Uncle Rico remains the connection between the protagonists and antagonists. This has interesting implications on the underlying narratology: Rico is a Dynamite, who cares for Napoleon and Kip and lives in a van in the middle of a field. However, Rico also rubs elbows with those in a higher social circle in his travels as a salesman. His masculinity and social prowess (compared to Napoleon, Deb, and Kip) and “old boys’ club” whiteness (compared to Pedro and LaFawnduh) allow him to bridge the gap between social circles. The “losers,” as defined

by mid-naughties high school meanness, are only able to overcome their social hurdles and achieve their goal of getting Pedro elected president by banding together, as illustrated by the Schelling model.

Eliminating the relationship between Napoleon and his friends produces an interesting (and nonsensical, in context of the film) relationship network graph:



Modified Schelling model in which Napoleon, Pedro, and Deb are unhappy around each other. The social circles are no longer evenly split, but Rico is still the center.

Pedro's isolation in this graph shows an obvious need within the narrative for the outcasts to band together in order to succeed; none of the other characters he is connected to ever interact with him.

This project underwent many transformations from the original proposal. Many of the hurdles faced were technical: there simply aren't enough characters and interactions in the film to manipulate the data in meaningful ways. This greatly limited the number of transformations to the Schelling model originally intended. However, it seems that the nonsense produced in the manipulation of parameter help support the ideas represented in the original model of social relationships in the film.

The feedback in workshop was extremely helpful. The discussion of mid-2000's films and the

“mean popular girl” trope found in many of them (such as *Mean Girls*) helped inform the analysis of high school and small town social interactions in this project.



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