

## **21st Century Authors: Multi-platform approaches to interactive storytelling**

**Keywords:** narrative, interactive, storytelling, game, author

**Abstract:**

The idea that games may contain story elements is a hotly debated topic between ludologists and narratologists. For those in disciplines rooted in more traditional storytelling, the outcome of the game studies debate is largely irrelevant. Story exists where the author believes it exists, at least from a practitioner's standpoint. In other words, a writer may tell a story within an interactive text even if theorists debate the essence of the story.

It is within this frame that we approach understanding the skill set associated with authorship in an interactive, multi-platform environment. Specifically, we are trying to understand what skill sets (e.g., writing, producing, video editing, interaction design) might be necessary for authors creating transmedia narratives within interactive, tablet-based reading environments. Since the most robust debates on interactivity, transmedia narratives and story are currently occurring in game studies, we began our exploration there.

## **Introduction:**

Before we introduce the particular problem associated with authoring a transmedia narrative, it is prudent for us to draw a definition of “author.” Because the type of transmedia narrative we describe here attempts to seamlessly weave together traditional text and multimedia story forms as central to the narrative thread, the title “author” can no longer be limited to the person who writes. Rather, videographers, graphic designers, photographers and developers are equally capable and deserving of that status within the construct of the transmedia narrative. Each contributes essential elements to the core narrative, and each piece helps shape the story in significant ways. In this sense, authorship is collaborative, interdisciplinary and shared, to say the least.

Understanding the skill set associated with successful authorship for the tablet and eReader environments arose as we developed a transmedia storytelling class in which students would produce a work of fiction, designed and published for the tablet experience. And the more we explored the particulars of authoring a text that not only contains multimedia elements but also layers those elements as primary to the text and requires readers to leave the tent pole, the more we found our work referencing game design, interactivity, player motivation and storytelling within the game environment.

This was a logical progression. For five decades, game designers – both formally and informally – have tinkered with game mechanics and story. Certainly there is a continuum: some games may be seen as more mechanic and less story, and others may be seen as more story and less mechanic. The question of the role of narrative stories within the game environment is one of the most volatile issues within the game studies community.

Ludologists have staked out a space that makes little room for narrative storytelling, while narratologists have insisted that stories are an integral part of the game space. From the outside, the two sides appear locked in an intractable battle in which neither is willing to cede ground.

However, Henry Jenkins (2004) has sought to both find common ground between these two areas. But he also set about defining game makers as “narrative architects” who create story worlds with set limitations and rules in which narrative arcs can develop. While we aren’t interested in wading into this debate from a theoretical standpoint, we do need to acknowledge the complexities within it and recognize that we will not have the time to fully explore how each strand may influence our discussion. However, it is within this argument that we have found an interesting element for authors – in particular, traditional writers who are beginning to explore the world of storytelling for the tablet medium – to consider when developing stories for interactive environments.

On the surface, the question of skill sets seems easily answered. Master the arts of video editing, audio editing, information graphics design, photo editing, interactivity design and writing, and you can create rich content that takes full advantage of the multimedia potential of the tablet and eReader environments. A deeper look at the issue, though, reveals a more complex set of problems. For instance, game studies scholars have trouble coming to agreement on the core features of interactivity and immersion, as well as whether narrative stories exist within those environments. This makes it difficult to train authors on such platforms (in this case, non-fiction books written specifically for an interactive, tablet-based environment).

This paper seeks to explore the answer to this question: What are the tools needed for authors who want to operate within an interactive, tablet-based environment? We will do this through an analysis of the existing frameworks for understanding narrative stories within game worlds, examining the motivations that move players through interactive environment, and touching upon reader expectations for the tablet and eReader environments.

### **Project Description**

In the summer of 2010, we constructed a yearlong, undergraduate class that would bring 40 students from multiple disciplines (creative writing, journalism, visual communication, telecommunications, history, and theater) together to create a single, fictional, transmedia narrative reminiscent of *The DaVinci Code* or *National Treasure*. Our project partnered these students with the Indiana State Museum as a source for artifacts that would help frame a narrative that takes readers on a historical chase through the state's history. The final project: a tablet-based book, complete with embedded audio, video and text, as well as external websites, a live event, geocaching and puzzle-solving.

Setting aside the problem of the absence of a singular definition for “story” within this debate, there is an interesting subtext in this discussion that may help illuminate the nascent world of transmedia storytelling for tablet devices. And it is equally important to operationalize how we view transmedia storytelling within the digital book environment.

Henry Jenkins (2006) popularly defined transmedia as any property that includes multiple delivery mechanisms. His decision to use franchises such as *The Matrix* and *Star Wars* as design examples has caused some to view his initial definition as limiting.

Andrea Phillips (2010) explains transmedia storytelling as either a single narrative spread across multiple delivery mechanisms or one story world in which several stories are told. But Brooke Thompson (2010) begins to get closer to our understanding of what transmedia storytelling is by defining the genre based upon interactions. She delineates between “multiple media” projects (no interaction), “cross-media” projects (limited or one-way interactions), and “transmedia” projects (complex and inter-connected interactions).

None of these are perfect definitions, but Thompson’s view of complex, inter-connectedness resonated with our decision-making for the Tranmedia Indiana project. It also required us to conceptualize a transmedia design team that could both operate easily in various mediums and create transitions from one medium to the next to guide readers through the experience. This definition also helped frame the idea of authorship not as a singular voice pushing out an idea or theme through a singular medium, but rather as a group mechanism in which players contribute bit parts of a larger whole, which would require some active participation from readers. It was in this space – operating within a digital environment and moving readers from one experience to the next – that we looked to game studies to help develop a framework for digital storytelling and authorship.

## **Literature Review**

While digital reading devices (e.g., iPad or Nook Color) continue to gain traction in the commercial market, the idea of reading continues to focus on putting words in front of readers at a particular point in time. There has been little re-conceptualizing of the reading experience. Tablets and other eReader environments have facilitated that

opportunity, giving readers the option create individualized experiences within their own digital reading environments. This customization may include turning features on/off, fine tuning different settings, or exploring particular types of content (e.g., data visualizations) in greater detail. Whatever the outcome, publishers and authors must embrace the pleasurable elements of reading in print and find ways to translate that experience in entirely new ways in the digital environment. (Kostic, 2011)

In order to create that experience, it is helpful to explore some of what we know about readers and their opinions of these environments. In non-fiction environments, Kostic (2011) found positive attitudes toward search-ability, access to ancillary information, and share-ability. On the other hand, people had negative attitudes toward functionality that was not easily learn-able or memorize-able, poor text layout and design, and a lack of agency within the text. In other words, readers want the freedom to search, share and explore their own related ideas, and they want to easily understand how to do that and how to get back to where they started within the original story.

The design dynamic is also a common thread within digital reading literature. Publishers and authors, presented with a palette of unlimited functionality, can easily overwhelm readers within digital environments by focusing on what *can* be done instead of what *should* be done. Design in these environments should focus on searching and sharing, while mitigating feature creep and poor layout. Words – or other visual storytelling elements – should take center stage, while navigation metaphors should be divided into two distinct parts: home/library and page/book navigation. There should also be cloud functionality (e.g., multi-platform syncing), and exploratory searches that can be done alongside the book (and ideally attached within the text as well). There is also the

sociability of the note-taking experience, which might include a social bookmarking setup (not mentioned in this text) or a note sharing capability. However, sociability should include the ability to export personal notes and create a personalized and annotated version of the text. (Mod 2010)

As authors work to contain feature creep, they should also focus on creating deep connections between the design of the story (e.g., the media created and the inter-connections between media) and the reader. Sheppard (2011) noted that students are often more engaged in reading within tablet and eReader environments, but that engagement doesn't necessarily translate into learning. Some research even suggests that interactive texts may reduce reader curiosity if there are too many directed functions (e.g., author-driven) because readers will come to expect answers to be handed to them.

The essence of transmedia narrative authorship, then, should take on more the just storytelling; it should consider elements of sociability and design within the storytelling paradigm in order to tap into the pleasure-able elements of tablet reading.

## **Game Studies**

Once we understood some basic underlying attitudes toward reading within digital and tablet environments, we realized we would need to understand how narrative works in interactive environments, what motivates players to move through those environments, and what types of mechanics could be used to facilitate that movement. We approached this problem with a narratologist's sensibility. We used the basic premise that that games are not a subset of stories (or vice versa), but that there are elements of each that exist within both. For instance, games can have story elements (Murray 2005), even if some do

not consider the game's story to be primary to the experience. Because of the existence of story *in some form* within game environments, we set about extracting the relevant motivations and designs that encourage movement as a way to understand what types of skills a digital author would need when conceptualizing and building a story.

Some of these skills will likely be computationally automated in the near future. We know of two companies working to develop complex publishing tools for long-form transmedia storytelling, although neither has a firm grasp on what types of author tools are necessary and how those tools might best be deployed. In much the same way that blogging software, such as WordPress, enables simple web publishing capabilities for those without web coding skills, software tools can and will be built that create powerful computational systems and enable storytellers to focus on the narrative while the computer focuses on tracking. (Mitchell 2009)

The question is: What are those tools?

This type of complex tracking software has been deployed for narrative games – not for authors – such as Dungeons & Dragons. And tracking reading patterns and movements on a tablet or eReader and across an individual's social graph may give storytellers new computational options within reading environments that enhance the experience of reading. Lindley (2008) suggests that such a system would enable players (or in our case readers) to have a more pleasurable experience because it would create a sense that the game was specifically created for the player. In many ways, this is the logical outcome of technological systems. Vannevar Bush (1945) suggested that digital networks would empower people by allowing computers to think for us in ways we could not easily think ourselves.

Although we approach this with a narratologist's sensibility, the development of computational publishing systems should be influenced by the ludologist's point of view. Players seem mostly concerned with three elements of games: 1) what gamers do, 2) expected outcomes, and 3) game functionality. The first – what gamers can do – is the most important for players, trumping context (e.g., story). Game play is driven by game mechanics, which require that players use some object with purpose (as opposed to simply pushing toys around with no understanding of relationships within the game). This involves creating learnable skills that are used quickly and replicated enough times – and in enough new situations – to make continued learning occur (Fabricatore).

Taken together, the idea of computational publishing systems that track and guide the reader within eReader and tablet environments is powerful, particularly when we can identify the specific elements of transmedia storytelling that can be enhanced by that computational power. The goal of interactive stories within a game environment is to give players access to different choices in order to develop a fully customizable end result. Boston (2010) asserts that to do that, information must be collected on player movement throughout the game that could be used to influence five specific areas of the game: story, virtual world, virtual agents, rewards and challenges. Interactivity, then, is not a static designed component of the game, but rather a framework for developing choices.

If we extrapolate the functionality of such a system from a game world and template that framework onto a fiction-driven publishing system, authors in a digital, tablet-based environment would have a powerful storytelling tool. Authoring transmedia narratives within an environment that enables sharing, searching and exploration in an

easily learn-able software interface that works in multiple operating system environments would change the digital authoring landscape.

For now, those elements are outside the realm of the storyteller. They will depend on an author-designer-programmer relationship for the creation of powerful, formalized software tools. And those tools cannot be built until authors begin to understand what skills they may need in this new digital reading realm. Still, authors may deploy different story elements within a transmedia narrative that can be used to influence any of those five areas, even if this functionality cannot yet come in the form of a computational software application. In lieu of computational software, though, authors may be able to replicate – in part – the customizable experience.

In more traditional narrative scholarship, authors may focus on creative writing, literary fiction, screenplays and other forms of storytelling. In his response to the ludologist argument that narrative story does not exist within the game structure, Jenkins (2004) laid out five different types of stories within a game environment that authors creating stories within a digital environment may draw upon. *Spatial creation* allows for the construction of a narrative, whether complex or not, with a set end (e.g., rescue the princess). *Evocative spaces* provide a framework for which others fill in narrative spaces (e.g., an amusement park). *Enacting stories* blur the line between performance (game play) and story (narrative) as players are given control within an environment to act on their own while still progressing the overall narrative forward. *Embedded stories* appear within larger narratives (e.g., backstory). And *Emergent narratives* take place within structured digital environments without a set narrative (e.g., The Sims). These story forms provide a framework for conceptualizing a larger narrative – such as Transmedia

Indiana – by allowing authors to focus not only on the main narrative, but also on smaller sub-narratives (e.g., spatial creation) that have complex inter-connections to the main narrative through links and other transitions.

The problem with removing the computational system from the eReader environment is that the author must then create a compelling narrative that will motivate readers to move not only through the multiple media text of the main narrative, but also the transmedia elements outside the story. For many, Richard Bartle's (1996) taxonomy of player interactions is the starting point for player motivation. His deconstruction of Achievers, Explorers, Socializers, and Killers broadly defined the types of motivation actions that occurred with the Multi-User Dungeon (MUD) experience.

Bartle's work has become part of the lexicon of game motivation, but it does not provide the most accurate description of those motivations (Yee 2006). In other words: players are not necessarily limited to simply one form of motivation. Yee broke the motivation actions down into subgroups beneath the large taxonomies: Achievement (Advancements, Mechanics, Competition); Social (Socializing, Relationships, Teamwork); and Immersion (Discovery, Role-Playing, Customization, Escapism).

This is mirrored in traditional interactive game development research that focuses on four specific motivations – Achievement, Acquisition, Harm Avoidance, and Aggression (which resemble Bartle's taxonomy). These in-game motivations give designers a framework for understanding what types of story or game elements (depending upon your point of view) should be positioned within a digital environment to encourage players to act (Bostan 2009).

What is interesting is that Achievement is identified as the behavior that templates across all motivations. Players like to accomplish tasks, and given the choice of multiple options without a directed narrative storyline, players will construct their own motivations when given open-ended solutions, determining their experiences within an environment (Bostan 2010). For transmedia authors working within a digital environment, then, it is important to develop sub-genre stories that incorporate at least one of the motivational elements as a main part of the story in order to drive reader action.

## **Discussion**

Telling stories within a transmedia environment does not require a new framework for narratives. But it does require authors to understand elements outside of traditional storytelling. They must understand concepts such as interaction design, multimedia capabilities, and game motivation in order to conceptualize what is possible. This means understanding the tool and skill sets available in other disciplines. And authors can use sub-narratives as motivation for readers that take the place of more common written “game elements,” such as a cliffhanger at the end of the chapter. For instance, transmedia narrative writers may use an *embedded story* within the main narrative. And using basic search tools, they can require readers to search for a pass code on the web that unlocks a video to the back story. This puzzle-solving game mechanic can be embedded in the story (and this type of tool may be useful within a computational software environment) without the use of computational software.

That we have chosen to use video as an *embedded story* throughout our narrative was a design choice. Many of the sub-genre stories have emerged in Transmedia Indiana as a means for offering more practical examples to support this discussion. As noted earlier, Transmedia Indiana is based on a fictional narrative that includes artifacts from the Indiana State Museum and takes readers on a historical chase through the state's history. Designed as an interactive, tablet-based experience, the book seamlessly weaves together traditional text with multimedia story forms (e.g., photo slideshows and galleries, animations, interactive information graphics, video and audio clips, interactive timelines and puzzles) to convey the core storyline. To do pull this off, multimedia content must be designed and conceived not as supplementary to the story, but as central to the narrative thread. In other words, the reader/viewer/user must view all part of the story – text and multimedia content alike – as integral to the “reading” experience and overall comprehension.

Thus, the Transmedia Indiana authors were challenged to not only explore how best to weave their story, but to determine what forms (e.g., narrative text, interactive graphic, photo/audio presentation, etc.) were most appropriate for each part of the narrative. For example, at one point in the text, the story's main characters visit an old man who owns an important antique steam engine invented and manufactured in Indiana. Excited to have an audience with which to share his treasure, he tells the visitors more than they would ever want to know about the engine. Of course, we could have conveyed this portion of the narrative with text. However, we found it much more interesting and immersive to do so through an interactive information graphic that includes an illustration of the engine with clickable buttons that reveal audio clips of the old man explaining its

parts. This way, the reader encounters this portion of the story through the eyes and ears of the main characters, as opposed to through a more traditional narrative that recounts their experiences. Likewise, there are small puzzles embedded in the book that allow the reader to uncover additional pieces of the storyline through active discovery and engagement with outside sources, such as websites and geocaching activities built around the book.

Ultimately, the tools necessary for an author working in a multimedia, tablet-based environment simply extend beyond skilled use of the appropriate media tools. The author must be able to build in audience motivations as primary components of the story. In the future, software tools may also enable authors to embed searching, sharing and exploration of ancillary content within that environment, which would give authors an even greater palette to construct and design stories. Narrative devices like these clearly play on the motivation actions outlined above for game mechanics and shed new light on their potential to advance storytelling for digital, interactive platforms.

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