

# An Introduction to Game-Mastering: Telling Stories with Tabletop Role-Playing Games

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**Abstract.** This full-day workshop introduced participants to some perspectives and techniques of storytelling commonly used by “game-masters”, a subset of players of tabletop role-playing games. A talk and presentation was held on the uses of these games as tools for collaborative storytelling. Some practical exercises involving role-playing and world-building were also held at this workshop. There was also some discussion on how game-masters’ approaches to storytelling could be applied in the field of computer games.

**Keywords:** Tabletop role-playing games, Dungeons and Dragons, Storytelling, Collaborative storytelling, Game-masters.

## 1 Introduction

In recent years, there has been a revival in interest from the general public toward the field of tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) such as Dungeons and Dragons (D&D). There exists a strong level of mystique and misunderstanding about these games, which are encouraged by the barriers to entry that exist for new players. The rules can be difficult to learn, it may be hard to find groups to play with, and playing these games requires large quantities of time and social interaction, which are both scarce commodities in the frenetic world which we live in today.

## 2 Description

This full-day workshop sought to dispel some of these misconceptions and break past these barriers by introducing participants to the basics of TRPGs. It also shared some methods which TRPG players use to create stories together, and also discussed how stories are told and remembered by groups of players together over long periods of play. Different types of motivations, perspectives and practices of TRPG players were also discussed, and storytelling exercises were conducted.

These questions were explored—what are some storytelling (and story-remembering) methods used by TRPG players? What can we learn, in terms of both knowledge and practice, about story creation from observing and understanding some of the practices of TRPG players?

In particular, this workshop focused on the role of a subset of TRPG players known as “game-masters” (GMs), and discussed the roles which GMs assumed within their respective gaming groups as the leaders, organizers, and sustainers of creative collaborations. The workshop organizer shared his opinions and insights on how to draw upon one’s emotions, feelings, and thoughts in fostering a safe atmosphere for one’s friends and fellow players to engage in creative collaboration and storytelling.

### **3 Workshop Organizer, Shao Han Tan**

Shao Han Tan is an avid and experienced TRPG player and GM. He currently works as a teacher in the National University of Singapore, and was previously a game designer at the Learning Sciences Laboratory in the National Institute of Education of Singapore. Shao Han sees several applications for learning which can be drawn from the practices and perspectives of TRPG players. He is currently planning to increase the public awareness of storytelling games, and is working to develop more storytelling games for a general audience. It is his hope that more people will become interested in becoming “game-masters” of sorts, and create and share narratives with each other.

# Managing Informational Interactive Digital Storytelling (IDS) Projects

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**Abstract.** The aim of this half-day interactive tutorial workshop was to introduce the informational interactive digital storytelling lifecycle and affiliated processes and deliverables. The session provided an overview of project management and design management processes necessary to achieve a high quality product and smoothly functioning development process that involves stakeholders and fosters the collaboration of interdisciplinary collaborators.

**Keywords:** interactive digital storytelling, project management.

## 1 Introduction

The design of an informational interactive digital storytelling project is a highly complex enterprise. When fully realized, informational interactive digital stories are intricate products integrating design features from numerous disparate domains. Sophisticated design processes are necessary to facilitate communication enabling the integration of interdisciplinary design features.

Such products have the capacity to not only be engaging but highly effective in conveying information and, when appropriate, to fulfill learning outcomes. The manager of such projects must be aware of how to lead such a design project with expertise not only in working with designers from different disciplines but the ability to facilitate the design process to enhance quality and quantity of original ideas. The manager must coordinate the initial gathering of product requirements and determine at product completion not only product usability but also how well the requirements have been fulfilled. Processes must be utilized to maximize the contributions of contributors and stakeholders to make the best choices of content to include and strategies with which to implement them, and to create the optimal story world, narrative, and interactive affordances to result in excellent user interactions and user experience.

## 2 Description

In this half-day participatory tutorial workshop, Elizabeth Cohen provided a roadmap for people interested in best practices for managing the design and development of informational interactive digital storytelling projects. She provided an overview of

project management and discussion of why the complexity of interactive digital storytelling projects is well supported by project management processes. She also discussed issues related to interdisciplinary collaboration and stakeholder involvement.

Cohen discussed phases of the IDS design and development process, introducing deliverables associated with them, including requirements gathering, designing from requirements, communicating visual and interactive information through storyboards, managing the review process, bridging the design and development phases through walkthroughs, and testing for usability and quality control. Students were provided with deliverable samples and given the opportunity to practice various design processes.

### **3 Workshop Organizer, D. Elizabeth Cohen**

Elizabeth Cohen is an experienced interactive digital storytelling producer, a currently certified Project Manager (PMP), and the recipient of numerous awards for media design and development. With early experience as a musician and theater and film director and scriptwriter, she evolved into an instructional designer. After specializing primarily in technology-based educational communications projects, she began a 15 + year career managing educational multimedia products for a variety of high-profile clients. Her PhD is in Computing Technology in Education, and she is currently an Associate Professor in the Global Education Center at Gyeongju University in South Korea. Her research interests encompass global digital media for education and social change.

# Narrative Analysis of Interactive Digital Storytelling

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**Abstract.** The “Narrative Analysis of Interactive Digital Storytelling” half-day workshop presented theory and methods for research, practice, and design of IDS as a sense-making process. Workshop presentations, activities, and discussions built on the idea that interactive digital storytelling is dynamic, complex, and unpredictable, yet, as a symbolic communication system, IDS invites analysis as well as surprise, enjoyment, and human development. The focus of the workshop was the application of strategies for analyzing meanings and interactions in different kinds of IDS environments. Colette Daiute, Professor of Psychology at the Graduate Center, City University of New York, highlighted narrative inquiry strategies including hyper-plot analysis, multi-dimensional character mapping, and poly-cultural values analysis, based on her published and ongoing research. Dr. Daiute welcomed elaborative discussion with workshop participants, who included researchers, program designers, and others interested in studying and extending IDS.

**Keywords:** Narrative analysis, Interactive digital storytelling research, Interactive digital storytelling design.

## 1 A Narrative Lens on Interactive Digital Storytelling

Digital storytelling is multi-modal, multi-interactive, playful, and sometimes profound. While complex, dynamic, and unpredictable, interactive digital storytelling is symbolic communication and, as such, invites analysis as well as surprise and enjoyment. The “Narrative Analysis of Interactive Digital Storytelling” workshop presented interdisciplinary theory and methods for IDS in research, practice, and design. The foundational premise of the workshop was that narrating is an interactive process of meaning making [1].

Definitions of narrative as an interactive process have become increasingly common. Cognitive theories have explained that narrative is “something used by humans for the purpose of aiding, enhancing or improving cognition” [2, 3]. Socio-cultural developmental theory highlights narrating as an activity to “figure out what is going on in the world, how one fits, and sometimes how it should be changed,” [4], and critical discourse theory posits tensions between master narratives and personal stories. [5] Together these and other approaches are consistent with literary theory explaining that even extended monologic narratives, like novels, interact with authors’ prior, present, and intended interactions with relevant others [6]. Contemporary

theories of narrative include that culture is integrated in the narrative process via semiotic elements that also contribute meaning. [7] On this view, narrative authors (speakers, performers, artists) use narratives to mediate interactions with actual and imagined audiences. The primary narrative goal is, thus, to *do* something serving one's knowledge development, pleasure, and/or participation in ways that connect with actual and imagined expectations in the environment. A narrative approach to IDS puts this organizing function of narrating into action (and to the test) by paying attention to the creative and interpretive narrative qualities like plot, character, values, and so on.

Consistent with definitions shared among ICIDS conference participants, this workshop focused on analysis of stories created completely or partially with digital tools in digital environments, expressed in multiple symbolic modes, with contributions by multiple participants who add to or alter a story intended as a whole in some way. Interactive digital stories may be defined by digital space, context of origin (such as website, classroom, user group), project goal, or another relevant category. IDS may occur among self-defined on-line communities, guided contexts such as education and community activism, or experimental projects. The analysis strategies were relevant across such contexts.

## 2 Toward the Analysis of Interactive Digital Storytelling

Extending other models of narrative relevant to IDS, the approach in this workshop was to employ qualities inherent in narrative – such as plot and character – as analytic tools. Presentations, activities, and discussions applied this idea that the major organizing frames of narrative meaning include purpose (values), structure (plot), and character and demonstrated how these literary concepts can provide parsimonious analytic means for insights about IDS.

## 3 IDS Narrative Analysis Concepts and Strategies

The workshop began with a brief overview of narrative theory and rationales for narrative analysis, with an illustration of each in IDS contexts. The following principles provided a foundation for subsequent workshop activities: 1) narrating is a dynamic process—interactive across persons, time, space, semiotic media; 2) narrating is a meaning making process, implicitly purposeful for connecting, disconnecting, figuring out what is going on, how one fits, and sometimes changing things to create innovations; 3) interactive digital storytelling weaves multiple expressive strands of meaning; 4) IDS is amenable to narrative analysis. Consistent with these principles, Colette Daiute presented three strategies for analyzing interactive digital stories and storytelling processes: “Hyper-plot Analysis,” “Multi-dimensional Character Mapping,” and “Poly-cultural Values Analysis”. For each, she offered an example, a template and guidelines for participants to apply, and invited discussion about the kinds of questions the analyses could address.

*Hyper-Plot Analysis:* Plot is the structural organization of stories, guiding perception and interpretation of meaning. From the reader's and the author's perspectives, story

meaning – and a reason for interacting – comes in large part from his/her sense of the evolving plot as integrated with sub-plots, parallel plots, and so on as these relate to some personal or collective purpose. To create and make one’s way through complex narratives, a participant uses a plot structure (often intuitively). Because IDS is interactive across even more dimensions than non-digital narrating, interactive digital story participants engage with what we refer to as “hyper-plots”—multiple plots within and around digital stories.

Daiute illustrated hyper-plot analysis with an example of multi-modal interactive storytelling from an activity coordinated with community centers across separated countries following the 1990s wars that shattered the former Yugoslavia. Story authors included youth and young adults growing up during and after the wars, and one of their digital activities was to continue from a story seed [8].

Daiute explained that this story launch inspired 137 participants across the post-war contexts in different ways, and then she illustrated hyper-plot analysis with examples. The following excerpts offered a mere hint to the richness of the interactive storytelling in that context and the effectiveness of the hyper-plot analysis for identifying patterns of uptake, development, and transformations across the completion alternatives. The story “Rockers and Posers,” for example, by Thor in Serbia, emerged as relatively rich in how it picked up and elaborated the story seed setting. Thor established an initiating action with the metaphor of fire and its vengeance, developed the story with complicating actions, and concluded by resolving with a stated lack of resolution. Daiute explained that a story by JS in Croatia picked up in a different way on the story seed, introducing the initiating actions of financial obstacles and, in contrast to the previous story, a series of activist resolutions.

The group considered relevant questions that could be addressed, such as “Which plot elements from the story seed do diverse story participants take up? How do they develop and alter these plot elements, with what similarities, differences, transformations across story, mode, time, participant, or group?”

*Multi-dimensional Character Mapping:* While plots function as structural scaffolds, characters serve as anchors of interactive digital storytelling. Dynamic in their own way, characters enact and/or develop different meanings with their orientations, qualities, goals, or relationships over time and spaces in a story world. For that reason, character mapping offers insights about another dimension of how story authors create meaning individually and collectively, to interact with one another, to elaborate or shift plots, and to change or maintain their own involvement over time in the story world. The workshop leader illustrated the character mapping process with excerpts from a different story world than in the example above and provided a template to guide a character mapping workshop activity with prepared materials and/or for participants to apply to their projects. Analytic categories included: character, character person (first person [“I”...], second [“you”]), third [“he, she, it”]), character number (singular, plural), character enactment (actions, psychological states).

*Poly-cultural Values Analysis:* As cultures, interactive digital storytelling environments establish values, which may be temporary, enduring, consistent, conflicting, or transforming as participation by different authors augments the story in different expressive modes/spaces and over time. Guiding story values are worth identifying as

the basis for author/interpreter selection of what to express, what not to express, and how to do that, as well as the contribution of implicit and explicit values with plot and other elements to meaning. Daiute presented an example of values analysis of a multi-modal story world to address questions about community development related to immigration rights in the United States. Daiute illustrated, for example, how the importance of separating the past and future emerged in a values analysis of multi-modal stories. She explained that once researchers identify values from the database of interactive digital stories, they apply the broader set of values to the entire database, revealing the nature and frequency of values across modes. As presented in the workshop, visual expressions tended to highlight graphically the value that immigrants who participate positively deserve and expect possibilities for the future, while textual examples critiqued obstacles. In addition to indicating interplay of values across expressive modes, the analysis example addressed interplay among story participants, time, and digital genres.

## 4 Conclusion

The workshop concluded with a discussion about the narrative approach to interactive digital storytelling, the specific analysis strategies employed and integrating among them, questions about attendees' projects, and ideas for a follow-up workshop.

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# Future Perspectives for Interactive Digital Narrative

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**Abstract.** In a maturing field of Interactive Digital Narrative (IDN) it is vital to identify trends and areas that require continued attention to understand opportunities for future research. This ICIDS workshop will be an exercise in futuring, starting with a discussion of broad trends described by the organizers. Given the speculative nature of the exercise, broad visions for the field are also invited, from the Holodeck to a meta-narrative textual universe to ubiquitous narrative computing and brain-wave interfaces.

## 1 Introduction

Interactive Digital Narrative (IDN) is an ever growing field that encompass a wide range of practices, from avant-garde art to electronic literature, and applications in video game design. While the pace of development in the field shows no sign of slowing down, after more than 25 years, we can identify broad trends and major achievements as a foundation for an exercise in futuring. By hypothesizing about possible developments, researchers in the field can identify opportunities for future research and create a foundation for collaborations and grant development.

To start the discussion in this half-day workshop, we suggested a range of directions. More exactly, we discussed narrative game experiences, place-specific digital experiences and finally, the application of IDN technologies in news reporting and documentary practices.

## 2 Perspectives on Future IDN Development

Current video games are adopting a wide range of narrative strategies: from the overarching narratives in single-player games such as the Assassins' Creed [1] series, to

the chains of quests in massively multiplayer online roleplaying games such as World of Warcraft [2] to the more emerging structures that can appear in sandbox games like the Grand Theft Auto [3] series. Games like The Wolf Among Us [4] or The Walking Dead [5] have appropriated forms of episodic storytelling typical of graphic novels or television series. Independent video game auteurs have experimented with tropes like the unreliable narrator or role reversal in pieces such as Dear Esther [6], Gone Home [7] or The Stanley Parable [8]. Finally, hybrid forms exist, for example CAVE! CAVE! DEUS VIDET [9], an art piece blending elements from interactive visual novels with graphic adventure games. A plausible future trend for this specific IDN practice would be an even tighter integration between narrative components and game design elements, leading to a more central role of computer-controlled characters in video game narratives and, at the same time, to a more conscious and varied use of dramatic compression.

Micro-narrations that react to their user's physical location are another recent trend. Currently, the Foursquare app [10] is one of the best-known examples in this category as a "recording device (in the fashion of a travelogue, to share written notes on places, routes, episodes)." [11] Several other apps are specifically designed for storytelling – amongst them Broadcastr [12] and MapSkip [13]. The combination of interactive digital narratives with location-based technology and pervasive gaming has resulted in playful travel guides, interactive museum experiences and even geolocalized fitness apps. For example, Whaiwhai [14], currently available for the cities of New York, Florence, Rome, Milan, Venice and Verona, blends the style of traditional travel guides with game elements. Fitness apps like Zombies, Run! [15] and The Walk [16] feature complex narrative structures. These titles are the first to rely on interactive storytelling to entice users to start training. Future developments in this specific area of IDN practice would rely on more advanced techniques for geolocalization, especially following recent developments in in-door location tracking for an even tighter integration between narrative and physical places. The combination of interactive narrative and ubiquitous computing could open a new field for IDNs to develop.

Adopting IDN elements and technologies to present news and other journalistic contributions is a relatively new tendency in this field. Partially overlapping with the fields of newsgaming, serious gaming and interactive documentaries, some recent digital narrative projects aim to inform their audience or present political messages. While interactive documentaries have existed since the 1980s as exemplified by Glorianna Davenport's piece *A City in Transition: New Orleans 1983-86* [17], only recently, with the widespread diffusion of fast broadband connections, interactive documentaries are becoming a more established genre of IDN. *Inside the Haiti Earthquake* [18] is a recent example that casts the user variously in the role of journalists, aid workers or survivors of the January 2010 Haiti earthquake. The piece is designed to challenge assumptions about relief work in disaster situations, allowing interactors to try various strategies and experience their consequences. *Fort McMoney* [19] discusses the Canadian oil industry and lets players explore the small town of Fort McMurray and the consequences caused by the get-rich-quick mentality of its inhabitants. This piece is more explicit than many others in blending some typical video game structures and design tropes with a documentary objective. *Fort McMoney* creates a quest-like system: participants need to search for information by exploring

interviews; their progress is tracked using points and credits on a dashboard. Finally, *1000 Days of Syria* [20] presents three narratives set in the Syrian civil war that began in 2011: users can follow a foreign photojournalist, a mother of two living in Daraa or a rebel youth living in Aleppo. *1000 Days of Syria* is presented as a text-only hyper-textual structure in an attempt to force users to empathise more with the characters' internal struggles without being distracted by visual elements. Future developments for this specific IDN practice might follow different paths. One could be tied to more realistic virtual environments for players to explore, interacting with relevant computer-controlled virtual characters. This way, users could experience far away or dangerous places and interact with specific characters within these environments. Another possibility would be related to new developments in three-dimensional presentation: for example *Condition One* [21] presents video footage in which users can rotate their point of view by physically turning the device. One of the demonstrations for this system was a short interactive documentary in which the participant was situated in a trench during a battle in Libya. An improved version of the same system is currently under development for the Oculus Rift virtual reality goggles, promising a true immersive experience in documentary footage. Finally, documentary IDNs might become more closely associated with the newsgame genre, adopting more ludic characteristics such as providing players with objectives to achieve and leaving them to explore the diverse consequences and effectiveness of various tactics.

### 3 Workshop Format

These three perspectives were meant only as a start for the discussion, in which participants debated possible future trends in IDN. As a next step the workshop considered resulting issues and identified opportunities for research that resulted from the findings. More exactly, we discussed the following questions with the participants:

- What research questions arise from the trends in IDN practice?
- How do these questions connect with existing research?
- Which discipline/field has the best expertise to cover these questions? Is an interdisciplinary approach needed
- What opportunities for collaborations and grant development exist?

The organizers asked participants to send a list of cutting-edge examples and potential grant opportunities before the conference as a basis for discussion. The results of the discussion are shared on *the Games & Narrative* research blog [22].

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# Story Modeling and Authoring

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**Abstract.** The complexity of interactive storytelling technologies often requires the use of authoring tools, which may embody specific models for thinking about storytelling. These models can both empower and constrain authors. This workshop addressed the issue of story modeling and authoring within the interactive story conceptualization and creation process. Contributions were sought in the form of informal position papers and presentations. These contributions formed the basis for discussions about the impact of story models on the authoring process, the relationship between story models and authoring tools, and the ways in which these models can be made visible and accessible to non-technical authors.

**Keywords:** story modeling, authoring tools, authorial constraints and affordances.

## 1 Motivation

Interactive Digital Storytelling (IDS) is an interdisciplinary field of research, technology development and artistic expression. Intelligent technologies have often been presented in the form of concept papers and working prototypes at previous conferences. These papers and prototypes have encompassed a wide range of perspectives on interactive storytelling, including various approaches to automatic drama management in reaction to user actions within storyworlds; various ways to structure AI-based behavioural models of agents for digital characters; methods for language understanding and generation as a foundation for dialogue design; and frameworks for smart graphical rendering and animation. Complete end-user experiences that make use of the above-mentioned intelligent components have not been presented as frequently. This lack of “real” examples of interactive stories has often been attributed to the obvious difficulty for story creators and authors to apply their full artistic expression in the context of technically challenging tools and programming concepts.

On the one hand, difficulties for content creation take the form of direct practical obstacles to perform technical authoring with complex programming languages. Authoring tools can help to ease the technical creation, but often bring with them certain models for thinking about storytelling. On the other hand, when the implementation of dynamic content is distributed across different authoring roles and performed by technically savvy teams, the conceptual and creative aspects of storyworld creation

may be predetermined by the method of drama management provided by the underlying technical system. Different tools and engines contain, to a greater or lesser extent, predefined story modeling approaches, thus presenting affordances for the creation of specific types or genres of stories and interactive experiences.

There have been several discussions at ICIDS conference workshops in previous years (2008 to 2010) that have encouraged interdisciplinary conversations about authoring problems on the one hand, and the comparability of tools and drama engines on the other hand<sup>1</sup>. This year we returned to this topic, revisiting the actual state of the art and focusing on the influence that tools and preset models have on our creations. We also addressed the notion of story modeling as an authoring task, and how to provide authors with the ability to see, and potentially modify, the underlying models embodied in the tools they are using to create interactive stories.

## 2 Workshops Aims

Researchers, engineers and creators in the area of Interactive Storytelling were invited to contribute to the workshop in the form of informal position papers and presentations, and to participate in a joint discussion about drama management models, authoring tools, generative story engines, narrative structure, as well as various approaches to story conception and creation in interactive storytelling. We called for contributions in (but not limited to) the following general areas:

- Presentation of story engine approaches operating on narrative structures
- Presentations and/or comparisons of narrative structures in interactive storytelling
- Types of models of interest for interactive storytelling (e.g. character models, relationship models, psychological models, plot models, dialogue models, interactive fiction and hypertext models etc.)
- Practical reports of authoring challenges in interactive storytelling with specific story models and authoring tools
- Abstraction and story modeling performed during authoring and interactive story conception

The discussion was guided by (but not limited to) the following questions:

- Does the inherent presence of narrative structures in a tool lead to the creation of ever-similar interactive story experiences?
- What types of narrative models within tools are more or less constraining for authors?
- Do constraints support and/or hinder creativity, and in which way?
- Can representation layers (choice of graphics, camera, audio, text) be thought of separately from story structures during authoring?
- How can authors craft their own models?

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see <http://redcap.interactive-storytelling.de>

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