Beyond tools: We need to talk about the Author

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ABSTRACT

Ever since digital interactive authoring tools made creating IDNs (Interactive Digital Narratives) approachable by a wide audience of people beyond programmers and curious academics, we have not stopped talking about them. We have been inventing them, testing them, improving them, and re-inventing them tirelessly. As we should. However, if we take a step back and think about what we have really been talking about, whenever we meet to discuss interactive digital narratives, is tools, narrative forms, 'the authoring problem', and while all those are topics we should be discussing, and building knowledge on, we have forgotten to discuss about humans. Who are we building these tools for? Who is using them to make the stories? How are they using them? It is about time we take a break from talking about the myriads of our tools. In this article we are going to talk about the interactive author, or as we shall refer to them in the end of this article, the interactive creator.

KEYWORDS

interactive digital narratives, authors, authoring tools, user experience

INTRODUCTION

The IDN (interactive digital narrative) author is like a magical being that IDN scholarship refers to, but not really regards. The focus of discussions and IDN research has predominantly been about IDN tools, new and old, and how easy or difficult it is to write with them. While the focus on tools persists, and the creation of new ones, it is a different matter when it comes to the people that use the tools. It is a very rare topic of discussion, the role of an author, what it entails and how they use the tools to create.

Authors have been addressed:

> "Some have argued that an interactor in a digital story is the author of the story. This is a misleading assertion. There is a distinction between playing a creative role within an authored environment itself.... Interactors can only act within the possibilities established by the writing and programming." [5]

> "With familiarity we will come to realise that the procedural author can shape a juxtaposition or a branch point in a multiform story as artfully as a traditional author shapes a speech in a play or a chapter in a novel." [5]

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Roles have been assumed for them:

> *"The author did not disappear, as was feared or hoped for, but became a kind of designer or architect or landscaper as well as writer, building or laying out a structural or geographical space through which the reader might roam as though on a quest of her own, guided or not guided by its artist-maker."* [2]

The lack of including them in IDN scholarship has been recognised:

> *"It makes sense for us to reflect on our own experience of our tools. We know our tools, and so our experience using them relates to their underlying affordances, not to the happenstance of novice confrontations with a new medium or a new interface."* [1]

But, what has the scholarship told us thus far, about how authors experience authoring? Really.

IN TALKS WITH IDN AUTHORS

In previous work we set out to find out about IDN authors. About how they use IDN authoring tools, what process they follow while creating, and what problems they face [4].

By interviewing a group of them, we developed a framework of five high level themes, and 18 categories for the issues authors face when writing. Here we want to mention three of those categories, as a motive for discussion. The categories we have chosen to present, respond to issues that fall outside of mainly technological or developmental remits authors currently face with the tools. These fall closer to the time which an author will pick up their tool and start to bring the artefact to life. Shortly after most of their ideation has taken place.

1.   Conceptual Misalignment

Conceptual misalignment falls into our high level theme of **User/Tool Misalignment** and was inspired from the needs and actions of authors with their chosen authoring tool. Evidence from our data showed that numerous authors were attempting to achieve something with a tool that did not support it. This category is defined as:

> *"The authoring tool's natural environment, whether the mindset of an author is aware or unaware, does not suit what the author wants to achieve in several phases of the authoring process which may result in abandoning or altering the creative idea to conform."* [3]

This category raises the impact of authors' choice when it comes to deciding which is the right tool for their IDN creation. Often authors will choose one that does roughly what they seek but not exactly. A level of responsibility falls to them if they end up struggling to create, as a result of choosing the wrong tool. It shows lack of capacity to do proper research. Yet, in the case where the author has performed their research and still chose the wrong tool, we ought to think whether it is perhaps because the developer has not clearly told them, either through help guides or tutorials, what it is that they can do with the tool. If so, a great level of responsibility falls with the developer who has failed to properly inform the author what their system is designed for. This is a common contributor to the generic 'authoring problem'.

2.   The Known Unknowns

Based on the Johari window, originally created by psychologists Joseph Luft and Harrignton Ingham in 1955 [5], but inspired from the adaptation of Donald Rumsfeld, our interpretation of the known unknowns have to do with the knowledge an author possesses about a tool in terms of what they know they can do, think they can do, and how. This category is defined as:

> *"The known unknowns best describe those issues where documentation for things that the tool can do or people can do with the tool are not well documented or not documented at all."* [3]

3. The Unknown Unknowns

Similarly, based on the Johari window the unknown unknowns have to do with the knowledge an author possesses about a tool in terms of not recognising what they can do, and how. This category is defined as:

> *"Unknown unknowns describe those issues of inability to conceptualise or find through documentation a lot of features the tools allow an author to do."* [3]

Both the Known Unknowns and Unknown Unknowns categories are closely related to the aspect of Conceptual Misalignment but fall in our high level theme of **Documentation**. As representatives of the documentation of a tool, these categories show how developers are inconsiderate or neglectful of teaching or demonstrating to authors how to use their tool. When authors know what they want to do but not how to do it, or they do not know what they can do with their tool of choice, there is a great gap in communication between tool and creator, which constitutes a significant contributor to the general 'authoring problem'.

BEYOND THE TOOLS: CREATORS ON THE SPOTLIGHT

We have presented three contributing factors that cause a rift in the interaction of author and tool. We chose to present three out of 18 categories, because these focus much on issues that authors face, or as we like to refer to them, **creators**, and not so much on issues that the tools contain. As we mentioned in the introduction of this article, our focus is to talk about humans and learn about their experience, analyse their approach to creation, understand their concerns and learn by listening to them how developers can provide better experiences for them.

Very often theory is ahead of practice and it takes years for practitioners to accomplish what theory has proposed or demonstrated. In the IDN field, the reality seems to be the opposite: practice is evolving at a very fast pace where the only constant is experimentation. As IDN researchers, we need to create that touchpoint with practitioners from all over the world to study their creations and reflect on the way they are creating across all the technologies available.

The work presented in the previous section is based on talks with creators which showed us the challenges they face during their creative journey of building an IDN. We believe that it is important to understand not only the experience, which we thus far have not successfully determined, but also the creative process and the creative minds behind it.

To generate this discussion, we want to put creators back on the spotlight by presenting some preliminary research that consists of a series of interviews with IDN creators. Opening a window to listen directly to the creators' voices regarding topics such as: the creative workflow, the relationship with authoring tools, their view on technology, and their view on narrative, will allow us to discuss the way academia dialogues with industry and/or independent creators, the way we approach them and the way we study their creative process. We do not only need to talk **about** the creators, we also need to talk **to** them.

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