Narrative Analysis of Interactive Digital Storytelling

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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 multi-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 mono-logic 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 imaged 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 im-
portance 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 work-
shop, visual expressions tended to graphically highlight 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 inter-
active 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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