Tools make it possible authors make it real

Sofia Kitromili

University of Southampton, Southampton, UK
s.kitromili@soton.ac.uk

1   Tools make it possible

In the thirty or so years and counting that digital interactive narratives have been acknowledged, we have witnessed them through hypertext fiction, interactive fiction, artificial intelligence programs and further media such as TV, films, games and other experimental forms [1]. What could only be possible if one possessed technical and programming skills in the early 70s, research and passion for the art has made it possible during the 80s, and to this day, for the general public via an abundance of authoring tools to engage with and assert their creativity on developing more stories. Part of making the discipline prosper are the variety of digital interactive authoring tools researchers and developers have been tirelessly developing. In fact as gathered by Shibolet et al. [2] there have been over 300 tools available with the passing of the years. Every year new tools are introduced each one promising to solve issues previous tools were not able to do so or introduce a feature that previous tools were not able to accommodate. It is almost as if there is a race to build the better tool. Without ignoring the need for the tools and their significance in narrative creation, unfortunately we have reached an iterative point of re-inventing the wheel without improving or solving the issues that bear the use of all these tools [3]. Developers whom include a great variety of researchers have taken it upon them to build tools for this and that type of narrative and a lot of their valuable time and effort goes into building and testing a tool for what the tool can achieve instead of how the tool can be used to achieve that. This sometimes means that those involved in the development and testing of a tool without feedback from people who will ultimately use it, assess it with their own usability and narrative construction biased expectations [4]. For example if one is aiming at building an ideal locative hypertext tool and the tool performs well in attaching locations to narrative content, the developer may be pleased, but how does the developer assure that the tool is adaptable to an author's creative expectations and how does that tool reflect functionally the process the author is going to follow? It is understandable that a lot of developers want to build the ultimate tool for creating complex interactive stories for an audience, however a majority of them neglect to realize who they are building the tools for.

2   Authors make it real

The first interaction with an authoring tool was the brainchild of an author and a professor who had the same vision of using a tool to create a new form of fiction [5]. The tools that are built and re-built ever since serve the same purpose. They are meant for authors who cannot afford to engage in extreme programming activities yet wish to write digital interactive narratives. The protagonist in authoring for interactive storytelling is any author who will fundamentally blend their thoughts with the tools and create sophisticated narratives to show the immersive potentials of interactivity and enrich the library of works this discipline has seen so far. Developers need to be clear on who their true audience is and consider their experience with the tool during every step of the authoring process. We can build a thousand tools, but none will make a difference if authors cannot use them properly. There is a certain misalignment between the use of the tools and the creative conception of an author that shows how tools fail to communicate their purpose successfully to the mind of the author and how the mind of the author fails to grasp the true potential of the tool [6].

For the tools that are out there and while building a new tool, developers should establish clearly what the tool can do, how it can do it and what steps in the authoring process it best serves. An authoring process should also be discussed, validated and communicated. Previous work made it possible to identify and establish a set of steps undertaken by authors during the authoring development [6,7]. Those steps include Ideation, Training & Support, Planning, Visualising & Structuring, Writing, Editing, Compiling & Testing, and Publishing. Currently there is no clear indication which of these steps are best served by the tools that are out there or whether they are considered equally as a significant step in the authoring process. The tools should be able to reflect some if not all the steps in the authoring process and have provisions to accommodate authors during each step in the narrative development [8].

Finally issues during the authoring process must be collated, addressed and understood. There needs to be a classification of those issues so that developers can acknowledge how their tool can improve on minimizing those issues. For a deeper understanding those issues should also be matched to the steps of the authoring process they are most likely to occur. At the moment we have little indication of what that process truly is and not enough theoretical backbone to inform the tool developers of those steps. In this cycle of tool development, it may be time to take a break from development and instead focus on reflecting what we already developed, as well as try to assess how an author engages with the tools. We need written work if we are to demonstrate the potentials of this discipline and we need to compare written work in order to develop more theoretical knowledge. We need creative minds to grasp the use of authoring tools and understand what they can do with them. The author is the one who currently needs help. For the eminent future, we do not need more tools, we need to understand how authors use the existing ones.

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