Authoring as if Interactive Digital Narratives mattered – considering the ethical dimension

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1 Introduction

Authoring remains a crucial aspect for research in interactive digital narratives (IDN). This topic can be approached from a range of perspectives: as analyses of particular authoring tools (e.g. [1-5]), by comparing different authoring tools [6-9], as an HCI problem or with the aim to understand the impact of different authoring systems in the sense of tool studies outlined in Koenitz and Eladhari [10] inspired by Simon Penny’s earlier insights on the impact of tools on artistic output [11]. Furthermore, authoring can also be investigated as the practice of interactive narrative designers in the sense of praxeology, which has been developed by Annakaisa Kultima for video games [12].

In this chapter I would like to explore an additional dimension of interactive narrative authoring – the question of ethics. Why and for what purpose are we creating IDNs? What level of agency and ability to co-create do we want to enable for the interactors? To what degree do we want to control the experiences? What effects do we want to elicit in audiences? These are questions we need to address at a point in time when IDN is considered as a crucial element to represent complex topics such as global warming, e-mobility, or the COVID 19 pandemic.

2 The Ethical Dimension

What drives artist to create interactive narrative works? And what effects do they intend to achieve in their audiences? The questions I will consider here have less to do with individual reasons to engage in IDN authoring, but rather with the more general question of ethical dimensions of IDNs. The question of the effects of mediated products on their audiences has been studied for a considerable time. Walter Benjamin in his analysis of the work of art turned mass media product observes the loss of the authority of the unique art piece, yet at the same time identifies a democratization that makes art accessible to much larger audiences. The Frankfurt School warns of the dangers of a manipulating and manipulated “cultural industry” [13] in part influenced by their observations of the role of media in the raise of Nazism and as a propaganda instrument in the hands of the Nazi government. In contrast, Jürgen Habermas [14] emphasizes the crucial function of the media to inform citizens in democratic societies...
and consequently alerts us of the considerable responsibilities of media producers. Over the last decade, the use of IDN by public broadcasters like Arte (France/Germany) [15], VPRO (the Netherlands) [16] [17] and the BBC (UK) [18] increased and more recently, private streaming producer Netflix has entered the field with Bandersnatch [19]. At the same time, the European research network INDCOR (Interactive Narrative Design for COmplexity Representations)\(^1\) investigates the use of IDN for representing complex topics with the aim to increase the application and understanding of IDN even further.

In this situation, it is high time to consider the ethical dimension of IDN authoring. Fortunately, useful frameworks exist in neighboring fields such as HCI and design research [20-22] as well as game design [23-26]. The question is however, to what extend these insights are directly applicable to IDN authoring and where important differences need to be considered.

Thus, in this chapter, I will investigate the ethical dimension of IDN authoring by considering related work and specific challenges with the aim to provide a foundation for further investigation into this crucial aspect of IDN research.

References


\(^1\) [https://indcor.eu](https://indcor.eu)