

Eric Huang/John Davison/Will Jewell/Laura Dockrill

Storytelling in interactive media

Media professionals in the UK share their experiences

How will storytelling have to change to fit in with children's media consumption? Will stories cease to have a beginning, a middle and an end? Directors and scriptwriters discussed in a panel at the Children's Media Conference 2012 (CMC) in Sheffield about what storytelling for interactive media really means and what trendsetting future developments they anticipate.

Is storytelling in interactive media really different from storytelling in "standard" children's TV?

Eric Huang: I don't think it's essentially different, but there are subtleties. Interactive storytelling asks the audience to be an active participant and requires the child to be ready to engage in the story by moving the story along, choosing an outcome, or even playing the role of the protagonist – depending on the story and the platform. For example, storytelling apps like *Me Books* or *Morris Lessmore* require participation from the child to record audio or lift up a house by swiping.

No sit-back-and-listen experience

It's not a sit-back-and-listen experience. *The Land of Me*, an interactive storytelling brand – but in-browser – is another example (cf. ill 1). Each web app has a story that kids create by choosing between options or composing music that the characters then sing.

John Davison: Interactive stories can be consumed at any time (not scheduled) and are designed to be revisited and exited at multiple points. Interactive stories by definition allow for agency and contribution which affects the story in some way (decision making, customization etc.).

Agency and contribution

In this sense a linear TV story demands empathy and imaginative immersion into a non-malleable experience. Interactive media allows the user to impact the story in some way, even if this is as simple as controlling the pace of the narrative. Any game is an example of this.

Laura Dockrill: In my experience and to the best of my knowledge storytelling for interactive media is and should be different from children's TV, under the same umbrella and of the same family but its uses, different. It should function in a new, innovative way. However, it should remain true to the story. The writing, ideas and imagery should never be secondary.

Extra context and interaction

My new series, *Darcy Burdock*, will call upon digital media and interaction to provide its audience with extra context, encourage them to interact with the character and themes but

never will it impose on the job of the book (nor TV if that happens) – the two can communicate but should complicate each other and not distract or overlap.

Is writing for interactive media fundamentally different from storytelling for “standard” children’s TV?

Will Jewell: It is different in that for traditional (i.e. linear) storytelling you sit down and plot your story arc from A to B and you effectively play God and move your characters around to serve the storyline. When creating an interactive piece you almost have to switch seats and put yourself in the viewer’s place and ask yourself what would make a satisfying and immersive narrative experience.

Put yourself in the viewer’s place

The scriptwriter then has to develop ways in which they can cede a degree of control over the story to the viewer so that they feel they have this power, whilst still “pulling the strings” to make an exciting, surprising and satisfying story. This is a fine line to walk.

In some instances where the viewer is given license to explore the world you’ve created at their freedom, then

you hit problems of having to almost dilute or level out the story to cover every eventuality – i.e. whether a viewer has or hasn’t explored a certain room and met a certain character, learned a certain piece of information etc. This was certainly the case in scripting *7NK: The Shakespeare Murders* for the BBC/Little Loud – a 5-episode animated murder mystery. This was further complicated by the fact that the ultimate killer was randomly generated from 1 of 3 characters so a large proportion of the time was spent drawing logic trees to work out all eventualities that a viewer may/may not have experienced, which sometimes distracted from the act of storytelling (cf. ill. 2). Another aspect is how to work in Mini Games so that they feel part of the story and not bolted on – this was an issue in scripting Channel 4’s 5-part interactive game/drama *Bow Street Runner*. Another factor the interactive writer has to balance is production/budget issues, as interactivity if not carefully considered can result in an exponential mushrooming in scenes/options that need to be filmed.

Mushrooming in scenes that need to be filmed

A 30-minute episode could require 60 minutes or more of finished footage

– which has major budgetary issues. This helps focus the mind on when interactivity is key to the story and not just for its own sake.

Laura Dockrill: If interactive media is based on a story, for example, the story is already concrete anyway. Users will come to digital hubs to investigate more about ideas and characters. For me, as writer, the writing voice should be consistent and so should the events and story lines. It could be really upsetting for a reader to discover a blip in the story line over digital media – something that is supposed to enhance a project, not lead it to ruin.

The writing voice should be consistent

Writers can use interactive media to connect with fans, provide extra background content and games, interviews with the writer etc. I did a project with a company called UsTwo where we created the storytelling app *Papercut* for the iPad. The app is interactive and responsive to the reader but overall enhances a reading experience. My story, *Topple*, had already been written for a short story website, Shortfire Press. We were very careful not to jeopardise or fiddle with the art of the written word, or story, we only played and experimented with the form (cf. ill. 3). I can safely say the story was

completely executed the same way I would embark on publishing a story – I didn't change my writing to suit a new audience or platform.

What, from your experience and point of view, is quality in storytelling in interactive media?

John Davison: Interactive stories come in many forms, from linear story-games to exploratory worlds like *Grand Theft Auto*, to sandbox environments from which stories emerge from the player's creativity and use of tools. Quality storytelling in any form is about compelling protagonists and plots that are original and surprising: moving, dramatic experiences. Quality interactive storytelling still does this, and must align all of its additional components (game mechanics, UX, etc.) to achieve it.

Quality is about compelling protagonists and plots

Interaction does bring additional challenges however. Interactive narratives often struggle to deliver satisfying endings, or when set narrative structures are imposed (in games for example), the exchange is often a lack of freedom and control for the user. This restricted agency can result in a more emotional experience however, EA's *One Chance* game is a good example of this.

Interactive stories in the context of games have conventionally been much narrower in their emotional experiences; which is usually competitive and/or adrenalin-filled. Games such as *Journey*, *Flower*, *Fez* are examples of more uplifting and pleasant game experiences.

Eric Huang: The interaction has to be integral to the story or reading experience and not a gimmick or add-on. Augmented reality is a good example

of a cool function that is often just a gimmick. It's a distraction to the story. Games in the middle of digital picture books are also often a distraction. Kids spend all their time playing the casual game that isn't linked to the story or is really ancillary.

Will Jewell: *Wannabes* on the BBC is a good example. Video games don't rely on having to shoot numerous live-action scenes so they are probably the medium in which

real open world exploration can take place which is probably the extreme example of interactivity. However, storytelling in games is often poor so when this catches up I think this will be the field in which interactive storytelling could most come into its own. Other good examples in interactive media include *Bow Street Runner* on Channel 4.

Please name one example which really leads to the future of storytelling in interactive media.

Laura Dockrill: I found *Pottermore*, the online digital home of Harry Potter, a really inspirational and influential concept, with forward-thinking aims. I haven't actually read the *Har-*

ry Potter books but after exploring *Pottermore*, I bought them straight away. *Pottermore* is an extension to a story that already exists, a safe and secure environment that protects the life and functioning of a successful author and their works. Constantly referring to the life of the books themselves but also celebrating the readers.

An extension to a story that already exists

Involving them in the history of a story, making them feel special but also, to be frank, allowing them a brilliant environment to geek out on something they love. It's fantastic. I want one! Books and authors could never have done something as unique and as playful as this years ago and the author, Joanne K. Rowling, gets to sit back and watch it all unfold, it's moving and exciting.

Eric Huang: I feel that *The Land of Me* is a great example of the future of storytelling because it's interactive but firmly rooted in an educational framework for preschoolers – and a fun narrative experience.

The interactivity isn't an add-on but core to the story experience.

Will Jewell: Several years ago I was commissioned to script the BBC's first ever interactive series – a 14-part comedy/drama series called *Wannabes* in which we were pioneering some interactive techniques that haven't been run with since (cf. ill. 4). We introduced the concept of "friendship ratings" as the concept was the aspirational characters in the show were the viewers' "virtual friends". At several points in each episode the characters would be at a crossroads/dilemma and would turn to the viewer and ask their advice – the possible outcome of that good/bad advice would then be seen. If the viewer

*Personalised video
messages from the
character to the viewer*

This tailored/personalised storytelling really made viewers feel the show was “talking to them” and was responding to their actions – which is true interactivity.

John Davison: Although not yet released, the latest project from the creator of *Minecraft* (cf. ill. 5-7), called *0x10c* takes the concept of a story-world but extends this into a story universe or “Multiverse”. Like *Minecraft* this will be a sandbox world in which users can build sophisticated, inter-planetary space fleets from which epic stories can emerge as its players create.

*An epic story-verse that
blossoms over years*

I think this is an emerging form of interactive storytelling in both its scale and ambition and also its duration: this epic story-verse is designed to blossom over years rather than months. I’m intrigued to see what this virtual galaxy will look like a decade after its release. ■

gave a character consistently good or bad advice then when the score hit a high or low point this would trigger a break in the narrative for a personalised video message from the character to the viewer either berating them for bad advice and trying to get them into trouble, or expressing undying friendship for helping them out.

WEBSITE

<http://www.e4.com/game/one-chance/play.e4>

THE EXPERTS

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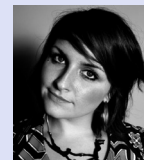


John Davison is Creative Director at Kanoti, UK. His role includes content strategy and conceptual development for all projects. John manages the creative production team, provides art direction, animation direction and designs games and interactive content.



Will Jewell is a UK-based screenwriter and director who has created drama and comedy for broadcast/web platforms including Channel 4, BBC and Sky. Will’s credits include Channel 4’s BAFTA-winning web series *Bow Street Runner*, *Wannabes* (the BBC’s first interactive drama) and web episodes of BBC’s *Horrible Histories: Terrible Treasures*.

Laura Dockrill is author and illustrator, among others, of *Mistakes in the Background*, *Ugly Shy Girl* and *Echoes* and poetry performer.



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