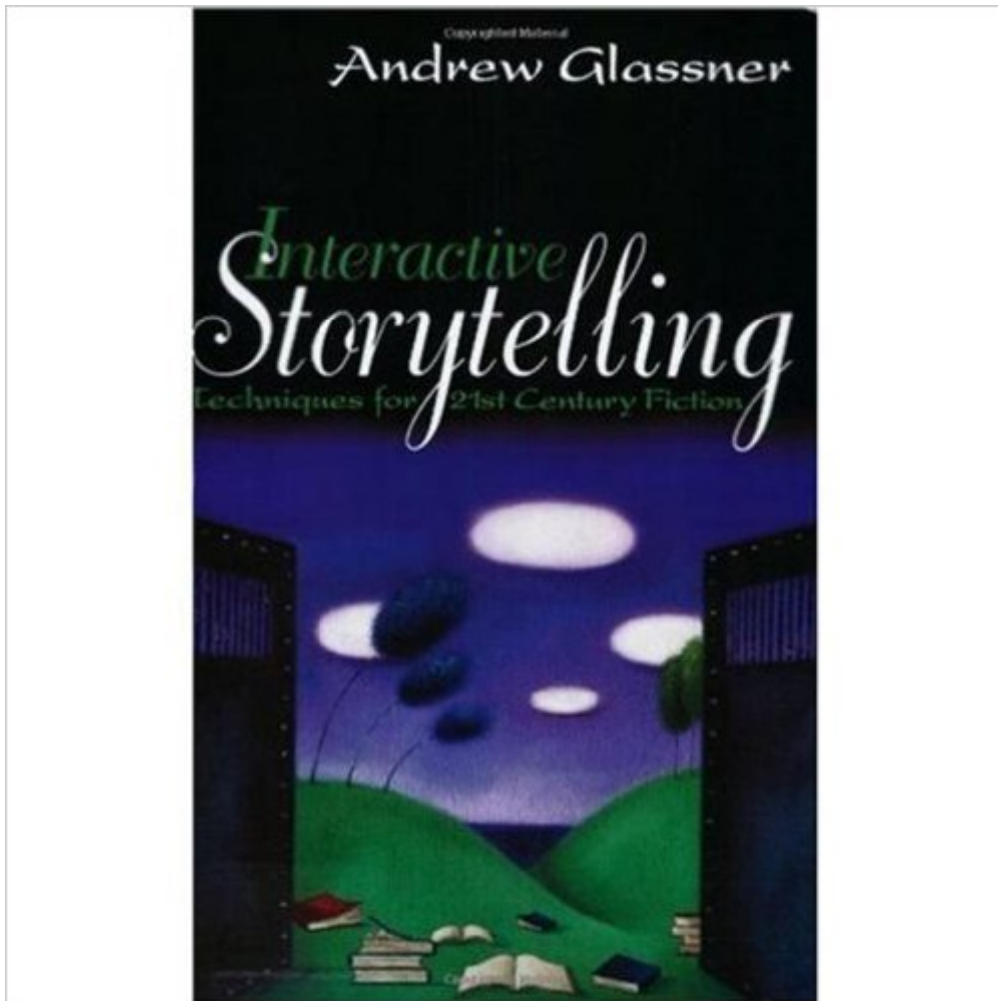


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Interactive Storytelling: Techniques For 21st Century Fiction



Synopsis

We are on the verge of creating an exciting new kind of interactive story form that will involve audiences as active participants. This book provides a solid foundation in the fundamentals of classical story structure and classical game structure and explains why it has been surprisingly difficult to bring these two activities together. With this foundation in place, the book presents several ideas for ways to move forward in this appealing quest. The author has a conversational and friendly style, making reading a pleasure.

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Customer Reviews

I never would have believed that someone could talk so much without having anything to say. I'm positively amazed. I've waded through this book for hours trying to find even a shred of a concept among the heaped piles of trivia, irrelevancies, flawed arguments, bold and baseless assertions, large amounts of poorly analyzed information and fantastically impractical propositions, not to mention the incessant repetitions of said. The fact is, this book contains neither illuminating theories nor useful practical suggestions, but only seemingly random (albeit grammatically compatible) sentences strung together in what must be the most extravagant display of Da-Da intellectualism to ever see print. For example, after stating that on the one hand, the merging of games and stories seems natural and desirable, and on the other hand it has proven more difficult than expected (by whom?), the author treats us to this piece of sublime poetry: "The quest to find a way to combine storytelling and gaming has all the qualities of a great story or game: there's a noble goal to be

achieved, difficulties to overcome through understanding and insight, and success to be won by the careful use of skill, planning and execution". This self-indulgent babble fills the book's pages to the point of choking. Another episode of it is exemplified when the author is considering the proper term to call users of his "participatory storytelling" idea, kindly sharing his profound thinking processes with the reader: "What shall we call the people participating in these stories? I like players; someone taking part in a game is called a player, as is a performer in a play or film. Since a person participating in a story environment is doing a bit of each activity, the term "player" seems both fitting and economical". Thanks to Mr. Glassner for his enlightening elucidations. Later in the book, the author arrives at a conclusion that several difficulties that he claims to be inherent to interactive storytelling require the transition to a new aesthetic goal, which he calls "participatory storytelling". In addition to the fact that it is impossible to yield from this text either an intelligent overview of these difficulties, a coherent argument as to the superiority of "participatory storytelling", or even a solid definition of it, it seems the author has actually no grasp of the considerations relating to the subject matter. Mr. Glassner suggests, for example, the use of a fantastic science fiction technology he calls "living masks". A living mask, we are told, is a form of "interpreter" assigned to the player, who translates that player's input into the story world, transforming it into a more professional performance. In other words, this "mask" is supposed to be able to understand the player's intention, and then express it in a way that is more theatrical and more "in character" than a non-professional player would be able (or, Mr. Glassner claims, would want) to achieve. A computer rephrasing a human's speech to be more theatrical! Changing his tone to express more emotion! Manipulating his facial expressions to be more like "professional" acting! If this is at all possible, which is in doubt, this technology would certainly consume lifetimes to achieve! But technology is not the only thing that the author seems to have no grasp of. Not by a long shot. The book drudges through an exhausting overview of what differentiates stories from games (Based, of course, on the misled assumption that Story + Game = Interactive Storytelling). Since this comparison is about as appropriate as asking what differentiates a symphony from a papaya, Mr. Glassner has to invent some highly imaginative points of comparison which, other than providing an opportunity for several obscene atrocities committed against the English language as regards the definition of certain terms, stretched beyond recognition to be applicable to both stories and games, like the claim that both stories and games have a "referee" of some sort, have very little value. But even within his own twisted semantics, he simply doesn't seem to grasp the core concepts. When comparing the rules of games to those of stories, he focuses on stories, saying that their rules are hard to define because they are dependant on many practicalities - the laws of physics, the capabilities of the

characters, or the ramifications of some actions. He's got it all backwards - all of these are the exact considerations which decide the rules of computer games. Stories, all stories, have one, and only one constant and inescapable set of rules - the rules of narrative. It seems Mr. Glassner's understanding of interactivity is no better than his understanding of storytelling or games. He bemoans what he calls "The Myth of Interactivity: more interactivity makes any experience better". It's hard to say who exactly Mr. Glassner thinks are the subscribers to this "myth". After all, I've yet to hear someone express a wish that food or music, for example, were interactive, however that could possibly be achieved, yet these activities are among those most enjoyed by people the world over. The examples given by Mr. Glassner serve both to undermine his point as to the overestimation of interactivity and to demonstrate that he, himself, has no idea of what interactivity is: "Interactivity itself is hardly novel or interesting: an ATM is interactive... and the automatic doors in front of a supermarket are interactive. The whole world is filled with interactive experiences, from waving down a cab to sharpening a pencil". For all of these activities save the last, the author is correct in claiming that they are, strictly speaking, interactive. The part about the pencil sharpening is outright puzzling. However, all these activities are perfect examples of why increased interactivity is better: first, they are the simplest, silliest forms of interactivity. Supporting a claim to the overestimation of interactivity with these examples is like supporting a claim to the overestimation of reading with the example of bumper stickers. Furthermore, each and every one of these activities could be improved with more interactivity. The interaction with an ATM would be much more interesting if, for example, it gave you financial advice instead of just spewing out cash, listening to your concerns and recommending a proper course of action. A door at the supermarket would be much more interesting if you could ask it for directions to the different products you're looking for, and a cab ride is improved immeasurably if you have an engaging conversation with the driver. Improve the interactivity of these experiences, and you improve their value (To learn more about interactivity, read Chris Crawford's book on the subject, and while you're at it, read his one on interactive storytelling, too). What passes for a main argument in this forgettable book is that interactivity and stories conflict because stories are meticulously construed by master craftsmen and therefore cannot brook interference from the audience without being destroyed. And since this "interference" is the essence of interactivity, the two are incompatible. If Mr. Glassner were correct, which he most certainly is not, then it would be impossible to wed the two - this would be a shotgun marriage with neither party gaining anything, and the only question being how much each would lose on behalf of the other. As Mr. Glassner would have it, the interactive part would lose dramatically while the story would lose little (The storyteller retains control of the main characters,

their actions and emotions, with the players making secondary contributions). An understandable position for a screenwriter. However, what the author fails to see is that story and interactivity can actually be combined in a way that benefits both parties instead of simply making both lose their soul. This, however, requires a major paradigm shift because it is simply impossible to deal with the concept in the terms of current artistic media. The result will be nothing like traditional games and it will be nothing like traditional stories. It will have a different contract between storyteller and audience than that Mr. Glassner is howling like a frenzied fundamentalist to preserve, and it will have a very different kind of interactivity than that of a computer game, let alone the sports games that Mr. Glassner seems so interested in for some reason (being, is it were, the farthest thing from relevant to the subject which can still be termed "game"), and it will have a very different definition for the role of storyteller - to create a system of narrative possibilities out of which hundreds of thousands of moving and powerful stories can be constructed using the user's input. Is it possible? Yes. Do we have the technology? Yes. Will Mr. Glassner's book take us any closer to it? Don't bet on it. After having despaired and having been irritated beyond measure in my attempts to extract even a modicum of benefit or interest from this oversized doorstop, I literally threw it away with force. Avoid doing the same with your time and money.

The first part of the book is a decent introduction to both storytelling and games, at least for novices. If you know nothing at all about stories, his discussion of the three-act structure, Hero's Journey, etc. are useful primers. The same is true of his remarks on the basics of game design: challenges, competition modes, scoring systems, and so on. Unfortunately, Glassner runs off the rails when he starts to talk about combining gameplay with storytelling. He frequently makes theoretical arguments founded in preconceptions from traditional storytelling media, while ignoring the practical experience obtained by professional game designers over the last forty years. His chief argument against branching storylines, for example, is that they haven't caught on in mainstream media such as books, television, and movies. At the same time he acknowledges that branching storylines are one of the most popular ways of doing interactive storytelling on computers. The fact that flipping through book pages and rewinding the VCR is awkward, while a computer can deliver a branching storyline seamlessly, does not seem to have occurred to him. Worst of all, his perspective seems to be based more upon what he WANTS players to want rather than upon what they actually DO want. He proposes what he calls the "Story Contract," in which the author is granted exclusive control over both the psychology of the main characters and the plot sequence. Having done so, he treats this contract as axiomatic for the rest of the book -- but a good many game designers and players would

strenuously object to both provisions. In addition, the book contains a great many irrelevant digressions into territory with which the author is clearly unfamiliar. He categorically condemns settable game difficulty modes (easy, medium, hard, nightmare, etc.) and airily proposes that all games should include dynamic difficulty adjustment. However, he doesn't address the points that dynamic difficulty adjustment is hard to do well, not necessarily suited to all game genres, and above all, that some players LIKE to choose a difficulty level at the beginning of the game. And what this has to do with interactive storytelling, I cannot imagine. In short, I second Jonathan Lev's conclusions, though perhaps not in such vitriolic terms. The first two hundred pages are good basic material for first-year undergraduates. The rest isn't much use to anyone who actually wants to build interactive storytelling experiences.

I don't know who is writing all these five-star reviews, but I suspect they are by friends of the author. My advice is to listen to the two and one star reviews. There is little in this 'book' of real value. Many chapters are given over to simple ranting about how bad particular concepts are, without offering any kind of insight or solution. But the worst sins are the contradictory arguments. In one chapter he decries the use of branching narrative as completely broken and useless, that narratives are not meant to branch - and in the very next chapter he complains about the limited number of choices characters are given in the games he's played! This is without doubt the shoddiest, most badly-researched book I've ever read. I physically tossed it away, and when I came here to read others reviews, I was unsurprised to hear someone else had thrown the thing across the room too. Believe me, this work demands action. Let literary darwinism take its course, and steer well clear.

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