

# What's next? Rolling stories: engaging scientists as game world designers

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## ABSTRACT

Rolling stories is a project, currently in its early stages, which explores the potential of engaging science practitioners in communicating their understandings and knowledge of the experienced world through the design of 'story worlds' for table-top role playing games (TRPGs). This short paper presents the project background and process to date.

## Keywords

Game design, Design, Table-top Role Playing Games, Meaning-making, Mimesis, Story worlds, Story-telling, Science communication.

## INTRODUCTION

The importance of story-telling in the construction of identity and culture is well established in the arts and humanities. From early literacy activities in educational contexts (Luke & Freebody, 1997) to potential activism and mobilisation for both individuals and communities (Adichie, 2009; Beeson & Miskelly, 2005; Freire, 1994; Haraway, 1991), the ability to tell one's own 'story' as an empowered agent is enshrined in UNESCO resolutions (UNESCO, 2003), given methodological power in ethnographical research (Geertz, 1973) and valued as both data and catharsis in psychological research (Bruner, 2004). For the philosopher Ricœur (1984), story-telling is the essence of our being in the world. In Design, we recognize that stories are told through the artefacts that we put into the world (Willis, 2006).

The importance of 'story' and the need for story-telling is also recognised by the Queensland Government Engaging Science program (Queensland Government, 2016) when they say: "... *scientists need to become better at communicating their research in plain English. Media which are supportive of science stories or programs should be targeted and scientists should become more active at pitching stories*" (p. 26). Echoing the call for science ways of meaning-making to become more available to 'lay' people, Saffran (2017) insists that 'science' must become more subjective and empowered to explain itself through story-telling which acknowledges its membership of humanity and culture. The problem for science stories is that they deny Aristotle's dictum of beginning, middle and end; they are complex and interrelated and deeply dependent on variables in different contexts. The stories science needs to narrate are stories embedded in the experienced world.

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This is the key insight behind the Rolling stories project. If science stories are embedded in the world as experienced, then why not tell them as a story world which can then be experienced by participants? What if a playable game world were to be envisioned by scientists as story world designers? We decided that it would be interesting if we could engage practicing science professionals in the design of Table-top Role Playing Game (TRPG) worlds as a channel of communication.

## **TABLE-TOP ROLE PLAYING GAMES AS STORY OPPORTUNITY**

Contemporary research (Bowman, 2007, 2017) into use of TRPGs beyond play applauds opportunities for meaningful story telling and agency. For example Hawkes-Robinson's (2016) work on use of RPGs as therapeutic activity for young people and Raffael Boccamazzo's (2016) work on the use of TRPGs and autism. Such research builds on educational research that investigates potentials for using role-play for cultural competence (Kodotchigova, 2002) and drama and 'impro' for critical thinking (O'Toole & Dunn, 2002). However, stories told and meaning made within a constructed story world must ultimately depend on the designed world for context. As Ricœur (1984) tells us, the world as context is more than mere backdrop; it is an essential actor in the mimetic process and a powerful participant in the construction of meaning (Turner & Bidwell, 2007). If the story world itself is such an important collaborator in the meaning-making activity of players, then how much more powerful is the imagining and design of the story world and can the designing of TRPG story worlds become a medium of communication?

## **THE PROJECT**

We started to explore this question by inviting a participant group of scientists from a range of different areas (marine biology, plant biology, robotics, engineering and design) to a workshop where we introduced them to the idea of TRPGS and the importance of world building (Schrier, Torner, & Hammer, 2018). We then invited them to engage in world building using a 'toolkit' of our own making. At the end of the workshop the participants presented their worlds and discussed their experiences as world creators.

The basic toolkit we used was inspired by contemporary TRPGs which forefront world making. Games such as *Microscope* (Robbins, 2011) where players construct whole worlds and histories and *The Quiet Year* (Alder, 2013) where players construct a map of their experienced world during play. The resulting toolkit is very much based on the timeline activities in *Microscope* where participants start with a premise or tag line and construct chronologies of events that resulted in or were a result of the initial premise. As the histories are built up collaboratively, more details emerge and are added to a point in the timeline. This approach to world creation – or indeed simulation – is where the participants drew on their own knowledge as science practitioners, effectively implementing their knowledge in a fictional world.

The next step was to take the created story world and to turn it into a 'game book' so that the world our participants had envisioned could be played through by others. We have opted for a simple game play system, derived from Rob Donoghue's (2018) *Tiny Fate* system, itself a stripped down version of *Fate Accelerated*. A narrative emphasis system, rather than one that is more focused on character creation and statistics, was chosen so that the game world can shine through. At the moment we have one complete game book in production. We also have some interesting insights into the collaborative act of designing story worlds for games and the nature of communication for our science professional participants in the design of story worlds for play.

## BIO

Jane (truna) Turner is a game and interaction design educator and researcher in the Design Lab at QUT in Brisbane, Australia. Her research focuses on Design Ontology: the material and cultural aspects of game designing and the ways that design and designing are storytelling practices which add stories to the world. Truna's recent work explores the potential of analogue game design as an opportunity for critical literacies, participatory design and meaning making. Truna is the Brisbane coordinator of the IGDA. She designs and coordinates a number of community events including regular game jams and an annual game design festival.

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