Exploring Hybridised Storytelling in Story-driven Boardgames

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Digital tools automate elements of tabletop play to make games more usable, but this can negatively affect the player experience depending on *what* is automated (Kankainen, 2016; Larssan et al., 2020; Wallace et al., 2012). Players accept hybridisation which automates "chores" – labour necessary to articulate a game (Xu et al., 2011) – thus allowing more time to engage with the "core" gameplay (Soraine & Rogerson, 2024). For story-driven games, like the *Adventure* and *Crossroads* games series, storytelling functions seem to be "core". However, technologies like virtual dungeon masters (Ang et al., 2023) show there is interest in hybridising storytelling functions. This preliminary work explores how players feel about apps for story-driven hybrid digital boardgames to find the "core" of this genre.

We conducted a small study using *Adventure Games: The Volcanic Island* (Dunstan et al., 2019) – a cooperative story-driven campaign game[1] that can be played with either a physical booklet or storyteller app. We recruited eight groups of 3-4 players (29 players total) to play 45 minutes of the first chapter of the game. For the first fifteen minutes, groups used the app, after which they could use any storytelling method (app, booklet, or both). Post-session, the players completed a survey and a semi-structured group interview about the experience. We present here three preliminary themes from our data:

Convenience – Every group played the full session with the app, stating that it was more convenient than reading and it centralised information on the table. Players noted that the app prevented accidental spoilers and minor forms of cheating (e.g. reading ahead). The app preference was strong despite a strong dislike of the narrator and complaints about the app functionality (e.g. not auto-scrolling).

Roles and Responsibilities – Players informally divided labour between themselves during the game. The recurring roles we saw were app-manager (handling interaction with app), game coordinator (double checking rules and keeping the game on track), and notetaker (cataloguing important-seeming information). Players discussed frequently taking on these roles for other games and in other play groups.

Social connections – Players described the primary goal of the game as being social, with the story as an activity to facilitate this socialisation. Players described the enjoyment of collaborating and arguing with each other, and despite some conflicts, no player would want to play the game solo.

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This study suggests that the "core" activity of story-driven boardgames may be the social interaction, rather than the story itself. Since the app alleviates some of the labour without interfering with the social experience it is seen as superior to the booklet. These findings are consistent with elements that are known to be important to players in tabletop roleplaying games like Dungeons and Dragons (Liapis & Denisova, 2023). Our findings are limited by our focus on a singular game which the players describe as a "choose-your-own adventure" novel, and our choice to use the published app which has minimal functionality. Future work should explore more interactive storytelling apps for similar games.

BIO

Melissa Rogerson is a Senior Lecturer in Human-Computer Interaction and ARC DECRA Fellow in the School of Computing and Information Systems at The University of Melbourne. Her research examines the play of boardgames in both physical and digital forms, as well as the characteristics and motivations of hobbyist boardgame players, designers, and developers. She is currently researching the uses and application of technology in boardgames.

Sasha Soraine is a Post-Doctoral Researcher in Human-Computer Interaction in the School of Computing and Information Systems at The University of Melbourne. Her research focuses on understanding player and spectator experiences of tabletop and digital games, game design, and player communities. She is currently working on the use and application of technology in boardgames.

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ENDNOTES

[1] A style of boardgame that takes multiple gameplay sessions to complete.

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