

Like audios, like record it so that we could and we'll just transcript the conversations into text and we won't show your face that for us in the research process. And then once we are done with this project, we'll delete this recording. Is it okay from both? Sure.

(0:19 - 5:38)

Okay. Yeah. And, and also one thing is like, because I, so we have Peter and how could I pronounce your name? My name? Yes.

Sure. Sure. Sure.

Sure. It's a Dutch name. Yes.

Okay. Yeah. We were like checking like Googling like how should we pronounce your name? Yeah.

Okay. But sure. Okay.

You can try it. I don't mind. Thank you.

So, um, let's start then. So I think before we start, so the goal of like this project is like, we want to, um, like just to, um, design like a user interface and, and also do more like from a user perspective, um, angles as to, um, how can we improve like the IDN tools? Because when we're studying this project, we find that there's a lot of like problem. And also the existing tool today is like not really helping the writer or the authors.

So this is the goal of this project. And before we start, we just want to have like a check, um, just checking in and also because this is not like an interview, but it's more like a discussion. So while we are talking about, um, like having this conversation today, I think both like Peter and sure, like you could like add on each other that if you have something that you want to discuss with each other.

And for us, because we are more like a new beginner. So you guys are the expert, you have more experience. So that is just feel free to talk to each other.

This is like a discussion among us, not like an interview. So this is how we set up today. Is that okay? Perfect.

Okay. So we gonna start. Um, so before we start, um, so can you, can you both just share, like, is there any, like, what's your favorite IDN tools and what's your favorite IDN and what is that

areas about? Peter should go first, maybe.

Are you talk? I think you're mute, Peter. Like we can't hear you. We can't hear you.

How about now? Does that work? Yeah, that works. Yes. Every meeting I joined has different settings for audio.

Sorry. No, no worries. Um, so yeah, my favorite, uh, interactive digital narrative, uh, I think the weight of nostalgia is heavy.

So I would look at like the Infocom games, um, which I think were from the eighties. I mean, Trinity and, uh, mine forever voyaging hitchhikers guide to the galaxy. And is that any reason behind why you like it? Um, I mean, those were the games that I was playing when I was discovering interactive narrative.

Um, and then in like the two thousands, I was super excited to see that people were still using tools like inform to create those kinds of stories. Yeah. I, I wonder before you start creating, like, have you been playing those tools before? Like, oh, playing, how do you play? So I like having involved with like those ideas and experience, like before you entered the author? Um, yeah, I did a lot of, spent a lot of time playing the games.

I don't think I tried creating work of my own until like 2018. I mean, so that would be almost 40 years from first play the Infocom games to, uh, trying to make them myself. But, uh, sure.

What are your favorite interactive digital narratives? Oh, I haven't been around that long on this earth rather. So I don't have much experience with the Infocom games, but I do know that I played beyond Zork, which is from that era. If I recall correctly, but I enjoy a lot of the indie works on itch.io, which is a heaven for many of the platforms like red by twinery.

Even some informs are still found there. And one of my favorites would be C chip, which is a very gamey, heavy interactive fiction. Hmm.

Yeah. Um, and you have been like, well, like doing some interactive fiction, right? Yes. I have been writing since 2019 and I've released on itch.io roughly five games or four.

(5:39 - 11:59)

So your fiction form is more like, it's just like a game, like as a final product kind of like that. Sorry, could you repeat that please? So the final product of your IDN is like a game form, like your interactive fictions. Yes.

With HTML5 nowadays, there is a lot of capability and possibility for browser games. And like in the past we had just text on screen, but nowadays we can use images, we can use audio, we can use all kinds of tricks to enhance the experience of an interactive fiction story. So for Peter, is it the same that it's like your IDN products, this is like in a game form or like more like a fiction form? Definitely on the game side of it.

I mean, there's kind of a conflict between designing a game people can play and telling a story people can read. Exactly. Yeah.

I prefer to have more of the game aspect of it to get them to read the story. I was curious, like before we go into the workflow out of stuff, like what makes you guys go from a player audience to authors? Like what makes you to go on this journey to be a creator? Sure. Do you want to go first? Well, sure.

Well, the first part was like in early 2015. It started for me to try and dissect the games, or well, stories into looking at the behinds. Did I miss anything? Were there secret rooms? Were there secret parts of the story? And eventually you start to learn a whole other language.

For me, it was the first experience with Twinery because the game was made in Twinery. And it made it very interesting for me to try it myself. And well, a few years passed by trying a lot of small things, prototypes.

And here we are, one full-fledged game and three smaller games and one upcoming game. And how about for you? So I also got started with Twine. The sort of thing that encouraged me to make the transition from player to author was actually a game called Dragon Quest Builders, which was a lot like Minecraft.

There was a sandbox mode where you could kind of build your own environment. And sort of that plugged the pieces together in my brain when I realized, you know, I could try plugging various things together to make an interactive story. Why don't I do that? And I had a friend who also wanted to publish games, so he encouraged me to look at Twine.

So what do you guys think is the biggest difference between an author and a player or creator? Go ahead, Peter. Sure, that's fair. I guess, you know, a defined difference, especially with the sort of online community that you can find with like the interactive fiction database, the IF forums, the sort of the work the Interactive Technology Foundation is doing.

I am finding that as I develop personal relationships with other authors, I'm more interested in playing their games. The parallel I'm thinking of is almost music. I had a friend who was really into music, and I would just like buy the album because I liked the song, and he would be paying attention.

Who's the producer? Who are the people behind the band putting the things together? Because that's going to help me, that would help him find music that he liked. And I find that I am now paying more attention to, you know, authors, engines, formats, things like that, as I find works to enjoy. Well, for me, the difference between the developers and like people reading or playing whatever was made is like becoming a very thin veil, because in most AAA games, you have the player, which has no direct link to the developer.

The emails are just dumped on a pile of hundreds of thousands of emails. But in interactive fiction, which is a very small user base, a rather niche world, I'd say, you have a lot of options to

directly communicate with whatever developer, writer, creator, and it makes it for the audience to be like closer to us, which allows us to explore different games, different genres, and different people together. And

it feels becoming thinner and thinner with Discord and with other media, which allows us to communicate better and better.

Wow, this is really new insights for all of us. I think we didn't, we couldn't read this, like from the research paper. But now we just want to understand it's like, could you both like briefly describe your workflow when you start developing your IDN? Well, I'm very eager to learn Peter's.

So go ahead. Oh man, so in writing, there's the plotting versus pantsing debate. Are you doing a detailed plot before you sit down to write the story? Or are you flying by the seat of your pants? And yeah, I find that my development process has become more structured as I go along.

Like as I, each game's development project, development process is a little more structured than the last, just because I'm finding that, yeah, I do need to keep all the different stuff straight. And the challenge is always, it's the art versus science challenge. And the best answer that I've heard is you use the science to build a framework that allows the art to grow.

(12:01 - 12:37)

I think my earlier efforts were much heavier on the art, and I've been trying to integrate more structure to support a sort of richer narrative. Could you explain more details? It's like when you say more direct, it's like, do you have the ideas first? And then, or you sometimes have the characters first, like how does it normally look like for you? If I don't have the ideas, it's very difficult to use the tools. My collaborator and I have sort of branched out into other engines like Unity and RPG Maker.

(12:38 - 13:41)

And when we sit down and have the blank canvas, it's sort of challenging. Okay, this can do this, this and this, but I don't really have a reason or a story that would support that. So, what? I couldn't agree with Peter more.

I think the first game I made, which is rather art heavy, I'd say, as Peter's words paraphrased, it's, well, not very structured. And I just jumped in. And after having learned throughout that experience, that it's not a very great experience for the developer to just jump in and start writing.

I have read up on a lot of works of the great writers around us, including one George R. Martin. And he had an interview, which like echoes once a month through my head, where he says that there are two types of writers, gardeners and architects. And most people who are gardeners just jump in and do their stuff.

(13:41 - 15:18)

And it grows, like a gardener tends to his botanical garden. And we have architects that firstly create the whole back spine of whatever story, all the characters, all the little quirks around it, and then start to process it and write down everything. And personally, I'm a gardener more than an architect.

But because of what Peter said, you start to grow into a project and you need to learn from experience that you need some kind of structure, some kind of backbone. I force myself to firstly write a rather clear backbone and explore that first before I start dumping out all ideas to keep a red thread within whatever I'm doing. So I hear both of you talk about like, that's like a structure that you want to create before you start writing or creating.

What do you think is the most important things that we should be include or consider when we're forming our structure or backbone, like before we start writing? Like, let's say, yeah, like how should we process? Like my answer, I think has changed over time. Right now, I am finding that it's most important for me to have an idea of what is the beginning, the middle and the end of the story that I want to tell. Yeah, I agree.

It's important to have a vision of an end. I mean, the end is not written down with clay and chalk and stone, whatever. It should still be morphable into something else.

(15:18 - 17:55)

But having a vision of both the beginning and the end is for me one of the most important things when writing something because you can make the story more coherent. You don't want something that starts out as like a romance game and ends up becoming a horror game. That's so true.

But also because like the nature of my idea and it's like not like an in-ear storyline, it's just like a lot of layers. So how do you guys organize those like, like layers? Is that something that you consider when you begin the project? With mental breakdowns and a lot of crying. No.

So for me, don't forget the coffee. Yeah, the coffee. Yes, exactly.

No, that's also very important. Now for me, one of the most helpful tools would be I have like a twine story for my twine story, which keeps all characters in line and all linked up so I know which reference to which. But I find twine limited, very limited to what it could have been.

So I use Visual Studio Code and I wrote my own framework in which I keep all things linked up. So I have like a replica of twine made into my own framework so I can work smoothly from there to write down a story. Is this the same way how you work like Peter? I mean, what Sjoerd was just saying, having a twine to organize the twine is, I'm finding that too.

I've been using Google Slides with like links so that you can jump to the different parts of the



story. But yeah, it's interesting that the, I need to be able to sort of move through the narrative to look at how things are functioning, but that's going to be a different experience than what I'm presenting to the player in like the top level produced version. So when you want to be able to move through the layers, what do you think is important to look at? It's more like what are the things that you should look for? You want to focus on the relationship between scenes and scenes or what is the things that you think is key, essential for helping you to organize and creating? Do you understand my questions? You can take some time because I know it's a big question.

(18:01 - 21:16)

I did not completely understand the question. Sorry, I was hoping Peter went first. I want to understand because when you're creating a story, what you're looking for is more like how you could see the overall structures or actually you want to focus on the relationship between it's like, what are the things that you're really looking into when you're like, You're asking like what we keep track of in the lower level twine that's organizing for the higher level.

Thank you for helping me. I mean, the weasel answer is it depends. So like the Google Slides example that I was using, it's going to depend on the scene.

What's in the scene? Are there characters? Are there items? And then I'll have just brackets that sort of note, don't forget like this has to change and this has to change and this is going to be affected by this scene. So it's more of an inclusion mindset like, oh, I'll need to bring these elements into this part of the story than an exclusion or sort of a, it's difficult to look at the story from the specific pieces that you're using. Like, oh, here's my story with just the scenes or with just the items or with just the characters.

Yeah, I agree. I use like a lot of, well, small mental links for myself inside of the notes to get around. But the process is rather difficult because the story becomes bigger and bigger and the more mental notes you start having, the more you start either forgetting or just part of documentation that you failed yourself, which makes you forget the future you need to do something, which sucks.

But it makes it very difficult to track something correctly after the story has become big, like big, big. So personally, I use like the framework I made myself to keep everything in check, but eventually it starts to go out of hand because the links, well, one link becomes 20, 20 becomes 100 and what link is important, what link isn't. And with links, I mean like parts between small paragraphs, story stuff, non-playable characters, all that kind of stuff.

Those are links in my head. Yeah, I think like if I was going to describe it, it's not quite HTML markup. Like I'll have sort of invisible notes for myself.

Here's how the things should change that I've marked out. And then yeah, what Stuart was saying, you think you know what you're going to be tracking when you start the project and

then as the project develops, you realize that there are other sort of different important things and then it gets big enough that you don't want to go back to the beginning and try to track this thing that you had ignored at the beginning and now pay attention to in the middle. I wish I had an easy way to pull it all out, but I didn't plan for that.

(21:16 - 26:46)

Sure. As we have talked about the challenges that you guys face while you're creating stories, what are the things that you both feel the most challenging when you're in those story creating process? Well, I think the most challenging part for me would be to keep the story coherent. I mean, emotions within ourselves evolve from day to day, from week to week.

When you start out a story with maybe anger, maybe sadness, maybe happiness, and the next day you're the opposite emotion, the story evolves around that when you're writing that. So keeping the story coherent is very important, which is before the reader, of course, and for the players. Otherwise, they are like in one big mess, spaghetti.

And keeping that in check whilst also having like hundreds of paragraphs, passages, you name it, is the most difficult to me. Multi-universe. How about you? It's interesting that keeping the mood and the consistency is an issue.

That is something I realized in the last project I worked on. I sort of sat down and wrote out a paragraph of this is the tone that I want to try for and this is sort of the general attitude these characters should take, because I wanted to be able to get to that even when I wasn't feeling that mood. But for me, the biggest challenge is the sort of quality control, checking my work.

I've gone through it so many times and I'm just kind of a little disgusted with some parts or I wish it could be landing better, but I've got a deadline so we're cutting out scope and things like that. So going back over the same parts of the story again and again and again, trying the different options to make sure that the different pieces are firing correctly to adjust the state of the narrative. When you talk about the story quality control, are you referring like the story that you create or more the assets that come with the quality? The assets, like by the time I'm checking to be sure that the code or whatever the variables, things like that, by the time I'm checking to see that those are updating, I've already kind of gotten the writing to a place where this is what I'm going to be presenting.

So that's where I'm, you know, gosh, I wish I had done a better job of writing this before I went to plug it into the story, but we're hooking things up then. Questions for users? I will move to the tools. So since you guys have talked about a lot of tools, so just for Peter, have you also created your own tools while you're writing stories? Not really.

I mean, the Google Slides might be the closest I've come to that. Yeah. Oh, but by the way, so, Sjoerd, you have created your own tools, so you have more like a technical background, if I understand you correctly.

Well, after the first story I made, I learned very quickly that having control over the complete back end of your story is more important than the words on paper during development, because a prototype paragraph can work for yourself, just don't ship it in production. But to me, learning programming and learning HTML5 suites has made it very easy to create what I want, and I just can focus on writing instead of the whole back end. I have my back end done for the upcoming project, and maybe I need to tweak some stuff here and there, but I can focus on writing, and I no longer have to look at anything like, ah, Twine is limiting me, or this is limiting me, that's limiting me.

It's just what I created for myself works for me, maybe for others, but just for me, that's the most important part, and I can use it to just focus on writing instead of on coding. I just wanted to ask, so would you say you have more of a technical background? Well, it goes hand in hand. I started both with zero, like no writing ever done, just some school projects during high school, and I did have, I have a very, well, not experienced past, but during high school I've tried a lot of things, like hacking into the computers of the principal and stuff, just for fun, for the giggles, changing backgrounds around, and I already had that experience, but I did not have the experience of creating a website, because essentially most tools create a website for you nowadays, like Twinery, Rampy, all of them create websites, or well, web experiences anyway, but both started at zero, I'd say, and I learned them whilst trying around prototyping a lot, failing a lot, and currently I'm at an experience level that I'd say I can help others.

(26:47 - 28:00)

I'm not an expert, but I can help others. So I just wanted to ask, like I'm an editor, I have more of a writing background, so it sounds like you get the easy part done first, which for you is the technical end of it, and then you focus on the writing that's more challenging for you, correct? Exactly. And I focus on the writing because that's easier for me, and I'm not worried about the writing, I'm worried about have I got the presentation details, the programming part of it.

Yes, exactly, I already understood that from your story, I was like, yeah, we do the exact opposite, perfect. I'm just quite curious, because we have read a lot of research papers talking about the tools requiring a lot of technical background, or like back-end background, to run those IDN2s. So as a writer, do you think how important for you guys to learn this back-end, to learn about back-end, or do you think you have what is needed for you to learn, or you wish something that you don't have to? What's your thoughts about learning about back-end? I think most writers, if not all writers, they shouldn't have to worry about the back-end at all.

(28:00 - 28:28)

Like, sure, if you want something like tailored for yourself, if you want something very, like unique, very cool, you could touch the back-end of whatever thing you're making, to make it more yourself. But all of the available tools nowadays gives you enough options and enough possibilities to create something amazing. So I think a writer should focus on writing, and they should never have to touch the back-end, besides from maybe a few tweaks.

(28:33 - 29:59)

When I, I guess like when I'm writing, I'm thinking about other games I've played, other experiences, to get similar effects. You know, when I have an idea of how a scene is playing out, I have an idea of the various technical parts that are going to accompany that experience, and then sometimes I'm able to look up how to do it and implement it, and other times I just kind of give up because it's too hard. I don't have the patience to learn.

Okay, yeah. Oh, okay. Now I receive a question.

I don't know. No, we just want to more understand, our team want to understand more, like, when you guys explain your framework, like when you say, because you have, I think one of you had mentioned, like when I'm creating my own framework in writing stories, so we want to understand more of this perspective, like, how does it work for you both? This sounds like a question for Sjoerd with the Visual Studio Codes that you developed. Well, no, I did not develop Visual Studio Codes.