

Player Experience of Hybridity in a Narrative Boardgame

Sasha Soraine, Melissa J. Rogerson

School of Computing and Information Systems
The University of Melbourne
Parkville, VIC, Australia

sasha.soraine@unimelb.edu.au, melissa.rogerson@unimelb.edu.au

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INTRODUCTION

Game designers and researchers have used a range of technologies to create “smart” hybrid tabletop games. In narrative-focused games, strategies have included adding soundtracks to boardgame sessions (Farkas et al. 2022), and using large-language models to assist (Kelly et al. 2023) or replace game masters (Ang et al. 2023) in tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs). Various works have, however, implied that the inclusion of digital tools can negatively affect player experience¹ (PX) based on *what* is automated (Kankainen 2016; Larsson et al. 2020; Wallace et al. 2012). Understanding the impact of game designs on PX is important to game designers, however little existing work has looked at how digitised functions impact PX in Hybrid Digital Boardgames (HDBs), let alone narrative-focused tabletop play. Yet a 2023 review of games catalogued on BoardGameGeek as “Digital Hybrid – App/Website Required” found that more than 25% used Storytelling mechanisms, making this the second-most common mechanism for HDBs (Rogerson et al. 2023).

We are interested in hybridity in narrative boardgames, i.e. story-oriented boardgames where narratives are constructed by players engaging with the rules and play of the game (Arnaudo 2018, Ch. 1). These are similar to TTRPGs in that players often have a character that represents them in the game world, who they act through to make choices that shape the overall gameplay and narrative. However, the narrative events in these games are predominantly game-specified rather than player-created (Sullivan and Salter 2017). Narrative HDBs have been commercially explored through game series like *Adventure* and *Crossroads*. The digital tools in these games provide *Storytelling* (enhancing and representing a game’s theme and story) and *Informing* (controlling the flow of information to and between players) functions (Rogerson et al. 2021). Therefore, this paper asks ***how do hybrid Storytelling and Informing functions influence PX of a narrative boardgame?***

METHOD

We invited eight self-formed groups of 3-4 players (29 total) to play the first of four chapters of *Adventure Games: The Volcanic Island* (Dunstan et al. 2019) (*Adventure*),

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a cooperative campaign-style game played by exploring numbered, card-based locations and reading the associated paragraph entry in either a storybook or an app (Figure 1). Groups were instructed to use the app for the first fifteen minutes, after which they could use any storytelling method (app, book, or both). In this paper, we report on post-game interview data, which we analyse using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2023).



Figure 1: The initial layout for *Adventure*, with the app open and components on the table

THEMES

Using the session recordings and our notes, we generated two key themes in response to our research question.

The app helps balance sociality and efficiency

Players identified *Adventure* as a family-weight game, and expected it to be leisurely, discussion-based and social. All groups felt that looking up information in the app was faster and more convenient than searching for it in the booklet. This allowed everyone to have equal and simultaneous information access, and afforded them more time to engage in pro-social play through discussing the information received.

Players treated the app as a communal resource and described an implicit social etiquette for interacting with it. Modulating the scrolling speed to match the reading speed of the play group was important, even if it was faster or slower than the narration. Another consideration was how to review information to avoid a player “hogging” the app. Players expressed that the optimal configuration was to have the app as the main information source and book as secondary/back-up for personal reviewing.

The app offers value as (imperfect) game master

Players took on four roles at the table (Figure 1), each of which serves both a game and social purpose. *Rule-bearers* were knowledgeable about how to play and acted as a leader when others were confused. *Note-takers* functioned as the group memory

and were considered reliable experts on in-game information. *App-managers* interacted with the technology and modulated the game pace. *Fabulators* added flavour and created an appropriate tone at the table.

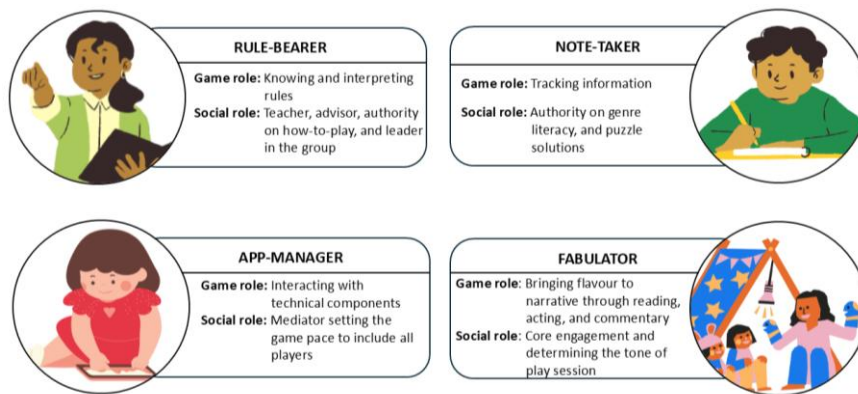


Figure 2 Four roles players take on when playing the game: rule-bearer (top left), notetaker (top right), app-manager (bottom left), and fabulator (bottom right).

Players felt that the app took on the Fabulator role, albeit with subpar acting. Many suggested that being a Fabulator is difficult, and that the app allowed more players to *play* the game instead of someone *facilitating* it. They wanted the app to also take on the Rule-bearer role so it could teach them how to play and clarify their understanding when confused.

Players seem to conceptualise the app as an imperfect game master (GM). In line with the role as laid out in the *Dungeon Master's Guide* (2014, 4), players expect a GM to dramatically realise the game world and make calls about the rules so that players can “avoid confusion...[and have] more time...to be immersed” (P15). Players recognise this as significant labour and so perceive that the app-as-GM takes on an undesirable role that a human player would otherwise have to fill. This allowed the players to engage more with each other, thus supporting the social PX.

CONCLUSION

Our case study of *Adventure* suggests that players expect an inherently social PX from narrative boardgames. Despite the app's simplicity and shortcomings, players viewed it positively because they perceived it as supporting sociality through making Informing a communal activity and taking on GM-style labour, freeing players to engage with each other.

Our analysis suggests that players perceive a tight coupling between the app's Storytelling and Informing functions, possibly because those are the expected functions of a GM, thus matching their expectation of this type of narrative boardgame. In the context of narrative boardgames, this implies that hybrid Storytelling and Informing can have a positive influence on PX when they support the expected social PX through taking on non-social labour.

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ENDNOTES

1 Player experience is the personal experience of play informed by both the player's *interactions with the game* (Wiemeyer et al. 2016) and their *expectations of the experience* based on broader player and game contexts (Nacke et al. 2010)