

Democratizing Interactive Filmmaking: A No-Code Solution for Arts Students

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper addresses a key challenge in teaching interactive filmmaking: the lack of accessible, free software. Without this students cannot create interactive film experiences. As of 2026, students must either develop intermediate programming skills use workarounds in other software, pay for expensive programs, or a combination of these. This issue is especially pressing given the growing financial constraints of many universities, the high cost of filmmaking equipment, and the fact that many students in interactive film courses come from arts and humanities backgrounds, where coding anxiety is common (Jr and Amoloza 2015; Morais et al. 2018). In response, this paper proposes the use of software based on a modified version of Twine—a widely used tool for interactive storytelling—adapted to provide a mostly drag-and-drop interface. The goal is to enable students to create interactive films similar to *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (Slade 2018) or *I'm Your Man* (Bejan 1992), democratizing the creation of interactive films for non-technical students.

The relationship between interactive film and game studies is complex yet foundational. Bernard Perron and Mark J. P. Wolf have long debated the nature of interactivity in film. Wolf (Wolf 2008) argued that interactive cinema is defined by branching narratives shaped by player actions, while Perron contended that storytelling and interactivity in such films are fundamentally separate (Perron and Wolf 2003). This debate paved the way for more nuanced discussions of agency and interactivity in the genre, influencing much of the scholarship in game studies.

Despite the fact that these early discussions are nearly two decades old, interactive film—and its close relative, FMV (Full Motion Video) games—appears to be undergoing a resurgence (van de Ven 2024). Commercially and critically successful interactive films by Sam Barlow, along with releases from Wales Interactive and a

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growing wave of Chinese-language interactive films like *The Invisible Guardian* (New One Cinema 2019) and *Hello Love: 18 Again* (Indelible Studio 2025), underscore the renewed interest in the genre.

However, the tools that once supported the creation of interactive films—such as BBC Storyformer, Eko Studio, and Blacktale—have largely disappeared. With Netflix removing interactive content, including *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*, it seems that mainstream interest in the genre has waned. Meanwhile, companies like Eko and Stornaway have shifted to enterprise-focused, subscription-based models, and platforms like Klynt and Korsakow come with high price tags (\$300–500). Though affordable options like Charles Engine (developed by Prague-based Charles Games) exist at €36.79, this still poses a significant financial burden for institutions with large numbers of students.

While creating interactive films in branching narrative tools such as Ren'Py and Twine is technically possible, these platforms often require some coding knowledge. For example, Molleindustria's *TweeVee* project adapted the Twine engine to create interactive film experiences, but the need to initialize a local server or engage with code can be daunting for those without technical expertise. This creates a gap for educators who wish to teach interactive filmmaking to arts students, many of whom have limited coding experience.

This paper proposes a free, no-code solution: a modified Twine Harlowe that enables the drag-and-drop addition of content. This open-source platform aims to simplify interactive filmmaking for educators teaching non-technical students, offering a solution that is both customizable and accessible. Twine Harlowe was chosen as a base for this project given the accessible nature of the software but also the generally understandable syntax of its many 'macros'. This did cause certain issues in the program that I will discuss briefly before the end, and a revamped version of this project will likely abandon Harlowe in future.

The interactive filmmaking platform (provisionally named 'TwineForge') enables users to drag and drop video content into their browser, add options on top of that content, to set variables, to preview the content together and to view a current 'story map' in a manner that is familiar to current Twine users but does not rely on Twine's own editor. The program can then either produce code to be added to Twine or else compiled into a functioning Twine using the Tweego command line function.

To advanced Twine users, these features may not sound terribly exciting but in practice I have found real world reasons to implement this solution. While it has been mentioned that students with reading difficulties can excel as programmers and coders, this can require specific approaches in the classroom (Steinen Duran & George, 2014). My own students struggling with dyslexia reported considerable preference for the visual interface I provided them with, suggesting a real-world demand for drag and drop tools like this.

Beyond this, the customizability of Twine owing to its CSS and JS derivation means that this platform prototype, though just a beginning, has the potential to grow with subsequent semesters into something that can suit many varied student projects, or even projects for artists beyond a classroom setting.

Returning then, briefly, to Perron and Wolf's foundational work and Van de Ven's return to it: perhaps it is not that the desire for FMV game creation subsided in the early 2000's but simply that the tools were not available and not prioritized? My hope is that by providing an easy to use and, importantly, free tool to students, that the continued resurgence of interest in FMV games may be something that can be sustained.

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