

The Narrative Design Exploratorium

The N.D.E. is a Stephen Erin Dinehart project aimed at creating a forum for discussion of the burgeoning craft that is interactive narrative design.

Masters of Narrative Design 1: Jan Sircus

By [Stephen E. Dinehart](#) on June 19, 2008 12:27 PM | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBacks \(0\)](#)

This is the first part of an ongoing NDE series featuring interviews with Masters of Narrative Design. While a seemingly new term, the design of story experiences is as old as time itself. Storytellers have been making careers out of it since the days of Sumerian ritual. As game developers are increasingly looking to create meaningful virtual narrative experiences, looking back at the lessons learned by these masters becomes increasingly valuable. Today's Master is Jan Sircus, place maker, storyteller, architect and designer. His almost 40 year career has had him working on everything from Location-based entertainment, and theme parks for Disney, to Olympic resorts. Jan has spent a lot of time crafting interactive story in the real world, with huge teams with big dreams and big budgets. Today I'm hoping to see what virtual world creators can learn from his wealth of experience.

Stephen E. Dinehart: Jan, it's a pleasure, thanks for taking the time to speak with me. You are currently President of the [Themed Attraction Association \(TAA\), Canada](#); can you explain what you do there?

Jan Sircus: The themed attraction association brings together people that are involved in just about every possible aspect of creating what I would call story places. From very simple media experiences, in museums or exhibits, to visitor centers, science centers, entire places, expos, attractions and pavilions, theme parks all the way up to big international destination resorts. So it's a very big field, it goes from the small and particular all the way up to the big and general. People in the association could be economists and planners or designers, not just architects and show designers, but lighting designers, media people, filmmakers, producers and fabricators of various kinds; again a very broad selection of people. It's interesting, it's such a complex business in many ways, and not really fully understood; I'm always having to explain what our association is all about. If you think about theme park design, at [Walt Disney Imagineering](#) we had under one roof something like 300+ disciplines to put together a theme park, which is pretty substantial by any measure. That's what it takes when putting together something that is going to be that complex, fully integrated, coherent and consistent, from the smallest detail to the biggest idea, or vice versa.

SED: It also seems to me because your creations are real world experiences you have to address a full array of sensory possibilities?

JS: In some situations yes, but that doesn't always come into play. We wouldn't be necessarily doing that in say a museum exhibit, like you would be more inclined in a theme park attraction. So it depends on the application as to how far you go, and how many people and disciplines need to be involved. The theme park is really the extreme. The most complex, in my experience. But, regardless of complexity, a lot of general principles apply. You can do something like an expo pavilion with a tenth of the people and disciplines. It's a matter of the problem type and what needs to be brought to the solutions. It's one of those things, how complex is a story place? It depends on what the program is, what your audience is, and the operational objectives. If it is a place people are for the most part visiting only once, the way you would approach that design is very different from the way you would do in a place where you are trying to bring people back, and need to refresh it, and bring in new things to rebuild or remarket it, and so on. Again the design strategy changes for the solution.

SED: You often mention that the balance of rich meaning in an experience and information overload relies on hierarchies designed within the experience to gate users and allow them to choose how deep they go. Can you elaborate on that?

JS: I think that is really important, to have those layers. If you were to do it all in one level, for example, you could put it all out there. I'm trying to think of an example. Let's say you had a museum where there is a group of small exhibits, just a bunch of exhibits in glass cases, or a gallery with paintings on the wall, and there is nothing else, that's it. To me that is a one level experience. While you could look at it again, you are essentially looking at it the same way; there is not another dimension to it. Now for example if we were to add in a media component to that experience, it might be, let's say a large immersive media component that provided a context and story for those glass cases or paintings on the wall; that's one other level. And then you might have say a small media kiosk, or something over your cell phone, or whatever, that was giving you another set of information, you have a third level.

So how you engage with the experience can be at several levels, and once it takes on more dimensionality it allows you to engage in different ways.

SED: I'm wondering how does that relate to legibility? Do you try to create legibility within these hierarchies or do you let the user intuitively move through them?

JS: That's interesting. There are two ways to think about that. I think there is value to both. There is value to having a structure that is clearly understood. I think, there are a lot of people that really need to feel secure in the way they move through and experience information; it needs to be delivered in a way that they 'get it', every step of the way. Otherwise it becomes confusing, and if you're confused you're stressed and then the first thing you're going to do is turn off. So that's one aspect of it. Beyond that, however, the fact that other people can go off the path, or can access information in a kind of browsing, serendipitous way, is also very powerful. Because you discover things there you may not have done if you stayed consistently on the path. My view is, ideally, you want to try and provide both kinds of experience. You want the defined, obvious structure. Again it's like creating a 'main street', but then you add little alleys, or gateways for people to escape down and discover things; for those that want to be more adventurous or browse around and pop out at a different place, so to speak. I think that's highly desirable. That's what makes it rich, fun, more engaging. It invites you to come back and discover new things.

SED: What you saying makes me think of play. I'm wondering when you design spaces, these systems, these story systems do you think about play? And if so what is that you to you?

JS: It depends on how you define 'play'. To me it's part and parcel of the experience. Play involves a certain level of interaction. Obviously it's about enjoyment and interacting in some way with something. Whether it's full body interaction or mental interaction, that's fundamentally what play is about. There are ways to do that in the real world or in virtual worlds, or vice versa, because you move through these spaces with mind and body reacting to what you encounter. So at one level you are always engaged in play whether you realize it or not. It may be very loosely defined as in the sense of playfulness, or may be a structured competition, or it may follow a narrative path as in a more theatrical sense of a play. Regardless, you are engaging yourself and others in sequential interactions that may be conscious, or may be totally serendipitous and unplanned.

But it's going to happen.

SED: That's awesome. As games are increasingly trying to focus on creating space and places and really inviting people into virtual worlds and trying to make them emotional experiences at the same time. I think the idea of what play is and how to integrate play with the designed experience is really important for games.

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JS: And I think it's something even more important as body motion is involved in gaming. Like the Wii, which is going to continue. You're now introducing another visceral dimension, which is so powerful in terms of creating emotion and engaging you, and in terms of creating a memory of the game.

SED: In your article in the [TAA newsletter](#), "[Invented Places](#)", you speak of your guiding principles for creating place [1. Structure and form, 2. Sequential Experience, 3. Visual Communication]. You suggested that the combination of these elements creates gestalt in the audience. How do you know when you've found the right balance?

JS: Exactly, it may be at a very subconscious level, and that's fine; in fact it often works better that way; as an underlying knowledge of a pattern that you've learned, like a 'mandala', or you pick it up as it reveals itself as you go along. It doesn't necessarily matter how it occurs, the recognition of the pattern can obviously reinforce the entire game structure and the narrative and your sense of how you relate to it.

SED: You use story in a pretty unique way, what is your definition of story?

JS: A good question. If you think about classic story telling, a story is a describing to others an experience or series of actions that have taken place that you want to share. Obviously there have been very classic story structures, like the 3-act play. It comes back to Joseph Campbell and the heroes' journey, which has a beginning, middle and end. That's what it's all about, and it's really if anything a mirror of life. The basic 3-part evolution of what we feel comfortable with in story is really something that is derived from our own life cycle; how we perceive what we do both on a daily basis and as our entire existence on the planet. It's deep stuff, and it's genetically hard wired. Story in its essence allows us to share experiences, in ways that we have a common understanding, which comes from real world experience of life, which does tend to unfold in these limited, simple few steps. Obviously it can be complicated, poetic, abstract, and so on, which is fine. There are situations where the intent is for people to create the story out of pieces of information that you give them. Which can be interesting, but often can result in very diverse experiences for people, and depending on what you are trying to do that can be a good or a bad thing. There are all these parameters, or creative constraints, which determine whether you want to make something loose and serendipitous or highly structured and predictable.

SED: That seems to relate to what you spoke of early in terms of scoping solutions?

JS: What I find, to be perfectly honest, is that it doesn't matter so much what the scale of the problem is; whether it's a very complex mixed-use resort with entertainment centers and theme parks, or a simple museum exhibit area. What I find is, apart from creatively approach it in a similar way, what I'm looking for is a very simple construct to begin with; as a way to get the big idea; to get that gestalt; to get that understanding of 'what is this really about?' Regardless of size you need to take the same approach. It almost becomes, rings within rings, because if you start with a complex place, there needs to be a clear, systematic organizational set of relationships to that world. You can then go into part of that world and derive another set of organizational relationships, but again relatively simplified. And then you can drop down to another level within that place. Let's say we were talking about a series of cities: At the highest level, there is relationship between the cities. Then you can go into each city and in each city there are neighborhoods, and there are relationships between the neighborhoods. You can go into them and there is a relationship between the buildings. You can go into the building and there is a relationship between the rooms. So you sort of drop down, level by level, but at each level I believe there really needs to be a way to organizationally and structurally understand what is going on.

SED: I find that interesting, especially with your architectural background. There is a well know professor at MIT whom has a published a paper called "[Game Design as Narrative Architecture](#)". His view is that you are really creating an architecture, a system for people will navigate this space and come away with, their own story. What you are saying in terms of these interrelated systems within a space sounds very architectural.

JS: Well it is architectural; there is no doubt about it. I discovered that when I first got into Interactive Media back in the early 80's, when I first had to design how people would interface with that kind of information in that context. Back in the early 80's touch-screen was very cutting-edge, no one was quite sure how people would react to it. The big problem initially was to try and understand how to keep people engaged and how they would feel comfortable with the material without becoming disoriented or frustrated in other ways. It is really architectural because it's about time and space.

When programmers create these complex tree structures of all the various bits of content and how they relate, that's an architecture.

SED: How has technology affected your craft as a storyteller?

JS: In the end of the day it doesn't matter if you are talking about a movie, a place, or a game, much of it depends on a good story. Whether you do something as a simple animation, just by drawing a few lines, or you do it as full-blown 3D CGI stuff, it doesn't amount to anything if the story's not there. The difference in technology is interesting, but not essential, unless you're evolving a totally new level of experience as in 2D versus 3D. If the story is better with the simple line presentation it will get a better response than however much money and digital effects you throw at it. New technology is novel for about 5 seconds, then everybody goes "Okay, now what?" So I'm a great believer that story is the foundation for a great experience. One of the best examples of that approach is PIXAR; these days the most successful studio in animated movies. And why are they so good? It's because they spend years on building a story for each of those movies. I mean YEARS, just on the story!

But you really see and feel the difference, compared to others that don't take the time to evolve a really good story.

SED: There's an analogy I make in reference to my problems with the production methodologies employed in videogames. It would be as if PIXAR would animate for a few years, and after animating for a few years they'd kinda try to figure out what the story was. Maybe if then if they couldn't figure it out they'd higher some hotshot writer to come in and try making sense of the omni-directional chaos that's been in the production pipeline for two years.

JS: Exactly!

SED: That's not how they do things, right? They preplan stuff with people who are trained storytellers.

JS: Absolutely. That's exactly what one of my game design friend's has to deal with as a creative director. He's trying to get in there and setup stories right at the beginning, so the game flows out of it. As opposed to trying to fit a story to a game structure that is there for other reasons.

SED: Hmm... Maybe he'll have to be my next victim?

JS: Why not?

SED: All right, well thank you Jan, it's been a pleasure!

JS: Thank you.

It was in transcribing this interview that I truly realized the deep nature of the approach Jan brings to the table. His wisdom certainly inspires me, and I hope you can say the same for yourself. For the Narrative Design Exploratorium, I'm Stephen Erin Dinehart, thank you for your time.

You can find out more about Jan and TAA Canada on their websites:

<http://www.studiosircus.com/>
<http://taacanada.com/>

A fascinating article by Jan, which is quoted in this interview can be found @ <http://taacanada.com/publicpdf/TAAnews2006Q4fs.pdf>

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