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Future Story Chasers: An experience with co-creation of fiction in the classroom through a collaborative storytelling game

ABSTRACT

- 1.
2. *In this article, we will outline the co-design process of the Future Story Chasers*
3. *storytelling game methodology. Future Story Chasers is a research project aimed at*
4. *fostering the collective creation of stories based on a common fictional premise. A*
5. *first experience was carried out in late 2017 in three primary and secondary schools*
6. *in Barcelona, with approximately 200 participants from three different age groups*
7. *and diverse social backgrounds. Previously, a co-design process was carried out*
8. *to establish the grounds for the narrative and game experience, with a twofolded*
9. *aim: to nurture adaptive storytelling strategies through a broadly defined fictional*
10. *universe set in a near future; and to stimulate reflection around social issues, mean-*
11. *ingful for the participants, through fiction and creativity. We will focus on the design*
12. *process of the board game that served as the starting point for the experience and the*
13. *challenges for the overall research methodology.*
- 14.

KEYWORDS

storytelling
board games
narrative
co-creation
co-design
education

INTRODUCTION

Stories are essential in many domains of our everyday lives. The concept of storytelling allows us to point to a social and cultural practice oriented to the act of telling and sharing stories, be it by traditional means connected to the oral and performative tradition, or by technological reproduction, what Klapproth describes as the ‘narrative sharing of worlds’ (2004: 127). Storytelling has usually been approached as a product, with a focus on content and narrative practices led by creative agents, but also as a methodology, as an agent to stimulate the creativity of publics, identified as participants of narrative experiences. Storytelling methodologies can serve to stimulate debate, to generate, share and develop ideas, to express personal experiences around different subjects characterized by proximity to participants (Kankainen et al. 2012). Even if many times these stories come from actual life experiences, fiction is also used as a way to explore other kinds of expression, taking creativity one step further: this approach allows dealing with complex subjects indirectly, in a more detached way, through analogies or speculation (Dunne and Raby 2013), while at the same time using well-known narrative strategies coming from media and popular culture.

The interest in the design of storytelling experiences, and specifically in co-creation, has been a continuing line of research of several authors (see Roig et al. 2014; San Cornelio and Roig 2015; Roig and San Cornelio 2016). More specifically, co-creation of fictional stories connected to social subjects was the starting point of precedent projects (Communities and Culture Network, 2015 and MINECO, 2014–17). A more applied and elaborated methodology has been developed for the project object of this article, Future Story Chasers (from now on FSC), a project funded by the Barcelona City Council in 2017. For the FSC project the research team collaborated with three schools in Barcelona; a close collaboration with each school board was key to developing a storytelling experience that touched the imaginaries of the participants related to the future, as well as to identify social issues and topics closer to each school’s agenda. Drawing from other experiences in the use of board game design to discuss social issues such as environmental sustainability (Horn et al. 2014), it was decided to design a physical board game to foster creativity through storytelling. By engaging with the schools from early stages it was possible to refine a methodology to help students discuss and address social issues such as sustainability and acceptance of the Other through play.

In this article, we will focus on the first stage of the project, that is, the process of co-design of the narrative experience with the schools, specifically, the development of the board game, which was in fact not only the starting point but also the backbone of the project.

OUTLINE OF THE FSC PROJECT

The FSC project is, in a way, at the crossroads of three different lines of research: first, it is the culmination and the practical application of the authors’ previous inquiries on co-creation; second, it is their first formal attempt of integrating storytelling as a transformative tool for creativity. Finally, it brings back to the spotlight the game culture (Roig et al. 2009) in relation to both narrative and design.

The field of game narrative is a vast and compelling area of study that presents research opportunities for scrutinizing how storytelling can be employed for teaching and learning processes (Dickey 2011); specifically,

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1. fields like persuasive games (Ferrara 2013) or educational games are currently
 2. growing areas (Göbel et al. 2009, Morales and San Cornelio 2016). At the
 3. same time, there has also been a revalorization of board games, used for
 4. different purposes, also in the educational field (Frossard et al. 2012). In this
 5. regard, it is remarkable that design methodologies such as co-design (Sanders
 6. and Stappers 2008) have made possible this close connection of design with
 7. education. Thus, both future design and speculative design have also been
 8. part of our sources of inspiration while conceptualizing the project.

9. The overall goal of FSC is to contribute to the area of co-creation and
 10. collective creativity through fictional narratives and applying these kinds of
 11. methodologies in educational settings through story games. In our approach
 12. to formal learning environments, we have considered the process of trans-
 13. formation experienced by the Catalan educational system. We have opted for
 14. a constructivist and an experiential approach that includes various strategies
 15. such as project-based methods or the so-called 'new literacies' (Knobel and
 16. Lankshear 2014), depending on the specific context of the school.

17. Taking this context into account, the FSC project had two main objectives:

18. 1. to develop collaborative frameworks and tools for the production of stories
 19. in an educational setting; and
20. 2. to create and develop techniques that promote reflection concerning social
 21. and environmental issues by using creativity, fantasy, fictional elements
 22. and future imaginaries.

23. The idea of creating a game that used storytelling with future imaginaries was
 24. based on the following working hypothesis: by imagining possible worlds, we
 25. can spark creativity in pre-writing and writing activities of different kinds of
 26. media texts (photos, drawings, videos, memes, texts and so on) and, at the
 27. same time, foster critical thinking and citizen empowerment. Therefore, we
 28. understood this storytelling-based game as an essential tool that could be used
 29. to discuss both collective and individual social issues that affect the partici-
 30. pants in their current context, which in many occasions are deeply rooted in
 31. their everyday life and are difficult to express or articulate straightforwardly.

32. **APPROACHING THE FIELD: PLANNING AND COORDINATION WITH** 33. **THE SCHOOLS**

34. According to the objectives and scope of the project, three schools were
 35. chosen: the Ramon Llull School, the Juan Manuel Zafra High School and the
 36. La Salle Gràcia School. For this first experience, the selection criterion was
 37. that they belonged to different neighbourhoods in Barcelona (Eixample/Fort
 38. Pienc, Camp de l'Arpa/Clot and Gràcia), with different dependencies regard-
 39. ing property: two public schools, owned by the regional and local govern-
 40. ment; and one private, belonging to a religious order, and also with different
 41. cultural and socio-economic backgrounds of the families. Additionally, the
 42. similarity in education levels became a priority (a primary school, a second-
 43. ary school and a primary/secondary school) to be able to work with similar
 44. age groups and carry out a comparative analysis between two of the three
 45. schools. Finally, we wanted to conduct all the experiences during the same
 46. week, as it was essential for us to enhance the feeling of a simultaneous
 47. activity and real time.

School	Grade	Age	Expected amount of participants
Ramon Llull	Fifth Grade Primary	10–11	50
La Salle Gràcia	Fifth Grade Primary	10–11	25
	Sixth Grade Primary	11–12	25
	First Grade Compulsory Secondary	12–13	50
Juan Manuel Zafra	Third Grade Compulsory Secondary	14–15	30

Table 1: Distribution of groups per school.

Additionally, we opted to select schools we had some kind of previous ties with, in order to facilitate the co-design and planning processes with the principal and teaching staff. It also aided to obtain a more in-depth insight of their interests, as well as to build a relationship based on mutual trust and understanding, which is key in co-design processes in community settings (Cruikshank et al. 2016). There were about 180 expected participants in the experience as a whole, divided into four groups and a total of eight sessions, with the following distribution.

We suggested the schools to conduct the experience from 13 to 17 November, during the Science Week of Catalonia, an initiative coordinated by the Catalan Foundation for Research and Innovation. The 2017 edition was inspired by International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development, promoted by the United Nations. Even if each school followed the Science Week in different ways and with different intensities, it served as a way to make it easier to ‘disrupt’ classes and as an umbrella for a coordinated experience.

We assigned one researcher as an interlocutor for each centre, while the project’s core team tried to be present at all the meetings in order to strengthen familiarity and trust with teaching and managing staff. As a result of these meetings, a scheme of two two-hour workshops soon appeared to be the most convenient. In Workshop 1, common for all, the board game was central, with some minor differences considering age; Workshop 2 would be adapted to each group as decided during the initial phase. The overall structure is detailed in Table 2:

Workshop 1	Generation of ideas and stories through play, using a board game designed specifically for the experience and small-group work (four participants per group). Organization of ideas and a first draft of the story.
Workshop 2	In the same groups, development of story and production of the first version in a specific format.
	<i>Outputs per school:</i>
	Ramon Lull: Open text potentially used for scenic arts
	La Salle Gracia: Comic and Storyboard
	Juan Manuel Zafra: Social Media Storytelling

Table 2: Workshops planning.

1. In the initial meetings, we not only agreed on the schedule of the work-
 2. shops during the week, but also discussed the need for preliminary actions
 3. to create expectation and provide information to the participants. We offered
 4. to organize some presentations for students and teachers and to produce
 5. support material like posters for the classroom and graphic and video content
 6. to foster engagement. We ended up doing a couple of presentations, which
 7. proved to be very valuable for information purposes and as a chance to begin
 8. a conversation with the participants beforehand.

9. Due to the fact that we were going to work with under-aged subjects, a
 10. few steps had to be taken in advance to ensure ethical research: first, to agree
 11. with each school the most suitable way to let families know about the project
 12. and asking for image rights; second, to apply for the individual legal require-
 13. ments derived from working with under-aged.

15. THE NARRATIVE BOARD GAME FSC DESIGN

16. *Conceptualization*

17. The FSC board game was designed to generate ideas and stories in fictional
 18. and future backgrounds that would additionally set the ground for further
 19. discussion on the creative process and related social issues. According to
 20. Sterling (2012), design fiction has to foresee the culture and the context where
 21. a designed artefact will be implemented. An advantage of using a fictional
 22. design is its internal logic and possible worlds elements that can generate
 23. empathy and engagement in the people that get in contact with it, and might
 24. assimilate it into their context. Therefore, using fiction with futuristic aspects
 25. as our framework for designing the board game allowed us to consider the
 26. values, meanings and implications from an ethical and socio-political perspec-
 27. tive (Sterling 2012).

28. We designed a game with fictitious narrative elements that helped to visual-
 29. ize imaginary scenarios and create stories based on the topics previously defined
 30. between the researchers and the school board members. The starting point for
 31. creating the game was inspired by the notions of 'tourism' and 'sustainability'
 32. (themes taken from the Science Week), the reflection on the participants' own
 33. prejudices regarding the 'Other', tourism and urban environmental sustainabil-
 34. ity. The process for creating the FSC board game was grounded on three pillars:
 35. (1) to be aligned with the suggested topics; (2) to foster motivation and engage-
 36. ment by using known game components, such as board, cards and dice; and (3)
 37. to allow participants to use the game resources to create stories based on the
 38. narrative elements of the game in different kinds of textual formats.

39. The game was developed in an evolving and co-designed process drawing
 40. from previous experiences, the collaboration with the schools, a series of brain-
 41. storming and work sessions to allow the research team to test a varied range
 42. of game dynamics to create the storytelling game. The team's interdisciplinary
 43. backgrounds (media, design, anthropology, arts, computer science, advertising
 44. and education) were instrumental for the final result of the game. During this
 45. process the game evolved from a playing cards game based on classic narra-
 46. tive elements from Greimas' Actantial Model (Greimas and Courtes 1990) to
 47. a more complex structure that still included some classic categories (main
 48. character, skills, objective/obstacle, assistant/support), and also a category for
 49. narrative development (events/actions) as shown in Figure 1. A board and a
 50. dice that contributed with a random element were also added through the
 51. process. Once we had a prototype, a final test was carried out with two groups
 52.



Figure 1: Some examples of cards (by the authors).

of four kids to adjust the final design of the game and the tutorial that would be presented to the students at the beginning of the first Workshop.

The thematic of each card typology was based on the topics that emerged from the whole co-design process. The goal was to work with sustainability and interculturality, and dialogue with the leading theme of the Science Week: sustainable tourism. The first idea was to think of the traveller seen as the 'Other', as a way to prompt reflection on the world and about the life experience (Nash 2001) of being in strange place. This idea evolved to a traveller from another planet, an extraterrestrial. Nonetheless, our aim was not to generate stories about the first contact with other species, but rather to look at them as any other traveller from a different cultural background. Therefore the narrative storyline of the game was

To be able to sustain the growing extraterrestrial tourism market in Barcelona, one of the favourite extraterrestrial destinations, the new Terminal T was designed. The presence of living beings from other planets is not something out of the common anymore. However, in recent days, the arrival of a special group of extraterrestrials got particular attention. This group has shown to be very interested in what is happening in the city, particularly everything related to environment and sustainability. Their arrival requires our engagement.

Another critical issue for the team was also how the data would be collected, organized and subsequently analysed. This had an influence on the design

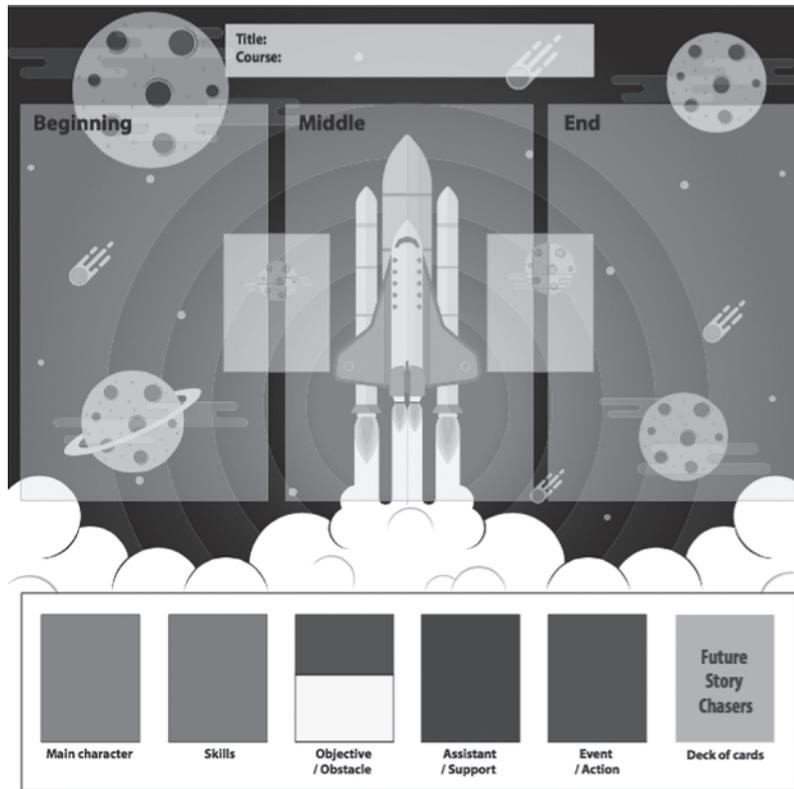


Figure 2: Board Game design (by the authors, background image: Gadingeffendi0-Freepik.com).

process, as for instance the decision of using a board with stickers or numbering the cards.

GAME MECHANICS

The board game was designed for groups of four or five participants, who hold seven cards at the beginning of the game (previously shuffled). In turns, the players throw one card on the table, placed in its right category in the bottom side of the board (see Figure 3). Then, the player rolls the dice, which introduces the elements of chance and choice ('previous card', 'vote', 'choose a card', 'nothing happens', 'draw a card from the deck' and 'throw 1 card'). At the end of the game, the cards at the top define the basic elements that will be used to build a story. As an exception, we allow the players to use the top four cards in the Event/ Action category in order to have more creative choice: these cards are then distributed by the players over the board following the traditional narrative scheme of Beginning, Middle and the End, or, potentially, as turning points. This distribution can be changed at any time. Once the first elements are set, a quick brainstorming section was performed. Thus, the remaining parts of the board were available for the kids to include post-its with their new ideas. For subsequent analysis, we took pictures of each board after brainstorming (see Figure 3) and compared it with the narrative outputs.

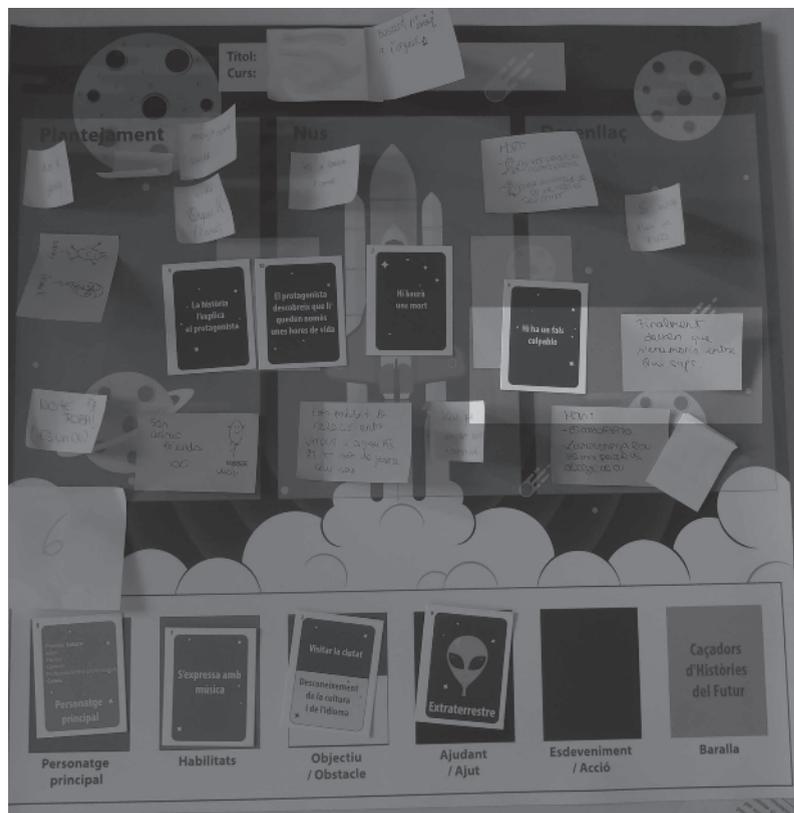


Figure 3: Board game after playing.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this article we have detailed the earlier stages of the FSC research project. Following our main research objectives, we designed a game structure for playful story generation through a participatory process where we entered in a close dialogue with the centres where our experience would take place. This have allowed us to acquire a deeper insight of the environment we were going to intervene in, but also helped us to refine the design process by including the participants from the beginning. The design process moreover demanded us to consider how data coming from the board game were going to be collected for subsequent analysis, while keeping in mind ethical issues regarding working with under-age subjects. This recursive method based on feedback and adaptation to the participants was carried out in the actual workshops. The design process resulted in a highly valued game experience: participants adopted different strategies and play styles, leading to imaginative potential stories, which were developed in the second workshop in the form of some tangible prototype. For both students and teachers (always present during play sessions) the game revealed a great way to foster motivation, especially regarding the creative part of the narrative process, encouraged disruption – also for the research team – and prompted conversations about social problems such as the acceptance and integration of new immigrant students, tourism and sustainability. Upcoming work will include

1. a thorough quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data obtained from
2. story development, leading to more than 40 stories (with some comparative
3. elements in similar age groups) and also strategies, play styles and reflec-
4. tion on the process coming from observation and group discussion. Future
5. steps for the project will explore the possibilities of this design methodology
6. to other kinds of collectives and realities through even more flexible game
7. settings, as well as expanding the game element to the whole experience.

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