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Interviewers:

Mehulkumar Desai, Indian Institute of Technology (Indian School of Mines), Dhanbad, India,

https://orcid.org/0009-0001-5483-0849

Shanmugapriya T., Indian Institute of Technology (Indian School of Mines), Dhanbad, India,

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1524-429X

Interviewee:

Hartmut Koenitz, Södertörn University, Stockholm, Sweden

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3390-831X

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Interactive Digital Narrative as a Medium for Complex Times: An Interview with Hartmut Koenitz

A narrativa digital interativa como meio para tempos complexos: uma entrevista com Hartmut Koenitz

Interviewer: Mehulkumar Desai[1], Indian Institute of Technology (Indian School of Mines), Dhanbad, India, Shanmugapriya T. [2],Indian Institute of Technology (Indian School of Mines), Dhanbad, India,
Interviewee: Hartmut Koenitz[3], Södertörn University, Stockholm, Sweden

ABSTRACT

This interview with Prof. Hartmut Koenitz establishes IDN as a computationally grounded medium requiring distinct theoretical frameworks. Drawing from cybernetics and systems theory, Koenitz argues that interactive feedback loops fundamentally distinguish IDN from traditional narrative forms. His SPP (System, Process, Product) model conceptualizes IDNs as dynamic systems generating meaning through participant interaction. He advocates IDN's particular capacity to represent complexity through multiple simultaneous perspectives, contextual decision-making, and consequence visualization. Koenitz positions generative AI as a tool for expanding procedural narrative design while maintaining authorial control. He emphasizes the need for globally inclusive IDN research, particularly formalization of non-Western narrative structures, to advance culturally diverse expressive forms suitable for twenty-first-century complexity.

Keywords: Interactive Digital Narrative, cybernetics, SPP model, complexity representation, narrative design, procedural branching, systems theory, Hartmut Koenitz.

[1] **Mehulkumar Desai** is a research scholar at Indian Institute of Technology, Dhanbad. His research centers at the intersection of Electronic Literature and Interactive Digital Narratives in the Indian context. To foster creativity and establish scholarship in Interactive Digital Narratives in India, he has co-founded Indian Consortium for Interactive Digital Narratives (ICIDN) with Dr. Shanmugapriya. He currently serves as an Editor-at-Large in DHNow and has previously served as a Guest Editor for a Special issue titled, “Digital Futures: Archives, AI, and Access in Indian Digital Humanities” in the journal IJHAC (forthcoming).
Email: mehulmd1106@gmail.com

[2] **Shanmugapriya T** is a researcher in digital humanities and digital literature, working within South Asian, particularly Indian context. Her research focuses on questions of technology, gender, and environment in both conventional and digital literature, at times employing computational literary methods and tools for the former. She has published in DSH, DHQ, and New Review of Hypermedia, among others. She is a co-founder of ICIDN with Mehulkumar Desai and serves on the Board of Directors of the Electronic Literature Organization, as Secretary of DHARTI, and as a Peer-review Editor of DHQ.
Email: santos.gonzalezt@ciplima.org.pe shanmugapriya@iitism.ac.in

[3] **Hartmut Koenitz** is a distinguished scholar of interactive digital narrative whose work has significantly shaped the field’s theoretical and applied dimensions. As Professor at Södertörn University, he investigates interactive digital narratives and video games as dynamic systems for representing social complexity and fostering critical reflection. His research spans narrative theory, game studies, user experience, and digital media, with major contributions including Understanding Interactive Digital Narrative and the co-edited volume Interactive Digital Narrative: History, Theory and Practice. He has also played a central role in advancing international collaboration through his leadership, including his presidency of ARDIN, the Association for Research in Digital Interactive Narratives. His scholarship is widely recognized for demonstrating how interactive storytelling can deepen public understanding of migration, climate change, and civic discourse.
Email: hartmut.koenitz@sh.se

RESUMO

Esta entrevista com o Prof. Hartmut Koenitz define a IDN como um meio com base computacional que requer quadros teóricos distintos. Baseando-se na cibernética e na teoria dos sistemas, Koenitz defende que os ciclos de retroalimentação interativos distinguem fundamentalmente a IDN das formas narrativas tradicionais. O seu modelo SPP (Sistema, Processo, Produto) conceitualiza as IDNs como sistemas dinâmicos que geram significado através da interação dos participantes. Defende a capacidade específica das IDN para representar a complexidade através de múltiplas perspetivas simultâneas, da tomada de decisões contextualizada e da visualização das consequências. Koenitz posiciona a IA generativa como uma ferramenta para expandir o design narrativo processual, mantendo simultaneamente o controlo autoral. Salienta a necessidade de uma investigação globalmente inclusiva sobre as IDN, em particular a formalização de estruturas narrativas não ocidentais, para promover formas expressivas culturalmente diversificadas, adequadas à complexidade do século XXI.

Palavras-chave: Narrativa digital interativa, cibernética, modelo SPP, representação da complexidade, design narrativo, ramificação procedural, teoria dos sistemas, Hartmut Koenitz.

1. Introduction

On April 22, 2026, Mehulkumar Desai and Shanmugapriya T. interviewed Hartmut Koenitz via Zoom in a ninety-minute conversation spanning multiple time zones. This discussion offers a comprehensive exploration of Koenitz's intellectual trajectory, his foundational contributions to Interactive Digital Narrative (IDN), and his vision for the field's development.

The interview examines how Koenitz's diverse background in literature, information science, journalism, and media practice led him to recognize that interactive narrative constitutes a distinct field requiring its own theoretical vocabulary. The conversation traces the intellectual foundations of his work, particularly the influence of cybernetics and systems theory on his SPP (System, Process, Product) model, and addresses why conventional narratological frameworks prove insufficient for understanding digital interactive forms. Central throughout is Koenitz's argument that IDN represents not a derivative extension of literature, cinema, or games, but a fundamentally new expressive medium.

The interview also addresses the relation between theory and practice in Koenitz's work, including his authoring system ASAPS, the renewed significance of procedural branching, the role of generative AI in contemporary IDN practice, and the need for globally inclusive narrative design knowledge.

2. Interview

Mehul: Thank you so much, Professor, for doing this interview. Let us begin from the beginning. Before Interactive Digital Narrative became your field-defining commitment, what first drew you toward narrative, digital media, and interaction as a combined problem? How did your journey in this field begin?

Hartmut: Thank you for your kind words. I am happy to be here and to talk about Interactive Digital Narrative. For me, it began with a combination of interests that, for a long time, I actually saw as separate. I studied English literature and language, German literature and language, and information science. Information science, as it was framed where I studied, was mostly concerned with practical applications of computation. My German degree, which at the time was called the Magister, combined information science, German literature, and politics.

At the same time, I worked as a journalist, particularly as a technology journalist, and I also consulted on media projects. So I was already very interested in computation as a means of expression. I also worked at the Central Computing Services Department (ZEDAT) at Freie Universität Berlin, where I gave courses, many of which were essentially creator-oriented courses using tools such as Macromedia Director and other early authoring systems.

For me, using the computer for creative expression was always fascinating. At the same time, I had completed studies in German and English literature. These interests came together more clearly when I was writing my master's thesis on reducing complexity on the internet using artificial agents. During that work, I encountered the idea of interactive narrative using virtual characters. That was the moment when I felt: finally, I can bring these two interests together. That became my hook, and since then I have worked in this field. It organized my academic career and my general perspective.

Mehul: Your scholarship suggests that interactive narrative is not simply an extension of literature or cinema, but something that requires its own conceptual language. When did you first realize that existing narratological models were insufficient for digital interactive forms? In your 2010 work, you argued that traditional theory was inadequate because digital media challenged assumptions inherited from non-digital forms, and you developed the SPP model, foregrounding system and process rather than only the finished product. Was that the decisive intellectual turning point for you? Which scholars or intellectual traditions helped shape this direction?

Hartmut: It starts earlier than that, really, with the trajectory I just described. I bring not only a narrative understanding; my thinking is very much influenced by information science. At FU Berlin, information science included cybernetics and systems theory. That meant thinking in feedback loops and systems.

Cybernetics is basic to computation. Sometimes, in my talks, I compare canonical narrative structure with an artillery table, and they actually look similar. An artillery table assumes a fixed mapping: I put the gun here, the target is there, I know the inclination and the projectile, and then I hit the target. That works for fixed situations. But it is no longer sufficient when the target is a fast-moving airplane or submarine, and that was the foundational problem during WW2 which led to cybernetics - how to hit a moving target. To solve that problem, you need continuous feedback: input, recalculation, and adjustment.

That, to me, is exactly what cybernetics helps us understand. Interactive computing itself is a feedback loop. There is a program; it runs by itself, but also waits for user input, processes that input, continues, and then waits again. This is the fundamental structure of the digital medium. Once we put narrative into an interactive medium, its fundamental structure is no longer the same as in a fixed medium such as printed text or the theatrical release of a film.

So for me, this was not a single dramatic insight. Given my training in cybernetics and systems theory, it was rather obvious that if one makes an interactive artifact, one needs a framework that accounts for feedback loops and for the fact that what one is creating is a system.

That also drew me very strongly to Janet Murray, who became the main supervisor of my PhD. She shares the foundational understanding of procedurality as one of the essential qualities of the digital medium. Procedurality means recognizing that a computer program can run by itself. When it becomes interactive, participation enters. When we add spatiality and encyclopedic affordance, we have a completely new expressive medium and these - the affordances of the digital medium and understanding its potential for novel types of expression – are seminal contributions in her work.

Janet Murray's work drew me to Georgia Tech. I think Janet and I align because she combines deep narrative understanding with an understanding of computation. She was trained as a Victorian literature scholar, but she also worked as a programmer at IBM in the 1960s. That shaped her thinking. Similarly, I had programming and technical support experience during my academic development. For me, the combination of understanding narrative deeply while also understanding computation is crucial.

This is where we reach the limit of how far we can stretch narrative theory built on non-dynamic works. We need a new theory because we are dealing with a different kind of expression and a different kind of medium, one governed by cybernetics and systemic representation. What I developed was a framing for how to understand that.

Mehul: Since cybernetics and feedback helped inform your SPP model, and since electronic literature scholarship also has a strong background in cybernetics, what made you adopt the term Interactive Digital Narrative when adjacent terms such as interactive storytelling already existed? What motivated you to use IDN as the label for the field?

Hartmut: This is a loaded question, because there are several issues here. My problem with the term storytelling, and the reason I do not generally use it, is not that I imagine I can stop others from using it. I am not naïve. People will continue to use it, and if practitioners are happy with it, that is fine. But if we want analytical precision, I think there are several problems with the term.

First, at the word level, what are we even talking about? Is storytelling the thing or the activity? The term can function as a noun or a gerund. That is not ideal when we want to define something precisely.
Second, storytelling includes the term teller, and that becomes problematic for Interactive Digital Narrative. I would challenge the assumption that there is a teller in the traditional sense. The term carries assumptions that must be problematized.

Third, across different practices, the meaning of storytelling is highly contested. A filmmaker, a journalist, and someone working in public relations may all mean very different things by it. For some, storytelling simply means making facts colorful. For others, it will be a specific way to present a topic, and some people take it to mean the sum of all of their activities on a project.

For me, storytelling is an amorphous word that means too many things to too many people. Interactive Digital Narrative is more neutral. It also creates a useful alienation effect: people do not automatically assume they know what it means. When I use "storytelling," many people assume they understand it, but their understanding usually does not align with mine. That is why I find the term imprecise and potentially confusing.

Mehul: How do you see IDN fitting among adjacent and emerging fields? Some are grounded in established disciplines, while IDN seems to build from several different areas. Where do you see IDN in terms of positionality? And what are the threshold points at which a work becomes IDN or fails to be IDN?

Hartmut: Overall, I think IDN is a perspective. It is a perspective that says something genuinely different and new can be done. In that sense, it pushes back against remediation.

To put it simply, remediation often says: there is nothing new under the sun. I reject that strongly. That does not mean IDNs do not take inspiration or content from earlier forms. They do. But the computational medium introduces a fundamental change because it gives us capacities we did not have before.

There is also a limit to how far theory can be stretched before it becomes imprecise. A typical example is the idea of text as an analytical unit. That term has become so amorphous that everything can become a text: what you are wearing, the colors a political party chooses, and so on. At that point, one begins to lose the distinction between text and expression. We need precision in our terms if we want to understand something.

This is not an attack on literary theory. Literary theory is fantastic as it is. It gives us wonderful instruments and methods of understanding. But Interactive Digital Narrative is materially different because it is a narrative expression in a digital interactive medium. That is where the limitations appear when one tries simply to stretch literary theory.

I have shown examples of this in my book. One recurring problem is the assertion that interactivity does not create narrative meaning. I find that baffling. Marie-Laure Ryan, for example, has made that argument more than once, but to my knowledge she has never really supported it convincingly. Nick Montfort's insight was important when he said that interactive fiction is not a narrative by itself; it is a computer program. That is a fundamental and correct insight. But when he then says that literary theory still applies, I find myself asking: how do these positions connect?

This is, unfortunately, typical. Scholars starting from literary theory often recognize that IDNs are somewhat different, go some distance in that recognition, and then stop. My position is that the new medium challenges basic assumptions.

I am not the first person to say this. I build on many influential scholars. A major influence on me is Roy Ascott, who developed cybernetic art theory in the 1960s. One of his key insights was that we are no longer creating objects; we are creating systems. My SPP model owes a great deal to that insight.

Ascott also recognized something crucial: as IDN creators, we create incomplete works. We create works that are offerings to the audience, but the audience must do something. The completed work emerges from the combination of what the creator puts into the system and what the audience, as participants or interactors, do with it. This is not the same thing as interpretation. The full meaning of the cybernetic artwork is completed by the participant.

Mehul: What are the threshold points at which a work becomes IDN or fails to be IDN?

Hartmut: Essentially, all works that apply computation to facilitate a participatory narrative experience are IDNs. The particular manifestations can vary widely - video games, journalistic interactives, interactive documentaries, XR representations of cultural heritage, interactive narratives for therapy, but also hybrid board games which apply a digital system for progress etc. I have a definition of IDN in my latest book:

> Interactive digital narrative is a narrative expression in various forms, implemented as a multimodal computational system with optional analog elements and experienced through a participatory process in which interactors have a non- trivial influence on progress, perspective, content, and/ or outcome.

Mehul: Many scholars come into IDN carrying the intellectual baggage of traditional disciplines such as literature, cinema, theatre, game studies, or media studies. Does that disciplinary inheritance help them, or can it also limit them?

Hartmut: I'm not sure I would understand the knowledge people bring from different disciplines as baggage, but rather as enriching the multidiscipline of IDN studies. Of course, intellectual openness and curiosity is required for example if someone originates in literary theory and come for example to the ICIDS conference and listens to a paper describing an AI narrative planning system. That might be an intellectual challenge at first, but it is also an incredibly enriching experience. As I said before, IDN is a perspective - and in terms of studying IDN this does not mean to forget one's own roots, but to be open to novel approaches and perspectives different from one's core training.

Mehul: Many scholars have passed through IDN as an emerging field, but you have stayed. What made you remain committed to IDN over the long term, and what future do you anticipate for the field?

Hartmut: I think there are two answers. First, I like challenges. Understanding IDN and making IDNs is a very interesting intellectual and creative challenge. It has kept me busy since I entered the field. I do not think it will ever be completely finished, and it should not be. That is the nature of the work, and that is what makes it exciting.

Second, I am incredibly stubborn. I have had many papers rejected. The 2010 paper you mentioned was initially rejected by another venue with the argument that the problem had supposedly already been solved in the narratology-versus-ludology debate. But here we are many years later.

So yes, it takes stubbornness to continue. But more deeply, I have a conviction that we need a medium of expression for the many complex issues that surround us. This is not only an academic enterprise for me. I am deeply convinced that there is a problem with existing media.

We live in a highly complex world in which many people search for orientation and often find only problematic populist perspectives: simple answers to complex issues. In that sense, this is also a fight against simplification. I do not think simple messages work anymore. One can connect this to the postmodern project, in the sense that grand narratives, often simplistic narratives, are gone.

If we have any chance of survival or development, we need better ways to express ourselves. We need global understanding, and that can only come from acknowledging many different perspectives. We need forms of expression that are no longer simply binary, no longer just "this is right" and "this is wrong." Instead, we need forms that allow us to understand that in one context one solution may be best for the people directly affected, while in another context a different solution may be better.

We cannot express such complexity simply with the newspaper article or the television broadcast as they currently exist. We need dynamic ways of bringing in local data, representing multiple perspectives, allowing people to make decisions, see consequences, and perhaps replay. That is what IDN brings to the table. That is why I call it a medium for our complex times.

Shanmu: Since you mentioned complexity and the move away from simplistic binary narratives, I want to bring in your work on complexity. You and your co-authors have argued that IDN can help people understand complex public and personal issues, including migration, climate change, pandemic experience, trauma, and interpersonal relations. Why is IDN particularly suited to complexity in a way that more linear forms often are not? Does this move toward complexity mark a major evolution in your scholarship, or was the field always moving in that direction in your mind?

Hartmut: The reason IDN can represent complex issues is that, in the same artifact, you can have multiple perspectives. This comes from the encyclopedic quality of the digital medium: you essentially have vast space.

Unlike a film director, television producer, or newspaper journalist, you do not have to present one perspective, cut away from it, and then present another. You can present several perspectives in parallel and create decision points at which people can move from one perspective to another whenever they want. Users can explore different perspectives and then replay and choose another path through them. That is already a clear advantage over traditional media.

Another advantage is that you can incorporate decisions, not just one decision, but many decisions, and then show consequences. For example, you could create an IDN about environmental footprint. Users could say: I ride my bike three times a week, I change all my lightbulbs to LEDs, I add solar panels. These can be computationally represented. A newspaper can only write about the options. An IDN can let users input their own context: I live in this county, on this street. Then the system can calculate a more specific carbon footprint.

Good advice only becomes possible when context is taken into account. IDN allows users to enter their context and situation, make different decisions, and see an accumulation of effects. This applies not only to environmental issues, but also to life decisions. It need not be a simplistic branch such as “become an engineer” or “become a cook.” It can represent broader chains of consequences: moving to a different part of the country, changing family relationships, affecting future opportunities, and so on.

These are the kinds of representations we need now because people already know that simplistic messages no longer work. People know things are complex. What we need are answers that fit a specific problem and a specific context. That requires dynamic representation.

So again: multi-perspectivity, decisions and consequences, replay, and the ability to bring in live data. One could query the current price of gas or electricity; in theory, one could even connect to a smart meter. If people are willing to share relevant information, family situations and other contextual factors could also be incorporated. Of course, privacy concerns matter. I am not saying this is uncomplicated. But these are clear advantages of working in a dynamic, computational, connected medium.

At that point, we are no longer trying to “improve the book.” Some early hypertext scholars imagined the project as solving the problems of the book from a poststructuralist perspective, but I do not think that was a compelling project for most people. Books are fine. Films are fine. They are wonderful forms of expression. They were not waiting around to become interactive.

IDN becomes interesting when we stop saying, “This is the interactive novel” or “This is the interactive movie.” It is a different form of expression. That is what makes it interesting. And it also means that interactivity is not always necessary. With each project, one must ask: does this need to be interactive or not? That is a perfectly valid question. I am not making a universal claim of superiority. I am saying that there are things, especially aspects of our current condition, for which IDN has clear advantages because of its materiality and its dynamic computational foundation.

Mehul: One thing I value in your scholarship is that you are not only focused on academic theory; you also build creative models and practical systems. You have worked on how IDN can be used socially, educationally, and therapeutically, and you are interested in how creativity can be built around IDN. Could you speak about the relation between theory and practice in your own work?

Hartmut: I have always had both sides: theory and practice. Even in my PhD thesis, I developed the SPP model. It understands IDNs as digital artifacts, as dynamic systems containing what I call the proto-story: the prototype for all narratives that can be instantiated.

Instantiation happens in the first P, the process, meaning the interactive process in which an interactor engages with the system. The outcome is the product. The product can be distinguished as an objective product, such as a recording of the experience or a play trace, and a subjective product, meaning the participant's understanding of it in their head. That subjective product can itself become another system when someone tells another person about the experience or produces fan fiction based on a game experience - the latter part are enhancements of SPP influenced by Eladhari's work on Re-tellings. These are the basics of my SPP theory and model.

On the practical side, I created an authoring tool called ASAPS, the Advanced Stories Authoring and Presentation System. It implements that theory and is basically a branching narrative authoring tool. It uses procedurality in the sense that one can work with variables, inventory, counters, timers, and conditional checks. That is why I describe it as implementing procedural branching.

I developed ASAPS as part of my PhD and maintained it myself for about a decade. It was used for around 150 works. Unfortunately, because it was built in older technologies such as Flash and ActionScript 2, I eventually ran out of steam to maintain it. But conceptually I still think ASAPS had real value, and I have never quite found anything equivalent to it.

Twine is, of course, very popular. My issue with Twine is that it frames IDNs in a text-only way. Yes, with effort one can add images and other media, but they do not feel native to it. Twine is fundamentally a hypertext tool. ASAPS, by contrast, was multimedia from the beginning. It always supported images, video, sound, and so on. It also had a more visual programming logic, where one could see conditional structures instead of hiding everything in script.

Mehul: You mentioned ASAPS and its technological limitations. In the present moment, generative AI seems to be changing authoring, procedurality, and narrative design. How do you see generative AI in relation to IDN, and does it change the future of systems like ASAPS?

Hartmut: At one point, I thought perhaps I would find a grant or a very interested student to resurrect ASAPS, but that never really happened. Then came generative AI. Last year I asked Claude whether it could read ActionScript 2 and transform it into something new. It said, "Of course." That answer turned out to be premature. It took a lot of trial and error. A regular model failed, but with Claude Opus I made progress.

Since then, ASAPS has become what I call Project Phoenix, Phoenix out of the ashes. It is alive again and gaining many new features. I call the narrative units "beats," and I have added many new types of beats, including a considerable number of generative-AI-based beats.

I think there are a lot of opportunities here. Of course, I am very aware of the ethical issues around generative AI, and I am certainly not saying that generative AI can do everything for you. But I have built examples that show its power in this context, especially when it is controlled by the designer.

For example, in a work about environmental impact, the system can ask where you live, incorporate contextual information, allow you to make choices about commuting or energy use, and then produce a summary of what you have done. There are now AI-powered beats that allow the participant to speak with an environmental expert or receive a contextualized summary. I programmed this in an open way so it is not locked into one particular AI provider. One can use any available model, including locally installed AI models.

This is important. Locally trained AI models are something we should push for, especially when we talk about representing global culture. We should push for African and Indigenous knowledge to be represented in AI models to a much larger degree. Equally, We should push for Indian cultural and Indigenous knowledge to be represented in AI models to a much larger degree. These are among the frontiers where I see major opportunities.

Mehul: When future historians of the field write the intellectual history of IDN, what do you hope they will say your work made possible? A vocabulary, a theory, a design practice, a community, or a conviction that interactive narrative is one of the defining expressive forms for understanding the complexities of the twenty-first century?

Hartmut: The last one, ideally. I hope I have some influence on that. That is how I define the project I feel I am part of, even though it has many different facets: theoretical facets and practical facets. Vocabulary, theory, and design practice matter, but the larger conviction matters most to me: that interactive narrative is one of the defining expressive forms for understanding complexity in the twenty-first century.

Mehul: Finally, what future directions do you see as especially important for IDN?

Hartmut: We need much more research into the many narrative and storytelling forms around the world, but not just archival work. We need structural ways of representing them so that they can become productive for use in IDNs.

For example when one looks at African oral storytelling forms, one finds many archives, transcriptions, and recordings, but very little structural work. To put it simply: where are the diagrams of African oral storytelling forms that I can hand to an IDN designer to implement?

One of my dreams would be an army of PhD students in Africa, India, South America, and elsewhere working on this issue and contributing to global design knowledge about how narrative is communicated in different cultural settings and communities. I think this is a major opportunity.

One project I am working on with students and a colleague from the University of Amsterdam explores how we might adapt from one cultural context to another. We are trying to create an IDN situated in a Swedish context and then another situated in the context of Sri Lanka. The question is not simply how to translate the content, but how to understand narrative structures, cultural assumptions, and situated forms of meaning-making.

This is where IDN has a global future. It should not merely reproduce Western literary or cinematic models in interactive form. It should help us understand, formalize, and creatively activate narrative structures from many cultures. That would contribute not only to IDN as a field, but to global expressive culture more broadly.

3. Concluding Note:

This interview presents IDN as far more than a technical or aesthetic category. It emerges as a theoretical, cultural, political, and ethical project: a way of understanding narrative as system, interaction as meaning-making, and computational media as a form capable of representing complexity. Koenitz's work insists that interactive narrative is not a derivative extension of literature, cinema, or games, but a distinct expressive medium with its own materiality, vocabulary, design problems, and global responsibilities.

At its core, the interview frames IDN as a medium for complex times: a form capable of representing multiple perspectives, contextual decision-making, consequence, replay, live data, and culturally diverse narrative structures. Its future lies not only in better tools or more advanced technologies, but in deeper theoretical precision, ethical AI integration, global narrative research, and a commitment to forms of expression adequate to the complexity of contemporary life.

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