

Appendix II

Interview with Dan Cox

November 3, 2017, at HASTAC in Orlando, Florida

SM: Can you talk about what drew you to Twine, or your lead-up to Twine? How did you get started?

DC: I first ran into Twine in November 2012, which is when Porpentine's *Cyberqueen* was submitted at Ludum Dare. Which I was a part of, and when you take part in them, you participate as a judge, so I saw it right then. I think I started posting stuff late December 2012 for the first time.

SM: So via Porpentine?

DC: Yes.

SM: What is Ludum Dare?

DC: Ludum Dare is a twice-a-year game jam that has a random theme, picked sometimes hours before. It's usually forty-eight hours, although sometimes they change the rules—that's been going for years now.

SM: So via the personal game community to Twine? What other things were you working with before Twine?

DC: I did Flash games for a little while; I did C++ before that. Two to three years before that would have been middle of high school for me. I'm in my early thirties now.

SM: It's appalling how old people are who seem very young to me now. This will happen to you eventually. People will say they are in their early thirties and you'll realize there's this whole swatch of things that happened before you were born.

SM: I noticed that people like Porpentine or Anna Anthropy use pen names or screen names that have almost become a signature of Twine. What's your screen name?

DC: Videlais.

AS: Do you see Twine as belonging to the game space, the interactive fiction space, the web space, or belonging to some other tradition?

DC: I would say it belongs to the interactive fiction space, since that opens more doors than it closes. It has its roots in wikis, but I don't think it [does] anymore: for the longest time, it was built on Tiddly-Wiki, from when Chris originally built it. If there's any of that left, it's just the barest of bare bones. 1.3.4 and 1.4.2 still are on that, but 2.X, as far as I know, is not based on that.

SM: This is continuity with our interview with Chris, when I asked him, "So why did you build a hypertext system?" and Chris replied, "I didn't think that's what I was doing, I was much more thinking about interactive fiction."

DC: I will just say, especially sort of post Gamergate—well, Gamergate's not really over—I'm way more open to applying things like

developer and *gamer* to things in Twine because of the hideousness that came out of that, and especially conversations I was a part of right before that where people were sort of dismissing it. Even before *Depression Quest* was around, there were huge conversations about “Twine stories aren’t games, they aren’t developers.”

SM: You’ve in fact anticipated another question from our list—should we say *Twine game* or *Twine story*, or *Twine fiction*? I put this to Darius Kazemi, and he said, “The kids just say Twine.”

DC: I’ve seen that in a number of places. I should put it to the committee and see what they say. I have at various times said *Twine fictions*, *Twine stories*, myself.

SM: When we mentioned “Twines” to Chris, it raised the question of trademarking Twine, which apparently has been discussed.

DC: Yes, it still is.

AS: Let’s talk about some of the things you’ve been working on, like the Twine Cookbook. What motivated that project, and where do you see it going?

DC: A not-small amount of it is me being sort of selfish in that I’ve got five years’ worth of Twine tutorials and videos that are somewhere around ten hours’ worth of content and I still get comments from people looking at stuff that was recorded around four years ago and going, “Hey, this doesn’t work anymore.” And I’m like, “Yes, because it was for three versions ago, for systems that don’t exist anymore.”

When I joined the Twine Committee, I proposed something similar, and they said they had had something like it on the backburner and asked if I’d like to take it over. And I said yes because I’ve got years and years of examples. We had discussions about how those examples would go in and become a part of it. It’s still an ongoing conversation, and I think I just did something yesterday, planning a meeting on how to move forward.

AS: Why GitHub?

DC: This was an interesting problem. We wanted to be as open as possible and traditionally—and I say *traditionally* in that it started with Twine 2—most Twine documentation has been on BitBucket. Chris's stuff is there, Leon's stuff is there, most of the story formats live there.

The problem with BitBucket is that a lot of the people who contribute to projects are just more familiar with GitHub from a brand perspective. So with GitHub, it's easier for those who don't have accounts to navigate. Given we were considering moving to GitHub anyway, this was a good test, starting on one of IFTF's private accounts, to let us play with some things. We're trying GitHub out to see if it works as well to support open-source and offer a better way to let people contribute.

SM: And you're committed to the open-source aspect—it has a wiki feel, so users will be updating and making changes?

DC: Yes. That was a Chris suggestion. He'd been looking at GitBook, which is the format we use, and I played around with that—it's weird because my memory of it extends before it was public, and we tried other things. But we liked GitBook for the free export to a range of formats.

SM: Could you give us a little gloss on the IFTF? We heard a little bit from Chris about it.

DC: My understanding of its rise is it came about from a number of different problems. The Interactive Fiction Competition (IF Comp) wanted a place to keep track of code and funding and other things. Simultaneously, Chris was feeling the pull of the Twine community exploding and not being able to keep up with a lot of the development. There's also a bit of a history here in that 1.3.5 was Chris, but 1.4.2 sort of wasn't, in that it was Leon and a couple other people who had moved into that space. Eventually, those people took over a story format, and then they all moved into development for Twine 2.

IFTF came about as a confluence of wanting to keep track of a bunch of interactive fiction efforts and give them a place, and a nonprofit, and to pool funding and resources. I've really only been a part of it for a few months now, but my understanding was we've got all of these different funding sources and this was a way to put it all under a single nonprofit to protect their future.

SM: Do you have a sense that this is a formalization of the IF world, that this might be a starting point to look for money?

DC: That's in fact going on right now. We have an asynchronous meeting this week, and we've started the conversation on *If we find funding, what do we do with that?* And simultaneously, there's been conversations about formalizing specifications, like the Twee specification, which is currently informal. It doesn't have an ISO or IEEE format or anything. There's been ongoing conversations about how we might standardize to help people—the Twee stuff's not documented anywhere, for example.

SM: From my perspective sitting in the dinosaur world of higher ed, this feels like the arrival of the mammals. As our institutions die out, here's maybe a way to keep the things we care about alive. Good luck to you.

AS: Switching gears, we've discussed the open-source aspect of Twine: How's that model working for you, and what do you see as the successes and challenges?

DC: My own experience with the open-source communities, which has extended to three or four of them now, is that it tends to be the eighty-twenty problem, where 20 percent of the contributors are doing 80 percent of the work.

Right now, at least within Twine, there is a great deal of support coming out of the committee and less work coming out of the community, which isn't doing technical work. They're producing a lot of interesting things, but they don't always contribute back to the technical

documentation, which is a problem right now. Chris told me after I joined that the push for me to be on the committee was driven in part by my history documenting Twine stuff and the need for a champion for that. I've made it my mission to do the work of trying to document story formats. As an example, Snowman hasn't had any formal documentation for a year and a half. I personally wrote a lot of it, and Chris checked it for me to make sure it was right. That went up on the wiki a few weeks ago, and before that, we had some Google documents I had created.

These efforts are me trying to collect community knowledge, and in doing that, I learned that a number of people had been doing that already—Keegan Long-Wheeler, for instance. So community reception has been very positive, but it's also turned out that a lot of people have been doing this work but none of it is standardized or formalized. We're just now trying to get it on the site, which has been an interesting open-source problem.

The successes and problems, at least as I've been dealing with documentation and standardization, have been interesting in the push and pull about how best to document code when we have existing documentation on different websites. How do we make it easier for people to see that? One of the problems right now is that to see the documentation of story format, you have to know that you can change story formats and then click a link to an outside site, which is three or four more steps than it should be, but it's been the traditional way. We're trying to figure out UI/UX stuff at the same time as we improve documentation, and solve parts of the problem with the Cookbook, and figure out what the future solution might look like. There's a whole lot of stuff in the air as we're trying to figure that out.

SM: Given this range of formats, do you think there's any chance of Twine having a schism where a format takes off on its own?

DC: Away from Twine?

SM: Like, there was Twine, but now there's Harlowe. We don't hold for Snowman.

DC: I don't think there's been official talk of that, but yes, my personal feeling precommittee was that I was seeing people get annoyed when I made videos supporting one story format over another. Anyone who has looked at them over time realizes I do a run of like a dozen on one format, and then I switch and do a run on another, but I have seen that in places. I think it's more because of the weird functionality overlaps and disconnects. For instance, for a while, Harlowe didn't do arrays, but now it does—SugarCube did them better, so if you wanted to do anything with arrays you would use it. And then, of course, Snowman hasn't had documentation in forever. Generally, they try to be on par and support similar things, so I don't think it would be purposeful.

AS: From an educational perspective, this is why it took me so long to get on board with Twine 2—the variance in story formats, particularly in syntax, creates a lot of [confusion] for students. Do you think the formats will ever reconcile?

DC: I wish they would. I will say that while trying to write the Cookbook stuff, I've gotten complaints that “I'm doing this wrong” on parts, and it's in part because [of] the transition between thinking in different story formats—the difference in variable scope between formats, for instance.

SM: When people make up a language from the same root as yours that *isn't* yours, you're in trouble.

DC: We had a whole conversation about whether we should make things as close as possible to one another—if we're using the replace macro here, should we change it, or try and match the different functionality in the story format? Link replacement in Harlowe and SugarCube works slightly differently, and Snowman doesn't have link replacement at all. I wish they would come together, but I don't anticipate them ever doing that.

SM: How well are Twine folks connecting with the parser-driven Inform 7 community, for instance? It's almost like we've got different congregations in our church, but then there are other churches.

DC: I will say on our IFTF Slack, the general channel is open to anyone, and I've seen conversations between Chris and Zarf (who does IFComp/Inform stuff), and I've seen groups gather and start general conversations connected to past projects, such as the Inform Recipe Book.

SM: History is a factor here, as we're discovering.

AS: We talked a little about Twee and its documentation. What do you see as the motivation and future of Twee?

DC: I can talk a lot more about the future of Twee than I can talk about the past, since I don't know the motivation behind the decisions Chris made with Twee or the community's view previous to me. I was aware it existed, and my feeling is that they wanted a format that they could exchange between versions and import and export. With Twine 2, the ability to import from HTML, and thus to import anything that was made after Twine 2, in any story format, was essential.

As for the future of Twee, I haven't been an active part of these conversations, but as part of the committee, I've been observing them. The story format editors, along with Chris and a couple of other people, are trying to figure out a way to standardize it so that other people can build editors for it or tools that export it. One of the things we've found is that people want to use parts of Twine in Unity and other engines, so Twee has been a format bridge to help people with that. There's no specification for it, so you usually just have to go ask people, "Does this work?"

As part of this, we've learned there's no way to do commenting internal to Twee code either. You can do HTML comments in Harlowe [and] JavaScript comments in SugarCube and Snowman. This turned into a Cookbook problem: How do you put comments in the code to show people on a website? I don't know if anything will come of it this year, but there is an active conversation about it and where we put comments. For the future, I think the hope is to build something that can move toward a visual interface.

AS: So moving out of the code and into the community, what has surprised you the most in how people are using Twine? What do you most admire?

DC: I would say the anti-Twine response has been the most interesting, particularly since 2012. One of the things I've gotten the most angry about with individual people is people saying Twine stuff's not games, or Twine stuff's just projects, or even people going as low as to say women can't code, or we don't want people of color, or we don't want queer people—a whole [lot of] homophobic, racist, misogynist responses—which blew up during Gamergate. It makes sense in a weird way that it blew up around *Depression Quest* because of Quinn's use of Twine. There's a lot of silent hatred that was bubbling and exploded in its wake. My first response is, "Who cares—like, what are you, the game police?"

AS: Which was, of course, a Twine game.

DC: My response pre-Gamergate would have been to say that you're not Chris, so who are you to say what Twine is? But in a positive way, I've seen Twine embraced in academia, which I did not think was ever going to happen—your Chronicle posts and mention of my videos, which is where we met. Previous to that, I was told by people at my current institution that Twine was a waste of time. I'd been doing the videos for a while, but I don't talk about Twine a whole lot outside of Twitter. I was told Twine was a waste of time, it was never going to catch on, and that I should stop doing the videos, and eventually that I should just take the videos down. My feeling from that was "Oh right, no one in academia is ever going to care about Twine." It has been adopted by academia in a number of surprising ways in the last year.

Based on the initial negativity, I'd decided not to talk about Twine at conferences, as my thought was of course, *Everybody hates Twine, so I'm just not going to talk about it*. Last year, I introduced myself in a workshop as the guy who does these videos, and everyone went, "Oh,

it's you," because they'd only ever heard my voice and didn't know what I looked like. "You're Dan."

When I started making videos in 2013, Anna Anthropy's guide to Twine already existed, so Twine being embraced by the personal game community was not very surprising. It had been that way for as long as I've known it. But the hatred? I've never understood it.

To turn to your next question, what have I admired? I tried my hand at personal games, and I found that I have the teacher bug more than I have the developer bug. I'm really good at explaining things, not particularly good at creating things. The people I admire are those who can imbue wonderful and personal stories into Twine. I'm sometimes jealous of that, when I'm moved by a game that's amazing. I admire people who do weird things with Twine, like when Porpentine's done something new, like a jQuery experiment pre-Twine 2 for a proto-MMO with multiple players in the story. She always does wonderful, delightfully weird things. *Even Cowgirls Bleed* by Christine Love was really cool and inspired a whole lot of conversations around whether we should try to enable that in Twine 1. I was excited to see a lot of that come into Twine 2, like events and mouseovers suddenly were enabled.

A lot of student work is also great. My teaching experience with Twine has been very strange—entirely online for five years. I've never taught it in a classroom. My experience with my students is that someone would email me a question, I'll try to answer it, and then they will disappear. There's a couple people that have been very nice and a year later or so will email me a "Thanks, Dan" and put me in the acknowledgments or something. It's usually triage. Student projects have always been my favorite.

AS: From your perspective, what's Twine's place in larger culture? You've talked about it finding more of a space in academia, and of course there's the more literary world, the IF world—do you see Twine as belonging, or really being its own community?

DC: My increasing feeling over the last few years is it doesn't really matter as long as people are using it and doing good work—and good work

here defined as *not hate speech*. Over the last five years, I've felt a very strange connection to the community, in that at times, I feel like I'm very, very close to it, and it feels like there are maybe fifty people who are the main contributors and that I basically know the names of them. Porpentine, Anna Anthropy, [and so on]. And then there's times when I'll discover there was a whole other community producing hundreds of works that I knew nothing about.

The other day, when I put a call out on Twitter for teaching resources, I found a community that had been using Twine for years. They had a ton of personal projects, tutorials, student projects—all archived—that I couldn't believe I hadn't seen. And still they said, "Thanks, Dan." And I'm just in a room by myself, talking to myself for hours at a time, trying really hard to say things like "the value of the variable" and not screw that up.

AS: Is there anything you would like to see from Twine in the future?

DC: Someone once asked me, "What can Twine do? Is it anything a web browser can do?" And I said yes, and I'm going to forever tell that story because the answer is always yes. The possibilities are endless. This includes things like game controllers—I've seen some projects use game controllers. I've seen stuff integrate video, audio, like your thing at SIGDOC last year. What haven't we tried? Well, what hasn't games explored? Every time I think games cannot do that, someone comes out with a game like *Blindsight* (all audio) or *Hidden Agenda* (using mobile phones to play and vote on a story).

AS: So where do you think it's headed in the next decade?

DC: I think it's easier to say in the next year what I'm hoping will happen: documentation and standardization, which is sort of a double-edged sword—formalization also cuts. My hope is that standardization will help more than it hurts. As for the second decade, I have no idea. I did not anticipate Twine 2 existing. I didn't even know Chris was working on it, and then, hey—Twine 2. Harlowe has changed a whole lot. if

you'd asked me if Sugarcane would become SugarCube, I'd have no idea, so in a decade—I have no idea. I've seen with Flash and HTML5 projects, they're around because there's a niche for them, and then when there isn't a niche, they fall. Will the web browser be around? Or is the web browser the computer? I don't know.

I will say, when I mentioned Inform the other day in a workshop, someone laughed and said, "People are still using that?" And I laughed and said, yes—me.