



# What We Talk About When We Talk About Insights from Interactive Digital Narratives

Joshua A. Fisher<sup>(✉)</sup> 

Ball State University, Muncie, IN, USA  
Joshua.fisher@bsu.edu

**Abstract.** This paper proposes a rhetorical reconceptualization of the insights generated by Interactive Digital Narratives (IDNs) seeking to represent complexity. It challenges the notion that IDNs offer a transparent window onto complex phenomena, arguing instead that they function as persuasive procedural, narrative arguments about complexity. Walter Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm is positioned as the most effective lens for this analysis, shifting the evaluative criteria from factual accuracy to Narrative Rationality supported by Procedural Rhetoric. The paper deconstructs how systemic, embodied, and transformative insights function rhetorically to provide users with “good reasons” for belief and action regarding complex systems. By treating the IDN as an authored, persuasive model rather than a direct simulation of complexity, this work clarifies how subjective, imaginative engagement in that model can yield critical insights into the constructed nature of that system. The understanding of those insights can support democratic discourse in an increasingly algorithmic world.

**Keywords:** Systems Thinking · Narrative Paradigm · Communication Studies · Interactive Storytelling · Procedural Rhetoric

## 1 A Missing Bridge

INDCOR<sup>1</sup> [1] has framed IDNs as a narrative form that uses affordances<sup>2</sup> to yield products that contain insights into complexity and complex phenomena [5–9]. It is stated that these insights will empower citizens by enabling a deeper understanding of contemporary challenges [5, 10]. However, while these insights are intended to foster a systems thinking that deepens democratic discourse [4–6, 10], the qualitative nature of the understanding users are meant to gain is left ambiguous. The INDCOR argument elevates what IDNs representing complexity can do beyond the confines of media studies, but their position leaves unexamined the relationship between this intervention, a computational model’s capacity for representing complexity, and a singular real-world complex system

<sup>1</sup> A research initiative funded by the E.U. to study IDN as a form for addressing complexity as a societal challenge.

<sup>2</sup> The established affordances are procedural, participatory, spatial, and encyclopedic. The aesthetic qualities are immersion, agency, transformation, and kaleidoscopic [2–4].

itself. This gap blurs the distinction between the user's interaction with that model for a genuine experience of reality. Further, this gap has resulted in an ambiguity in how an understanding of complexity can lead to an empowering understanding of a complex phenomenon. The relationship is not direct; it is rhetorical.

If the insights provided by IDN are not factual or objective, then it is worth questioning how they can lead to a shared discourse that empowers citizens. Proposed evaluation frameworks [9, 11] do not address this issue. The challenge can be answered by Walter Fisher's Narrative Paradigm [12]. Fisher argues against a "rational world" model where humans are persuaded by data and evidence. Instead, he posits that humans are story-telling animals who are persuaded not by facts, but by compelling narratives. Fisher refers to this as Narrative Rationality. Adopting this paradigm allows us to analyze the IDN not as an attempt at objective truth, but as a successful social artifact that functions through narrative persuasion, providing audiences with what Fisher calls "good reasons" to integrate into their understanding of complex issues.

Applying Fisher's paradigm to IDNs demonstrates that while they may model complexity more effectively, the insights they provide are derived from a rhetorical modeling of that system, not a transparent, albeit kaleidoscopic, window onto a complex issue. To that end, this article defines insight as a user's justified sense-making grounded in Narrative Rationality, not propositional truth. The "understanding" they facilitate is not of the complex phenomenon itself, but of the argument the IDN is making about the system giving rise to that phenomenon. To specify how an IDN rhetorically generates these good reasons, this paper draws on two complementary theoretical frameworks: Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen's No-truth Theory of Literature [13] and Ian Bogost's Procedural Rhetoric [14].

The No-truth Theory of Literature would frame the IDN not as offering propositional truths about a subject, but moments of reflection that stimulate thought about choices or themes within systems<sup>3</sup>. This reflection is experienced through an authored, rule-based narrative process that represents that complexity within an ideological framing [14]. Users engage in this persuasive, authored IDN Process where they speculate on choices and consequences, empathize with characters, and emotionally respond. The impressions derived by the user are about those constructed dynamic entities and relationships. Within the Narrative Paradigm, if these insights resonate with participants' values and rule-based systems in the real world, they acquire Narrative Fidelity. It is this fidelity that transforms a subjective, non-factual insight from an IDN into a powerful, persuasive basis for a shared, democratic discourse.

The article's primary contribution is an evaluative lens that integrates Narrative Rationality with Procedural Rhetoric to evaluate complexity-oriented IDNs tackling social, political, and cultural challenges. After establishing this framework, the article explores its implications for IDNs seeking to improve democratic discourse, clarifying that the IDN Product can be good reasons that empower and motivate users. To structure

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<sup>3</sup> Koenitz's System-Process-Product Model (SPP Model) of IDN is used [4]. The framework presents, the system, the structural elements enabling the IDN to exist; the process, the dynamic, real-time interaction between the user and the system where the story unfolds through their actions; and the product, the resulting artifact or understanding, which can be objective (a recording or play trace) or subjective (a retelling [15]) [7].

this analysis, the article uses Koentiz's SPP model, centering its use in the Narrative Paradigm and framing the Product as rhetorical. By situating the complexity-oriented IDN within that paradigm, it can be better analyzed as a social artifact that persuades audiences with its Product of good reasons to shape their understanding of complex social, scientific, and political issues.

## 2 Narrative Rationality and Literary Non-truth

Walter Fisher's Narrative Paradigm is an appropriate framework to discuss how IDN Products enter discourse. While the paradigm encompasses all forms of narrative, Communications scholar Scott Stroud provides a bridge to IDN. Stroud has used the paradigm to discuss how complex static religious texts such as the BhagavadGītā use contradictions and blanks in the text to activate participants as co-creators in the process of meaning making [16, 17]. The No-truth Theory of Literature suggests that narrative is not primarily valued for imparting objective truths or factual accuracy. Instead, the value of narrative, including interactive narrative, lies in its ability to evoke meaningful, imaginative engagement.

### 2.1 The Narrative Paradigm

Walter Fisher's Narrative Paradigm positions human life as "a story that participates in the stories of those who have lived, who live now, and who will live in the future" [18]. Fisher believed that humans pick among those stories for those that are valuable and will help them lead a better life [12]. Narrative Rationality implies that it is not logic and facts that necessarily change beliefs or cause action. Instead, it is whether a narrative experience has coherence and fidelity [19]. Narrative Coherence asks if the story hangs together; Narrative Fidelity evaluates whether the narrative aligns convincingly with what audiences recognize as identifiable from their own lives. These two aspects align for a user as "good reasons" to believe or act [20, 21]. These concepts have already been valuable to IDN scholars [9, 22, 23]<sup>4</sup>. However, this review centers Narrative Cohesion, Fidelity, and how they manifest at the level of persuasion to understand IDN as a rhetorical and social artifact.

**Narrative Coherence.** As mentioned, Narrative Coherence is a metric by which a participant evaluates how well the elements of the narrative support one another. Within the SPP Model this would refer to the elements of the system, all the structural elements that enable the interactive narrative experience to exist [4, 24, 25]. It can also refer to material coherence with stories of the same event told in other discourses or the coherence of characters motivations, actions, and depictions [26]. For IDN, narrative coherence exists within the instantiation of a single product and across replays [22].

**Narrative Fidelity.** Narrative Fidelity is the second metric by which a participant evaluates whether a narrative contains values the user can identify with. The term identify

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<sup>4</sup> The INDCOR Whitepaper 4 cites Walter Fisher in its works-cited section but there is no matching in-text citation.

here is used in the Burkean sense of feeling a shared sense of commonality with the narrative [27]. For IDNs, whose arguments are procedural and embodied, this paper proposes extending fidelity to encompass two specific forms: Procedural Resonance, where the system's logic resonates with a user's experience of other rule-based systems, and Embodied Fidelity, where the physical interactions are recognizable with their referent. Stroud suggests the evaluation of Narrative Fidelity involves articulating the message's explicit and implicit values, assessing their appropriateness and impacts, and determining if they resonate with one's own ideals and experience [26]. After the aesthetic experience of the IDN, reflecting on these elements helps a participant evaluate if the Process had Narrative Fidelity and results in good reasons for action or belief.

**Good Reasons and Narrative Rationality.** When a participant feels an IDN coheres and that it has Narrative Fidelity, they are provided an opportunity to act or change belief. Motivating this shift are insights from reflecting on the aesthetic experience of the IDN Process [19]. Fisher suggests this opportunity manifest as a "felt-belief," [18] which emerges prior to any deliberate reasoning. Participants retrospectively examine the narrative elements that initially prompted this aesthetic response, transforming them into concrete grounds for critical interpretation. So, narratives stimulate the construction of generalized, abstract reasons for belief or action, even though the narrative details prompting these reflections can be specific, fictional, concrete, or dynamic. Through this accumulation of narrative episodes, texts effectively propose and reinforce overarching themes or arguments. Extending this idea to IDN, the accumulation of playthroughs from multiple perspectives reinforces the central themes and values present in the experience to create good reasons. However, Fisher's paradigm is silent on what epistemic weight these good reasons carry.

## 2.2 The No-truth Theory of Literature

Lamarque and Olsen's central argument in their book *Truth, Fiction, and Literature* is that the primary purpose of literature, especially fiction, is not to propose truths about the world the way science might [13]. Instead, its value is its ability to create opportunities to explore universal human interests through fictional content, to engage a participant's imagination in a reflexive process with experience, emotions, and dilemmas. Lamarque and Olsen begin their discussion first with fiction, then narrative, before applying their ideas to literature. So, while their ideas have been identified as the "No-truth theory of literature", it is applicable to other narrative forms, including IDN.

On narrative they state, "There is no implication that the events represented in a narrative should be actual, probable, or even possible" [13]. Indeed, they propose that narrative distorts fact based on its structural elements; greater the complexity, greater the distortion. This follows for IDN where not just language but visual, audio, and procedural systems compound the potential for narrative distortion. This distortion is not inherent to narrative, but it does mean that a narrative can only reliably claim facts that exist within the narrative itself. Still, the distortion does not diminish the epistemic value of what is presented because it is a fallacy to assume there is an "ideal narrative" that could perfectly "mirror" facts without any point of view. Lastly, that depending on the narrative's genre, this distortion is perceived differently. Certainly, this is true in IDN

where a whimsical, alt-history adventure like *80 Days* [28] is granted wide latitude for imaginative departures, while a documentary-styled title such as *1979 Revolution: Black Friday* [29] is scrutinized for minor historical liberties. If narrative is indifferent to truth and reference, then it is the rules of genre that result in the degree of fiction and what might be considered fact. Yet, regarding the acquisition of knowledge, Lamarque and Olsen propose that this distinction is irrelevant. The imagination of the participant is always present, mixing real and imaginary objects from within and outside the narrative experience. This is an observation that aligns with David Herman's discussion on narrative cognition. The result from this process is not a deductive process that results in factual insight but a reflective imaginative play that allows a user to enrich their understanding of human possibilities and perspectives.

Adopting this No-truth theory removes the burden of assessing factual accuracy from the insights gained from experiencing an IDN. Accepting that the user will always engage in imaginative play encourages different ways of valuing IDN understanding. However, this argument does not privilege factuality; imaginative departures can increase Narrative Coherence and Fidelity for some audiences. Even if an IDN presents a highly realistic scenario, its primary value is not its accuracy as a historical document but its ability to evoke certain emotions, stimulate thought about human choices, or explore a particular theme. To be clear, the claim is not that factual IDNs are superior or inferior to artistic ones; rather, Narrative Rationality and the No-truth Theory provide a common evaluative ground across both factual and fictional IDNs.

### 2.3 Procedural Literacy: Recognizing Ruled-Based Arguments

The modeling of complexity for an IDN involves the shaping of the entities and relations at the System-level of the SPP model. Procedural literacy is the ability to recognize and understand that authorial and rhetorical process, identifying how a computational model argues for a representation of those relationships and entities [30]. This procedurality exemplifies Procedural Rhetoric. Procedural Literacy then is the ability to read the rhetorical composition of an entire system. It is suggested that the discourse of IDN complexity is one of proposed persuasive representations of complex systems rendered by different IDNs. For example, procedural literacy enables a user to engage with two different IDNs about climate change and recognize the different propositions for how that system works within each.

Taken together, these claims ground the evaluative lens. Fisher's Narrative Paradigm provides the tools for this analysis, shifting the focus to Narrative Coherence and Fidelity. Procedural Literacy becomes the essential skill a user needs to perceive Narrative Fidelity within a computational system, recognizing its persuasive arguments through Procedural Resonance and Embodied Fidelity. From these, a user draws insights into "good reasons" to act or change. Having established this theoretical foundation, the following section analyzes how insights identified in the INDCOR whitepapers function within this rhetorical framework, exploring precisely how they become those persuasive good reasons.

### 3 Building “Good Reasons” from IDN Insights

Having grounded IDNs as persuasive narrative artifacts whose primary value emerges through imaginative engagement, Narrative Rationality, and Procedural Literacy rather than factual accuracy, the specific insights outlined by the INDCOR whitepapers can be examined. As a reminder, in this article, insight means a non-propositional, situated takeaway that organizes subsequent sense-making and action. The INDCOR insights, conceptualized as systemic and relational, procedural and embodied, and experiential and transformative, will be analyzed through the combined lens of Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm and the No-truth Theory, demonstrating how Narrative Coherence and Fidelity transform subjective narrative experiences into socially persuasive good reasons a user adopts and shares through IDN Products.

#### 3.1 System and Relational Insight

The nature of this insight is that it is a “systemic understanding” [6]. Rather than learning a list of facts, the user develops a mental model of the topic. This model is understood as the “interplay of elements in and between various systems” [5]. The participant learns how decisions lead to specific outcomes. This insight is deepened by multiple perspectives that accumulate as participant knowledge by providing counter arguments (via subjective experience), even those from fictional experience [6].

As Lamarque and Olsen’s No-Truth theory suggests, the systems modeled, and relationships developed, are imaginative constructions that are no more truthful or factual than traditional narratives but potentially richer in evoking imaginative reflection. The system insight is valuable not because it explicitly proposes truths about a system but because it opens a space to derive understanding about interrelated dynamics through imaginative and interpretative engagement. This framing helps dismiss the idea that the complexity of an IDN equates to a propositional truth. System and relational insights enrich the layers of engagement, enhancing the narrative rather than clarifying a truth.

Therefore, within the paradigm, the system’s proposed model is an argument for how that complex system works. A participant might assess the Narrative Coherence of that argument by evaluating if the interplay of elements is internally consistent and the causal relationships are believable within the authored rules of the world, as established by its Procedural Rhetoric. The multiple perspectives contribute to this coherence not by adding objectivity, but by creating a more robust and seemingly complete narrative argument. For example, in *Papers, Please* [31] the more the user plays as an official and makes choices regarding travelers, the more the systematic relational insight evokes meaningful reflection on bureaucratic decision-making. The more aspects of *Papers, Please* a participant engages in the greater the insight they have into how the IDN is arguing about that same system and its relationships.

#### 3.2 Procedural and Embodied Insight

The INDCOR framework claims the participant has a “first-hand experience of the complex system.” Applying the lens of Procedural Rhetoric, this can be corrected to “the participant has a first-hand experience of an authored, persuasive model”. The

embodied, trial-and-error learning [9, 32] is an internalization of the argument embedded in the system's rules and the user's iterative cycle of interpretation (triple hermeneutic) [33] while engaging with the system. This Process achieves Procedural Resonance when its system logic feels comparable to previously experienced procedural systems.

From the No-truth standpoint, these insights do not equate to direct factual truths but constitute a deeper form of imaginative and experiential learning. They arise from engagement in a fictionalized complex system through trial-and-error. The IDN provides an imaginative space with that fictionalized model enabling an indirect experience of that complex phenomenon. The procedural and embodied insight is framed by that proxy relationship. It is not factual, but it is performatively real: its "actuality" comes from the user's own tangible performance and the effort they invest into the interaction. Ultimately, these repeated embodied interactions enable the general exploration of different outcomes. This exploration fosters reflective consideration on why certain choices, accurate to the authored system or not, lead to particular results.

Fisher claims that narratives "pile up" to become dominant themes that draw users' attention. Similarly, the triple hermeneutic nature of the IDN process means that understanding is built iteratively. With each new engagement, the user's prior experiences demand their attention and inform their current actions, causing the narrative insights to gain Coherence and Fidelity. As users enact that process, they put forth effort, aligning their embodied interaction with the active creation of belief [34, 35]. Over time, this effort gains Embodied Fidelity as it compounds within their lived experience. When the user's actions resonate with their own sense of previous physical performance, they may experience an Embodied Fidelity that informs Narrative Fidelity.

### 3.3 Experiential and Transformative Insight

This experiential insight is defined by the quality of the engagement that produces it. This engagement is shaped by multiple combinations of experiential elements such as, "autonomy, presence, flow, character identification and believability, curiosity, suspense, interest, enjoyment, meaningfulness, narrative coherence (making sense and not being confusing)" [7] and aspects of the IDN System [4, 32]. Through the experiential texture of these items, the IDN Process, the participant generates understandings that might be emotional, challenging, through-provoking, or belief-altering.

Lamarque and Olsen would say the experiential and transformative insight arises from the aesthetic, emotional, and imaginative qualities of the experience. This involves deep emotional resonance and personal engagement, allowing participants to explore alternative realities imaginatively. This imaginative exploration fosters personal meaning-making, engendering Narrative Fidelity. When an IDN achieves emotional resonance and provokes meaningful reflection, it is because the narrative is identifiable with the user's personal values and lived experiences. This is the heart of the Narrative Paradigm: the belief-altering transformation occurs not from the presentation of facts, but from a profound connection to a story that, for the user, has achieved Fidelity and so has provided them with good reasons for change. There is however a paradox in this insight and a challenge to be addressed.

## 4 The Paradox of Transformational Insight and Civic Discourse

A central motivation of the INDCOR papers is to frame the capacity of IDN to cultivate “well-informed citizens” to improve the quality of public discourse. This goal relies on a model of civic engagement, defined here as post-experience engagement spanning personal reflection, public discourse, and sometimes action. This is not something all IDNs pursue, but those that do rely on the user being a well-informed citizen, which in this context, is someone who has engaged with a topic critically, has the capacity to reason about it, and the ability to evaluate competing arguments and sources of information. If IDN experiences are persuasive representations of complex systems presented in “a customized narrative experience” to foster powerful states of “immersion, and identification” [5] they may actively inhibit the critical, detached reflection essential for that well-informed democratic citizenry to develop [36]. A deep sense of immersion in a narrative has shown to reduce a participant’s criticality, limit the use of their lived experience to challenge premises, and to diminish their detection of inconsistencies [37]. While models of critical immersion [38] or reflective play [39] exist, the transporting nature of an IDN may persuade a participant to accept an uncritical adoption of its embedded beliefs. So, paradoxically, IDN’s affordances may not lead to neutral deliberation but emotional resonance and effects or actions that are not rational. The precautions and design considerations at the end of White Paper 2 do not guard against this eventuality [6] and achieving a compelling emotional response (affect, enjoyment, and eudaimonic appreciation) is part of Roth’s evaluative framework [11].

The way out lies in reframing the nature of the critical faculties required to engage with IDN’s persuasive power. First, accepting that IDNs are authored, persuasive models rather than propositional truths (a freedom granted by the No-truth theory) correctly shifts the user’s goal from verifying facts to analyzing an argument. A procedurally literate citizen can critically engage with the IDN’s persuasive systems, even while immersed. They can recognize that the feelings of Procedural Resonance and Embodied Fidelity, along with Narrative Fidelity and Cohesion, are not just effects to be felt, but are rhetorical strategies deployed by the IDN creator. Interrogating their usage, Procedural Literacy allows the user to ask: “What argument is this system making, and how is it using its rules and my actions to make me feel its validity?” Through this lens, the subjective, imaginative play becomes a form of critical inquiry. The felt belief about a complex model the IDN generates is not an uncritical adoption, but a good reason that has been consciously evaluated, understood, and then integrated, forming a basis for shared democratic discourse. In practice, this good reason surfaces as civic outcomes. For example, a user who recognizes coherent labor-policy tradeoffs from *Papers, Please* is motivated to share a city-council agenda with others and attends a union meeting.

## 5 The Discourse of IDN Insights on Complexity

IDNs offer rhetorical insights into complexity, functioning not as factual representations but as imaginative narratives that shape user beliefs through persuasive experiences. These rhetorical insights enter public discourse as IDN Products that circulate through play reports, clips, and commentary. Discourse centers on how different IDNs exploring

the same complex phenomenon represent it through potentially radically different IDN systems. Users derive beliefs from these systems as the result of reflections on insights prompted by the systemic and relational, procedural and embodied, and experiential and transformative aspects of the IDN. Within this discourse, it is these insights that enable critical, nuanced participation in public debates on complex issues.

Take the previous example, *Papers, Please*. In the experience, timed inspection, wage penalties, and family needs encode a claim that precarity aligns bureaucratic compliance against care. Coherence is strong: citations, wages, and household status reliably follow player choices; fidelity is high for many users' world-models of gatekeeping and low-wage labor. The warranted insight is not a proposition about real borders but a reasoned sense that scarcity and surveillance shape morality. Other IDNs may model immigration and border control differently, yielding competing claims users can compare. By contrast, *80 Days* relaxes factual fidelity: its evaluative burden shifts to Narrative Coherence and Procedural Resonance. Under Narrative Rationality, departures from fact yield good reasons when the system's constraints and outcomes are understandable and thematically justified, even if highly fictionalized. However, in IDNs like *1979 Revolution*, historical fidelity carries more weight. Here, good reasons depend jointly on Coherence and selective fact-checking to support Narrative Rationality.

To engage in this kind of discourse, a user needs to have Procedural Literacy, an understanding of how computational models create systems that produce effects. A well-informed citizen in the age of computational media is not one who has absorbed the correct model from a single IDN product. It is one who possesses the faculties to engage with any procedural system and ask critical questions such as "what is the system loop doing? Which parameters encode value judgments? What do failure states teach about the system's claimed causality? Why is the process enacted in this manner?" These questions orient the user to treat mechanics as arguments.

The challenge for designers of complexity IDNs is to design experiences that encourage this kind of critical reflection. Future work might integrate tactics from the Reflective Play Framework [39], such as breaking immersion, foregrounding the constructed nature of the model, or creating advanced narrative game mechanics [40] that reward critical analysis of the system itself. Ultimately, if the systems-based, non-factual insights IDNs provide are meant to support a well-informed citizenry, they should be designed to invite critical engagement with their procedural Narrative Rationality.

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