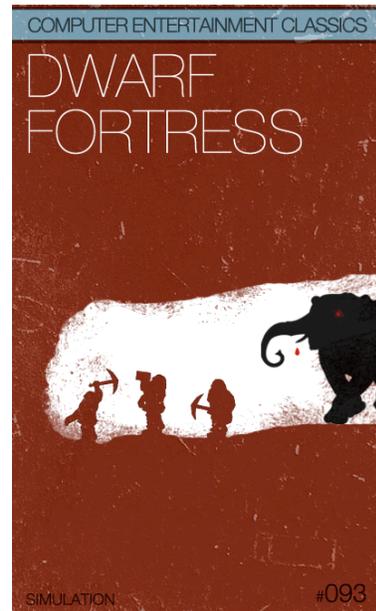


# Game Narrative Review

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**Game Title:** Dwarf Fortress  
**Platform:** PC/Mac/Linux  
**Genre:** Real-Time/Turn-based Strategy RPG Sim  
**Release Date:** N/A  
**Developer:** Tarn and Zachary Adams  
**Publisher:** N/A  
**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** TouretteDog, mariguana, Keyboard Fox, Locus, StarkRavingMad, Bremen, Sankis, Astroautonomicon, Unknowing, Cross Quantum, Major Failure, Mystic Mongol, Doctor Zero, Guerilla Medic  
**Author of this review:** Andy Kim  
**School:** SMU Guildhall



## Overview

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This game narrative may be a bit unorthodox as it is a player-created story; a fourteen player-created emergent narrative to be exact. Each player plays a year of the game as the up-and-coming overseer for the fortress known as Boatmurdered - writing up their report of what events took place and what they were able to accomplish during their time.

Once the year passes, the next player in line replaces the previous overseer – these types of gameplay within the gaming community are known as succession games.

The main characters of this game narrative are not in-game characters per se but rather the actual players who play as the overseers for their given year. Overseers, however, can name a dwarf after themselves and thus continue their legacy as a retired or current ruler of the fortress, further enhancing the potential for emergent narrative.

## Characters

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- **TouretteDog** – The first overseer took care of carving out a mountain home using his initial seven dwarves, aided by war dogs to guard their home and cats to take care of pests.
- **Mariguana** – The second overseer was very disappointed with the state of the “hovel” that was the burgeoning fortress. Having the task with assigning jobs to the waves of new immigrants, he regards them as annoying pests.
- **Keyboard Fox** – A stuck-up overseer who feels superior about his designs than his previous overseers, he tasks himself with creating maximum efficiency by finding flaws in a variety of aspects; minute or critical. He regards the elephants in the surrounding lands to be of concern and prepares elephant traps as mounting dwarven casualties occur due to dwarven curiosity.
- **Locus** – Security and provisions are his greatest concerns. As no standing army exists but rather rows of traps as fortress defenses, Locus focuses on arming and training an army. He, like previous overseers, contends with the destruction the elephants are causing, even elephants that are supposedly tame. As the first overseer to contend with the arrival of nobles, Locus must take care of the incessant demands nobles’ mandate.
- **StarkRavingMad** – Cursing like a sailor, the newest overseer has much hatred with the “honor” of taking care of the fortress and all that is wrong with it. This includes removing much of the stockpiles placed outside, blasphemous for the constant raining and endless sky that consists of the outside. Also, Stark must remove the rows of tamed elephants caged outside; “The previous Overseer must have had some sort of sick fucking fascination with them, because we have elephants everywhere. Elephants in cages, elephants in the



halls, elephants shitting in the dining room, everywhere. I don't know what to do with them; I guess starting butchering them and hope they make a good roast.” This fascination leads to disaster as wild elephants kill dwarves en masse. The overseer, having lost his sanity from the loss of a significant chunk of the fortresses population to elephants, orders the construction of a top secret project that will funnel magma to the outside and destroy the entire surrounding lands outside the mountain fortress.

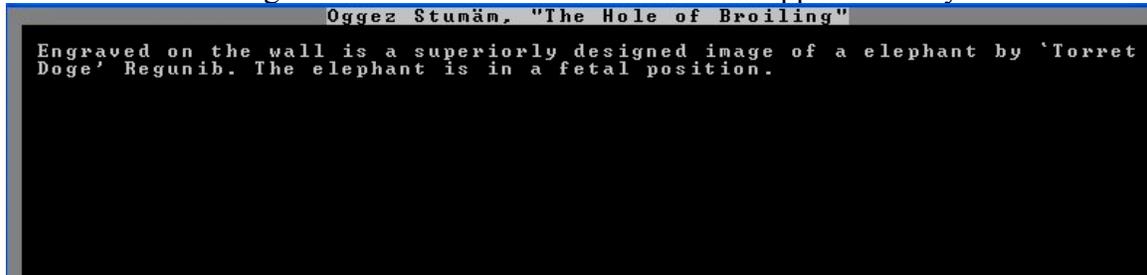
## Breakdown

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The characters described above are just one third of the successors that would come and pass. The fortress would still deal with the elephants and, later on, countless sieges by goblins. As with the previous overseers, each successor would have their own personalities, which would not just change how they play the game, but how they tell the story. As each successive overseer acclimates to their new position, they must contend with understanding how previous overseers ruled the fortress. At this point, the new overseer can then pass their judgment on what is going right or wrong and then possibly take actions to better suit their desires for how the fortress should evolve.



Dwarf Fortress has absolutely no story to it, yet the game easily allows players to imagine their own stories as they play. Although the game is depicted in ASCII symbols, players can vividly imagine what is going on in a fortress such as Boatmurdered (the screenshots throughout this document depict various player's conceptual drawings of Boatmurdered). In a sense, then, ASCII characters were symbols that initially burdened the player as incomprehensible, but once the player began to understand the symbols, they could create their own vivid and personal imagination of the game world based on how they perceived the symbols and action sequences. This is similar to how one would read a book and imagine how characters and actions would appear visually.



*"I told our engravers to engrave the walls and floor of the new dining room. They proceeded to decorate the room with some of the most horrifying shit I've ever seen. I mean, fuck, dwarves are trying to EAT in there."*

## Strongest Element

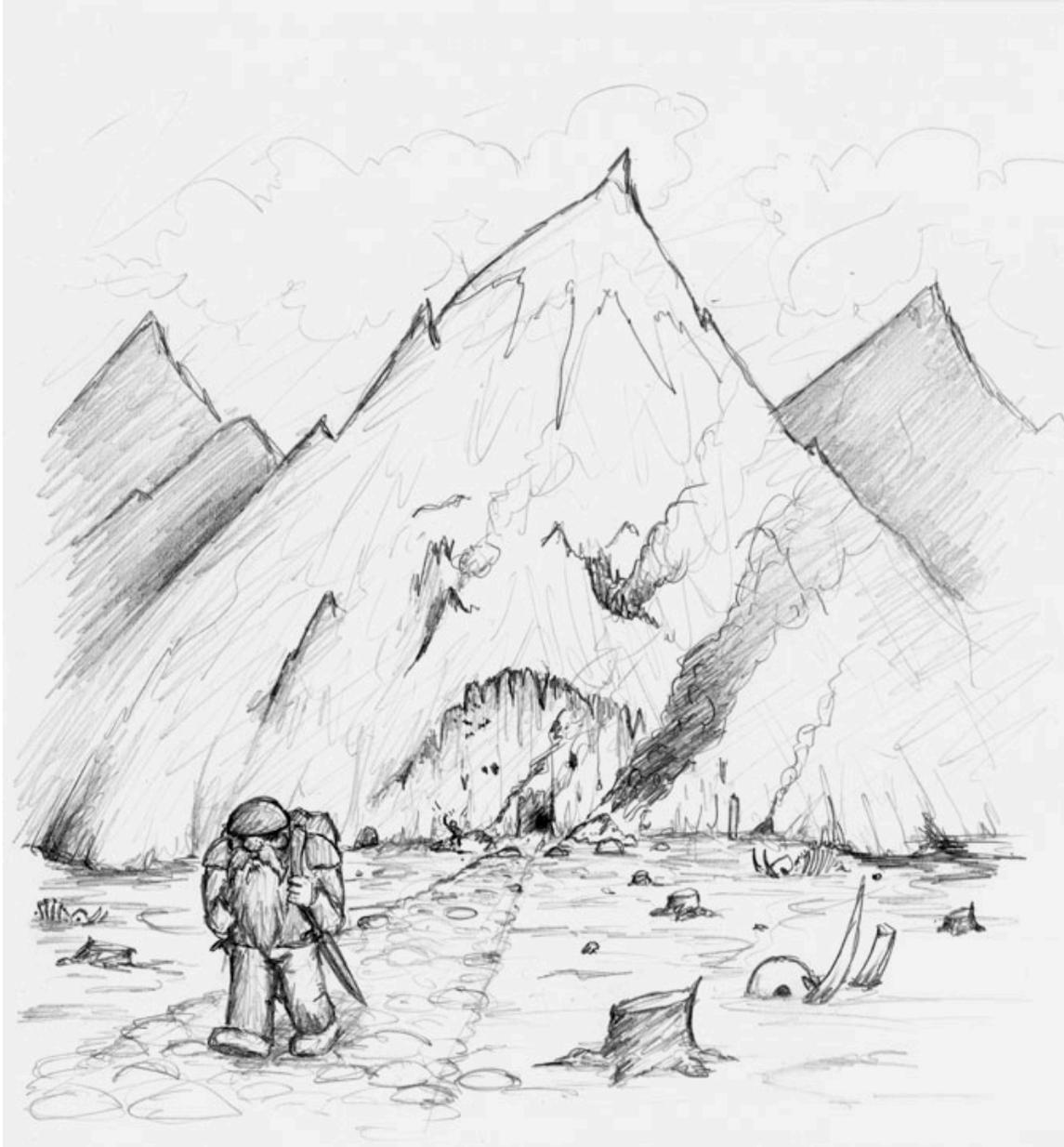
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The strongest element about the storyline, which relates to the intent of the game design, is that "losing is fun!" Generally in a game of Dwarf Fortress, the player tends to eventually succumb to defeat that can be traced to a single cause. In the story described above, a mysterious fire engulfs the entire fortress to doom, but others could end in psychological death spirals or massive flooding of underground chambers. What this lends itself to a story is a conclusion, a grand conclusion to a fortress that has evolved from the first seven dwarves and a mining pick to one of utter chaos and delight (or horror).

## Unsuccessful Element

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A very risky element to a succession fortress – whereby multiple players share the same fortress as it evolves over time – lies in the writer's skill for emergent narrative. As the writers are the players who role-play as the current overseers, having just one overseer with a lackluster personality or writing skill can lead to an entire succession game towards boredom. As the player is dependent on writing a grand narrative through their imagination and as their actions impact future successors, stories can crumble and become forgotten with no real ending if there is no excitement over the happenings of the given fortress. Another cause for the destruction of story in a succession fortress is the disappearance of a player, especially as the task is time-consuming. As the fan base for a succession narrative wanes, so does the author's desire to continue their story and so the story would end haphazardly.



## Highlight

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The elephant wildlife was a constant threat to the fortress of Boatmurdered, to the point of multiple players over the course of multiple years designing their own mechanisms to rid themselves of the grey menace. Eventually, the culmination of mechanisms to kill elephants led to the greatest discovery, channeling magma and water at the same time to create a devastating steam attack that would destroy all wildlife outside the fortress.

What this did for the game was to open to other players the immense possibilities the game offered, and to create their own “world destroying” projects for themselves. In this sense, the story lent itself to teaching players that there is more than just one way to kill an elephant and more than one way to play the game.

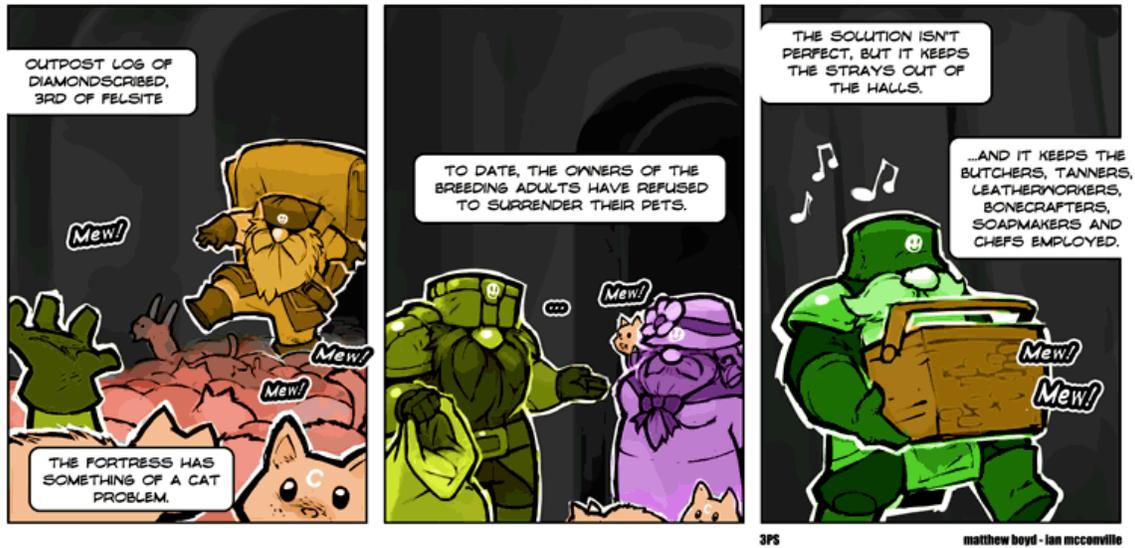


## Critical Reception

Dwarf Fortress, being in an alpha state and not in its final product, has not had reviews from reputable sources or an overall game score. Rather, people who tend to be fans of the game generally review the game – thus, they tend to also not be very reputable sources.

John Harris of Gamasutra, however, interviews the programmer of Dwarf Fortress, Tarn Adams. In the interview, Tarn Adams details that his idea sources for the game comes from storytelling; as Tarn and his brother, Zachary, write chapters and decide which parts are easily achievable. Instead of writing a plot to Dwarf Fortress, of which they were not interested in, the creators of Dwarf Fortress decide to break the game down into its core elements and working on those instead – “... *It's really the same principle as world generation or anything else in the game: finding the key, basic elements, finding the rules that govern them, and then activating those things in the world.*”

Another key in their game was to create believable characters, which is evident by players of Dwarf Fortress who have experienced “death spirals” in their fortress population. Death spirals are just one of many emotional reactions dwarves can take, in which the mood of dwarves can also evoke themselves to go berserk, suicidal, or complacent after seeing much bloodshed, “... *Create actors with motivations, and let them go. It's about the same process you'd go through in a writing class, or with Dramatica or something. Not to say I've implemented much of this but that's the idea, and it applies to all aspects of DF design.*”



## Lessons

- **Break the game down into its core elements of gameplay** – “*Rules of physics are followed. Rules of geology are strictly adhered to. My fortress is on a mountain of igneous rock, which directly affects the types of stone I dig up. Rivers supply endless water, but lakes can be depleted by overuse. Valleys flood during heavy rainstorms. Volcanoes are laced with magma channels that can both hurt and help.*”
- **Create believable characters with their own psyche** - “*One player’s dwarves accidentally made a mistake in their mining, which led to total disaster. Every single dwarf died – except for one of the baby dwarves. This baby dwarf, which was extremely sad, crawled around the screen, past its dead mother and father, and then finally found a pond, where it decided to drown itself out of sorrow.*”
- **Losing is Fun!** – “*... but as you sit there year after year, watching your dwarves safely and happily bustle back and forth, the game begins to be a screensaver more than anything. This is not fun. Winning is not fun. Losing is fun. How can you spice it up? The easiest way is to embark to a more dangerous habitat. Instead of a meadow filled with frolicking deer and a gentle brook, try the side of a mountain filled with antmen and magma pools. This forces you to change up your strategy and learn how to manage things differently. With more aggressive wildlife you’ll need a military and better defenses and magma is a great tool and weapon if you can figure out how to channel and control it. The first thing you’ll probably want to do is make a moat, which is easy. But then you think “How can I really keep things out?”. So then you try building a flooding magma room inside your fortress. Then you realize that with proper design you could simply put a magma waterfall over your entrance whenever you want to keep things out, freeing up your flood room for something else. The game*”

*encourages you to think and innovate like this. Rather than being about what you should do, it's about what you can do."*



## **Summation**

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Dwarf Fortress continues to be an odd choice of write-up for a game narrative review, but writing up on an emergent narrative for a game with no story stood as an enticing subject to select. Not only does Dwarf Fortress have no explicit story to review, there are no formal reviews for a game in alpha state. This makes the narrative review for Dwarf Fortress enticing as it teaches the fundamentals of how to create emergent narrative due to the creator's focus on breaking the gameplay down to its core. By breaking the gameplay down, it tells the player to do what they want and experiment with the core gameplay elements it offers – even actions that accidentally cause a horrendous and more than likely epic downfall to a fortress because, “Losing is fun!”

## References

Screenshots/Concept Art:

[http://lparhive.org/LetsPlay/Boatmurdered/Thread%201/Update%2027/for\\_boatmurdered.jpg](http://lparhive.org/LetsPlay/Boatmurdered/Thread%201/Update%2027/for_boatmurdered.jpg)

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[http://lparhive.org/LetsPlay/Boatmurdered/Thread%201/Update%2016/ScreenHunter\\_39.jpg](http://lparhive.org/LetsPlay/Boatmurdered/Thread%201/Update%2016/ScreenHunter_39.jpg)

Interview with Tarn Adams:

[http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/3549/interview\\_the\\_making\\_of\\_dwarf\\_.php?page=4](http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/3549/interview_the_making_of_dwarf_.php?page=4)