

THE WRITERS' ROOM

Revealing the Art and Science of Game Writing

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— GARY WHITTA

WHETHER WE'RE FOLLOWING MARIO AS HE LEAPS THROUGH PIPES TO RESCUE AN ABDUCTED PRINCESS OR SCULPTING THE SAGA OF COMMANDER SHEPARD IN THE MIDST OF A UNIVERSE-SPANNING WAR, MOST VIDEO GAMES HAVE STORIES TO TELL.

Even Ms. Pac-Man – a game about a hockey puck that eats pellets – provides fiction for its characters, showing us how Ms. Pac-Man and Pac-Man fall in love.

Some video game stories are expressed through simple pantomimed animations. Some are told entirely through text. Others unfold like motion pictures with voice actors, orchestrated scores, and dramatic cinematography. We're even seeing games that invite players to create the narrative through the choices they make.

Although video games have been around for over 50 years, the medium is young when compared to other entertainment avenues. Writer Gary Whitta – who recently collaborated with Telltale Games for *The Walking Dead*'s first season, and is also credited for writing the film *The Book of Eli* – compares

the current state of video game storytelling to the era when silent movies turned into talkies.

"We are just now at *The Jazz Singer* in video games," he says. "We are starting to figure out that there are things we can do beyond the conventions of cinema and there are ways to tell stories that help the gameplay along and not just ape the experience of film or television."

Telltale's *Walking Dead* is the perfect example of a game that experiments with interactive storytelling. Although the threat of a zombie attack looms large, the game focuses on a group of survivors and the conflicts between them. A gun is rarely fired. Most of the player's time is spent conversing with the characters, getting to know them, learning who to trust and who to keep an eye

on. The undead threat serves as the backdrop for the human drama. Telltale sacrifices action sequences, effectively reimagining the adventure genre as an interactive drama. You don't need to be holding the controller to appreciate this emotional story.

To better understand how game writers practice their craft and break down the boundaries of this nascent entertainment form, we spoke with some of the most prominent writers in the industry. In doing so, we found that the ways in which game writers approach their job are as diverse as the games themselves. There's no one "right" way to craft a game story, and every studio finds its own methods for balancing the needs of story, technology, level design, and gameplay.



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STORY INCEPTION

As a writer for *Borderlands 1* and *2*, the *Brothers in Arms* series, and the forthcoming *Aliens: Colonial Marines*, Gearbox's Mikey Neumann has used a variety of scriptwriting and creative processes. For him, the game dictates what approach is used. "It's not like someone comes in and is like, 'This is the game and here is the script,'" he says. "It is actually really drawn out and collaborative, but probably one of the most fun processes in the game industry and game production."

Game scripts change over the course of a development cycle, and numerous challenges arise for the development team. Budgets, time constraints, and unforeseen curveballs like a designer introducing a new gameplay concept or an artist adding a new defect to the character's features complicate the writing process — which can, in some cases, last for the majority of a lengthy development cycle.

"We have a motto at Gearbox that good ideas can come from anyone," Neumann says. "We stick to that." For some studios, a script fuels the gameplay. For others, it's the other way around.

Borderlands was born when game designer Matt Armstrong submitted an idea for a mix between *Diablo* and *Halo*. The wasteland

theme was established early in this project's life, but the general tone of the story didn't gel until several writers and designers plotted specific missions. "The first time that *Borderlands* crystallized in my head as to what kind of story it was came from Scooter's line, 'He messed up my mama's girly parts,'" Neumann remembers. "So many people were involved with the plot and what we were doing with the game; I sort of gave it context and humor and silliness."

Other writers, like Ubisoft's Corey May, lead writer of *Assassin's Creed I*, *II*, and *III*, advocate a process where story and design are integrated from the project's inception. For each of the *Assassin's Creed* games, May involved himself with the projects from "day zero," making sure he and the creative director worked together on high-level ideas for the stories.

"We come up with something that we pass back and forth," he says. "It can be anywhere from one to three pages and it's just a very general overview of what the story is going to be about, where we are going to go, what some of the major plot points are, and a lot of the big moments."

Once Ubisoft has the overall narrative arc and the characters outlined, they pitch the

treatment to the mission design team. "This is sort of the first coming together where we say, 'Here is where we want to take the story, and start thinking about the ideas that we have for gameplay and to see if there are ways that these things can come together,'" May says.

When the team agrees on direction, May begins his historical research for the story and the mission designers work on a game prototype while conducting design research. After that, the creative director oversees a "blueprint meeting" with the writers, game designers, and level designers in attendance. This high-level meeting walks through the game and breaks it into different arcs.

May compares the *Assassin's Creed* series' design to television shows, but where these shows have multiple episodes, *Assassin's Creed* has sequences. "Our games are always divided up into sequences, so we'll generally have the concept of arcs, but not necessarily acts, because I don't know if all games necessarily fit into an act one, act two, act three structure," he says. "We will sit there and we'll map out the sequences each with a discrete beginning, middle, and end — an end that concludes in such a way that it pulls you into the next sequence."



THE ART OF COLLABORATION

Balancing story and gameplay is one of the most difficult challenges for writers. Hideo Kojima obviously makes few concessions with the amount of storytelling in the *Metal Gear* games, but some development studios don't want to leave the player hanging for too long without any interaction with the game. A fair number of games blend storytelling seamlessly with gameplay.

Half-Life 2 allows Gordon Freeman to move around the environment as characters converse with him and the plot is introduced. *BioShock* delivers backstory through recording devices that play messages as the player explores and engages in combat.

Although *The Walking Dead* finds success in its slower moments, Whitta recognizes the importance of player interaction. "When I am enjoying my writing, I have to stop myself because I realize I haven't actually given the player anything to do for the last five minutes," he says. "Sometimes [writers] have to go back and realize that they are kind of serving multiple masters at once. They are serving a narrative master who wants to tell a good story, but they are also serving a gameplay master. The game is a storytelling experience, it's a gameplay experience, and it's interactive in some forms and linear in others. The storyline pacing and gameplay pacing have to exist in harmony."

Irrational Games' Ken Levine wears two hats as the creative director and head writer for *BioShock Infinite* — a hybrid role many writers envy as it reduces the disconnect between the narrative and design pathways. "On the best days, your instinct as a game designer and your instinct as a game writer should be one and the same, which is it should be audience-facing — what is best for the audience," Levine says. "That's the whole philosophy of *Irrational* — the philosophy of not taking control away from the player and showing them 10-minute cutscenes. You're giving the story to them without asking them to be non-interactive. Trust me, there are times when you write a scene and you're really happy with it and you put it up and it's like three minutes long and you're like, 'there is no way this is going to work.'"

Striking that perfect balance often comes late in a game's development cycle. Naughty Dog's Amy Hennig, a veteran scribe who has worked on the *Uncharted* and *Legacy of Kain* series, says the story has to be the most flexible part of game creation.

"You have to try to make some best-guess assumptions about your story and kind of figure out what the arc of it is, and then pin some things to the wall and say, 'Well we're going to do this,' and then that sets people off with tasks," Hennig says. "Maybe you don't know exactly where you're headed with that idea, but then you, as the writer, again having to be the most flexible discipline on the team, say, 'Well, I'm committing to this and this is a part of our story and our game flow.'"

For *Uncharted 2*, Naughty Dog wanted to do something radically different from a tropical jungle. The team settled on a snowy setting early in development. "We didn't know where in the snow we were going, or why, or what sort of myth or historical mystery we could tie around that, but we put that pin on the board and said, 'Okay we're committing to snow,'" Hennig remembers. "Then my job is to then go

and start doing a whole bunch of research and say, 'Well, now I've got to find some historical mystery or some little hook from real history that sets us off and running.'"

Naughty Dog also wanted to recreate the big moments seen in adventure cinema. The *Uncharted* series is often recognized for these sequences, such as the train in *Uncharted 2* or the capsizing ship in *Uncharted 3*. The storytelling blends seamlessly with these big events, sometimes fooling the player into thinking they should still be watching the action, but actually have to control it.

"From a creative standpoint, especially for an action-adventure cinema narrative, a lot of times you do start from this idea of, 'What are our big set pieces, what are some of the things that we really want to hang our hat on?'" Hennig says. "It's not unusual as a writer to say, 'This would be awesome, right?'" Actually if you go back and look at the *Raiders of the Lost Ark* story transcripts you'll see Lucas and Spielberg doing the same thing. For us, the ante is upped one more time because not only do we go through that process of saying, 'Wouldn't it be cool if?' But then also, because we have the team all sitting there ready to work, have to say, 'Yeah it would be cool and let's commit to it, because these things are also going to be the hardest things we do.'" *Uncharted 2*'s train level was the first one the team worked on and the last one they finished. The narrative had to adapt to the ebb and flow of that lengthy development process.

Writers also have to think about how small details could have a huge affect on the game creation process. If a character puts on a jacket and lights a cigarette, that small moment could become a huge time commitment for animators and artists. Neumann says that dialogue with the art team is an important part of the writing process. "Sometimes I'll write something that in my head seems very simple, but then I talk to an artist about the art and animation and find out that it is incredibly difficult. Ultimately we only have so much time, so much budget, and we're going to spend all our time and effort on the places that deserve it the most."

May says there is a lot of back and forth between the writers and other teams. "It may not be readily apparent where you can put X type of gameplay into the main path, so we'll sit and brainstorm a little bit and find a way to make sense of it. It's a super collaborative process and it usually takes a couple of weeks to go through the entire thing, move missions around, move plot points around, and go back and forth, bargaining and compromising. I am really lucky in the sense that I've been working with most of these guys for a really, really long time now, so we know each other pretty well, we have a shorthand. It sounds like it should be chaotic, but it's not. It actually works out really well and it's really fun."

A game writer's role usually diminishes toward the tail end of a project, but their work isn't necessarily done. Focus shifts to enhancing communication and readability to the player. "At this point, we should be done with the big, emotional narrative stuff," May says. "It's more logistical housekeeping, polishing, small things like that. We need to make it very clear what the mission objective is, or, a mission objective has changed slightly and the dialogue refers to the old one, so this is what we have to change."

THE COMPLICATIONS OF BRANCHING NARRATIVE

When a game gives the player the choice of determining who joins them on missions, who their love interest will be, and who will live and die, the writer needs to keep track of all of the different threads that stem from these decisions. The Mass Effect series expands its narrative web by allowing players to select whether they are male or female. Entirely different interactions and stories are tied to both choices.

"With The Walking Dead, I'll finish a scene and then go back and write it seven other times, taking into account every possible

permutation of the scene that can happen," Whitta says. "I remember when [Telltale] handed me the script for episode one of The Walking Dead. It was like 600 pages. I nearly had a heart attack because there is so much stuff!"

Maintaining consistent tones through a conversation thread can be problematic, especially if emotion is expressed by the player character or the NPC. In games like Skyrim, the narrative flow can be jarring when an NPC who is angered by one question the player character asks suddenly reverts back to a calm state to field the next question.

Whitta says that this type of writing isn't easy. "I wrote a scene in Walking Dead's fourth episode that had so many different permutations and could play out so many different ways that I had to go lay down for five minutes in a dark room because it gave me a migraine just figuring out how it would all work," he remembers. "You have to read every different version of it and make sure that when the player plays through their version of that reality that the characters all make sense and that the character doesn't then say something that contradicts something they said right before."



BLENDING INTO A BIGGER UNIVERSE

It isn't just in-game scripts that writers have to keep straight. Licensed products pose just as much challenge. The game's lore needs to sync up with the motion picture, comic book, or novel. The tone has to match, and parameters are often in place to prevent writers from exploring specific ideas.

When High Moon Studios approached Hasbro with ideas for its Fall of Cybertron game, it learned that Hasbro wanted to reboot all of Transformers' fiction. Nearly 28 years of lore was about to change. Rather than keeping High Moon at bay, Hasbro saw video games as a delivery system for this new initiative.

With the assistance of Hasbro, High Moon was given the freedom to create a new beginning for this universe.

For Aliens: Colonial Marines, a game 20th Century Fox decided to be a canonical sequel to the Aliens films, Neumann says scriptwriting was a different process from day one because they had to factor in where characters were in the universe, and what characters could or couldn't be used.

"It is the game I've worked on where the story matters the most by a staggering margin," he says. "We had to have such a well hammered out plan in place before we started writing."

Some companies seek consistency by having the same writer from a comic book, movie, or television show work on the game script. South Park creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone are the head writers for Obsidian's upcoming RPG, South Park: The Stick of Truth. The benefit of this approach is that the writing should be indistinguishable between the game and the television show. But given Parker and Stone's hectic schedules when the show is in season, their time for working on the game is limited so the development team may not have the flexibility to alter the narrative in service to the gameplay as frequently as studios with full-time writers on staff do.



STILL AN EVOLVING ART

While all of the writers we talked to take different approaches to their craft, when we asked them how game writing could improve, their responses were remarkably similar – all pointing to being given the freedom to experiment and for teams to find their own right way to do things.

"In general, we're getting better at it. I think we're getting better talent in the industry and I think we're individually getting better at what we do, we're becoming better writers," Hennig says. "The thing I try to avoid is this idea that there is one goal, one mountaintop that we're all trying to shoot for and I hate the idea of there being some homogenous answer to this. I don't like dogma. I don't like people saying stories should or shouldn't be like this. At the end of the day, the only thing that matters is, 'was it effective?'"

May is wary of publishers trying to implement a structured system across all of its titles. "I am very against the idea that there is a magic formula or a single right way to do it," he says. "If that were true, there would be a developer or a publisher out there that was worth tens of billions of dollars because they were knocking it out of the park every single time. My hope is that what you discover is that everyone does it differently and yet all of these different methods and approaches

can still lead to interesting narrative and successful games."

Experimentation has led to unique experiences, like Journey telling a story without any words or dialogue and Heavy Rain imitating the everyday occurrences of life to strengthen the bond between the player character and his family. Writers like Jonathan Blow are turning game storytelling into an art with world reflections hidden in a tale that initially comes across as a playful spin on Mario chasing a princess. From Bully to Grand Theft Auto, Rockstar Games' Dan Houser invites players to enter worlds brimming with intelligently written characters, savvy political parody, and hilarious pop culture callouts.

"I think you see every now and then a game like Limbo that expresses a story without feeling the need to hold you by the hand," Levine says. "I think we're still learning to trust gamers with our story rather than sitting them down on our knees and 'All right gamer, this is what's happening now.' That's a very positive thing. I still think anyone can sit back and write a 2,000 page document that explains everything about your universe...but it's not important. The only thing that is important is what is on the retinas and the eardrums of the gamer and how it hits those things, because that is how they respond to it emotionally."



Like the spider scene in Limbo. You could write that on paper, but who cares? It's not an interesting scene on paper. It's how it's presented visually. How little that game explains is a strength of that game. You can imprint so much upon it. It kind of looks like a Rorschach and it kind of is a Rorschach. Emotionally, it's a very primal quest. It's a very simple quest, and then it becomes about the experience of each room. It tells a very effective story."

Other franchises have stuck to their guns for decades. The Legend of Zelda series shuns the modern-day enhancements of voiceovers, making Link an eternally silent protagonist, and Final Fantasy wouldn't be Final Fantasy if the antagonist didn't transform into some kind of multi-storied beast.

There was a time when a game's story could only be found on the pages of a manual tucked inside of its box. We also lived through an era when developers and publishers wouldn't fix translation errors from games ported from Japan. Today, a story is just as important as gameplay. The writer plays just as vital of a role in a game's creation as a programmer or designer. Video games have enjoyed a creative renaissance since their inception, and if a writer like Whitta truly believes game writing is turning a new leaf like film did in the '20s, we have much to look forward to. ♦