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Professional Techniques for Video Game Writing

SECOND EDITION

Wendy Despain

Professional Techniques for Video Game Writing

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Professional Techniques for Video Game Writing

Second Edition

Edited by
Wendy Despain

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Preface

Welcome to the second edition of *Professional Techniques for Video Game Writing*. The first edition, written more than 10 years ago, was a fledgling book in a fledgling craft, aimed at drawing out the best techniques from the few professional writers in the game industry. Video games were just beginning to be appreciated as a storytelling medium, and there were few standard practices.

We've come a long way since then. Now, new blockbuster games are evaluated on their story content. Most game companies recognize the value of having a trained writer available for consultation early on, and dialog writing is rarely left to the last minute as an afterthought.

Now we have no excuses. Back then, being a professional game writer was something a lot of people aspired to, but the craft was still being invented. Now we have more established processes and better understood timelines, and we've found and shared many techniques across game studios and the industry at large. We haven't exactly reached full maturity, but we're well into our awkward teenage years where we really ought to know better by now.

So while the first edition of this book gathered whatever processes were working, the second edition looks at many of the same topics but brings together industry best practices, some tried-and-true methods for success, and some outlines for where we're getting better at figuring out how to do this job.

Many of the original contributors have revisited their chapters, updating them with the decade-worth of knowledge and exploration they have gained. In many cases, the original advice still rings true, and there they've clarified or added examples. In other cases, things have changed—either because as writers we have found better ways of doing things or because the industry has changed around us and we've adapted processes to the needs of the game. Those updates are in here, too. Some new chapters have

been added, often because we originally bundled several topics together into a single chapter, but over time they have grown to deserve being addressed in their own chapter.

The list of contributors for this book is pretty impressive. Each one has double-digit years of experience working with the biggest companies in the game industry. At the same time, there's a good variety—plenty of experience on small indie gigs, experimental projects, and in academia. Their bios are included in this book, and they're pretty good reading as well—more than one sly joke, I promise.

But none of them claims we have nothing more to learn. There are still many mysteries, challenges we have yet to tackle, and problems we don't quite know how to solve yet, but we're starting to narrow down the field of what those challenges are.

Other books—whether they focus on the general craft of writing or specifically writing for games—cover more theoretical or general advice, and there are some really good ones out there. This book aims at providing very practical techniques used in game writing from the trenches where it's happening every day. Less theory here, more practice.

In that vein, we have provided writing exercises at the end of each chapter, relating to the material covered in that chapter. Some are light-hearted, and others are introspective efforts at helping you understand how you can do better and be better. All of them require some effort to do well.

Game writing is still not just watching movies and playing games all day. It's a lot of hard work, delving deep into the personal wells of creativity while sticking to a deadline and collaborating with sometimes very large teams. This book aims to arm you for that struggle with practical approaches to common problems, outlining the pathway ahead so you can go faster and farther and do better than we have done so far.

Wendy Despain

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Editor

Wendy Despain has more than two decades of experience spearheading digital media projects. She has worked with teams around the world as a writer, narrative designer, producer, and consultant on interactive experiences ranging from video games to augmented reality. She's worked with EA, Disney, Ubisoft, Tribune Entertainment, Cartoon Network, PBS, Marvel, two Gene Roddenberry universes and Wargaming. Currently, she's a Production Director at ArenaNet, makers of the *Guild Wars* franchise. Her latest short fiction was published in the table-top RPG anthology *Pugmire: Tales of Good Dogs* (Drivethru Fiction, 2019).

Her other books include the following:

- *Writing For Videogame Genres: From FPS to RPG (A K Peters, CRC Press, 2009)*
- *Talking to Artists, Talking to Programmers: How to Get Programmers and Artists Communicating (A K Peters, CRC Press, 2009)*
- *100 Principles of Game Design (New Riders, 2012)*

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Contributors

Tom Abernathy is the Studio Narrative Director at ArenaNet. His major game credits include *Guild Wars 2*, *The Division*, *League of Legends*, *Halo: Reach*, *The Saboteur*, and *Destroy All Humans! 1 & 2*. A 20-year veteran of Jumo (Director of Narrative), Riot Games (Lead Narrative Writer), Microsoft Studios, and the late, great Pandemic Studios, among others, in 2009 he was named as one of The Gamasutra 20: Top Game Writers. A graduate of the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts (MBA) and Oberlin College (BA), Tom has an extensive background as an actor, director, and writer in theater and film; he was the primary writer on 2017's multi-award-winning *The Man in the High Castle: Resistance Radio*, and his most recent film credit, *Bad Country*, was released by Sony Pictures in 2014. You can follow his ill-advised Twitter rantings @tomabernathy.

Ross Berger is a screenwriter, narrative designer, and transmedia strategist. He is the author of *Dramatic Storytelling & Narrative Design: A Writer's Guide to Video Games & Transmedia* (Taylor & Francis, 2019), a best-practice "how-to" for fledgling game writers as well as an in-depth exploration of the future of entertainment and storytelling. Since 2007, Ross has bridged the gap between Hollywood and Silicon Valley by designing, writing, and producing story experiences across traditional and new media platforms. Credits include the Webby-Award winning *LonelyGirl15*, the *Obama Girl* franchise, and the Matt Damon/Ben Affleck-produced show *The Runner*. In the video game industry, Ross served as senior narrative designer for such companies as Microsoft Studios and Electronic Arts on titles that include *Quantum Break* and *Sunset Overdrive*. His first console title was *CSI: Deadly Intent*, where he learned video game storytelling from the former masters of narrative, Telltale Games.

Ross has also worked extensively in Virtual Reality as a writer for the Oculus Rift launch title *Farlands* and the award-winning *Eclipse: Edge of Ligh*t for the Google Daydream and Oculus Go.

A graduate of Brandeis (BA, Philosophy) and Columbia (MFA, Playwriting) universities, Ross is a member of the Writers Guild of America and the Television Academy.

Anthony Burch is a writer of videogames (*Borderlands 2*, *League of Legends*), comics (*Joker: Year of the Villain, Big Trouble in Little China: Old Man Jack, Rocko's Modern Afterlife*), and webseries (*Hey Ash Whatcha Playin', RocketJump The Show*). His work has been called "on par with the best of the industry" (*GameInformer*), "worth taking a look at" (ComicBook.com), and "I'm writing you out of my will" (David Burch).

Richard Dansky is the Central Clancy Writer for Ubisoft. He has 20 years' experience writing for games, including such titles as *The Division, Splinter Cell: Blacklist, Rainbow Six: Black Arrow*, and *Driver: San Francisco*. He is also the author of seven novels, including *Ghost Recon Wildlands: Dark Waters*. He lives in North Carolina with a variable number of books and bottles of scotch.

John Feil is a veteran game developer who has worked at companies such as LucasArts, Microsoft, Snowblind Studios, Amaze Entertainment, Wizards of the Coast, and most recently, Paizo. He's worked on properties like *Star Wars*, *DC Comics*, *Marvel Comics*, *Disney Princesses*, and *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Magic: The Gathering*. John spends the bulk of his time removing dog fur from his clothing, playing bass guitar, and helping game companies make better games.

William Harms has been a professional writer since the mid-1990s, and he has written for some of the largest and most prestigious entertainment companies in the world, including Sony Entertainment, 2K, Ubisoft, Techland, Marvel Comics, DC Comics, Sega, and Top Cow. His comic book work includes the acclaimed vampire series *Impaler* (finalist for the International Horror Guild Award) and writing comics featuring *Captain America*, *The Avengers*, and *Wolverine*, among others.

William currently works at Hangar 13 (a 2K studio) as narrative director. He led all the writing for *Mafia III*, which was released to wide acclaim

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Heidi McDonald is a game writer, designer, creative director, musician, author, lecturer, and workshop facilitator who has worked on 18 game titles (both entertainment and serious, original IPs and licenses) during her 8 years in the games industry. A frequent GDC speaker who has covered topics including romance and emotional engagement in games, Heidi has won a few awards, worn some outlandish hats, eaten a lot of cheese, and generally had a wonderful time. Her book *Digital Love: Romance and Sexuality in Games* was published in 2017 by A K Peters, CRC Press. Heidi has dedicated her career to the idea that games can make positive change and better human beings. More information is available at www.deathbow.com.

Haris Orkin has written for television, stage, film, and video games. He has written for *Dungeons and Dragons, Kingdom Hearts*, and *Command and Conquer: Tiberium Wars*. *Red Alert 3* for EALA came out in late 2008, and Haris received a Writer's Guild Award nomination for the best video game script. Ubisoft and Techland released *Call of Juarez: Bound in Blood* in June 2009 to strong sales and excellent reviews. *Dead Island* was released in 2011 and was one of the top selling titles of the year. In 2013, *Company of Heroes 2* for Relic Entertainment and *Call of Juarez: Gunslinger* for Ubisoft and Techland were both released. In 2015, Orkin wrote for *Dying Light*, which was one of the top selling games of the year. *Tom Clancy's The Division* (Ubisoft) and *Mafia 3* (2K) came out in 2016. *Mafia 3* was nominated for a BAFTA award for the best writing in a video game. In 2017, *Ruiner* (Reikon Games) and *Get Even* (Bandai Namco) were both released to wide acclaim.

Rhianna Pratchett has worked on titles such as *Tomb Raider*, *Heavenly Sword*, Codemasters' twisted fantasy games *Overlord*, *Overlord II* and *Overlord: Dark Legend*, 2k's *BioShock Infinite*, and EA's *Mirror's Edge*. She has also contributed to several books on games writing and authored the *Tomb Raider: The Beginning* comics with Dark Horse and the six-part Mirror's Edge miniseries with DC Comics, along with several of her own short stories and screenplays (*Vigilia* and *Warrior Daughter*).

Tracy A. Seamster began her games career as an independent contractor before working on a number of AAA MMOs (*EverQuest II*, *FreeRealms*, *The Agency*, *The Elder Scrolls Online*) as a writer and game designer. She's currently independent again, living with her cat Melody on a horse farm in the middle of nowhere surrounded by fields, forests, and insects. She hates insects.

Maurice Suckling has helped develop over 40 published video games since the late 1990s, including *Driver*, *BioShock 2*, *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel*, *Civilization VI*, *Killing Floor 2*, and *Fortnite*. He is currently Professor of Practice at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Upstate New York, where he leads the writing concentration for the Games, Simulation, Arts, and Sciences program (www.mauricesuckling.com).

Samantha Wallschlaeger is a writer and narrative designer currently working at Monolith Productions. Her credits include *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, and *Guild Wars 2*. She's passionate about the blending of narrative and design, healthy creative collaboration, and inclusivity in story and characters.

Andrew S. Walsh is an award-winning writer/director with credits across film, television, theater, radio, animation, and video games. A man of many job titles, he has appeared as writer, director, speech designer, narrative designer, narrative producer, story consultant, script editor, motion capture director, camera director, voice director, story producer, story liner, story editor, and once mysteriously as "t-by" something which he can only attribute to being a tea-drinking Englishman. Currently working as a senior writer with Guerrilla, to date he has worked on more than eighty video games including *Fable Legends*, *Nosgoth*, *Prince of Persia*, *Harry Potter*, *Risen*, *Shadow of the Beast*, *The Division 2*, *Medieval II: Total War*, *LEGO City: Undercover*, *Need for Speed: Most Wanted*, and *Watch Dogs: Legion*. His television credits include *Raven*, *Emmerdale*, *Byker Grove*, and *Family Affairs*, whereas his film work includes the English version of *Professor Layton and The Eternal Diva*. He can be found lurking online through www.andrewwalsh.com.

Marek Walton got his break as a writer on *Driver: Parallel Lines* in 2004. Since then, he's worked on story, script, and dialogue on a wide variety

of games including *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel*, *Fable Legends*, *Killing Floor 2*, and *Wonderbook: Book of Spells*. Marek also voice directs, having worked on titles such as *BioShock 2*, *Sonic* and *SEGA All-Stars Racing*, and the *Wii Fit* series. He holds a Master's degree in Creative Writing from Edinburgh University and is currently a senior narrative designer at Crystal Dynamics.

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CHAPTER 1

Getting Writing Jobs in Video Games

Wendy Despain

NCSoft, Quantum Content, International Hobo

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The video game industry is full of paradoxes. It's a job focused on goofing off. The tools used for making games range from absolutely free to outrageously expensive. Getting people to play your game can cost millions of dollars in advertising, or you can get lucky and have a word-of-mouth phenomenon. There are no rules, only exceptions.

The paradox at the core of getting hired as a writer in the game industry is that it's an entertainment industry job, and so is as hard to break into as music and television – but in order to be considered for an entry-level writing position, it's best to already have significant experience. So, how do you overcome the paradox? Mostly with a combination of knowledge and gumption.

So first, the knowledge. This chapter first focuses on what kinds of jobs are available for writers in the game industry and what kinds of prerequisites and skills are generally expected. It finishes up by covering job hunt advice that applies to all of them.

There are three different types of jobs a writer-sort-of-person may get hired for in games. Let's start with the one that at first seems most obvious, but actually has the widest variety of possible permutations.

1.1 GAME WRITER

It's oversimplifying to say that the game writer is the person who writes the script for the game. For one thing, writers think of the script as dialog and direction, whereas programmers think of script as lightweight programming. And to be clear, a game writer is usually not doing much of that kind of scripting, though they may do some. They do write the dialog script. And this is what most game developers think of. The writer is the person on the team who makes the dialog fun or dramatic or gritty or intense. They put words in the mouths of the characters the rest of the team is designing, modeling, and programming. They provide context for quests and names for monsters. They find 20 different ways of saying "You win!" so it doesn't get too repetitive to tell players when they are doing well.

Game writing is simultaneously very collaborative and very lonely. Often, writers are surrounded by programmers, artists, and designers with whom they co-create this piece of entertainment software. But the writer often puts headphones on or otherwise isolates themselves, so they can focus on getting the words written down. Many of their teammates don't understand what they do and don't intuitively know when to consult with the writer.

Although there may be a lead writer on a team of writers, the job is generally very focused on getting the right words into the right place in the engine. It's often more tactical rather than strategic.

Strong game writers generate short, pithy dialog that conveys story, emotion, and character. They do a lot of work to build out their characters and setting and plot, and many of those words never make it into the game. However, that work is a crucial foundation for them and the rest of the team. They answer questions like:

- Who is this character, and why do I want to follow them into danger?
- How do we tell the players what to do without sounding like we are ordering them around?
- What plot point can we use to motivate the player to move to that point on the map where the next gameplay element is?

Game writer can be an entry-level job, or a place where someone with experience in other industries can make the change into working for video games. At larger game companies, the writers work on teams with a fair amount of guidance and supervision. Many game writers still work as contractors and freelancers, parachuting in to write the dialog they are assigned and then moving on to the next gig.

Expectations of candidates:

- 2–3 years of experience—schoolwork and internships can count here if there is enough high-quality writing
- Portfolio with writing samples and games

1.2 NARRATIVE DESIGNER

A narrative designer generally focuses on solving the challenges involved in combining story elements with gameplay and interaction. Sometimes, this job isn't called out with a unique title. There are some designers with a natural affinity for storytelling, and this comes out in their work whether they are specifically tasked with narrative design or not. However, when a project is planned to have a heavy narrative focus from the beginning, many times there will be at least one person designated as a narrative designer. Their responsibilities generally fall into two areas.

1.2.1 Story Presentation Decisions

Narrative designers often architect the approach for presenting story. For instance, deciding when cinematics are used, solving how branching dialog choices are presented on screen, and how story logs or journals are incorporated. Individual tasks for narrative designers can vary widely depending on the project and the specific needs of the game. They may seem somewhat similar to writers' tasks, as narrative designers often participate in big-picture storybreaking sessions, write narrative summaries, maintain story outlines and scoping documents. However, some tasks are more similar to traditional game design, as narrative designers may sketch plans for user interface elements, create rubrics for presenting narrative elements consistently, and problem-solve edge cases where story and gameplay are clashing. They dig in on minutia like how many characters can be used in chat bubbles and which kinds of lines will have voice-over, rather than text-only presentation.

1.2.2 Designing Gameplay for Ludonarrative Harmony

The concept of ludonarrative harmony may be most easily defined by explaining its opposite—ludonarrative dissonance. This technical term is used by game designers to describe the problem of gameplay action or mechanics contradicting or conflicting with the narrative elements presented at the same time.

On a basic level, ludonarrative dissonance can be seen when a game gives players currency that looks like food (collecting apples, for instance) and a problem to solve that involves feeding something (small humans, perhaps), but even though you have a stack of 10 apples, you are told you have nothing to feed this hungry child. Ludonarrative dissonance can also be a problem beyond icon shape choices, at a more macro level. For instance, if the theme of the narrative in the game revolved around hope, optimism, and growth, but the only actions available to players were killing and destruction, the gameplay would often contradict the narrative elements. Hopeful, optimistic stories will fall somewhat flat, or feel tacked-on. Effective narrative options in this gameplay setting are pretty much limited to rescue missions and victorious wars against dastardly, one-dimensional villains. However, if the primary actions available in the game were crafting and exploration mechanics, these would more easily reinforce hopeful, optimistic narrative elements.

When narrative and gameplay work together to reinforce each other, instead of competing or contradicting each other, they have an exponential effect. The player experience can transcend other narrative forms as the audience doesn't just identify with a superhero saving the day—they themselves take the actions to save the day and stand up to shout at the screen as they triumph. Books and movies don't deliver this kind of experience.

Narrative designers focus on the combination of design skills with narrative skills. They answer questions like:

- How will dialog be displayed on-screen?
- Where are our mechanics conflicting with our story?
- How can the design of the game resonate with the story to deliver a more powerful experience?

Narrative design is a complex balancing act not usually entrusted to entry-level applicants. There may be opportunities to contribute portions of the narrative design while employed as a writer or designer on a large project, or if you're in a small studio or working on an indie game, there may be nobody else available to take on these tasks. Narrative design responsibilities are sometimes distributed across multiple designers, with none of them taking on the title. It can be a role that writers grow into, if they have an affinity for game design. Expectations of candidates:

- 4+ years of experience in game design, writing, or both
- Portfolio of completed game projects and large-scale narratives like plays or movies, and some writing samples

1.3 STORY EDITOR/LOREMASTER/LEAD WRITER/NARRATIVE DIRECTOR

This job goes by many names. On large-scale game projects, a team of writers usually works together, similar to a television series writing staff. This writing team's leader has a slightly different job from the other writers. Sometimes just called a lead writer, sometimes given titles like story editor or narrative director, this person is responsible for keeping an eye on the big picture story—sometimes spanning multiple games or tie-ins.

They often don't write dialog themselves, but they guide the work of other writers and help keep the staff working in the same direction. They spot problems when a character's tone has changed from one writer to another, and they make sure big story arcs are being followed and paid off. They often do a lot of big-picture planning for outlines and histories, which they then record in documentation and present to the rest of the team, usually soliciting feedback from the writing team as they go. This position is roughly equivalent to the showrunner job in television. Sometimes, these responsibilities are combined with managerial duties. They answer questions like:

- What is the high-level narrative arc?
- Where will the stop/start points be for episodes, chapters, etc.?
- How will the staff writers share tasks?

Lead writer is an advanced role requiring a lot of experience leading teams and solving narrative problems. This sometimes means experience writing on multiple game titles, but this kind of narrative experience can sometimes transfer from having worked in theater or television leading groups of writers. Expectations of candidates:

- 6+ years working in teams of writers
- Portfolio of published/produced plays, movies, or games

1.4 MORE WRITING-RELATED JOBS

There are a few other writing-related jobs some game companies hire. Editors are sometimes hired to help with copy editing all text that goes into the game. This is a final pass to minimize typos, conflicting boss names and confusing skill explanations. Not all game companies have someone in this role. When hiring for it, they look for someone with obsessive attention to detail, strong technical skills, grammar geekery, and the ability to persevere through a mountain of work without complaint.

A slightly more common job is a VO specialist or voice-over coordinator. This person shepherds dialog through the pipeline after writers are finished with it, booking voice-over talent, making sure all scripts are ready for recording, managing VO sessions and getting that VO back to game developers for hooking up in the game. They also make sure the handoff to localization goes smoothly. Less writing experience is needed for this job, but it can be a real benefit to have that talent for storytelling and ability to spot problems with scripts as they move through the process. Experience working in radio, television, or some other job involving voice talent is more highly valued.

1.5 GENERAL ADVICE FOR BREAKING IN

There are a few things that are common for all writing-related jobs in the game industry. Keep in mind that it's a business like many others, and professionalism is appreciated. This means being able to handle stress gracefully, communicate effectively, and have creative outcomes when approaches and opinions conflict. No matter what your job is, it's important to hit your deadlines, work within your constraints, and be reliable. If you're easy to work with, more people will want to work with you. Keeping the job you get or getting the next one will be much easier.

1.5.1 Titles in the Game Industry

No two game companies are exactly alike, and titles are not standardized across the game industry, so these descriptions are intended to convey a general sense of what many people expect people in these jobs to do. There can also be pretty wide variance in the day-to-day responsibilities of two people with the same title working at different game studios, so ask a lot of questions at the specific studio where you're applying.

1.5.2 Make Games—Indie Style

The way to solve the chicken/egg problem of needing experience doing the job before you get the job is to take the initiative and make your own games. There are several kinds of software available—many of them for free—that will help you make a game with little to no programming. Unity is a very popular game engine that is used in professional studios as well as by indie games. There are tutorials available, or you can just jump in and start pushing buttons to see how things work. GameMaker, Inkle, Ren'Py, and Twine are simpler and more focused on smaller-scale games.

If you can conceive, plan, write, and build a short game to put in your portfolio, you have gained valuable experience. Many people start that process and never finish. Just by getting to the end, you will be able to demonstrate that you can stick with a project all the way through and deliver on something you planned from the beginning. Don't underestimate how valuable it is to demonstrate that to a potential employer. A small game (or more than one) on your portfolio will also demonstrate that you understand the fundamentals of interactive storytelling and aren't afraid to learn new software.

If you want to be a game writer, don't wait for someone else to hire you to be one. You don't need anyone's permission. Instead of working on that novel every night after your day job, work on your game. Keep a handle on the scope. Finish it and put it on your portfolio. Then make another one.

1.5.3 Write Other Forms of Narrative

Don't just write games. Also write plays. Write comic books. Write movies. Try stand-up comedy. Write a script for a TV show. Find another narrative outlet to practice in. This will provide easy-to-digest writing samples for your portfolio, but it will also give you practice solving narrative problems

finding the right word, getting through writer's block, and finding an audience for your work.

Some games have had interesting, compelling stories, but the medium hasn't been around long enough to develop enough of its own storytelling language. There are some standards out there, but they aren't the entire box of crayons we could be drawing with. Video games have a lot of room for innovation and finding new ways to tell more effective stories than we have ever told before.

Do deep-dive analysis projects on why your favorite movies and games are successful. Play games, watch movies—the classics, the ones people talk about from 10 years ago and longer. See how other cultures use the same media and compare storytelling techniques. Come up with theories about what works in game narrative, and try them out on small projects to prove they work. All of this will make you a better game writer and help you get a job doing things you love.

1.5.4 Network

Build a network of friends and acquaintances who are also interested in breaking into the game industry. This can easily be done at a school with a game development program. Often, when one of your classmates gets a job, they can recommend people they went to school with when there are openings at their new company.

School isn't the only place to meet game developers. There are game developer conferences like GDC in the spring, with talks about best practices in all game developer disciplines. The International Game Developer's Association is a professional association with mentorship programs, meet-ups, online resources, and developer's conference information. Take advantage of their programs for people trying to break in. There are also internship opportunities and entry-level QA tester roles that don't require specialized training. These jobs can help you see what it's like to work at a game company and learn more about the development process.

Remember that networking isn't just about meeting people and business cards. It's about making new friends, helping people connect who otherwise wouldn't have met, and generally demonstrating you can be a pleasant person to be around. Be professional and respectful. Even if you hated a game someone made, remember that they may have learned things in the process they could share with you.

1.5.5 Portfolio

Build an online portfolio you can refer potential employers to. Fill it with writing samples, games you've made, and blog posts about your game-related experiences. Demonstrate your creativity, personal writing style, and display what your strengths are.

Your portfolio is what gets you the job. Make sure it reflects what you're interested in. If you really want to work in sci-fi, try to have at least one sample in that genre in your portfolio, but don't worry too much about customizing your portfolio for every job you apply to. Have a variety of work available, and suggest different pieces to different employers to point them in the direction of their kind of material.

If you include projects you worked on with other people, it can be very helpful to include some commentary about how that collaboration went and what parts of the final product were your contribution.

1.6 CONCLUSION

Video games can be a rich space for telling stories, and there are fun opportunities for collaborating with other creative people on making something innovative. It's a dream job for a lot of people, although too many people think more about the dream part than the job part. It's a job like any other. Someone is paying you to get specific work done on their timeline. And it is work. There's a lot of boring, tedious work to do to make 80 hours of gameplay, and you're usually doing it with other passionate people who may be hard to convince that your idea is better than theirs.

At video game jobs, you may get to play games at work, but they're broken games. They're full of bugs, the balance is off, the dialog is clunky or missing, and there are only a few things to do. Over time, the games get better, but just when they get to be really fun, you ship that game out to the public and start the process over again.

1.7 EXERCISES

1. Research game engines and pick a new one to learn.
2. Create a portfolio website with samples of your work.
3. Write a choose-your-own-adventure style short story in a program like Twine or Inkle and add it to your portfolio website.

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CHAPTER 2

Game Script Formatting

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If you're coming to this chapter to learn about the game industry standard practice for formatting a game script, I have bad news for you. There isn't one. In eight years as a freelance game writer, no two game companies ever asked me for the same document format. There's no call for one-inch margins and twelve-point Times Roman in .docx files. I've worked in three different Excel spreadsheet layouts and two kinds of modified screenplay format. Some of my big-picture interactive narrative assignments are turned in with a modified memo style along with an intricate, hand-drawn, Photoshop-edited flowchart. Many studios use their own homebrew text entry system into their game engine, and one game job required me to write my dialog directly into code. They all do what works best for their individual team. Conformity is not common in this industry.

And yet, storytelling has a history of appreciating structure—just ask the fans of haiku and iambic pentameter. Writers are accustomed to being given a structure and format set in stone and the freedom to fill in that structure with characters and content in any style they like. Game writing

doesn't work that way. In fact, sometimes it's exactly the opposite. You get an assignment where you're told they don't care what file format it's delivered in, but your narrative must include a princess, a plumber, and a bunch of mushrooms.

2.1 THERE IS NO ONE TRUE INTERACTIVE SCRIPT FORMAT

There just is no one true interactive script format. There are a few very good reasons for this and a few less good reasons. Let's start with the less good reasons. They're partly cultural, partly habitual, and partly arbitrary. For one thing, the video game industry has a long history of independence. Many of the early computer games were created by lone enthusiasts.

Although huge teams are brought together by big corporations to make games today, the organizations still have a maverick, rebellious culture. Everyone thinks they can do this better than the other guys, so they start from scratch and reinvent as many wheels as they can. Each studio has a different workflow and a different set of development tools and a different philosophy about narrative. They all have their own way of dealing with dialog and narrative planning.

Secondly, the added position of "writer" on these big development teams is relatively new. Up until about 2002, game designers and programmers did what we today call narrative design and dialog writing. Many of them didn't have the background in traditional forms of writing but were very inventive, so they created a system that worked for them on the particular game they were building at the time. As writers were hired onto teams and as contractors, they mostly worked in isolation from each other—again, coming up with their own formats.

Historical and cultural reasons aside, there are two very good reasons for not having one consistent script format across all games. For one thing, new ways of playing games, new ways of building games, and new genres of games are still being invented all the time. If we get too structured with back-end procedures too soon, we may tie our hands for future innovation. Games are not novels, they're not screenplays, and they need to develop their own format. Leading the pack right now are connected-box formats like Twine, where branching storylines and choice-based consequences can be visually represented, but something better may come along at any moment.

Possibly the most important reason for not having one consistent format is that games themselves don't have one consistent format. Consider writing quest dialog for a role-playing game versus commentary for a sports

game. They have different requirements, different delivery methods, and different purposes. It's difficult for them to effectively share a common format. Within the game-development process, text needs to be presented in different formats for different developers. For instance, programmers need to put icon names and slider labels text into game interfaces, animators need to lip-sync the dialog, and the voice-over actors need to put feeling and tone into an audio file. All these people need different things when they're looking at your words, and changing the format to fit the use can go a long way to bringing out the best performance and presentation for the game.

2.2 HOW FORMAT WORKS IN STUDIOS

It's a cliché because it's true. You've got to use the right tool for the job. It's possible to pound a nail in with a screwdriver, but it's much better to use a hammer, or even better a pneumatic nailer. The same goes for script formatting. Game developers today use different formats for doing different jobs. If you're writing a cutscene or cinematic or scripted event, anything that ends up being presented to the player in a noninteractive, movie-like fashion is best communicated using a movie-like script format. This is either the "traditional screenplay" or "modified screenplay" format. An example of a game script (from the console game *Call of Juarez: Gunslinger*) in a traditional screenplay format is included in Appendix A.

More interactive portions of the game are usually presented in a spreadsheet format. Often, writers aren't familiar with Excel, but when the end product needs to be imported into a database and triggered by code or randomized, that's the best format to put it in.

And when it comes to planning nonlinear narrative, a picture is still worth a thousand words. Sometimes the first draft of this picture is sketched on the back of a napkin, but this isn't very effective at communicating it to a development team. The format for presenting nonlinear narrative structure is still up in the air. I've seen whiteboards with color-coded markers, bulletin boards with note cards and photos, sticky notes on a blank wall, and modified PowerPoint and Visio org charts. Twine and its variants can make these visual representations more interactive, and Scrivener and Final Draft have some useful elements, but there's just no one tool that does everything.

Individual studios often create proprietary development tools to help streamline their production process. To get some idea of how these work, take a look at the modding features some PC games provide, or learn to

use Unity and Unreal with dialog add-ons. There are also some text-based game creators like articy:draft, Ren'py, or Ink that will not only allow you to enter text in a somewhat WYSIWYG format but also export it into Excel files that can be used for editing and voice-over scripts.

2.3 WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT SCREENPLAY FORMATS

Many other books cover standard screenplay format, so I won't cover it in-depth here. The way I got most comfortable with writing in that format was to find the screenplay from a movie or television series I enjoyed and immersed myself in reading those. Even if you think you'll never write a film, every game writer should learn how to write their ideas as a screenplay. Most games today include dialog voice talent, and actors are used to seeing their material in the traditional screenplay format.

The most common modified screenplay format used in games is essentially the same as the traditional format, but with everything aligned to the left instead of centered. As far as I know, the only reason for this change is that game developers are in a hurry and most of them don't have Final Draft or another program that does the centering with no fuss. They use Microsoft Word or a bare-bones text editor and just go straight down the page. The screenplay formats (traditional or modified) are best used for cinematic sequences and linear game narratives. If there aren't very many branches in the plot, the screenplay format can just chug along with occasional notes for interactive elements such as boss battles and the like. Don't try to describe the player's fight scenes blow by blow as if it were a novel if these scenes are going to be represented visually. A simple note introducing the big bad and listing some randomized fight barks is sufficient. One thing to keep in mind while working in this format is that all your dialog will eventually be put into a database, and you may or may not be the one to do the data entry. So group like things together and include many, many notes to clarify what you were thinking when you wrote this. (Example in Appendix C)

Always be open to learning new things and innovating on your script format. Take every opportunity to learn the methods writers use in other media and take whatever you can use.

2.4 LEARNING TO LOVE EXCEL

Microsoft Excel and other spreadsheet programs like Google Sheets aren't as antithetical to narrative as you might think. Most writers know how to work with an outline, and that's just a spreadsheet without the dividing

lines. It's also not confined to the 8.5 × 11 blank white page writers tend to think in. Your outline can go down one column, the next column can hold fleshed-out dialog, the next column can hold delivery notes for the actors, and so on off to the right and down forever. There's a lot of flexibility for innovation.

I learned how to use Excel back in college during my short stint as a physics major, but there are easier ways to learn its quirks. Online classes and tutorials can demystify things like how to automatically wrap cells and change how they're displayed. Don't let the accountant-style layout intimidate you. This is just another program to learn. Jump in and try new things. You'll be far more valuable to a game developer studio if you're not afraid of spreadsheets.

There are a few things I really love about Excel when working on game projects. For one thing, the tiny little cells encourage brevity. Players don't want to listen to long monologs—they need information delivered in punchy, relevant sound bites. If I only see a small space to write in, I'm going to think in terms of short sentences.

Spreadsheets are also good at managing huge volumes of data. When you're facing 100,000 lines of dialog, it can be incredibly helpful to sort these by character or quest or whatever. Having the lines automatically numbered can also be very helpful for planning purposes, and if you learn how to use some of the more advanced controls, you can have the program automatically generate numerical filenames and fill in a series of cells containing identical content. Page numbers aren't very relevant in the videogame world, so there's little need to use a word processing program designed to break things up by the page. (Although it can help estimate length of cinematics. Screenplay format lets you use the one-page-per-minute rule of thumb.) Individual line identifiers are far more useful to game developers, that's what gets connected to assets in the game. Audio engineers find Excel very helpful for organizing the voice-over sessions from the back end. The actors may not need all the columns and cells, but audio engineers can automate the gargantuan task of attaching multiple takes of each line to the spreadsheet script.

When I sit down to start a new project that I know needs to be in a spreadsheet, I start out by building the skeleton (Figure 2.1). I put headings on all the columns and set the program to keep those headings at the top of the window at all times. I also set it up to sort those columns without messing up the relationship to data in the rows. This way I can tell it to

Line ID	Story	Section	Character	Line	Voice Direction	Triggered by	Context
221	Eggs	1	Mrs. Winks	Jinx, there you are. I need your help. There aren't any eggs in the henhouse, so I guess all the hens have hidden their eggs around the farm. Can you and your friends come find them for me?	Busy.	Next	The player and friends will go to the activity point and get their egg baskets. They collect as many eggs as they can.
222	Eggs	2	Dorn	How many eggs are out there, Mrs. Winks?	Getting the facts.	Next	
223	Eggs	2	Mrs. Winks	Well, there are 15 hens, and I'm sure each one has hidden an egg somewhere around the farm. Go see how many you can find.	Helping	Next	
224	Eggs	2	Jinx	I think I see an egg!	Cheery	Close to an egg, but not moving (random)	
225	Eggs	2	Jinx	Hmmmmmm.....	Thinking.	Close to an egg, but	
226	Eggs	2	Jinx	Hey, what's that?	Excited	Close to an egg, but not moving (random)	
227	Eggs	2	Dorn	Is that one over there?	Unsure	Moving directly toward an egg	
228	Eggs	2	Freddie	Egg hunting is fun. It makes me want to run. When will we be done?	Singing.	Close to an egg, but not moving (random, not repeated too often)	

FIGURE 2.1 An example spreadsheet used for game dialog.

just show Grandma's lines, and it won't reorder just the data in that one column, lining up the name Grandma with dialog for Ninja #3.

Once I have my skeleton in place, I start filling it in. I usually work scene-by-scene or quest-by-quest, making sure to name or number the scenes and beats, so they can be grouped together this way later. Those columns can be filled in automatically. Then I type the character name in the appropriate column, the line in the cell next to it, the trigger for that dialog, and notes for the voice talent. Then I move on to the next line of dialog. I find it much easier to write all of these notes at the same time I write the dialog, rather than powering through the conversation and then going back and adding actors' notes and triggers.

As much as I am comfortable using Excel for writing game dialog, I admit it has its faults. The spell checking is turned off by default, formatting

can be tricky, and files can grow to astronomical sizes some computers will choke on. If you make yourself learn the tools available to you, you'll get a feel for which will work best for the job ahead of you. And if you're not sure which is most appropriate, just pick one and get started. If it's not right, you'll feel it soon and can make the switch.

2.5 REPRESENTING BRANCHING AND NONLINEAR NARRATIVE

In both spreadsheet and modified screenplay format, plot branches can only be represented in a linear way. For instance, making a note where the branching possibility happens and going through dialog for one possible path, then writing through the dialog for the next possible path, and so on. The same goes for lines that are intended to be picked randomly by the game to provide different-sounding responses to the same input. In modified screenplay format, this is just indicated with a note in the text, often italicized or in brackets. The script in Appendix B, from the console game *Bratz: Forever Diamondz*, is an example of this strategy. A few studios use linked wiki or confluence pages to represent branches—for Branch A, click here, for instance.

Because this is kind of clunky, most game writers also use a visual representation of their nonlinear narrative. These methods truly have no standard. It comes down to using whatever works. Some people list one event per note card and pin them up on a big bulletin board, then use string to show paths between events. Others draw it out on a big whiteboard or sketch it on paper and then scan it into a computer for digital editing. I've seen trees, webs, matrices, and spirals. Some writers say they can keep the narrative and all its branches straight just in their own head, but in game development, you often have to communicate your vision to others, and sometimes there's nothing like a flowchart or diagram to get the point across. In these cases, a cleaner presentation can be critical, so consider using a program like PowerPoint, Visio, or their open-source cousins to pretty up the scribbles.

Twine and its spinoffs can make the branching and state changes easier to track and proofread, but presentation often leaves something to be desired.

2.6 SPECIALIZED TOOLS

Many writers look at the current state of patchwork solutions and think there must be a better way. Tools programmers do, too, looking at programs such as Final Draft and Movie Magic Screenwriter and thinking

there must be a way to make a tool for speeding up the process of formatting and writing interactive narrative. A few people have tried. Some available tools include Ren'Py, Inky, Chat Mapper, and articy:draft. They may aspire to being industry standard someday, but as of this writing none of them are. They each do their own thing pretty well, and some writers find them very useful. Others still swear by a customized Excel spreadsheet.

So far, I'm unconvinced it's possible to have one perfect tool for all games, but maybe someday a plugin for the most commonly used game engines will prove me wrong.

The IF (Interactive Fiction) community sponsors a yearly contest for independent text-based games, and they have created some interesting tools for interactive narrative. The most commonly used are called Inform and Quest. These are parser-based engines that try to understand what a user types into the interface instead of asking the player to click a button or link. This community drives innovation and experimentation in the interactive narrative space, and I wouldn't be surprised if they generate the best tool for writing games someday.

Ultimately, specialized programs can mitigate some of the more tedious aspects of game writing that closely resemble data entry, but sometimes they just change the interface rather than introducing efficiencies. Since creating games is rarely a solo affair, the writer's tools need to work well with the other tools game developers use. This often means learning a new program or format for each studio or team you work with.

2.7 FREE YOUR MIND

Writers can sometimes get hung up on format. Let's face it—we'll play around with fonts, margins, headings, and underlines till we can make that blank page less intimidating. But games don't have just one standard way to format scripts. If you're facing the bleakness of trying to figure out what your blank page should even look like, pick one of the options described here to see if they get you off to the races. If that one doesn't work, try a different one, but don't pin your productivity on finding an exact match for what you need. If one of these formats or tools mostly works for you, hang in there till the job is done. And if you think of a better way, give it a shot and see what happens. Maybe you'll be the one to find the perfect game writing script format.

2.8 EXERCISES

1. Convert the script sample from Appendix A or Appendix B into one of the other formats discussed in this chapter.

2. Choose a story-heavy game you enjoy and draw its narrative structure in the format you think best fits the design. Be sure you don't skip any side quests or alternative branches.

3. Create the skeleton of an Excel script format in Excel and fill in ten lines of dialog plus notes.

4. Take an Excel tutorial focusing on conditional formatting, and brainstorm ways you can use this feature to make your game writing more efficient.

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CHAPTER 3

Documentation for Writers

John Feil

Paizo

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In this chapter, we'll cover the various types of documentation you may encounter while making games and the types of documentation you may create yourself in order to give you the best chance at creating spectacular narrative, dialog, and more.

Documentation is a fact of life for the modern work environment, especially in bigger companies. Documentation has a bad reputation: it can be a drag to read, and even a bigger drag to create. However, it is still the

best way to disseminate information across a large number of people and to store the essence of what the team is trying to achieve with their game so it can be accessed later, when time has taken its toll on memory and feature growth.

As a writer, you'll be looked at as an expert in documentation. You'll naturally be who people will gravitate to if they don't have time to do the writing themselves, or if they are creating a doc that needs to be as well written as possible. You'll also want to create your own documentation to refer to, in order to help you organize your ideas, get a sense of the personalities of characters, and help streamline your processes. When development stretches over years and the project develops through collaboration and innovation, it can be invaluable to be able to look back on original notes. Without strong documentation for a foundation, it can be easy for a project to lose its way.

We'll start this chapter by detailing the official documentation you'll likely encounter as a game developer and move on to the types of documentation you may be creating yourself.

3.1 THE PITCH, THE TREATMENT, AND THE GAME DESIGN DOCUMENT

The Game Design Document, or GDD, is an essential part of game design. This document details the features, story, and characters of the game. It calls out how the game will be played, how many players can play it, what platforms it will be on, and more. In developing the game, designers, artists, and programmers all refer to the document to nail down exactly what needs to be done in order to fulfill the vision of the team and make the product a reality. When it comes time for QA to test the game, they can also refer back to this documentation to determine if something is working as intended.

As a writer, you will also be referring to the GDD constantly to tease out the details you need to create the narrative, text, and dialog the game requires.

In this chapter, we'll briefly go over what a GDD is, how to find the information you are looking for, and creating a companion doc that will help you efficiently work together with the rest of the development team.

3.2 THE GAME DESIGN DOCUMENT

The GDD is the document created to let everyone from the biggest bosses to the lowliest tester know what the game should look like when it is done.

It covers every game mechanic, weapon, vehicle, character, and plot. It has maps, concept art, charts, graphs, and everything in between.

Some companies are very dedicated to their GDD, and others are reluctant to put effort into a document outside of slapping something together that allows them to get publisher approval. Usually, every team has grand aspirations to have the best, most organized GDD possible, but the actuality of game development tends to make this difficult.

If you are a writer associated with the project from inception, you may be called upon to help write narrative or flavor for the document. Throughout the lifetime of the project, the GDD goes through three forms: the Pitch Doc, the Treatment, and the GDD. Let's cover what each of these is and what you may be required to work on if you get involved in the process.

3.3 THE PITCH

The development team is ready to make their next (or first!) game. For most larger game teams, this means they must go through a greenlight process in order to proceed. It may be that the team is looking for funding and is trying to convince a publisher or investor to pay for development. It may be that the team is part of a large company and needs to convince their executives that their new idea is worthwhile of the company's investment. Maybe the game is being kickstarted, and the team needs to explain to an audience why they should pay a few dollars to help them build the game. In any of these examples, a document is generally required to communicate what the game will be.

The pitch document is an extremely high-level document meant to generate excitement and convince gatekeepers that the project is good enough to proceed with. The pitch doc is high on flavor, cunningly wordsmithed to make the project as unique and exciting as possible in as short a space as possible. It's very much like a vacation destination pamphlet, enticing the reader to buy that ticket to that island paradise they didn't know about before, but now they have to visit.

As such, the writer's job on a pitch document is simple in concept and hard in execution. Working together with the team leadership, you may supply flavor text, dialog snippets, descriptive text for concept art, and become the editor for the whole document as it goes through iteration after iteration.

Your job is to make the game irresistible to gatekeepers. You may not be in charge of the overall content of the piece, so you'll be working to satisfy

the esthetics of the lead designer or whoever is in charge of the project. The following are some tips on how to work on a Pitch Doc:

1. Keep it short: A pitch doc is like a movie trailer. It's for people with limited attention spans who see many of these types of documents. It should be highly visual, with no large blocks of text. Bullet points are your friends.

2. Be patient with the leads team: This is a high stress period. The team is fighting to get maximum independence to make their dreams come true while still being paid. Likely, there will be a lot of discussion on how to write the text just right. As you become more experienced, you'll know when to take charge and when to fade into the background. If you are new, stick more to the background until you can build the team's confidence in your ability.

3. Make sure you know the material: If this is a sequel, a licensed game, or derived from some external source, make sure you research it so you can bring authenticity to the text. You're not going to convince someone to fund your Spongebob Squarepants game if you keep thinking the main character is made of Swiss cheese.

4. Write for the audience. Different audiences look for different things. A licensor is looking for passion for its property. A publisher is looking to minimize risk by only funding sure-fire hits. Research the target, and alter your text to fit their needs.

3.4 THE GAME TREATMENT

A game treatment is the second stage of a GDD. It's the awkward middle child that takes the promises of the pitch and formalizes them into a more detailed document. It's still half a marketing document but has a lot more information on how the game will flow from beginning to end.

The game treatment is generated when the team gets an initial greenlight but isn't actually funded yet. A publisher, for instance, might like the pitch document and asks the team for more information to make a final decision.

When working on this doc, the team tries to keep the information high level, but this document's purpose is expanded beyond the pitch doc. Where the pitch doc was for selling the idea of the game, the treatment is more for selling the team. It tells the gatekeeper that not only

can the development team come up with an attractive game idea, but they also know how to actually create the product. The treatment shows that the team knows how to scope work, that they've done their homework on the competition, and that they have talented people who are good at the fundamental work it takes to bring a game into existence with minimal risk.

Here are some tips on helping with the game treatment:

1. Story is important: Game treatments are the first place the full story of the game is exposed. Even if the game is an arcade game or puzzler, the narrative of how the player goes from the beginning of the game to the end is detailed here. While there won't be a lot of dialog writing outside of some possible flavor text, the treatment should be filled with the esthetic of the game. Is it noir? High fantasy? Street racing? The treatment should exude the character of the game.

2. The treatment is where the game design and technical design also come to the fore. As mentioned, this document is not just for cementing the overall flow of the game but is also proof of the team's skill at making games. Make sure you work closely with the team to ensure you are not, with the story of the game, overpromising on technical, artistic, or gameplay elements. For instance, you may be tempted to write about the endless encounters with thousands of monsters in an open and varied landscape. This is a huge undertaking, and the team might not be able to commit to that level of work on the platform or budget they are targeting.

3. Get ready for changes. When presenting a treatment, or any doc to an investor, that investor might want to come back with requests for changes that make the game less risky for them. "Can this be more of a Battle Royale game?" "We'd like to see more quest elements," "Can we get a more diverse cast of main characters" are examples that might pop up. These types of requests can be frustrating, but being prepared for this type of request from the start helps you to be fluid in the face of change.

4. Clarity and brevity are still important: The treatment is still acting as a marketing document. Don't include ten-page world histories in this document.

3.5 THE GAME DESIGN DOCUMENT

The GDD is usually the responsibility of the lead game designer, and writers are generally not hired to create this type of document. However, if you are the staff writer, you may be asked to help build the overall narrative design of the game or to do editing passes. For story-focused games, like RPGs, you might work with a team of writers to fill in the story elements of the main plot and the scads of side quests that the player will experience in their journey through the game.

The GDD, in many cases, is a living document. It can live as a Google Doc, a wiki, a set of Sharepoint pages, or a set of word docs on Perforce. Everyone on the development team usually has access to the doc in order to refer to it and add to it as the game develops.

As a writer or narrative designer, you'll be referring to and adding to the doc frequently as you create new content, whether it be dialog for cutscenes and in-game conversations, text for pop-ups and descriptions, and generally story guidance so designers, artists, and programmers know what they need to build to ensure the story makes sense within the game.

Here are some high level tips on working with a GDD:

1. A GDD will quickly become irrelevant if the team isn't serious about keeping it updated. There are a thousand decisions every day in developing a game, and many of them end up in compromises that alter the design of the game because some element may be too ambitious, not work within the technical constraints of the game, or just plain doesn't make sense. If the team isn't reflecting these changes in the GDD, the delta between the written word and the reality of the game grows, making the GDD less trustworthy as a source for what is actually going on in the game. To mitigate this, communication with the game team is essential. Keep an ear to the ground and watch for sudden directional changes in design. Watch to see if changes are reflected in the documentation. This will help make sure you aren't writing things you'll need to throw away later.

2. As a corollary, keep your part of the GDD updated when the writing team decides to shift away from what's written in the doc. Perhaps you've suddenly figured out that one of the characters has grown into an ethnic stereotype, and you need to change how that character

speaks or acts to address the problem. Make sure you communicate that in the GDD as well as to the team through less formal methods.

3. This should go without saying, but the GDD is a professional document. Keep any personal feelings or attacks out of the doc. If you're having a disagreement with a designer, for instance, that disagreement should stay out of the comments of the GDD, especially if the conversation escalates into emotional responses.

4. Keep an eye on the change logs of the doc. In very large games, you might be concentrating on only one section of the narrative, but changes outside your domain can have incredible impact on your job. For instance, a primary NPC could be removed, a new area opened up, a new combat system architected, or any number of things that cause ripples of effect throughout the nature of the game. Keeping an eye on the changes happening in the GDD gives you the ability to minimize lost work due to these natural shifts as the game gets made.

5. Beware of GDD bloat. Though you should be adding to the galaxy of documentation that goes into the GDD, don't add things like personal notes, wish list design docs, and unnecessary world-building guides. One of the hardest things about working with a GDD on a large game is finding what you need to get the job done. Having to swim through a lot of false-positive search results creates frustrated developers, wasted time, and a reluctance to work with the GDD.

3.6 DOCUMENTATION FOR WRITERS

As a writer, you may be asked to write a great variety of things, from technical documentation to marketing copy to cutscene scripts to enough dialog to fill hundreds of hours of a player's time. Each of these tasks may require more than just writing text in a word doc. You could be entering text into excel, into a dialog tree tool, or using a form template to attach descriptive text to an item. Each team is different, and the number of methods to get text into games is roughly equal to the number of game studios out there.

Furthermore, the smaller the team, the more your duties will encompass (though the amount of time to get all the work done won't increase), giving you the additional task of trying to prioritize the importance of each task. In this section, we'll talk about documentation you can create to work more efficiently in the game developer environment.

3.7 GETTING IT ALL DOWN

The game has been green-lit, and you're in preproduction. For narrative heavy games, like RPGs, this means it is time for the rubber to meet the road. In order to make a fully fleshed-out game that feels immersive, most teams will want to create a few documents in addition to their GDD. One is a World Guide, which can be an expansive tome that details things like major NPCs, the geography of the game, and the histories of the civilizations that live there.

The World Guide is generally written by designers, but, depending on the team, you may also be heavily involved. In any case, the world guide is your best friend. It will be the document you refer to most to build character biographies, situational text, and more. Working closely with the design team, you may want to create a series of sister docs to the world guide, which delve into things like motivations, regional accents, pronunciation guides, family histories, and more.

Here are some possible sister docs you might want to make:

1. Deeper world reference guides: if the game is based on something concrete, like the real world, a historical event, a sequel to an established game, or a licensed property, you'll want to gather as much material from that setting as possible to fill in the blanks.

    a. Real world: gather as much data as you can through available sources. Lucky you, much of the real world is reflected on the Internet. Gather articles, maps, website links, and images from image search to create your reference library.

    b. Historical: they say history is written by the victors, but these days, it's written by people with a strange fascination for that time who can frequently put their own spin on things. Make sure your historical library for this setting matches the reference everyone else is using on the team. You don't want to be referring to a book that claims the War of 1812 was fought by aliens to secure the rights to Manhattan when the rest of the team knows it was Atlanteans seeking to conquer Buffalo.

    c. Sequels: The team that made the prequel to your game should have at least some relevant documentation you can refer to. That documentation should always be verified by comparing it to the prequel itself. As mentioned earlier, documentation gets outmoded toward the end of the project, so there may be some big

differences between the documentation and the actual game they made. Once again, work closely with the design team to figure out what is still relevant.

d. License: Your licensor should have a licensing bible that gives your team a lot of info on the world you are working in. This bible supersedes any fan websites that may delve into speculation and should also give you the best snapshot of the current look of the license. If there is no bible, there should be at least something the licensor refers you to in order to keep out of the assumptions and theories of the Internet.

2. Character folios: If you are writing text that has to do anything with the description of or interaction between characters, you'll want to gather or create a small folio for each character. These are useful to refer to when creating believable dialog, consistent reactions, and understandable motivations. As always, these should be communicated with the team to get sign off from the leads. Here are some tips on what you should be placing in character folios:

   a. Concept art: the final concept art, if available, will help you hear the character's voice in your head and will give you clues such as if they are right-or-left-handed, what social class they belong to, and more.

   b. Any external reference that might be available (historical reference, licensing bible info, docs from the prequel, etc.).

   c. Create or steal a "personality quiz" and fill it out for the character. This will help flesh the character's way of approaching various situations. They are also fun to do.

   d. Create a map that details the character's relationship, in one or two words, with all other characters they may encounter. This is easily done as a character relationship grid. You can find these on the Internet if you need an idea of what these look like.

   e. Create a list of dialog responses to different emotions. What does the character say when they are surprised? Excited? Dealt an emotional blow? Disappointed? You can also build this as a grid with other characters, so you can check to make sure you aren't making major characters sound too much the same.

f. List major possessions of the character: items, animals, vehicles, land and homes.

g. If the character has named items, detail them. For instance, if they have a sword named Esmerelda, how do they interact with it? Do they call it by name? Do they treat it as a separate character? Do they ignore it, and the player only knows it is named through dialog with other characters?

h. Character history: where they grew up, parent's names and occupations, notable ancestors, notable achievements, notable defeats, notable skills, close relationships, enemies.

3. Plot guides: sometimes, you might find the plot of the game is obfuscated in the GDD, mixed in with feature call outs and technical design language. In these cases, you'll want to create your own plot guides to refer to, so you can keep track of what you're supposed to be writing about. Here are some tips on plot guides:

   a. Games can sometimes be built in a series of level, where progress in the game is locked until certain conditions are met. Each of these levels has a plot with a beginning, middle, and end. In these cases, you should know exactly how the last level left off, where the next level will begin, and what the player should achieve during the course of the level. For instance, the level you are working on comes right after the player defeats the giant spiders infesting the jungle. The level begins showing they've fallen into a valley where the queen spider dwells. The player is to defeat the spider queen and her minions, which will allow them to complete the level and move on to the next, where they access the ancient temple of Amankhutep. Create your plot guide to acknowledge these major beats, and then include the minor beats (meeting characters, finding hidden things, encountering new monsters, etc.), so you can formulate a plan on how to write for that level.

   b. Always keep a streamlined plot document to refer to. It should show the major beats of the game. Having that handy can answer a lot of questions that might lead you into building story beats that stray too far from the main course.

   c. Cutscene or dialog encounter plot guides: if you are to write a major bit of dialog, you once again should have a reference that

you can look at to make sure the encounter or cutscene supports the overall plot. Make sure to note the motivations of the characters involved, so you can better imagine the conversation taking place and build good dialog that serves the story, remains relevant and interesting, and doesn't drag.

d. Some games don't have discreet levels but are built on open worlds. The character wanders around from story node to story node: some of which are available to the player immediately, and some that unlock after a condition is met. In games where there are no concrete delineations between story encounters, you'll want to build more of a modular, nodal plot guide. Detail each story node: what's going on there, who is involved, what the player is supposed to do or learn there, and how it ties to the grand, overarching plot. Write down the various stages of the area: for instance, you are responsible for the story encounters at an oasis. When the player is just beginning, it's just a way-stop in the desert. As they progress, the oasis becomes a stopping point for a group of soldiers on a diplomatic mission to a hostile country. Later, the oasis is filled with enemy soldiers, the result of a spectacularly failed diplomatic mission. Your plot document should cover these stages: who the player can talk to or fight, how the player can affect the situation, and what the player can learn from the encounter. Also write notes on how this area is entangled, plot-wise, with other nodes around the game.

e. For games that aren't story focused, it's still good to have plot documents or diagrams. A racing game, for instance, can have plots centered on winning and unlocking new tracks and acquiring new cars. Any level-based or progression-based game has the opportunity for story and plot. Keeping notes on the basic plot will help you understand the tone you need for any point in the game.

4. Series Bible. A licensor's bible is mentioned earlier, but you may be in a situation where you need to write one of your own. If you're creating a new IP from scratch or starting to plan out what the live team will be creating for content after launch, writing a bible can be very helpful. This document is a sort of summary of all the above, boiled down to the most essential pieces of information that absolutely, positively

must be addressed any time something is set in this fictional universe. If there are sequels or prequels or adjacencies or DLC packs or ongoing updates, the series bible helps to orient them in relation to each other and keep crucial elements consistent in every iteration. This isn't intended to lock down creativity. Different characters in different timeframes may have different points of view regarding specific events. But the series bible tracks the canon history of the series, makes sure fictional races and groups are represented consistently, and generally assures that fans can recognize their favorite universe in every iteration.

5. Lists and lists and lists. Lists of possible names for characters, lists of names for places, lists of all the main characters, lists of the creatures a player may fight, dictionaries for the various languages being used, and lists of anything relevant that might help inspire and inform your need to create worlds from scratch.

6. Also, to reiterate. If you're making decisions about the design of the game, make sure those decisions are communicated to the right people. The greatest percentage of wasted time on any game project is due to misunderstandings. Keep informed, stay informed, and inform others.

3.8 HELPFUL PROCESSES

As mentioned, you want to be as efficient with your time as possible. Creativity doesn't like schedules, so you need to make your time outside the creative process as efficient and time saving as possible, so your writing process has enough room to do a good job without resorting to tropes and clichés.

Here are a few processes and docs to make you a bit more efficient.

1. Daily standups: most teams have daily standups in their attempt to be agile. Most creative people hate daily standups. Daily standups are important to keep you from wasting time. Here are some ways to optimize these meetings:

    a. Keep your own updates simple, but always let people know you can expand on things after the meeting. Don't go into detail on your expertly written exchange between the hero of the game and Pit Droid #846578. Just let people know you completed it,

that today you're moving on to Pit Droid #0834750, and that you should be done with Pit Droids sometime next Tuesday.

b. Standups are valuable because they are the only time of the day that the team feels like, well, a team. Once it's done, everyone goes back under the headphones and individually tries to conquer their task list. Use this time to get to know everyone's name, and build lines of communication. It is way easier to ask for someone to do a little work to fix things when you have a good relationship with them.

c. Only ask questions if you need an answer: don't ask questions that you know the answer to, but, in asking, make you look smart. Nobody likes that person.

2. Checklists: they seem simple, but they work so well! Keep a daily, running checklist of what you need to accomplish. I find doing this in a journal works well. Every day when you start work, copy your checklist to the next page of the journal, leaving out everything you accomplished the day before. This will prepare your mind for the work you need to do for the day, and remind you of tasks you need to add. In high stress times, I'll prioritize the list to get the most important stuff done. On days when I can't seem to get enough energy, I prioritize the easiest tasks, since getting things done energizes me to take on bigger jobs.

3. Bug watching: if you aren't watching for bugs on a regular basis, they'll pile up. Keep on top of your bug list, or you'll start feeling overwhelmed.

4. Test your work: once you implement something, test it. Many awkward mistakes have shipped in games because writers didn't catch a bad spelling or a dialog line was swapped with one that was inappropriate for the situation. Make sure your efforts are working correctly before you move on to the next major task.

3.9 DIALOG

Dialog gets its own section because it comprises the greatest amount of text in games. While the art of writing dialog has been covered, this section will delve a bit into the process of it.

3.10 DIALOG TREES

Dialog trees are pretty straightforward. A line of dialog is launched by the player or the game, there are a few responses to choose from, each choice has a response, etc. Dialog trees, as you can see, can become complex tangles of text, and are hard to parse outside of the game when you are formulating them.

Some game engines have tools for dialog trees. Some game teams use third-party tools to craft them. I knew a writer once who created thousands of hyperlinked web pages locally on his machine to simulate the workings of his dialog trees.

Even when there are tools, the old method of creating dialog lines and writing them on post-it notes, so they can be arranged on a white board or nearby handy wall still, can rear its head. There's nothing like seeing your massive, hundred-line dialog exchange in multiple colors of sticky notes on a white wall outside some unsuspecting office or meeting room.

Dialog trees are very hard to keep in your head. Here are some methods to keep those cats herded before they're corralled in code in your game:

1. Refer to your plot documents: Earlier, we talked about keeping documents that reflect the ongoing plot of the game. This is when they come in handy: you need to know what your dialog is supposed to accomplish. What does the player gain by exchanging words with the game? What does this conversation unlock? Keeping the plot in mind helps you keep focused.
2. Do the golden path first: the Golden Path is the fastest, least obstructed pathway through the game. For your dialog, it should be the single questions and answers that get to the optimal result. This forms the trunk of the tree you can then grow branches and loops and little rollercoasters on. Once the center is there, fill out the rest.
3. The more important the dialog, the fewer pathways there should be. The player needs to know that he or she is making an important, game-changing choice. Keeping these conversations focused and simple will nail home the importance of the decision. If you feel the player needs more information about the decision, see if you can't put in a gatekeeper for the player to talk to that has all the information they need before they move on to the decision-making NPC.
4. Say it out loud before committing it to code. An old writer's trick: saying your dialog out loud helps you to find awkward wording and

"fluff" words that don't need to be there. I just did it with this bullet point, and it worked great. You didn't really need to read that lengthy example referencing the movie *The Adventures of Pluto Nash*.

5. Pronunciation guides: When you write dialog, always make a note of any invented or unusual words and write down their pronunciation. When the lines get recorded, they'll need these guides to help the voice talent get through unfamiliar jargon.

3.11 DIALOG IN SPREADSHEETS

In many games I've worked on, written dialog is parsed down into single lines in a spreadsheet. This allows for the game to find the appropriate text and print it out at the appropriate time. It also helps the sound engineers link the spoken word lines to the written lines. Chapter 2, covering script formatting, discusses this as well.

Writing dialog in spreadsheets isn't ideal for the artistic process, nor is it helpful for stringing together dialog trees. However, it certainly is an answer on how to collate all the written conversations and other text in one place, so it can be appropriately placed within the game.

Here are some brief notes on working with dialog in spreadsheets:

1. Always have a column meant to explain the flavor or intent of the line. This is for the voice talent. If the line is supposed to be delivered in anger, jot that down. If it's in response to another character, let the actor know. This helps a lot.
2. Always have a column for pronunciation. Having the pronunciation there for the actors keeps things efficient and less frustrating.
3. Have a column with game location written in it. This helps whoever is wiring up all the dialog to know they are putting the right lines in the right place.
4. Have a numbering system for the dialog that allows you to put in lines between other lines without having to add to the bottom of the spreadsheet. Each line has an ID number. You'll want to be able to add new lines in between others and not have it disappear if the spreadsheet gets sorted by ID number. Maybe this means numbering the IDs of the initial spreadsheet in leaps of ten (10, 20, 30) or having the ID number have the ability to have decimals. Either way, this will help a lot.

3.12 CONCLUSION

This chapter has given you some information on the standard types of documentation you may find game developers using and has given you some ideas on the types of docs you may want to write to keep you organized. There are many individual ways to keep yourself on task and many tools that can help you do it.

Always remember you are in the business of communication. Use those strengths to make sure maximum clarity is established among the writing and design teams. Use well-written, succinct documentation for communicating your contribution to the game. Always be aware that game developers rarely have time to do more than skim text, so craft your messages accordingly.

3.13 EXERCISES

1. A deposed bandit leader in exile finds an old hut in the forest. The player character (PC), naïve but still a formidable warrior, lives there. The bandit approaches the hut: using clever lies, he convinces the PC to rush off into the woods to begin the game.

    a. Write down what you need to know as a writer to create the dialog between these two characters.

    b. Think about how much of that knowledge might come from the GDD and World Guide

    c. Suggest three documents you might want to create to help you write the above dialog outside the GDD and World Guide.

2. Write the dialog for the above conversation, and place it in a spreadsheet. Make sure to include the fields suggested in Section 4.2

3. After a time, the PC above finds him- or herself imprisoned by dwarves in a dungeon deep beneath the earth. In the cell, the PC finds the dead body of the bandit that started it all.

    a. Write a short document detailing the plot of how the bandit found himself there and how he perished.

    b. The dwarven guard of the dungeon may know a little of the story, above. Write a short character bio of the guard that establishes the tone of any future dialog you may need to generate.

CHAPTER 4

Writing Instructions, Helptext, Walkthroughs, and Manuals

Text to Train the Player

John Feil

Paizo

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Training the player to play your game has gone beyond shipping a manual alongside some disks in a box or jewel case. Instruction sheets, helptext, walkthroughs, knowledge bases, and YouTube playthroughs comprise an exploded universe of assistance to help players get the info they need.

In this chapter, we'll cover the essence of pulling these data together and using it to build these various expressions to help your game start on the best foot possible.

4.1 HOW DID YOU GET HERE?

You may be the only designer on a small team making mobile games, a copywriter from the marketing department, a narrative designer being repurposed as a technical writer, or even a QA tester on a team stretched thin while in the middle of shipping a game. In any of these cases, you've suddenly been assigned to assemble and write information that will be used in a half-dozen ways to help players learn how to play your game.

No matter how you got here, it always starts with gathering the right data.

Generally, everyone on the development team intuitively knows how to play the game at an expert level. This means that they no longer remember or consider relevant the basic, ground-level information that someone new to the game would need to know in order to play the game. As the assigned writer, you have to cast your mind into the role of that empty vessel without preconception (or perhaps all the wrong preconceptions) and try to write down everything a player might need to know to get a good start on the game. Game developers are separated from new players by a high mountain of existing knowledge about the game (Figure 4.1).

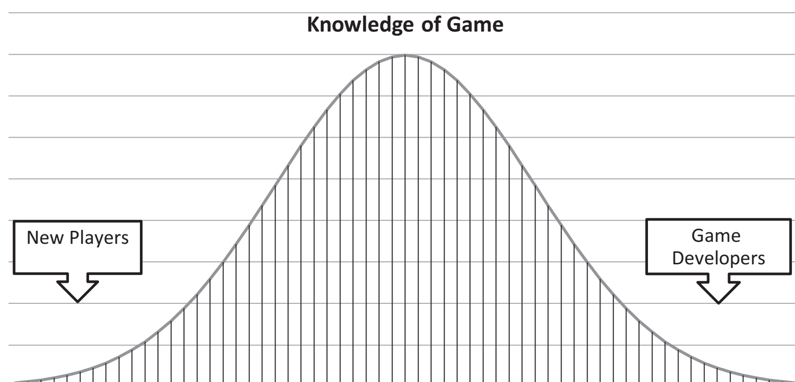

FIGURE 4.1 Game developers are separated from new players by a high mountain of existing knowledge about the game.

4.2 GATHERING THE INFORMATION

All the information you need to assemble is already present, in various documents, in the heads of the development team, and in the game itself. Unfortunately, by the time you've been assigned this task, the game is likely to be in a high state of flux. Control schemes, balancing, narrative, and character abilities are all changing as the game bucks and jerks into its final form. One moment, the "A" button is an attack, the next day, it's a block. The day after, it could be back to attack, or it could be something completely different.

What this means is that you need to be on top of what's going on in the game at all times. The secret to success here is to make sure you are keeping your lines of communication open in order to be aware of shifts and changes as they happen and also develop a sense of when you should react (change a bunch of text to recognize the change) or not to (write down a note and wait and see if the change cements itself).

However, the first thing you need to do is build a strawman of introductory knowledge, the basic database that you use as the reference for any tutorial documentation your team will need.

4.3 WHO AND WHERE TO GET INFORMATION FROM

Basic tutorial knowledge is found in several places. Here are the most likely places to find it:

1. Game Design Documentation (GDD)

    a. If your team uses documentation, this is the first place to start. These should help greatly in forming a base document that you can then use as your foundational database. If you are at the end of the development of the game and heading toward shipping, it is likely that the GDD has become outmoded and is filled with incorrect information. No matter the state, this documentation will still be useful as a starting point. Just be sure to verify the information before publishing it.

2. The team

    a. Interviewing the team, specifically the game designers and the testers, is always helpful to get the most recent snapshot of what's happening in the game. You'll want to establish tight relationships with these people in order to be able to get the best

information you can in the soonest timeframe possible. The most important designers to befriend are the ones who are working on the part of the game players will see first. They will be making daily decisions about how information is presented and are responsible for easing the player into the game through the act of leading the player from one game element to the next.

3. Play the most recent build
   a. The most current knowledge you'll get is by playing the game yourself. Try to take copious notes on each step, looking for places where you might find yourself unconsciously knowing things that a beginning player might not know or have difficulty with. You'll be doing this a lot in order to keep your knowledge document up-to-date.
4. Sit down with someone who has never played the game and watch them
   a. You need to expose your *unconscious blindness to the obvious*. Having someone with no knowledge of the game enter the game blind and patiently teaching them the basic lessons they need to succeed will expose a ton of your blank spots. You might want to do this every few weeks if the game is undergoing a lot of last-minute shifts.

4.4 INSTRUCTION SHEETS AND HELPTEXT

Writing a good tutorial is covered by Andrew Walsh in Chapter 5. Sometimes, however, in shorter games, mobile games, or games focused on arcade action, the game may rely on help text or a page of instructions as the player's guide.

4.4.1 The Instruction Page

In short games, or games focused on arcade action, you may be assigned to write a page of basic instructions that help the player figure out which button does what. For instance, A is jump, B is light attack, Y is heavy attack, and X is death ray.

These types of pages are fairly straightforward and rely mostly on you being able to present information in the shortest, most information-rich way possible. Here are some tips on making a good instruction page:

1. Keep it simple—use plain language. Gamers come here to learn game things, so don't be hesitant about using game terms.
2. Use the flavor of the game when appropriate—your instructions should have touches of flavor in it to make sure that the player feels at least somewhat immersed. The game designers will usually have named attacks something more interesting than "punch" or "kick," such as "Swift Strike" or "Snap Kick." Using these terms helps immerse the player.
3. Order instructions from most used to least used. For instance:
    a. Buttons or joystick for movement or turning
    b. Buttons or joystick for fast attack or acceleration
    c. Buttons or joystick for slow attack or deceleration
    d. Buttons or joystick for block or other, less primary controls
    e. Buttons to access menus
    f. Button/joystick combos for various effects
4. Finally, as always, keep in touch with the team to make sure you catch control changes when they happen. Generally, pages like this aren't looked at too closely when the game is coming close to shipping, and you don't want to have bad information published with the game.

4.4.2 Help Text

In a lot of games, a tutorial is pushed to the side in favor of helpful context-sensitive pop-up text that is presented to the player on a mouse-over, right-click, or other action. What very few people realize is that someone has to write all that stuff, or at least check it over to make sure whoever programmed in the text didn't make spelling mistakes or leave in information that is no longer up to date.

This text could be encoded anywhere, from being hard-coded into the game (hopefully not), to being in an excel sheet (best case scenario). In any of these cases, here are some tips to helping you write help text.

1. Again, keep it simple: you won't have a lot of room to write. A pop up will generally be as short as possible—get to the point quickly. "Press A to Open" or "Press B to Speak."

2. Establish a standard format: when writing text that is more for identification than instruction, like item or enemy info, for instance, keep a standard format, so players can learn to look for the data they are prioritizing, such as weapon damage per second, enemy deadliness, or attack type. Stacking information is useful in this instance, with name at the top, and each detail having a line below, like:

DENTIST'S DRILL

Piercing weapon
  Damage per second: 6.2
  Special attack: Sonic unpleasantness

   Be sure to use the same wording, format, and structure for every item in the category. Even small differences can be confusing to new players. If the same stat is called "Health" in one section and "Healing" in another section, or displayed first for one potion and third for another, there will be some players who are confused about whether this is the same stat or two different stats with different functions.

3. Keep flavor consistent with the world while keeping the language plain: the first priority of help text is to deliver information quickly and as succinctly as possible, but you can still wordsmith it to reflect the game's general tone, whether it be science fiction, fantasy, gritty urban reality, racing, WW2 combat, or fashion show. Throwing in some minimal flavor can make the game more immersive without sacrificing the usefulness of the text. Item and creature names will help with this, and if you have room, sometimes throwing in an adjective can give the flavor you want. Is this a first aid kit, a healing potion, or a regen injection? Under the hood, they may all have the same function, but the words matter.

4. Test your work. I shouldn't have to write this, but always test to make sure your text is popping up correctly, that the right words are in the right places, that there are no weird cutoffs from unknown text limits, no strange characters from there not being the right characters in the game fonts (uppercase Ys show up as dollar signs, etc.), that you have the right index numbers for the right places in the game (if the game calls the text from an excel sheet or similar), and that everything has correct spellings and grammar. After any change, always test again.

4.5 TEXT WALKTHROUGHS

Usually left for players to make and post on the Internet, you may still find yourself writing a walkthrough for various reasons, such as in a script for a tutorial video, reference for customer support, or building test plans for QA.

Walkthroughs are exactly that, step-by-step instructions on what the player needs to do to overcome the challenges of the game to get from beginning to end.

Writing a good walkthrough requires a thorough knowledge of each step of the game, which you might not have. This is where you once again should rely on the designers and testers of the game to help you outline the steps the player must take to win.

The language of a walkthrough is once again more akin to technical writing than to script or novel writing and should be delivered as cleanly as possible without obfuscation or shyness to laying out pure game terms and control schemes. Here are some tips on writing a good walkthrough:

1. The walkthrough must be accessible from any point: the user should be able to quickly skim through the walkthrough to find where they are in the game and start from there. To do this, it is helpful to structure walkthroughs as outlines, so you can refer back to section and chapter numbers. Example: "3.1.8. Once the player has beaten the Minotaur, they can use the Key of Minos (acquired in the cavern of the basilisk, section 2.1.2) to open the door to the inner fortress."

2. Walkthroughs should be objective. Stick to the facts: this is a technical document and should be pretty dry. However, there is some merit to some subjective game advice if there are many pathways to success. "To defeat the basilisk, the player should have at least a strong weapon, like the Club of Herakles, and a reflective surface, like the Shield of the Moon."

3. The Golden Path: Walkthroughs have to be complete, but sometimes games have way too many encounters to detail everything without losing the goal of getting the player through tough spots and on to the end of the game. Keep focused on the golden path, the most succinct and efficient way through the game with minimal or no focus on unnecessary gameplay. If there are multiple paths through the game (a dark and light path, for instance) you may need to address both in each step (if possible) or write multiple walkthroughs if the

gameplay is different enough. Remember, the first priority is to make information findable, so give a good amount of thought on how to format the information to best deliver the right data to confused players wanting to move fast.

4. Testing: Testing a walkthrough is best done by having a player who is unfamiliar with the game use it to get through the game. However, this may be unfeasible if the game is still being developed, and there are multiple crash bugs still present. What you may need to do is run the text by your expert designers and testers to make sure you have everything correct. This should be done in an in-person environment with dedicated time to talk through each step. Giving a designer a link to the document will generally result in a skim over (those guys are busy!) and give you less than stellar quality control. Call a meeting for an appropriate time and walk through the text step by step, so errors can be caught and fixed.

4.6 KNOWLEDGE BASES

A knowledge base is an online, hyperlinked document whose goal is to let users find the answers to their problems with software. In most cases, this work is a live document that is added to as new problems are found that have general (i.e. not specific to one person's machine) answers.

Knowledge bases can be either customer facing or customer service facing, depending on the company. They are highly technical and are meant plainly to address methodologies to overcome real-world obstacles.

In general, knowledge bases are assembled by the game developers, and not narrative designers, but, as you probably know, if your job on the team is to write stuff, you have a greater than normal chance of getting dragged into the technical writing aspects of the game, and you might be asked to collate and create text to fill the first iteration of this kind of database.

Here are some tips on creating knowledge bases:

1. Knowledge bases are highly fragmented, with each bit of knowledge findable by a search function. This means you need to be sensitive about easily findable keywords that can lead searchers to the solutions or information they are looking for. However, be aware that some information may not be available to searchers, for instance: boss names (you may know the boss' name is Fred, but the player might not have picked up on that), location names, etc. There is generally a

lot of room for keywords, so try and outthink the searcher and figure out several ways to locate the right information.

2. Knowledge bases, as mentioned, are highly technical. You won't need to add flavor outside of specific game names into the text. You are here to give real-world solutions to users who are baffled by how to get some aspect of the game to work or to overcome some sort of obstacle.

3. Knowledge bases are highly interlinked. One of your goals is to make sure related terms are part of the entry. As you build the knowledge base, you may want to keep a list of central keywords and search terms to help organize all the information within the database.

4.7 VIDEO PLAYTHROUGHS

The most popular way to find out how to do just about anything is by jumping on to YouTube and watching a tutorial. To make a successful tutorial, you'll need two things: a person who can explain things in a clear and understandable manner and a good script.

You may not be the one who has the great video presence, but you might be the one who is responsible for the script. Here are some tips on writing scripts for online tutorials:

1. Remember that the person being filmed will need to sound natural in order to be as clear as possible. For me, this means not writing word-for-word scripts that the actor has to follow but outlines that work through each step of a process that will get a viewer feeling comfortable about the game. Your outline should be complete, clear, and focus on the golden path to success.

2. Work with the team making the video, and the actor specifically to make sure that each step is clear and that the actor can go from one concept to the next seamlessly.

3. As a corollary to step 2, it is always helpful, if not necessary, to include pronunciation guides for game terms. Character names, locations, and other terms in the game may not be familiar to the actor, and they will need to be guided to the correct pronunciation. Work with the designers, writers, and game audio engineers to find pronunciations.

4. Your outline will likely be used for the source of any on-screen text. Keep this in mind, and make sure your prose is as clear and to the point as possible. On-screen text is usually only a few words long, so keep brevity in mind.

4.8 MANUALS

There isn't a lot of call for actual, paper manuals for software, but there are always edge cases that crop up. It could be that your team is called upon to make a pdf that will be placed online or that the game you are working on has a giant collector's edition, and a manual is one of the things the company wants to include in the box to add value.

Manuals allow for a greater amount of game flavor in them than the previous types of help/training methods. They can have game art, flavor text, and snippets of narrative that helps the player understand the world of the game.

4.8.1 Short Manuals

If you find yourself tasked with writing a very short manual, you must use what room you have to get all the information the player needs into that space. Here are some tips for writing short manuals:

1. First, recognize that the manual will have a front cover, and a mostly blank back cover. There might be a little bit of marketing text on the front and some legal remarks on the back.

2. Controller graphics: manuals do better with pictures, especially pictures of controllers or keyboard maps with callouts to each button or key's function. As the writer, you'll need to work with a graphic artist to pull together these controller pictures and help write the text identifying their function. Depending on the complexity of the game, this might eat up a good chunk of your real estate. Because of their necessity and size, put those in the manual first.

3. Next, explanatory text for the callouts in the graphics: the callouts in the graphics may need to be extremely short to fit in the manual. Players will look to the callout, and, if they can't quite figure out what the callout means, they'll want a sentence-long explanation to get them on their feet. Explanatory text for callouts should be located right under or around the graphic they refer to for ease of use.

4. How do I make it go? Once you figure out what room you have left after graphics and explanations, you should work on the intro. Check other manuals you can find for various ways to write this type of text. Start with some welcoming text and a thank you to the new player to give some basic flavor. You'll probably want to include language that gives the player an idea of how to install the game.

5. Terms and conditions: your company will want to put an End User Licensing Agreement (EULA) in the manual, if there is one. Get that text in next to figure out how much room you have left.

6. Whatever space is left should be dedicated equally to a smattering of in-game graphics, complex gameplay instructions (attack combos, explaining more about menus, the collection system, etc.), and a paragraph on how to get more help if the player hasn't found the info they are looking for.

7. Credits: I'll cover crediting procedures a bit below, but there will probably be a need to put some of the developer's credits in here, if just the leads. Hopefully, the game itself will have a credits page that is linked to from a menu that has the complete list.

4.8.2 Long Manuals

Long manuals have gone the way of the dinosaur, but occasionally someone with a great fondness for the video games from the 1990s will convince the team that it would be great to have a full, bound manual in the collector's box.

Manuals of this sort are filled with flavor text from the game: world histories, character stories, bios of major NPCs, recipes for the special cookies the main character's aunt makes, and more. Large manuals are major undertakings and are meant to fully train the player on how to play the game as well as entertain them with immersive content.

Below are some tips on how to approach writing a long manual:

1. Graphics are your friend: outside of controllers and keyboards, the long manual will have room for a good amount of art. Depending on whether the manual is printed in black and white or in color, the graphics you include might be from the team's concept artists, or from screen shots of the game itself, to photo quality renders of main characters, maps of the world, or vehicles. Gather as much art as you

can so you can make the manual a feast for the player's eyes and ease some of the work you have generating text.

2. Read other game's long manuals. There is nothing wrong with taking inspiration from those writers who have gone before you. Find similar manuals and look at what they chose to focus on. This should help a lot in coming up with a strategy on how you want your manual presented.

3. Graphics of controllers and keyboards, with callouts to their function. Text supporting these graphics. As in the short manual, you need to give the player the info they need to feel comfortable in the game. You can go a bit deeper in with a longer manual, but make sure players find it easy to find what they want.

4. Deep gameplay controls: sometimes you're writing a long manual because the game is that complex: a tactical wargame with different behaviors for dozens of types of units, a flight sim that has tech specs for each airplane the player can access, and more. This type of manual will have pages and pages of pictures of menus, various control schemes, and breakdowns to explain those game features. Manuals like this require a lot of interaction with the team, with changes happening until the game locks in for shipping.

5. Flavor, flavor, flavor. Character bios, stories of the world, and bits of narrative in the main character's voice. All of these might be used to embody the long manual with the kind of feeling a good travel guide might have. Cover the major enemies (that the player would know about from the start), major towns, cities, and locations that players will encounter, and describe the deadly weapons, incredible beasts, and mighty works they might be able to find, collect, or battle.

6. Legal text. There is always legal text. Make sure it is one of the first things in your document so you know how much room it takes up.

7. Credits: you'll probably want to put in the full credits for all the developers in a long manual. I'll cover credits in Section 4.9.

8. Longer manuals require time to print. Keep this in mind: someone is going to have to make enough books to fill all those collector's boxes, and they'll need time to do it. It is likely that the manual will need to be done before the game is completely locked down. If that is the

case, be ready to submit errata to whomever is responsible for the online manual or in-game manual files.

9. Index and table of contents: longer manuals will need references to where to find things easily. From the front end, there should be a table of contents to help the reader skip to where they need to go in a general sense. In the rear, it can be helpful to have an index, so readers can find individual terms. Both of these sections can be generated to a certain degree of success by a good word processor. It will still take some time for you to hand-hold the process to make sure you've formatted the manual correctly and to make sure all important terms are recognized in the index. For the index, it may be handy to keep a notepad by your side to write down key terms as you construct the manual. This should help remind you of important terms you may forget later.

4.9 CREDITING

In some circumstances, you may find yourself having to help create a document listing the roles and responsibilities of all the game developers that worked on the game. Each company has its own take on crediting, from just listing names and not roles, to creating novel role titles (lead code monkey), to not having credits at all.

It's my opinion that proper credits are necessary to establish a developer's bona fides as they progress through their career. Credits create a verifiable record of what you've done and where you've been, which is extremely important when considering how many times developers can move between companies due to layoffs, company failures, and seeking new career opportunities.

If you are not only tasked with creating a credits document but also given the job of figuring out who should get credited and how, you may first want to check out the IGDA's Developer Credit Special Interest Group. They've created an extensive ruleset for crediting that should help you figure out the strategy of crediting.

Outside that, gathering credits can be a bit of a quest. Generally, to find out who is doing what, you might check with Human Resources (HR). HR, however, might not have that granular idea of who is working on what.

The next step is to go to the leads of each team (Lead Producer, Lead Engineer, Lead Artist, etc.) and get them to provide a list of the people who are working for them and their title (associate designer, etc.). The lead

producer and their production staff should be instrumental in creating this list (they have to know who is doing what in order to track how the game is going.)

Finally, if you are dealing with a small developer, you may just be able to walk around the room and get the info from just asking names and what their role is. Make sure you run this list past the leads to make sure the individuals have the right title for their role.

4.10 CONCLUSION

Whether you are writing helpful tooltips or in-depth walkthroughs, these are the high-level lessons you should have come away with:

1. Get to know the development team well and have a clear communication channel to those people who are deciding on gameplay and controls.
2. Get to know the testing team, if they are available, and rely on them for help.
3. Always check and recheck your work.
4. Remember, you are writing this material for ease of access for a group of usually pretty frustrated people. Be clear and concise before you are flowery and verbose.

Writing help material is extremely important for the success of your game. Keep that in mind, as the creation of the material can seem like the last thing anyone wants to do when they are trying to ship a game.

4.11 EXERCISES

1. Write a short manual on how to drive a car. Include pictures or drawings of the steering wheel, gauges, and foot pedals with callouts to each. Keep the manual fewer than three pages using nothing smaller than a ten-point font. What things must you include to make sure the driver knows everything about the controls? What things do you have to leave out in order to keep within the space limit?
   a. Extra credit: show your manual to someone who can't drive. Test them to see how much they remember and how much they ignore. The test should not include having them drive a real car.

2. Take the manual from Exercise 1 and write it as if you were an old wizard explaining the workings of the car to a young warrior in a fantasy setting. Include flavor text. You may expand the manual up to six pages.

3. Find a manual online for a game and write a two-page critique of what it does right and what it does wrong in teaching the player how to play the game. Be sure to suggest ways that the manual could be improved.

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CHAPTER 5

Writing Tutorials

Write "Start" to Start

Andrew S. Walsh

Guerrilla Games, Sony

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5.1 TO BEGIN AT THE BEGINNING—WHAT IS A TUTORIAL?

"We're getting ripped to pieces on this beach. Take out that bunker, soldier!"

"I said, take out the bunker!"

"Why are you jumping up and down? How is spinning round going to help us? Hey, no! Don't throw that grenade!"

Boom

So, the hero dies.[1] And with them go the hopes, dreams, and narrative expectations of an interactive writer. For no matter how great the adventure, or how imminent the end of the world, if the player can't figure out how to run rather than throw a grenade, then their game is over and your amazing, interactive narrative will lie in tiny, smoking pieces before the story's started.

So, how can writers help players to play?

5.2 DO WE REALLY NEED TUTORIALS?

Back in the 1970s and 1980s, games were escaping computer labs to take up residence in arcades, home consoles, and then personal computers. In those days, it was rare for games to include tutorials. Instead, a list of controls displayed onscreen or came as printed instructions.[2]

For arcade games, a quick introduction was preferable so players could go from coin to action as quickly as possible. Experimentation also meant more digital lives were lost, keeping the coins dropping into the slot. In most games, the controls were simple anyway. Wiggle the joystick, hammer the buttons, and fly the spaceship.

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[1] Other genders are available, but we're talking about someone stupid enough to blow themselves up with a grenade, so, you know, let's stick with male.

[2] Games used to be sold on tapes. For those too young to remember tape, imagine putting a harddrive through a spaghetti machine and then having to wait 45 minutes for your game to load.

When games moved into homes, many titles were ported from arcade games or copied their designs. So, naturally, they came without a tutorial. This is fine when "Press to Jump" is all that is needed to traverse an entire side-scrolling platformer. In such cases, the idea of a special in-game section to teach the rules seemed redundant. Such thinking was reinforced by the overlap of common designs and control layouts.

Over time though, designers began to see that players had more time to play at home, meaning they had the opportunity to create games with longer, more involved gameplay. At first, this didn't change how games were taught. The need to absorb more complex controls was considered part of the challenge. If you wanted to play the game, you needed to do your homework. As the range of gameplay genres and diversity of players expanded, this broadening of the industry meant:

- An increasing demand for different forms of gameplay.
- A larger player base unaccustomed to standard control types.
- More complex games presenting a larger number of controls and playing styles.
- A wider variety of control layouts, so even experienced gamers arrived unsure how to play.

Understanding diverse and complex controls meant players needed more time to learn, and while there will always be a percentage of people willing to read an entire 747 manual before starting a flight sim, other potential players were put off. There was now a commercial need to make learning fun. Designers began to ask "as games are interactive, shouldn't learning to play them be too?" Enter…the interactive tutorial.

5.3 DESIGN MODELS

With a wide variety of players and game designs, there isn't a one-size-fits-all tutorial. Designers and writers must choose the solution best for their project.

5.3.1 No Tutorial

Games do not need a tutorial. Many still throw the player into the gameplay to succeed, or fail. This isn't wrong, it's a choice. Games with short gameplay loops (try, fail, learn, try again) can still teach gameplay quickly. Experienced players will have played many tutorials and sometimes push

for them to be removed so they don't have to repeat similar experiences and to increase the gameplay challenge. As a result, some games with tutorials have an option to switch them off, so that players can choose whether to learn first or dive right in.

5.3.2 Separate Tutorials

Creating a space outside the main game is another way to make learning optional. Discrete spaces have the advantage that they can be crafted to focus on introducing specific skills. This can be in a single space (*Mario 64*) or in a series of separate tutorial experiences (*Medieval II: Total War*). Some such areas are only accessible at the start of the game, others are available throughout the game for learning, or refreshing skills. *The Last of Us*, for instance, provides discoverable training manuals which, once opened, allow the players access a text tutorial whenever they want.

5.3.3 Integrated Tutorials

Integrated tutorials designate a level (normally the first) as a training space. These levels are often presented in restricted spaces preceding the main game. Linear narratives can simply open in a learning environment such as *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*'s training camp. For open worlds, it is common to produce a sealed section ahead of the openworld—*Prince of Persia* (2008)'s linear valley or *Fallout*'s Vaults. Such tutorials often start with the most simplistic controls and work up (e.g. walk, run, jump, pass, shoot, tackle), teaching the player as if they've never played a game before. Casual games almost always follow this model, containing straightforward, explicit tutorials at the start.

While such tutorial levels were revolutionary at first, their repeated form became so overused that *Blood Dragon* used its own tutorial to parody overly familiar formats. If a team elects to use a tutorial level today, they should be wary of the need to keep things fresh. Narrative can help with this.

Warnings aside, the integrated tutorial remains a good model for teaching players. Its resurgence in early mass-market VR titles is just one example of its value. A large number of players have never experienced virtual reality (VR), let alone the gameplay that awaits them. Games like *Doom VR* and *Batman Arkham VR* put the player into a linear process to introduce the world of VR before starting on the controls.

Some games have kept the tutorial model fresh by taking the principles of the tutorial level and then dropping the player into a gameplay section more representative of the whole game. *Grand Theft Auto V*, for instance,

throws the player straight into a bank robbery. Such levels are not generally as difficult as later levels but give a feel of what is to come, often using narrative as a way of framing this actionpacked start.

5.3.4 The Invisible Tutorial

Invisible tutorials put the player into a tutorial area and progression of skills, but without highlighting them. Gone are onscreen prompts and overt training sections. Instead, the player is free to explore and experiment free of overt instruction.

Ico opens with a cutscene showing a boy being dragged to a castle and sealed into a sarcophagus. Once the guards have gone, the boy makes his prison fall, spilling him out into the world. The player receives no instruction of what to do next. It is up to them to explore and discover the objective (how to escape) and solution (pull a lever). Once out, the next sealed room presents a new problem requiring the player to climb and jump, again without any instruction. In each case, the player is restricted until they solve the problem, so completing a stage of learning. This "do not tell" is the design equivalent of "show not tell" and is effective for similar reasons.

Be aware, however, that just as early designers relied on players being familiar with controls and designs, it is easy for today's developers to fall into the same trap. Gameplay parameters that are obvious to experienced players can be the wrong sort of invisible to new ones. For all their strengths, this means that invisible tutorials can end up being frustrating for players new to games or to the game's genre.

5.3.5 Ongoing Tutorials

Ongoing tutorials take the principles of the integrated tutorial level but extend the learning experience further into the game. This can break up overly familiar flows of teaching elements and allow complex controls to be taught over a longer period. *FIFA 19* gives the player challenges that both teach skills and offer rewards. These challenges open as the game goes on and can be accessed and played at any time.

5.3.6 Combined Tutorials

The approaches listed earlier can be combined. *Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* has a short training area in the initial cave, before switching to the ongoing model where the player is introduced to new abilities as they find them (an axe allows you to fell trees to create bridges) and to return and practice more complex powers (Runes presented in the game's shrines).

5.4 WHAT DO PLAYERS NEED TO LEARN?

So, what do players need to learn? The obvious answer is the control set, but a player's understanding of how to interact with the gameworld requires more than simply knowing which buttons to press.

5.4.1 Design's Golden Ingredients

To engage with an interactive world, participants need to understand the following:

1. Their method—how to do things.
2. Their freedom—what they can do.
3. The limits—what they can't do.
4. Their purpose—what they are required to do.
5. The joy—how to have fun in the space created by 1–4.

All these elements need to be addressed in a tutorial.

5.4.2 Their Method—How to Do Things

The control set whether it's one button, a VR handset, or spoken word; the player must know how to interface with the gameworld.

5.4.3 Their Freedom and Limits—What the Player Can and Can't Do

Every game has a limited set of verbs and prescribed conditions within which these apply. It is not enough for a player to understand "jump," they must know how far, when, and if there are required preconditions such as a ramp or power-up. Such limits are often determined by the gameplay genre. Players can run, but not drive cars, or can only climb highlighted objects. A mythological warrior might be able to slay dragons, but they can't walk through bushes because these mark the edge of the gameworld. Players need space to absorb such limits and abilities as well as the controls.

5.4.4 Their Purpose—What They Are Required to Do

Whatever the game, the writer and designer must ensure players know (or can work out) what they need to do to progress or succeed. In a tennis

game, the player's purpose is straightforward—win. Openworld RPGs are considerably more complex—fifteen subquest objectives, a main quest goal, and a bleeping alarm meaning that the player must find energy and water before doing anything else.

5.4.5 The Joy—How to Play in a Fun Way

The x player also needs to know how to have fun in the space that the rules create. How does their style of play fit the designers' creation? Are they enjoying the controls and the world as they progress through the tutorial? Is this a world they want to stay in?

Designers have a lot to communicate, but only a limited amount of space and attention span within which to fit lessons. This is why some game designers have nervous breakdowns when they realize that on top of teaching the player, they must also accommodate the narrative demands of the storyteller.

5.5 ADDING NARRATIVE

The story opens with a description of cherry blossoms. Slowly, poetically, over months, bright flowers transform into rich, sweet fruits, only to be eaten by birds at the very moment of ripening.

The 18th-century French seamstress who watched the cherries longingly through the seasons is robbed of the tantalizing reward that life had promised her. So, the protagonist's bitter plight is revealed through a powerful, if indulgent, fruit-based metaphor.

In novels, characters can and indeed do sit around thinking about things while the world around them is described. In films, paragraphs of inner thoughts transform into wonderfully lit, lingering shots following drops of spring rain along green leaves, expressing new hope sprouting in the heroine's soul.

Games are different. Interactivity demands expression through verbs designed into gameplay. This means the verbs your story requires must be represented in the design. If they are not, the narrative is likely to conflict with the gameplay.

Press X to look soulfully at the cherries.

Press Y to feel the inner torment thrust upon
you by the patriarchal class system.

Hold RT to experience hope.

It is not that emotion cannot be expressed through interactivity. Games like *Florence* show the power that well-thought-out mechanics can have. Choices made by the designer and writer must utilize interactivity to create meaning. Trying to superglue inappropriate emotions to button presses is not only ineffective, but it also destroys the experience. As such, while the narrative paradigms forged over millennia in other media can inform game writing, they do not define it. This is not writing for a passive recipient, it is weaving a story for active participants. Fail to respect the choices of the participant, and the narrative will also fail.

This is especially true in tutorials at the start of a game. For while it is the writer's natural instinct to want to establish the story, this must be balanced with the designer's need to give instruction.

5.6 MAKING THE START COUNT

As most tutorial elements tend to occur at the start of the game, it is important to ask the question—What makes a good opening? Knowing this will help structure all the necessary information in the strongest way possible.

1. A good beginning allows the player to understand and positively engage with their purpose in the world leaving them wanting more.
2. Where there is a structured narrative, the player should also be immersed in the world, identifying with the protagonist, the central conflict, and the protagonist's journey to resolve it.

To achieve this, the player will need to mix design's needs with narrative's golden ingredients.

5.6.1 Narrative's Golden Ingredients

1. Establish the setting (world building)
    a. Gameplay genre
    b. Narrative genre
2. The central conflict
    a. The central gameplay challenge
    b. The central narrative conflict

3. The characters and their goals.
   a. Protagonist
   b. Antagonist
   c. Goals and how they relate to central conflict
4. The story

This might seem a strange order to writers from other media, but remember, the game might not have a story.

5.7 ESTABLISH THE SETTING

Where there is no linear plot, there can still be narrative elements in the form of world setting and conflict. These help set the player's purpose, establishing limits and freedoms in an engaging environment.

Need for Speed: Most Wanted (2012) drops the central narrative that helped define the previous game of that title and instead presents scenarios the player can discover and opt to participate in. The central conflict is between drivers and the police who seek to stop them. The writer's job was to establish the world, central conflict, and the role of the police as antagonists. This was done with the player character (a car as an avatar) voiceless, while the world and antagonists are brought to life through overheard police radio messages triggered as a structured set of game barks.

Similarly, before the *Journey* series began in 2017, *FIFA* titles didn't have story. Instead, players drop into top-tier soccer matches with competition between teams as the central conflict (*FIFA 90-16* UK editions). The writing frames match in commentary, so the player feels like the game is being shown live on television so framing the players' actions is important in the gameworld.

Even where there is a story, narrative can be secondary to setting. In procedurally generated games such as *FTL: Faster Than Light*, it is important for the player to understand the driving danger (pursuing forces want to stop a spacecraft from delivering a message) and the goal (reach the end of nine systems to deliver the message). This information is delivered quickly and clearly at the start of the game with further story elements coming later in a set of scenarios from which the player can create their own narrative.

In games with a deeper story, the setting must be established so as to give relevance to the player character's actions and to help the player understand tone and goal. The world in the *Fallout* series has been laid waste by nuclear warfare. Those who survived are pushed to extreme lengths to stay alive and rebuild society. It is a bleak, grim setting undercut by a satirical commentary on 1950s America, big government, commercial excess, and the militaristic posturing of the Cold War. While desolation sets many of the goals (find supplies, rescue those endangered by mutants), the humor allows these problems to be addressed in an entertaining and imaginative way rather than forcing the player into a grim survival sim. *Fallout*'s tutorial opens with an animated cutscene, showing a newsreel celebrating soldiers executing a prisoner. As the camera pulls back, it shows an advert for a car before revealing a postapocalyptic world beyond. The tutorial ensures that the setting is established even before the narrator describes the events that led to the apocalypse.

5.8 GAMEPLAY GENRE

In other media, genre means "narrative genre." The categories found in bookshops, or online TV—thriller, rom-com, sci-fi, action, cartoon, etc. In games, genre is inevitably more complicated. While narrative genre is important, it is superseded by gameplay genre. Gameplay genre contributes to defining design and the space in which story can be told. The style and type of gameplay will also determine the complexity of controls and the pace at which players are willing to learn in the tutorial. Alongside narrative genre, gameplay genre fixes requirements that outline which type of world setting makes sense and, as a result, suitable central conflicts. World and central conflict in turn influence the sorts of characters and stories that fit in these spaces.

5.8.1 Pause for Screaming

I can hear some writers yelling. "Writing should not be prescribed!" "Genre encourages the formulaic!!" Such concerns have a basis. This is not, however, the fault of genre. It is the misuse of it. Genre is an important element of writing. Understand it, play with it, and then subvert it.

5.8.2 Gameplay Genre

Gameplay genre is the game's style of play. It tells the player whether they will be running, shooting, and fighting for survival (*Prey*) or annihilating Chelsea's defense with a well-timed chip (*FIFA 20*). The amount of space

required by narrative and the methods of storytelling available to a writer often depend on the gameplay genre. Platforming games, for instance, are tests of timing and navigation. Player characters leap chasms, scale ladders, conquer cliffs, and measure their progress by the distance traversed. Levels are often linear or have linear challenges within an open environment. As a result, gameplay and narrative objectives often involve traveling to a specific location. Platformers require a broken landscape that offers challenging traversals often with big height changes. This could be as a skyscraper under construction (*Donkey Kong*) or purgatory (*Limbo*). The writer's job (often in the tutorial) will be to establish why such a strange world exists.

The central conflict will be between the protagonist and the environment, with the antagonist's role providing a reason the protagonist has come to, or must remain in, this unusual space. Large height differences and expansive levels make it hard to create scripted events that can be clearly seen. In-game dialogue can be interrupted by the player plummeting to their doom. Such factors directly affect a game's narrative and speech designs.

First-person shooter (FPS) environments tend to be a mix of linear and open spaces. Locations tend to have low elevation. Sightlines vary to allow satisfying play for both short-range and long-range character classes. World settings require conflict, often attaching this to the narrative genre, e.g., a science-fiction, human versus alien conflict (*Halo*), or a historical war (*Call of Duty: WWII*). FPSs can demand character classes rather than singular characters to explain hoards of similar opponents.

It is easier to predict where a player will look in single-player games meaning that scripted events can be set up where writers and designers can be confident that most players will see them. Solo explorers can linger, explore environments, and discover collectables. In multiplayer games, however, players are under pressure to keep up with the team. With only one player, action can be stopped to present cutscenes or scripted events. If even one player wishes to skip the cutscene in multiplayer games, then there will be conflict between the story and design. Single-player levels are often only played through once, whereas multiplayer arenas ask for many playthroughs. The effectiveness of a cutscene viewed once versus one forced on players repeatedly is hugely different.

When creating a story and its opening, it is essential to understand these differences and requirements if the player is to engage with the game

from the outset. *Half-Life* (single-player[3]), *Left4Dead* (4-player co-op), and *Team Fortress 2* (team-based multiplayer) are all shooters with a first-person perspective developed by Valve, but differences in gameplay genre change the stories, settings, characters, conflicts, and worlds in which they can take place. As a result, their tutorials are also very different.

Half-Life is set in a deep storyworld that stretches a complex narrative across multiple titles (*Half-Life, Half-Life 2, Half-Life 2 episodes 1 and 2*).[4] Every level has spaces that deliver narrative moments directly (restricting the player in sealed rooms, turning off damage to stop players destroying in-game artifacts with gunfire, etc.) or by encouraging players to explore. *Left4Dead*'s light narrative presents very few scripted events with almost no player restriction. Atmospheric exploration is swapped for action, with constant, harassing pressure from enemies making in-game tourism a very bad idea. *Team Fortress* has even less in-game narrative. Instead, it focuses on the character classes' personalities, with the majority of the story appearing in videos and comics external to the game.

Half-Life's player character, Gordon Freeman, evolves over several games. *Left4Dead* establishes well-crafted archetypes, which have much to say, but little character development. *Team Fortress* provides cartoony character classes defined almost entirely by their gameplay role and a few ongoing gags. *Left4Dead* makes its conflict clear from the start (zombies! Kill or be killed!!), so does *Team Fortress* (defeat the opposing team!). In *Half-Life*, however, the player must journey onward not just to survive but also to explore the cause of and solution for the central conflict.

In a single-player game such as *Half-Life*, the designer needs to know what the player has learned, so they can pace the gameplay challenges and tutorial elements accordingly. In a multiplayer game, the challenge is the other players, so the player can face the full set of challenges from the start. As such, the designers of *Team Fortress 2* opted to put the tutorial sections separate from the main game giving players the choice of whether and when to learn. Each of *Team Fortress 2*'s tutorial sections are short optional, and focus on a single character class rather than asking the player to learn them all. In contrast, player instruction in *Half-Life* takes place in the gameworld with tutorial sections longer than several complete levels of *Team Fortress* or *Left4Dead*.

[3] For the main story game.
[4] To date. *Half-Life 3* is due out sometime in 2050…allegedly.

While it will rarely be the writer's job to choose the gameplay genre, writers do need to understand how and why genre changes the space available for story. Failing to do so may well result in a story that is unsuitable for the game and a tutorial form that conflicts with player expectation.

5.9 NARRATIVE GENRE

Narrative genre is usually decided after gameplay genre. Sometimes, gameplay genre is chosen to fit familiar combinations, such as a near-future tactical shooter (*Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six Siege*) or a story-based action-adventure game (*Wolfenstein: Youngblood*). More unusual combinations can make titles stand out by subverting expectation as was done by setting *Bioshock*'s FPS[5] in a dystopian 1960s undersea world.[6] Just as the writer needs to understand and clearly communicate the gameplay genre in the tutorial, it is the same for the narrative genre.

While gameplay genre suggests the space, technology, and storytelling resources at a writer's disposal, narrative genre provides a paradigm for tone, narrative structure, historical setting, and character archetype. Genre does not establish rules. It gives expectations. As soon as a giant spaceship passes overhead, tires spin up smoke, or the first dating partner appears above dialogue options, the player will have preconceptions of what will happen. Such expectations can be used to quickly establish setting reducing the need for explanation or description. Seeing a character in a trenchcoat will quickly seat the player into a period gumshoe tale. Knowing the story is a romance allows the (probably good-looking) protagonist, antagonist, and heartfelt quest to be quickly recognized.

In *Slay the Spire*, a procedurally generated deckbuilding roguelike, the player's purpose and progression is defined in the title. Players are fed only a few more narrative hints through the game, but as these crumbs match standard RPG tropes, anyone coming from tabletop deckbuilder, fantasy novel, or videogame RPG background will instantly recognize the genre's setting, purpose, and gameplay parameters from these story hints.

Genre is particularly good at setting tone. Tone in turn is very useful for signaling the emotions a writer wants the player to feel. The player character's torch searches the darkness, leading to an early encounter with an injured man who establishes a sense of danger; everything about *Resident*

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[5] *Don't System Shock*, or *The Force Unleashed* at me, each game makes its own decisions and *Bioshock* can be judged alone as well as part of a gaming ecosystem.

[6] The early 20th-century imperial obsession with supposed racial traits and purity playing into the game narrative's separate elitist society.

Evil 2 (Remake)'s opening screams the need to be afraid of the world. Compare that with *Mario + Rabbids Kingdom Battle* which establishes its world-shattering events by spewing a horde of Rabbids out of a teleporting washing machine shouting "Bwahh!" Yes, the gameworld is in terrible danger, but the emotional setting will be safe, relaxed, and comedic.

Total War: Three Kingdoms embraces two genres in one game. Playing in Romance (based on the the 14th-century historical novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, attributed to Luo Guanzhong and utilizing elements of Chinese historical fantasy), the players can control commanders gifted with superhuman strength. In *Records*, the commanders become human, and the player is given more historically accurate weaponry. These two different and culturally relevant views of Chinese history shift the genre, changing the gameplay and narrative experiences as a result.

Given the time pressures in tutorials, a concise way to frame setting and tone can be very handy. In the long term, it is important for a game writer to understand the impact of gameplay and narrative genres, so they can meet or confound the players' story expectations. Meeting expectations helps players understand their purpose and the golden ingredients. Handled carefully, confounding player expectations can generate surprises that set questions and build narrative drive. In the short term (most useful when writing tutorials), a genre's rules and conventions give writers shortcuts that players use to immerse themselves into the gameworld quickly.

5.10 CENTRAL CONFLICT

Narrative becomes interesting when the protagonist is forced to overcome obstacles to attain a goal rather than simply being given it. Complication makes the protagonist's journey compelling. The central conflict is the main "force" that acts to stop the player/player character from attaining their objective. This conflict gives protagonists their purpose and suggests their method.

Games require a central conflict too. This is the gameplay challenge. *Tetris* has a straightforward gameplay challenge—fit the blocks together before running out of space. *Angry Birds* adds a narrative conflict to frame the basic gameplay challenge of knocking structures over—the birds must defeat the pigs.

In story games, the central conflict defines the protagonist's struggle to realize their goal. The narrative cannot make sense until the player understands what the protagonist wants and what is stopping them from

getting it. Should the characters' goal and struggle not be compelling, then the player will be divorced from, rather than immersed in the gameplay. This means, it is vital that the writer establishes a compelling central conflict (or a journey to the central conflict) in any opening tutorial section.

If the central conflict and gameplay challenge compete, then the player can become frustrated. What is the player supposed to feel about a character if they don't want the same thing? What are they supposed to achieve if the gameplay asks one thing, but the narrative tells them the opposite? This is not to say the player wants to save the fictional sister/planet/technically amazing deviceydoohicky as if it were their own, just that the player's aim should align with the protagonist's.

By clearly presenting the player with the central conflict and genre, the writer will have addressed most of the golden ingredients.

The central gameplay challenge = player's gameplay purpose.

The central narrative conflict = player's narrative purpose.

The central narrative conflict should match, parallel, or complement the gameplay central challenge.

5.10.1 Matching Conflicts

The gameplay challenge and narrative central conflict match with both the player and the character wanting the same thing. In *Need for Speed: Rivals*, the player and avatar both wish to escape the police/catch the criminals. In *Mortal Kombat*, the player and the character want to fight and win.

5.10.2 Parallel Conflicts

Here the gameplay challenge and narrative central conflict have overlapping objectives. An emotional imperative is added for the protagonist, which the player can understand without sharing. Any dissonance between the player and the protagonist is minimized because the gameplay and central conflict take the player and character to the same place.

Character: I want to cross this space to save the prince/princess.

Player: I want to cross this space because platforming is fun.

Character: I want to beat the big boss to save my planet.

Player: I want to beat the big boss because it is the final gameplay challenge.

This type of conflict can also take advantage of the player's will to project themselves onto the characters in certain fictional settings.

Character: I want to date x.

Player: I want to beat the gameplay challenge of getting x to like the protagonist + (potentially) I enjoy the fantasy of being able to date x.

5.10.3 Complementary Conflicts

Complementary conflicts are the most engaging, but also the easiest to get wrong. While parallel conflicts tend to rely on a single, basic emotional state that overlaps the gameplay challenge, complementary conflicts call on nuanced motivations and may even question the player/protagonist's purpose. As long as the force pushing the protagonist remains compelling, then both the character and the player will still understand their reasons for doing things which they question. A character could, for instance, feel remorse, confusion, or doubt over killing while the player is still encouraged to continue this act in the gameplay (*Spec Ops—The Line*).

To ease the transition into complementary conflicts, more complex stories often delay, revealing the core conflict until later in the game. Opening tutorial sections tend to set basic emotional starting points (escape!) that set questions or hints to lead the player to the central conflict.[7] Gameplay genre suggests how complex the central conflict is likely to be.

- Fighting—*Soulcalibur VI*/Sports—*NBA Live 18* = matching conflict—beat an opponent.
- Platforming—*Super Mario 64*—parallel conflict—Mario wants to traverse the world to save Princess Peach from Bowser—the player wants to traverse the world to defeat the gameplay.
- Action adventure—*Red Dead Redemption*—complementary conflict—the protagonist seeks to be reunited with his wife and son. The core gameplay conflict is between the protagonist John Marston and anything that stops him from reaching his family. The core narrative conflict is with the Bureau of Investigation agents who force John into this situation. The player does not need to feel the same depth of emotion over the situation as the protagonist; they simply need to understand it and to engage with Marston's quest as they explore the gameworld.

[7] See *Prey* in slow burn openings for an example.

Note that conflict does not have to mean fighting. Conflict can come from an environment (*Shelter*), cooking food (*Cooking Mama*), or the unpredictable troubles of love (*Florence*). Anything that gets in the way of the protagonist's goal is conflict. As long as this conflict can be represented in/complementary to gameplay, then it works as a central conflict for a game.

5.11 THE CHARACTERS AND THEIR GOALS

When looking at the opening of a game (and so often the tutorial), the two most important characters to establish are the protagonist and antagonist. If the player leaves without understanding the protagonist's role and empathising with their quest, then any writer will face an uphill struggle to engage the player later on.

5.11.1 The Protagonist

The protagonist is whom the story is about. For a game with little, or no story, this is the avatar the player inhabits. For stories with a developing narrative, the protagonist is the character who changes or is changed by the world.

5.11.2 The Antagonist

The antagonist is the force against whom the protagonist/player competes. Antagonists can be a single individual, a movement, or a force of nature. Whatever their form, it is the antagonist's goal that creates or illustrates the central conflict. If you fail to establish a compelling antagonist in the opening, you can undermine your protagonist, the central conflict and the player's purpose. The antagonist can remain unseen at the start, but their actions, goal, and/or intent should be represented or at least foreshadowed.

5.11.3 Goals

Characters are defined by their goals, so the player needs to know as quickly as possible:

- What characters think they want
- What makes them want it
- How the characters are going to get their goal

If you fail to establish the protagonist's and antagonist's goals in an opening tutorial, the player won't understand the central conflict or the characters.

5.11.4 To create an Avatar or an Interactive Hamlet? That Is the Question

Just as genre suggests the complexity of the central conflict, conflict suggests the depth of the characters and their goals. Mario doesn't need intricate motivation to conquer his carting rivals. While *Mortal Kombat*'s characters are expanded by external material, in-game all that matters when the fighting starts is the winning, not the why. Episodic adventure games like *The Walking Dead: Season One* base some of their gameplay around complex moral decisions where the player decides who lives and who dies. This demands a deeper more complex protagonist.

5.11.5 Defining the Character

Please note that there has been no reference so far to the character's hair color, name, or favorite breakfast cereal. Such details can be useful but are secondary to a character's purpose. In the battle for space in a game's tutorial, it is essential to remember that if the details you're revealing don't establish the central conflict, character goal, or help the player navigate the level,[8] they are often irrelevant.

This isn't to say such details can't be important, but they can add clutter when you are trying to establish the character quickly through action. *League of Legends* can be played with no reference to the character story bios. *Ico* established emotion without spoken narrative, and the same can be true of stories with more complex narratives. Players only need to know the golden ingredients to start with. So, focus on these in the tutorial and then expand afterward. This will immerse the player faster and deeper than if they are force-fed the character's dating site profile.[9]

To round characters out quickly, it can be useful to establish three key details about them in the tutorial. Where possible, make these details adjectives, and then try to make two of the adjectives conflict. In the opening of *Uncharted 2*, for instance, Nathan Drake is introduced in perilous conditions that demonstrate that he is not only brave/heroic (the action hero) but also vulnerable (so more rounded and sympathetic than an invulnerable superman). Pretty much any introduction of *Sherlock Holmes* demonstrates both his intellect and his arrogance. Note that when a conflict is demonstrated, it tends to portray a strength and a weakness in

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[8] Or adding a detail to entertain, entertainment is an important way to engage and immerse the player. Build emotion, keep the jokes.

[9] Unless you're making an actual dating game…and even then…

the character. Multidimensional characters are more interesting (so pulling players into the story from the start) and set up questions to lead the player to want to see what happens later in the story (will this weakness undermine the character's attempt to attain their goal?).

Such adjectives are best expressed through action rather than statement—show not tell.[10] If the tutorial of the game is a WWII beach landing, then is the protagonist hanging back and panicking, or brave? Narrative does not have to mean dialogue. Players can infer a lot from art, animation, and the character's design purpose. Be it the character animations in *Overwatch*, or the barks in *Command and Conquer: Red Alert 2*, players can divine much about tone, personality, and purpose from a character's appearance, movement, and voice. Understanding how and when to show rather than tell can win writer's vital space in an information heavy tutorial section.

A great way to establish the character, details, and conflict is to present the protagonist with an early dilemma. Where possible, try to make this dilemma interactive. How the protagonist, or the player, solves this dilemma will tell the player a lot about the character they are inhabiting. If appropriate, involve the antagonist or a representation of the antagonist in this attempt to thwart the protagonist (the player) from the start.

5.11.6 Archetype, Stereotype, and Genre

It is common to find archetypes and stereotypes in games with thinner narratives. Even where characters are deeper, it can be advantageous to start out by establishing archetypal broad brushstrokes, so the player can engage with characters quickly and then discover details later. As always, the key challenge for writers in a tutorial is clearly establishing both the design and narrative golden ingredients. This may mean cutting details and minimizing the narrative footprint. This doesn't mean settling for caricature characters. It does mean careful selection of details in the tutorial section.[11]

5.12 THE STORY

Note that story comes last in the list of narrative's golden ingredients. One reason for this is simply that not all games have story elements.

[10] Better still "do" not "tell" in a game.

[11] See the earlier example from *Uncharted 2*, or *GTA V's* bank raid setting as examples of this.

Question: Do games need story?

Answer: No.

Question: So, gameplay comes first?

Answer: Interactivity is what defines games from other media; therefore, gameplay comes first.

Now another brief pause while I bang my head on a table...

For while there are those who will shout in triumph at the statement above, this isn't the end of the discussion. Sure, you don't "need" story in a game, but once the decision has been made to add narrative elements, then everyone should make sure they work.

With this in mind, it is important for writers to remember that their job is to create a story that fits into the space they have to tell it. For tutorials, this means focusing on material that introduces, reinforces, or highlights the golden ingredients and expanding from there.

5.13 LEARNING CURVES AND THE IMMERSION EQUATIONS

The pace and complexity of a game's tutorial correlates to how quickly and effectively a player becomes immersed in the gameworld. If too much narrative is introduced, or design information is introduced too quickly, the player can become confused and so less engaged. If information is presented too slowly, players can be bored.

5.13.1 Immersion Equation 1

The speed at which the player learns how to interact with the gameworld = the speed of immersion.

The design and narrative teams must consider how quickly players can absorb information and at what speed this is fun. To do this, they assess the load that the design and the narrative place on the player. This process is rarely expressed clearly in the development process, but it happens nonetheless.

5.13.2 Immersion Equation 2

The player's awareness that they are learning rather than playing = the depth of immersion

The golden ingredients require the player to engage with and become immersed in the gameworld. Story is one way to encourage this. Narrative

can hide the limitations of design (yes, it's another fetch quest, but this one is to save the FragaBurps!), create a compelling reason to continue with the game (I have to know what happens next!) and, in the case of tutorials, disguise the learning. To achieve this, the writer should create a story space where the design information feels relevant and compelling, and has room to breathe. The designer in turn should provide the narrative elements space and resources to establish themselves.

Genre has a large influence on the amount of information that will need to be delivered. Sims and RTSs can demand detailed, complex gameplay. On the upside, players of these games are often willing to learn before playing, allowing designers to load tutorials with design detail delivered at a fast pace. In contrast, the low barrier to entry that defines casual games[12] demands simple, quickly understood gameplay loops. Here, players are often willing to accept tutorials that lean on direct instruction to get them playing fast. In both cases, this often leaves little room in the tutorial for narrative. Action-adventure players also want to start playing quickly. However, they will also expect a compelling story with the design elements hidden among an unfolding plot. These players are generally willing to accept a higher narrative load in the tutorial.

When the team gets the balance right, they disguise learning by creating a fun environment. When a team gets it wrong by overloading the player, they slow the speed of immersion (impacting the first equation) and frustrate the player (unbalancing the second).

5.13.3 Immersion Equation 3

The team's ability to balance the game's narrative and gameplay needs = their chance of success.

5.13.4 Communication

Communicate, communicate, communicate, or to put it another way—communicate.

Successful tutorials involve the whole team. Writers should speak to all the departments to earn their hopes, expectations, and concerns with the story and the tutorial. Ask the very real and important questions—can we make this story work? Will everything fit and function in the tutorial sections. Will this be fun? If the team lacks the funds, time, or will to make

[12] This is not a swipe at casual games. This low bar is a strength. The whole point is that you should be able to pick casual games up and get playing quickly.

the impressive opening cutscene the story demands… then why make it? Too often, games try and make a story that is too big for the game and/or which forces the writer to use methods that are inappropriate for the gameplay genre. So, ask...Are you really telling the right story? If the amount of plot you have, or the way you are telling it is forcing other departments to compromise their aims…is this approach really necessary? There are times other departments must compromise and points when the writer must too. This counts tenfold for tutorial sections.

5.14 TELLING, SHOWING, DOING, OR FEELING

Designers started out by forcing players to learn a list of information but evolved their models, finding new effective, immersive methods. Writers have undergone a similar journey. Narrative often relied on silent film style text cards to tell story. When technology and budgets allowed, these were then replaced by long, involved cutscenes to show story (*Metal Gear Solid*). Then came action-orientated approaches mixed narrative and gameplay, so the player could learn inside the story (*King Kong*). While this development was partly down to the limits of technology, it was perpetuated by established design patterns.

Writers should always remember that games are interactive, so players become immersed more quickly and deeply in the tutorial if they feel and do rather than see and listen. Every time a story point requires noninteractive images, lines of dialogue, collectables, or voice-over, ask the following:

a. Is the point necessary?

b. Is there a way to replace it with emotion, action, or imagery rather than exposition?

c. How does your chosen method compare with others in terms of space, cost, and emotional impact?

Answering these questions should help create space, increase immersion, and deliver a more effective tutorial.

5.15 SHOW, NOT TELL

"The Year is 3051." Yes, we can see the spaceships.

"The war had started." The tanks told me that, dude.

"It was an oppressive wasteland full of dangerous mutants." A whole line of dialogue, you could have saved a whole line of dialogue!

Players don't have to be told everything. If the protagonist is a muscular Viking, or a punk hedgehog, and if the world setting is war damaged ruins, or a marshmallow castle, players will infer information without text, or dialogue. And they will remember it more and feel it more viscerally if they are taking the actions themselves instead of passively watching things play out on screen without their intervention.

Ico's invisible tutorial doesn't only teach controls, it presents the protagonist's purpose (escape) and setting (fantasy) without a single word. After escaping, the protagonist encounters a girl imprisoned in a cage whom they must free and then protect. The antagonists, shadowy, evil-looking creatures that arrive to abduct the girl and frustrate the protagonist, show they are evil through their actions and appearance.

Uncharted 2: Among Thieves opens with the protagonist injured and sitting in a train that is hanging off a cliff. The player learns as they climb, the precariously balanced carriages slipping, sliding, and plummeting as they do. The vulnerable action hero protagonist,[13] the player's purpose,[14] the world, and style of gameplay are all established from the moment the camera pulls back to show the setting and the character's reaction to it. The tutorial's narrative has done its job.

5.15.1 The Curséd Cutscenes

While showing is good, doing is better. Interactivity breaks the wall between story and game design. Studies also show that interactivity is not only more immersive, people actually remember more of what they're taught. Both are useful traits for tutorials. So, if interactivity is "better," why are cutscenes still used in tutorials?

The answer is simple. Showing works better than telling, and not all story moments can be shown in-game.

5.15.2 The Gameplay Lacks Assets/Action Needed for the Story

If you're making a game focused on cars, or spacecraft, you may well not have character models available. Similarly, if an FPS requires a conversation in an HQ away from the battlefront, the game may have characters, but not a specific location. Need a character to climb, swim, or jump where

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[13] Nathan Drake, an interactive Indiana Jones—survives the impossible, but gets bruised along the way.

[14] Survive against impossible odds and get the treasure

this doesn't happen in-game? Need to stop the action to move the player character into a new space? Cutscenes allow for the creation of characters, places, artifacts, and actions that aren't in the game.

5.15.3 Need to Ensure the Player Knows Something?

The percentage of players willing to read and absorb text decreases as the amount of text increases. So, if you want players to know something essential, players are more likely to take this information in with brief text backed by a spoken cutscene. Note that this is true of single-player console games. The action in multiplayer games is still generally best kept brief and cutscene free. The same stands for games on mobile devices as these are regularly played with the audio off.

5.15.4 The Tech Needs It

Loading times used to be a common reason for cutscenes. Something was needed to cover the dead time as the game booted up. Cue cutscene! Such technical limits may still come up.

5.15.5 Where It Is Well Thought Out

Showing not telling is a powerful reason in itself. A masterclass in the art of the tutorial cutscene can be found in the original *Left4Dead*. This one extended cinematic shows not only the postapocalyptic world of zombies but also introduces the characters, their purpose, the enemies, enemy attack types, and the main weapons. One engaging cutscene, all the golden ingredients.

5.16 THE NARRATOR

A narrator, or narration through text, offers a relatively cheap way of putting information across quickly and concisely in game tutorials. Narration does come with risks, however. It is easy for narration to fall into telling rather than showing. Writers who cling to backstory can be guilty of using narrators to shoehorn in additional plot detail, and there is the risk of players tuning out and failing to hear relevant information when there's too much narration.

Narration doesn't have to be separate from the action. It can be integrated by putting the narrator into the gameworld. *Grand Theft Auto* does this by having a DJ reporting events on the radio, whereas *Half-Life 2* used announcements on public address systems. Narration can even be

changed into ambient chatter between characters in the game or graffiti on the wall[15] (*Left4Dead*). Allowing players to discover and choose to listen to narration can make information feel more real, relevant, and immersive. It can also allow the player to get playing sooner rather than later, playing as they learn.

Used sparingly, text narration can work too. *Lego Star Wars* starts the game and each level with a scrolling synopsis, allowing levels to present narrative moments through action and setting. Beware putting in too much text at the start of the game though. While console games regularly split gameplay instructions into text and narrative into VO, mobile and casual games are likely to use for text for both. This restricts the amount that can be used for telling story.

5.16.1 Briefings

Briefings are a variety of narration. They should have style, but the most important thing is for the player to understand what they need to do. Sometimes the golden ingredients can be communicated subtly, and sometimes they need to be said straight out—Climb the mountain! You can only kill the super troll by stabbing the flashing bit! There are always points where it is quicker, more efficient, and clearer to say things straight out. Some tutorial elements, such as telling the player their objective, are often best delivered with straight exposition—"Get up the mountain now!"

5.16.2 The Text Trap

This said, a quick way to kill characters is to have them state game controls in dialogue. Although most voiced games have now left this practice behind,[16] many text games still cross this line. Yes, it can be accepted, but that doesn't make it a good way to go.

Onscreen text = Good for delivering control information quickly—"Press X to open the door."

Dialogue = Good for delivering objectives and in-world information.

Mechanics = Good for delivering information that can be introduced visually through play.

[15] Graffiti has become a cliché in itself. It can be used, but avoid simply writing exposition on the wall and be aware that this technique has been used a lot since *Left4Dead* came out.

[16] Seriously? You paid the movie star to say "*Press X to Jump?*!"

5.17 GETTING EMOTIONAL

Beyond showing, there is feeling. Emotional states are the purest and deepest form of immersion. This starts with knowing the central emotion the player is supposed to experience.

The more straightforward the gameplay setting, the more basic the emotion is likely to be. Many games without narrative aim for excitement or happiness. After matching three items, they explode, and the player feels happy. When the car drifts around the corner in a perfect battle of downforce and tire adhesion versus velocity, the player feels thrilled.

Simple stories tend to target basic emotions. The music swells, and the animation and art reflect the hero's tense excitement, putting player and protagonist into a similar emotional state ahead of the fight. Emotion is created by the gameplay challenge, and the narrative parallels them. Genre tropes can also help generate emotion. When a horror game forces the player into a dark room, the player knows what to expect and feels scared.

For deeper emotions such as guilt, love (not lust), or embarrassment (a character's prejudices reveal our own), the chemistry that creates such reactions is more intricate. This is partly because the emotion often lies in the spaces created between words and events. Telling a player what to feel isn't as compelling as giving them space to discover the emotion. Players really aren't likely to feel the true horror of war when a character is shot in the head in a cinematic. Reaction can create basic emotions, but for more complex feelings, they will need understanding and empathy. *This War of Mine* is a game that provoked a lot of reports of empathy from players entering a wartorn world where they must try to save a group of civilians trapped in the siege of Bosnia. Players also spoke of feelings of loss when a team member died in *XCom*, or a Mudoken didn't escape a level in *Oddworld: Abe's Oddysee*. *Half-Life 2* used environmental components such as an empty playground to bring players to the horrible realization of what had befallen the world's children. The character and central conflict in *The Last of Us* can be summed up more by what Joel doesn't say than what he does when he parts from Tess. *Florence* magically creates a bittersweet cocktail of emotions from jigsaws and coloring games. *Journey*'s esthetic beauty or the moment of loss brought about by a change of controls in *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* shows that emotional moments can also be generated through the subtlest of touches.

The player needs to know (at least subconsciously) what emotion the writer intends them to feel and the writer needs to start building to this right from the start and around all the other tutorial elements. Sometimes, this can be done by working with opposites. To feel relief, the player must be placed in a tense situation. To generate love, the player must work to build a relationship. If things are easy (two conversations, press Y to shag) a game can generate lust, or titillation, and give the buzz of beating a gameplay challenge, but it can't create genuine attachment. It is unlikely that so many *Final Fantasy VII* players would have reported tears at the death of Aeris if she hadn't saved their life for hours beforehand.

In complex stories, it is easier to start the game with basic emotions and then build. Achieving a basic emotional resonance from the start can mean players are more likely to be open to thoughts and feelings later on. *Gone Home* plays on the expectations of FPS, creating a scary and forbidding place to explore; this initial emotional response draws the player in before subverting expectations to deliver an entirely different story than the opening tone suggests.

When looking to generate an emotion ask—is it best to tell (I love you), show (two characters have sex),[17] or let players feel (the NPC we've been helping finally smiles at us[18])? A picture is worth a thousand words, but a feeling is worth ten thousand.

5.18 STORY VERSUS STRUCTURE

Narrative can be broken down into events (story) and the order in which these events are presented (structure).[19] Events are what happens, to whom they happen and why. The structure in which the writer chooses to reveal this information gives it meaning and emotional context. Structure often depends on genre/subgenre. It can connect the player and protagonist's journey and so set the player's purpose and expectations. Do we know who the killer is and then follow the twists and turns to see if they will get caught (suspense)? Or, do we know there's been a murder, but not who did it (mystery)? In both cases, the events, characters, and central conflict can remain the same, but by changing when things are revealed, the writer

[17] NB I count this as titillation rather than emotion, but use it as an example because sex is how many games express love. We can do better...

[18] With no dialogue from them, or the player character.

[19] Oh, the wasted hours of argument people have over plot vs. story. Writers and academics use different terminology and have yet to agree what each word means, so we could get involved in a deep argument over semantics, or focus on the proposition rather than the terms.

will alter the player's emotional response. Such choices will help decide how much narrative content will need to be included in the tutorial.

5.19 STRUCTURE THE PLOT

Starting with story points rather than jumping into the script makes it easier to structure points in the most compelling order; see if there's a sensible narrative load in each section and to make sure that the critical path is being clearly communicated. For each story point, ask what makes it compelling? How does it move the character and story forward? What does it add to, or reveal about, the central conflict? Is it really necessary? Do you have space for it? Is it being presented in a place that adds pace or, tension? If you can't answer these questions, change the story point until it serves a purpose, or remove it to make space to tell the player the golden ingredients.

5.20 NARRATIVE DRIVE

Narrative drive describes how structure creates a force that makes players want to continue with the story. Players can be pushed forward away from a place or a situation—You're fired! The house is on fire! The zombies are coming! On your marks, go! Please find my vases! Or, they can be pulled forward by an external force that needs them to reach it—Help me! What's that smoke? We have to find the murderer! Narrative drive should compel the player to overcome the central conflict, so they can achieve the protagonist's goal. At each point, the player should be given a compelling reason to move on. Completing a challenge opens the next one; answering a question leads to another. In tutorials, making the player feel an urge to discover more will push them on into the story and mean they're more likely to look past the learning process as they're absorbed into the story. This drive relies on an instigating moment that propels the player into the game—the moment of change.

5.21 DEMONSTRATE THE MOMENT OF CHANGE

Stories are about change, so they should start when a schism, shift, or evolution occurs for the protagonist. The moment of change propels the protagonist. This change can:

- have occurred,
- be in the process of occurring, or
- be about to occur.

Genre often suggests timing and the writer's choice will suggest a lot about the pace, style, and form of the story ahead.

5.22 THE BIG BANG

When a plane explodes, the alien armada invades; spectacular openings promise players that more action and excitement is to come. Multiplayer games often demand such obvious and instantaneous moments of change. *Hawken* has an extended narrated cutscene mix of film and GFX as it loads, which establishes the big bang moment of change (the outbreak of armed conflict) before gameplay begins. With the parallel conflict set, levels rely on short briefings and in-game environment to imply light narrative elements.

The single-player FPS *Bioshock* opens with a plane crash. This presents the protagonist's immediate history but gives little away about what happened before that. The question of "how I got here" becomes the starting point for the game's central conflict. After this, the story has space to spin its questions out, teasing answers and half-answers that pull the player into an ever more complex tale.

Big bang openings can work really well but should avoid cliché. Story archetypes can help to quickly define setting, but cliché can kill a story stone dead.[20] Establishing the moment of change as the Hero's wife being assaulted/kidnapped/murdered, for instance. Sure, this has been done before. It has been done a lot. Brutalize a woman at the start of your story and you risk the justifiable murder of your story by critics.[21] So, be it losing your memory (there's a reason that's a joke even for high school essays), or walking into bootcamp for training (makes sense, but oh it's been done so many times),[22] start your story in a way that won't be greeted with a chorus of "not this again!?"

Please note that big bangs don't need to be flame and wreckage. Impact comes from the suddenness and scale of the change. It can be the destruction of a rabbit's burrow or the row that ends a relationship.

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[20] Or at least leave it wounded, limping, and desperate to be saved.

[21] Seriously, if the social arguments around this trope don't persuade you, the fact that so many games have used this same story element should make you think about better ways of making your story stand out.

[22] Yes, many fine games use losing their memory (thanks for the contradiction *Bioshock*), or put you through basic (*Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*). There are ways to do this. But, ask the question loudly, "If it's been done many times before isn't there another approach that fits our story better?" Why settle for cliché?

5.23 THE SLOW BURN

In contrast to the spectacular opening, slow burns give players time to orient themselves before presenting the moment of change.

Half-Life introduced players to a form of story and integrated tutorial most hadn't encountered before. The pace is relatively slow, acclimatizing participants during a train ride. Players are free to learn controls (move and look) and how to apply them (there are things to look at, so explore and recognize what is important). The result was incredibly immersive. Most FPSs throw the player into combat quickly (for good reason). *Half-Life* successfully demonstrated that in a story environment, the pace of learning can be slower, giving the player an opportunity to enter the world before the fighting. It also shows that story can play out more slowly than gameplay. There are advantages in delaying story information. This not only makes space for the tutorial's gameplay information but also creates narrative drive by leaving questions. In *Prey* (2017), the player knows from the cover art, gameplay genre, and tone that *Prey* will contain fast paced combat and scares. Its slow opening gives space to learn and by not framing the central conflict straightaway, prompts the player's curiosity about what is happening. A question they will spend the game answering.

The *God of War* series was known for fast and spectacular starts, but the *2018* release has a slower opening. As the player learns the basic controls, they prepare and then witness a cremation. This slow-burn approach[23] allows them to experience the moment of change—the death of Krato's wife. The change of pace also creates questions. Where once there was the all-action Kratos, there is now a hero with responsibilities. How can the Kratos from other games and the gameplay style that made the series so successful be balanced with this new situation?

Please note a slow start is not about creating space to cram with exposition. It is about the pace of action. If a story presents a clear question, or lingering danger, the player will still feel excitement and narrative drive. Leave space for the emotion.

5.24 TIMING THE MOMENT OF CHANGE

In some stories, it is simple to place the moment of change at the start—there *are* no aliens to fight until the invasion takes place. In other stories, the writer may wish to establish the world before the change in order to

[23] Like that was a pun that could be ignored.

create narrative drive or to show the player the world that awaits. This can be achieved through plot structure.

5.24.1 The Retrospective

Retrospectives create narrative drive by structuring events, so the beginning of the story is an event from the end (or partway through). By selecting an intense moment, often a perilous, mortal, or bizarre event, the game creates a big bang opening that hooks the player asking, "How will the character end up in this state?" *Heavenly Sword* opens at the end of the story with the protagonist close to death. The player watches Nariko die and be taken to purgatory, setting the player the question of how she got there and whether they can change events.

5.24.2 Prequels

Prequels start with events preceding the main action. Prequels can create suspense, leaving the player wondering what happened and/or how these events will link to the main plot. *Project Zero/Fatal Frame* opens with a mystery involving the protagonist's favorite writer. Entering a creepy mansion, the player character Mafuyu searches for the writer, only to disappear, leaving the player with the game's true protagonist—Miku (Mafuyu's sister). Having faced an unknown danger, the player approaches the mansion for a second time alert and curious to discover what happened.

Prequels can also provide a clear way to understand the central conflict by showing life before the moment of change and give the player information the protagonist isn't privy to. *Fallout 4* allows the player to experience life before the nuclear apocalypse. The protagonist then wakes to see their partner killed[24] and child taken setting the protagonist on a course to save his son and recreate a version of this lost prewar "utopia"—two motives that combine into the game's central conflict.

5.24.3 The Newcomer

As story is about change, newcomers offer good potential protagonists. Be it starting a job ("Welcome, recruit"), or arriving in a new place ("My old precinct was a backwater, now the city beckoned"), the protagonist's world can be fundamentally changed by a new environment.

In *Kathy Rain*, the death of the protagonist's grandfather causes the heroine to engage with her past, lost relationships and a mystery

[24] Can be done, but there are less trodden paths that can set your story apart!

surrounding her family. While she is returning "home," the protagonist has been away long enough for changes during her absence to make her a newcomer. She arrives with knowledge of the area and inhabitants but is estranged enough to ask questions the player would. In *Love Island*, the player character arrives as the contestants in the TV series do, deposited in a villa to await a meeting with rivals and potential suitors. Scenarios like these not only establish a change for the protagonist but also allow the player and central character to encounter new surroundings at the same time. This commonality helps players become immersed quickly, the player learning gameplay as the protagonist discovers the narrative. *Love Island* might not be a traditional mystery, but it sets questions in a similar way to draw players in. Who are these people? What are their motives? Note that both these games present the player/antagonist with early dilemmas to illuminate the protagonist and their conflict.

5.25 EXPERT CHARACTERS

The opposite can be true when the player is asked to play an expert. While the protagonist is a trained FBI agent, pilot, or professional footballer, the player could be a schoolkid, plumber, or microbiologist. The knowledge gap between the protagonist and player has the potential to create dissonance. If the expert is supposed to know everything about the gameworld, how do we teach the player without undermining the protagonist's supposed expertise? In some cases, the moment of change can come to the rescue. Experts can be newcomers when their world shifts their role or location. A detective arrives in their new precinct. The trained soldier enters the disorientating horror of a first firefight.

5.25.1 Removing a Character's Power

A brute force approach to creating a rookie from an expert is to remove their advantages. *Far Cry* sinks the protagonist's boat, stripping them of their equipment. While this doesn't change the protagonist's knowledge or physical powers, it creates a situation that allows the player to be gradually introduced to new gear as if they hadn't encountered it before.

Removing physical powers or knowledge is more difficult. *Metroid Prime 2* tackles this by having Samus suffer battle damage, resulting in a loss of her special abilities. An overused method is to give the protagonist

amnesia. Amnesia can remove skills as well as align the player and protagonist's knowledge. It does this, however, in a way that school children would be marked down for.[25]

5.25.2 The Player as a Child

One effective variation of the "new recruit is starting the protagonist as a child. Childhood creates a natural prequel. The player expects the moment of change to come at adulthood preparing them to progress out into the world replete with the skills they need. *Fallout 3* puts the player through the Vault's education system. *Horizon Zero Dawn* establishes Aloy as a child and then presents a series of events that change the course of her life.

5.25.3 The Hero to Be

Instead of using childhood, *L.A. Noire* creates a "rookie" scenario by starting the player as a street cop, when they know they will become a detective. While the street cop is trained, they don't have the same level of expertise the protagonist will have later. This implicit future promotion bridges the gap between player and character by creating an environment where it makes fictional sense to learn.

Established franchises have an advantage with experts. Slowly putting on the mask to take the role of a well-loved character builds a sense of expectation that can be just as engaging as dropping right into the action. *Batman Arkham VR* acclimatizes the player as Bruce Wayne. Exploring Wayne Manor, descending into the Batcave, checking and donning equipment permits the player space to learn as they evolve into the game's hero.

5.25.4 The Player as Tutor

Rather than dodge the protagonist's expertise, the team can embrace it by having them train less-accomplished characters, thus teaching the player vicariously. *Assassin's Creed: IV Black Flag* assigns the player an incompetent sidekick who needs instruction, while *God of War* (2018) finds Kratos teaching his son Atreus, establishing the game's central conflict as the player is instructed.

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[25] Sure, yeah, *Bioshock*, but the point still stands.

5.25.5 The All-Powerful Player

While some games strip the player of powers to make the introduction of gameplay simpler, other games like *The Force Unleashed* opt to use a gameplay retrospective giving the player a taste of the power they'll have later in the game. When these powers are taken away, the player will want to know how they get these powers and be motivated to earn them back.

5.26 KILL THE BACK STORY

If the moment of change is the most interesting and relevant point of the story, this asks the question—why do so many games produce a thousand page back story[26]? Backstory has many uses allowing the team to see who the characters are, predict their behavior, nuance their actions, and make characters feel fully rounded. The art department can use it to create the world's look; animators can use it to create the antagonist's idle. Once created, though, backstory has the potential to be destructive.

The player wants to experience the now. The now should be the most interesting part of the story. The now should not be overshadowed by a backstory that is more interesting than what the player is experiencing. If the backstory is more appealing than the game story, then why didn't the team set the story then? Even where the backstory isn't as compelling as the present, it demands space for it to be presented. If the tutorial is filled with explanations of the past, it can put real pressure on space and overwhelm the golden ingredients. "But, my favorite world building book says to bring the world alive through detail!" "My process demands a living world before it will birth vibrant characters!" This is fine. Don't mess with your muse. Use your own techniques. Build your world. But, for the love of all things narrative, keep the detail relevant and start with the core concepts.

5.27 GETTING THE STORY STARTED

Tutorials are often tackled late in the development process when the team is more confident about final gameplay. This can mean the team can't answer specific questions until later on. This does not mean that the writer can wait until then to start the game's opening. Stories demand crucial decisions about the distribution of narrative information early in the process. Cinematics and scripted event pipelines will require scripts.

[26] Backstory being all that happened before the player, protagonist, and writer enter the plot.

Given that the rest of the team will need to make late decisions about the start, it is best not to proceed with the presumption that everything will come out as best case scenario, that a huge amount of story will magically fit into the tutorial, or that additional resources will appear. Give yourself and the team space to succeed.

5.28 CONCLUSION

First impressions count, and if the team doesn't get the tutorial right, they can lose players before the experience really begins. To crack this puzzle, teams must plan, communicate, and cooperate. It is essential that design and narrative understand each other's golden ingredients and work together to ensure that their solutions complement rather than conflict. With space at a premium, writers and designers need to select which information needs to be communicated and to see the elements that need to be stated directly or more subtly. Overwhelming the player with detail or starting too slowly can leave the player disconnected from the game rather than immersed, and immersion is key. When used correctly, narrative can assist the designer in pulling the player into the experience. In return, the writer must ensure that their story matches the design and genre. Get the start right, and there's only the rest of the game to finish and that should be a breeze…right?

5.29 EXERCISES

1. Examine the tutorial section of a game you like to play and consider how it would seem to an experienced player, or a new one.
2. Write a plausible narrative explanation for why an expert (detective, space marine, zoologist, journalist, you choose) would need to go through the basics of their job. Do not include amnesia!
3. Come up with a clear goal conflict which can be quickly introduced to the player and list the protagonist's goal, the antagonist's goal and the emotions you would want the player to experience.

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CHAPTER 6

Practical Techniques for Productivity

Getting the Work Done

Wendy Despain

NCSoft, Quantum Content, International Hobo

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You've got one of the most exciting assignments of your writing career. It's cutting edge, it's interactive, it's new. Now what? Well, now you've got to get the work done. Video games may be notorious for slippery deadlines, but nobody (especially not the writer) wants to be responsible for that calendar creep. And you're probably not going to have a huge team to spread the blame over. Quite often, if the script is late, there's nobody to blame but you. Worse yet, in video games, they'll move ahead without you. If someone needs your dialog and they don't have access to it, they'll put "dummy text" in, so they don't miss their deadline. Sometimes this is as basic as "blah blah blah," but usually they try their hand at writing dialog

(because, come on, everybody can do this, they think) and will show you exactly why they needed to hire you. And there's always a danger that some VP will read that dummy dialog and think it's the final dialog coming out of your office. In a project where so many people have their hands in the mix, the best thing you can do to avoid any confusion is to meet or exceed your deadlines.

6.1 IT'S A MATTER OF SCOPE

When facing your enemy (the blank page, or even worse the blank spreadsheet), don't underestimate the scope of the battle ahead. Most writing projects are scoped by words. An hour-long episode of television is somewhere in the range of 12,000–13,000 words. A 2-hour feature film is roughly 20,000–30,000 words. A novel, which every writer would consider a big project, is anywhere between 50,000 and 100,000 words. Video games blow all of these out of the water. They often have 100,000 words of dialog alone. This isn't counting character or scene descriptions, narrative summaries, presentations, notes to the voice-over artists, or notes so the programmers know which line should be played when the character trips over a crate. This is a big job. You're not going to write three novels in a month and a half, and you're not going to write one video game in that time, either. Respect the enormity of the task, and scope your projects realistically.

6.2 EATING AN ELEPHANT ONE SPOONFUL AT A TIME

The only way to tackle something this big is to break it into smaller pieces. Otherwise, you'll face an initial project paralysis and a final frenzied kamikaze attack at the end. Don't try to do everything at once. Every project is different, and every person will split things up differently. When I worked on *Bratz: Forever Diamondz*, I worked on one level at a time, then on the mini-games within each level, and on barks last. On *ArchLord*, I edited all the quest dialog and broke it up by the average length of the lines. There were 1500 short ones, 2500 medium-length ones, and 1200 long ones. The short ones were fewer than ten words, the medium ones were between ten and twenty words, and the longer ones were, well, longer.

When you've divided the overall project up into smaller pieces, make a task list. Consider using a spreadsheet or project management software. It will be most useful if you include the following specific information about each task.

- Detailed descriptions of each task. This task list will be with you a long time. Don't let a vague description cause confusion down the road.
- Time estimates. Guess how long you think each section will take to complete. As the project progresses, compare your estimates with actual hours spent, and adjust future estimates as necessary.
- Approval/edit lists. If anybody needs to look things over and approve them or if you're lucky enough to have someone editing your work, provide a place in your task list to specify which day feedback and approval were requested and when it was given. If more than one person gets approval, provide a slot for each person on each task.
- Their contact information. Sure, you have it written down somewhere else, but when you realize it's been 3 weeks since you sent in the last segment and you haven't heard anything back, the last thing you want to do is go find that phone number in that email they sent 3 months ago.
- Deadlines. Set specific deadlines for each task, and hold yourself to them. Remember to check your estimates to make sure you're not working 30-hour days. Don't give every task the same deadline and give yourself some wiggle room. Nobody estimates perfectly.
- Collaboration details. If you're working with other writers, include their contact information and a description of what they're contributing.

An example of my own task spreadsheet is included in Appendix C as an example you can use as a starting point for your own project management plan. Also keep in mind that the best way to get the work done may be to share. Many game writers freelance and may be available to help out with one or two of these sections if it's just not possible for one person to meet the deadlines.

6.3 THE BASICS CAN SAVE YOUR BACKSIDE

Remember that pep talk every Obi-Wan mentor ever gave the plucky young hero facing their worst fears? Remember your training. Don't abandon the fundamentals under pressure. When you're facing a huge project, the only way to get through it with any elegance is to remember the basics of the

writing craft. They apply to game writing as much as anything else. For example, fully realized characters write their own dialog. Cardboard characters are hard to write for. I was really worried about this when I started *Bratz: Forever Diamondz*. I didn't realize detailed character descriptions had already been written for each doll/character. When I turned these up in my research, I knew my job just got much easier. I made one-page character sheets for each of the main characters, including their image, brief description, and personal quirks. I hung these up around my office and really got to know them. I knew how each character would respond in a given situation, and that made writing dialog a breeze, even the very repetitive "barks" characters need to say as feedback to player input. Take a look at the script sample in Appendix B to see how it worked out.

You may have your own shortcuts, but one I use is personality theory. I'm a fan of Carl Jung's personality types, a system also known by the names of the creators of the sorting test Meyers-Briggs. It's a way to categorize different personalities with shortcut acronyms. I use them often enough that I know how effervescent an ENFP will be when she wins a game, and how embarrassed an INTJ will be when she's the center of attention. The dialog in those situations comes to mind instantly, whether it's for a video game or a TV episode. Writing the dialog faster will more than make up for the time it takes to breathe life into your characters, whatever method you use to flesh them out into full human beings with unique points of view.

Another truism writers in other media hear is that to be a good writer, you have to read a lot and you have to write a lot. This is just as true for game writing as long as you also include playing a lot. Playing video games should be a regular habit. It sounds crazy at first, but when you work on games and get caught up in your job, it can be easy to stop immersing yourself in other games and media. Don't let that fade out. You don't have to be the best gamer ever, but being literate and caught up is important, and you can learn a lot from your peers. Just don't get so focused on playing games that you neglect more mature artforms that demonstrate similar methods. Studying animated shorts can be excellent training for writing cutscenes. Studying improvisational acting can improve your interactive dialog options.

One of the fundamentals often overlooked in the games industry is editing. Editing and rewriting are the bedrock of writing. Do your best to include this step in your video game work. You may have to fight for it, but it will turn mediocre dialog into lines people won't mind hearing every time they replay the game. Try to get another pair of eyes you can trust to give honest feedback on your work. At the very least, read your dialog out

loud before you turn it in, and then play it in-game when it's been implemented. The line that sounds hilarious in your head may not be so great when it's said out loud.

6.4 TIPS FOR STAYING ORGANIZED

Organization can rescue a project in peril and avoid deadline slippage. By now I'm sure you've noticed how much I enjoy making lists, so here's a list of tips for staying on top of your projects.

- Write things down. Use whatever system works best for you. If you don't know what works best, try color-coded sticky notes, day planners, to-do lists, wikis, spreadsheets, email, and text documents. You're a writer; use the written word to your advantage and don't depend on remembering important details.
- Communicate with others. Even the best planners sometimes need someone to say, "Wait, weren't you writing a script that week?" Beyond that, the creation of an interactive narrative is a group effort, and your teammates will appreciate knowing how your part of the project is going.
- Use folders to organize files. Both digitally and in real life. I've got a different folder for each major project both on my hard drive and on my bookshelf. They're not exact copies of each other, but I have backups of important documents, and I can lay my hands on them at any moment.
- Use a calendar. There's nothing like a visual representation of time to help keep you on track.
- Learn your pace for this job, and work to that pace. They call this a job for a reason. If you know you can edit 500 lines in one day, sit down and do it. In a similar vein, don't schedule 3000 lines in a day if the best you've ever done is half that.
- Institute some form of version control. This doesn't have to be complicated. Simply saving a file with a new name including the date could be enough. Whatever works best for your own system, you need to be able to instantly bring up the most current version as well as several previous drafts. You never know when you'll need to step backward a bit, and you definitely need to be confident you're working on the most up-to-date file.

6.5 STRATEGIES FOR FREELANCERS

Freelance game writers often work removed from the development team and sometimes have to keep on task from the comfort of their own living room couch, surrounded by the distractions of housework, movies, and family. I've found a personal schedule and routine is critical to getting work done. I have a personal schedule each day and each week. So, for instance, I know at 10 a.m. on Monday I need to have the dogs walked and the spam cleared out of the inbox, so I can get to work on research. I don't always stick to my schedule, but at least I know what trade-offs I'm making when friends want to take me out to lunch.

Also, do everything you can to have a separate, dedicated office in your home. Not only is it beneficial for tax purposes (at least in the United States), but it also provides some separation from work and home life. I've found that if I'm not careful, I'm not working from home—I'm sleeping in my workplace. Sure, sometimes I work best on the couch with the TV on, but sometimes I need silence with project-related inspiration around me. I have to change it up sometimes, and it's a lot easier to get up and go in the other room rather than redecorating the dining room.

Get to know your own quirks, and make them work in your favor. Finally, go ahead and acknowledge the fact that you're working from home sometimes. One of the perks of freelancing is throwing a load of wash in the dryer between conference calls. Taking breaks and feeling productive can help you avoid writer's block and burnout as long as you don't go overboard and lose focus.

6.6 STRATEGIES FOR IN-HOUSE STAFF WRITERS

When working as a staff writer in-house, the biggest thing I have to watch out for is losing focus. It's easy to get caught up in the excitement of everything going on with coworkers. Of course, being connected to the broader development of the game is very important, but writing takes focus and concentration, so be aware of how your time is being spent. If you're always getting pulled off task by something shiny across the cube farm, you'll find yourself missing deadlines. Little things and interruptions can nibble away your day into nothing.

Good headphones and a playlist of music without words are crucial for me getting work done in an office environment. If coffee shop chatter is a better audio backdrop for you, take a laptop to a real one or find a looping audio clip online. I've even booked conference rooms for important

meetings with my fictional characters, so I can get a door I can close and have an uninterrupted hour of focus time. If you need a buddy to keep you on track, set up a meeting with them—with the understanding that both of you are just going to focus on writing, only talking to each other if you're stuck on something.

Chris Klug has worked with in-house teams of writers in games and television and had several tips to share about getting the work done while on staff. One thing to remember, he says, is that many game developers aren't familiar with the way writers work, so there may be some resistance to some of the strategies writers see as beneficial. They may not understand why you want to take over an entire wall with index cards and string. Don't let that stop you.

He says that the most important thing for writers on staff at a developer is to take charge of their own work process. If you need some uninterrupted time to focus on a tricky plot problem, ask if you can work from home one morning. If you want a whiteboard to break down a story into beats as a group, ask for one. Of course, you don't want to be a diva about it, but know the circumstances where you work best and do what you can to make them a reality. Don't expect the developers to set things up for you without being asked.

In-house writers should also take every opportunity to learn the tools other departments use to do their job. One of the benefits of sitting right there in the office is a chance to integrate narrative more closely with gameplay, but this can be an uphill battle unless writers step out of their comfort zone and learn about the other game development systems. The more you know about the tools that level designers use to build the game, the more you'll be able to make narrative easy for them to implement. Don't be afraid to get your hands on the more technical side of game development.

6.7 BEATING WRITER'S BLOCK WITH A CLOCK

There's never enough time in this business. You're always trying to beat the clock, and you never have the luxury of indulging in writer's block. That thought alone can be enough to send me into a mini panic attack, shutting down all progress. I know it doesn't sound logical. There's a reason writers have a reputation for being heavy drinkers. It's easy to give up and wallow in paradoxes. At some point, you're going to face writer's block on this job, and I hope I can provide some strategies you can use rather than turning to alcohol.

First of all, work on what you want to work on. Just sit down and get your fingers moving. If you feel like writing dialog for one particular character rather than the voice-over direction editing you had scheduled for today, go ahead and write the dialog. Progress is progress, and the scheduled work will come when it's ready. Just remember to reschedule it if you don't get it done that day.

Interestingly enough, this strategy applies to nonwriting tasks as well. I sometimes hit a block, and if I'm not careful, I'll sit staring at my computer all day, doing nothing. In the back of my mind, other tasks nag at me. If I stand up and go work on them, I get myself moving both figuratively and literally. Currently, I work from home, and sometimes doing the laundry is exactly what I need to do to get past my writer's block. I'll be folding socks, and the solution to the writing problem will just come to me. The trick is to get up and go back to the computer the instant that happens. Don't get sucked into the other work so entirely you forget what pays the bills.

If inspiration isn't striking when you're away from your desk, set a timer. Work on the other tasks for 15 or 20 minutes, then go back to the blank page and see if the momentum carries over. Another way to get yourself moving past a block is to edit some of yesterday's work—or better yet, last week's. It can get your brain into the right space and push you forward. Be careful not to edit and reedit just to look like you're doing something, though. Use that timer again if necessary. Edit for 20 minutes, and then write new material for 20 minutes. It doesn't matter if it's no good—you'll go back and edit it when this happens again next week.

And while we're on the subject of being good, nurture your inner cheerleader and recruit a real-world cheerleader. We writers have a host of demons in our heads telling us we'll never measure up to Shakespeare, so why bother? Often, they're at the root of writer's block. Don't let them win. Hemingway doesn't measure up to Shakespeare, either, but he did okay. You're cultivating your own voice in a whole new media. A few mistakes are allowed along the way.

Another strategy for dealing with writer's block is to call in some reinforcements. You're not alone in this. Talk to someone else about why you're stuck. Putting it into words will clarify the problem and help you find solutions. If you don't know why you're stuck, try telling someone specifically what you're trying to write and brainstorm a little with them. There are always multiple ways to say whatever you're working on. Try batting a couple of approaches around verbally, and see if it goes over the block.

The wackiest brainstorm ideas sometimes turn into just the unexpected twist you were looking for.

Finally, remember the fundamentals. Write an outline. It may be as simple as, "Get stick. Beat Black Spider with stick. Bring Spider's legs to Grog." It's not pretty, but it's a start. Now you can edit each of those sentences into the right voice and tone. Voila! You've made progress.

6.8 EXERCISES

1. Spend 10 minutes editing a writing exercise you produced from a previous chapter.
2. Estimate how long it takes you to write twelve lines of dialog for one of your favorite characters (an original character or one you know well from another property). Now time yourself writing twelve lines of unique dialog for that character, and compare the actual time with the estimate.
3. Write a list of ten positive things about yourself and your writing for use when the demons start shouting you into paralysis.

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CHAPTER 7

Collaborating with Art, Design, and Engineering

Anthony Burch

Santa Monica Studio

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Your job doesn't matter, and you don't know what you're talking about.

Wait. Bear with me. *Obviously* that statement isn't true. Still, God is dead, and everything is relative. Truth doesn't matter. And if you're going to be a writer on a large project, that mind-set might help you more than it hurts you.

Because while the truth doesn't matter, what *does* matter is making sure that you can get along with the other, more visible disciplines in game development. What matters is convincing them that you're humble, easy to work with, and a help rather than a hindrance.

Why? Because most nonnarrative developers have probably had lousy experiences with narrative developers. Maybe they think writers don't do anywhere near as much work as the rest of the team. Maybe they once

worked with an *auteur* who thought all the other designers were just tools to be used in the service of their narrative vision. Or maybe they're not the kind of person who cares about story in games, and they're inherently disinterested in adding story to anything they're working on.

Whatever the reason, other disciplines can be initially skittish about working closely with narrative. "Narrative," more often than not, translates to many developers as "person who increases your workload and will probably getting much more name recognition than you ever will."[1] So when you come to a project as a writer, you're often starting with two strikes against you.

With all that in mind, here are some random tips that might help you work better with other disciplines, which will, in order of importance, (1) make your life easier, (2) make *their* lives easier, and (3) make for a better game.[2]

(Note: None of the above applies if you're working on a narrative-driven game like, say, a visual novel or something. All the random advice I'm going to throw at you is specifically targeted toward people who are working on a game where narrative is an element of the experience but not its primary reason for being.)

7.1 FIND OUT WHAT YOUR TEAMMATES ARE PASSIONATE ABOUT, AND OFFER HELP ON IT

Every developer has a weird pet project that they desperately want to get into the game but can't without additional help. You can be that additional help.

When working on *Borderlands 2*, I found that nearly every quest designer had a fun, nonsensical sidequest they wanted to put into the game. The only problem: they had no narrative justification for why you'd have to, say, power a generator to raise a bunch of flags and then destroy the flags. By providing that narrative justification (by focusing on character—see below), the designers and I formed a tighter working relationship and developed a mutual respect for each other. This meant that when I had a really, *really* stupid idea for a narrative-driven quest of my own ("what if we had a quest where the only thing you were asked to do was shoot a single guy in the face while he begged for it"), they had few qualms about reciprocating the favor.

---

[1] How many game writers can you name? Now, quick—how many game art directors can you name?

[2] If you believe the quality of a game is more important than the well-being of yourself or your co-developers, maybe consider exchanging this book for one about upper management.

Similarly, the art director for BL2 had a small detail about one of the characters—Axton, the soldier—he wanted fleshed out. He'd given Axton two sets of dogtags and imagined one of them belonged to his ex-wife. I volunteered to write a discoverable audio drama about Axton's ex and their divorce. If I hadn't sought out those kind of details about Axton, and if the art director hadn't felt comfortable sharing them, then those audio logs would have never made it into the game.

7.2 FOCUS ON CHARACTER

Inevitably, you'll have to narratively justify some stuff that seems to defy justification. Why does this red key open this blue door? Why do these enemies want to kill the player? Why does this level have a bunch of flaming skulls everywhere?

When you have to answer these questions, it never hurts to fall back on character. Character isn't just one of the most effective aspects of story in video games,[3] but it's also a language that everyone on your team speaks. Maybe the red key opens the blue door because the technician who installed the security was lazy as hell. Maybe those enemies want to kill the player because they were warned about what a psychopath the player was. Maybe the flaming skulls are everywhere because the baddies here worship self-immolation.

Because these suggestions are character focused rather than plot focused, the other disciplines have narrative ideas to work with that are concrete but flexible. The artists can brainstorm what self-immolation chambers look like. The level designers can put a ton of coffee cups, magazines, and videogames at the security station. Both disciplines can create and place wanted posters of the player drawn from the enemies' perspective.

If these suggestions had been more plot centric ("the red key opens the blue door because the security team wanted to trick intruders and thus set off an alarm"), the other disciplines might either not know how to use those suggestions to create content, or they'd have to create a TON of extra work to convey what should have been a simple idea.

[3] Quick: tell me the entire plot, beat for beat, of your favorite narrative-driven videogame. You either can't, or you'll find that many of the plot beats are "find a thingy to unlock this thingy" (*BioShock*) or "walk from this place to this other place" (*Last of Us*). When it comes to games, plot is less effective and memorable than character.

7.3 ASK "WHAT IF" QUESTIONS, CREATE DISCUSSION

For some reason, suggestions coming from narrative folks always tend to sound like demands. It's a really small thing, but I found my pitches started to sound less authoritarian if I phrased them as "what if" questions and invited conversation and debate about whatever I was pitching.

What if the questgiver is his ex-boyfriend? What if this combat is a trap set by the villain? If you ask these questions rather than attempt to give answers, you're inviting conversation and debate with folks who can use their expertise to make your idea better.

You know narrative better than anyone on your team, but the level designers know level design better than you. The artists know art. If you can constantly make the other disciplines a part of your creative process from the beginning, rather than turning them into gatekeepers to whom you present your stuff at the end of the process, then you'll spare yourself a lot of grief and—oh yeah—make a better game.

7.4 ITERATE FAST, GET FEEDBACK OFTEN

Every other discipline has to constantly show crappy works in progress, grayboxed levels, sketched character concepts. So if you refuse to show anyone the scripts or narrative brainstorms you've been working on until they're "ready," then your teammates will (rightfully) resent you.

If you want to communicate to your team that you're open to collaboration and aren't too precious with your ideas, then iterate fast. Show them sketches of ideas and ask for their input, and then go back to your desk and quickly revise it based on your discussion. If something you're working on doesn't match what the rest of the team is making, toss it out and start again with the new info they've given you. Most people assume writers are precious butterflies who will lose their minds if they ever have to change anything. If you can show that you're *not* like that, it'll go a long way toward making your team trust and respect you.

Not only that, it will make the other disciplines actual collaborators rather than hurdles. I know this sounds like some overly obvious Seven Habits of Highly Effective Turds nonsense, but if you can work *with* your other disciplines rather than *against* them, it'll make everyone's lives a lot easier and make the game infinitely better.

7.5 STAND UP FOR THE RIGHT STUFF

Despite all my other advice, I would *not* advise you to be a doormat. Partially because it'll make you far less satisfied as a creative person, and

partially because, well, if you're not passionate enough about any of your work to make a fuss every once in a while, then what's the point?

Inevitably, your story *will* clash with design, or art, or engineering. They'll want one thing. You'll want another. Your thing will make the game better than their thing. Now you've gotta convince them to abandon the thing they care about in exchange for the thing *you* care about. How do you do that?

It's not easy by any stretch, but you can do it if you pick philosophically clear points of argument, and you don't make a ruckus unless it really matters. If you're a pleasure to work with 95% of the time, then you can be obstinate the remaining 5% and you'll probably get what you want. When you're choosy with your battles—when you're the very picture of collaboration and deference the rest of the time—the team will respect and understand that anything you fight for is damn well *worth* fighting for.

Many on the *Borderlands 2* team didn't want us to kill off the characters we did. But the creative director and I—who always tried to be accommodating when possible—dug in our heels and said *no*. We *have* to kill off these characters, because we *have* to convince our players that these games take place in a universe of consequence and brutality—where no one is immune and where death is omnipresent.

It took a lot of argument, and we didn't get *everything* we wanted (it still sucks that Roland's death is in a noninteractive cut scene), but we got damn near everything we asked for. Because we were passionate, we were clear in what we wanted and why, and because the rest of the time, we were willing to budge on the stuff that didn't matter as much.

7.6 CONCLUSION: UNDERSTAND THAT YOU'RE THE ICING, NOT THE CAKE

I love writing for games. I think what we do as games writers is really difficult and really useful. But if you took the writing out of a game, it'd still be a game. If you took the gameplay out and kept the writing in, it'd be nothing.

You provide the icing. Not the cake.

Don't get me wrong—a cake without icing can be a waste of everyone's time. But it's still a cake. Mary Berry can still take a slice of it and judge how soggy its bottom is or isn't. Mary Berry cannot, unless she's having a particularly bad day, shove a handful of icing into her mouth.

So when your awesome backstory for a third-tier NPC gets cut, don't take it personally. When the level order gets switched up and you suddenly

have to narratively rejigger everything, and you're thinking, "this ruins everything I've worked on, I'm gonna look like a complete doofus who can't write," don't sweat it too much. You're there to make the cake more delicious. People will forgive uneven icing.[4]

7.7 WRITING EXERCISES

1. Make a list of all characters in a narrative work—one of your own, or a favorite book, game, or movie. Be sure to include every character with a speaking part or other action in the narrative. Include crowds and armies, though these may be listed as one character if they always show up as a group. This list may be longer than you first think. After the list is made, put it in order from "Most essential" to "Could do without." No ties allowed.

2. Using the list made in the first exercise, cut all but the top five characters, and write a two-paragraph synopsis of how the essential plot could still work, but with just those characters on-screen.

3. Make a second list of all settings in the narrative work, and conduct the same exercise, cutting it down to just five settings—count internal and external spaces as separate locations (such as inside the house and out in the front lawn).

4. Assess how your synopsis of the plot with the abbreviated character list would work with the abbreviated settings list and rewrite it as necessary.

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[4] If you don't believe me, ask anyone who has worked on a massively successful, critically-acclaimed game. They'll tell you stories about bizarre mistakes and compromises that made it into the game that, somehow, players didn't notice.

CHAPTER 8

Writing for AAA Games

Playing in the Big Leagues

Marek Walton

Crystal Dynamics

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For some people who enter the world of game development, working at a big studio on a large AAA project is their ultimate goal. They're the largest, they garner the most attention (in part thanks to some astronomical marketing budgets), and some would say they're the best (each to their own). This was certainly my goal for a long time. I spent my early career working on medium-sized and small games to earn a living as well as, at least in my eyes, my stripes. I picked up a lot of valuable experience during those years and made a lot of useful contacts, but the whole time what I really wanted was to work on a AAA game. Now I am. And there's no denying; in some ways, it's brilliant.

I'd like this chapter to do two things. Firstly, identify what, in my opinion, is different about working at a AAA studio compared with a

smaller one. Secondly, I want to pass on advice relating to how best to handle that specific aspect. In a sense, I'm speaking to my younger self… what do I wish I'd have known back when I started working on larger games? The list below is by no means exhaustive, but hopefully it covers some useful basics.

I'll add a few caveats before we get started. Firstly, every large studio is different. I've worked at a few now, but that doesn't mean I've learned everything there is to know and it doesn't mean that things that work for me will work for you. What I'm really saying is, here are some things I've learned so far about working at a large studio, and here's advice I'd give anyone looking to move into that writing space. Do with it what you will, but I hope my thoughts are useful.

Also, for the purposes of this chapter, I'll refer to game writers and narrative designers somewhat interchangeably as both work closely with story, though a game writer is usually involved in only writing a game story, whereas a narrative designer is also involved with the design and implementation of it. Finally, my advice is primarily aimed at those of you seeking to work in-house, as the experiences of a freelancer might well be slightly different.

8.1 WHAT IS A AAA GAME?

It's worth briefly defining just what a AAA game is. For most, AAA (or triple-A) is simply shorthand for "a big, important game title" or "blockbuster" if we're going to borrow a term from our film-based cousins. It's essentially shorthand. It's a title with millions in the budget, not thousands, and chances are you will have heard of it if you're a gamer.

8.2 WHAT'S THE SAME?

Before we journey into the deep blue waters of AAA game writing, let's briefly list what—broadly—is often the same, no matter what size of project you work on. In short the core principles of game storytelling remain the same. What makes a good story in an indie game makes a good one in a larger one. A well-crafted narrative with interesting, believable characters, and a plot that both drives gameplay and pulls you through the experience, should be the goal of both large and small titles.

This story can feature characters, and scenes, and text and VO, though it doesn't have to feature cutting edge anything to be successful and fun. *Thomas Was Alone* (2012, or 2010 if you count the initial Flash version) is

a puzzle platformer that tells the story of Thomas, a shape with an average jumping height, who journeys through a basic though fascinating game world meeting other shapes with different abilities and personalities and having adventures. It sold over a million copies.

If an architect was used to designing a small one-bedroom house and then moved to designing fifteen-bedroom mansions, the new, bigger structure would still need to obey the same principles as more modest dwellings: it would feature rooms, have windows, need to follow a certain logic that obeys both physics (you couldn't design the mansion out of candyfloss, regardless of your budget) and a multitude of other conventions. It's the same with writing in video games.

So what's different about working at a large studio on a large title and what wisdom do I have to impart that'll help provide guidance to those of you thinking about working at one?

8.3 IP

Short for intellectual property, if you're writing for a AAA game, you might well be working on an existing IP that's very well known (i.e. famous) to one or more player groups. *Call of Duty, Assassin's Creed, FIFA,* and *NBA 2K* are all franchises a lot of people have heard of. Smaller titles that hail from the indie side of the tracks don't usually garner as much limelight, unless they're made by Mike Bithell (*Thomas Was Alone*, 2012; *Subsurface Circular*, 2017), Lucas Pope (*Papers, Please*, 2013; *Return of the Obra Dinn*, 2018) or another well-respected developer.

Developing a large, beloved IP can come with a lot of benefits. For one thing, your writing team will be working with established material, which means characters and a world (or universe) that have most likely already been hammered into a decent narrative shape. Working in the Borderlands game universe to write *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel* (2014) meant we had a lot of existing characters, story arcs, and environments to draw upon while creating our own story tracking the fall and rise of Handsome Jack. While this means you always need to make sure whatever you write fits with existing material, you also have a lot of content to riff from.

The flip side of this is you're playing in a sand pit that a lot of folks have a vested interest in. If the IP's owners are external, they'll certainly want to make sure you treat their property with the respect it deserves. This can mean everything from writing inside boundaries they feel comfortable

with to making their creative feedback part of the narrative pipeline. In essence, they'll be an additional seat at the writing table that needs to be satisfied.

This can make things tricky. You need to respect they're a natural part of the process so resist the temptation to view them as a burden. Cultivate a positive relationship with them where possible, and listen to their needs. Be sure to keep them in the loop with regular updates that make them feel listened to. On the other hand, you don't need to bow down to their every story demand. There's a good reason you're the one writing this and not them, but be open to creative input and treat them like the partners they are. In addition, bear in mind that the IP's owners can be a rich source of information and inspiration. Who better knows the world and characters you're working with?

Fans too, while passionate advocates for your IP, can feel a sense of ownership that presents an additional set of challenges. Paint too far inside existing gameplay and story lines, and you might be accused of playing things too safe and of creating a game that's only designed to turn an easy profit. But stray too far outside them, and you could be accused of betraying the very world the studio's worked hard to secure.

When presented with an existing IP that's loved by fans and guarded by a third party, the best course of action, in my experience, is to stay true to the core IP for the most part, while working to inject it with something surprising. How do you navigate this creative minefield? Carefully. Accept that, to paraphrase Abraham Lincoln, you won't please everyone all the time, but that's a necessary price to pay if you want to create something distinct. If you're working on an existing IP, research what they've done that was popular, and see if that sparks any ideas. Also, has something been created that was wildly unpopular? Why? You'll certainly want to draw lessons from past successes and failures. Marketers use something called a SWOT analysis to help with project planning that helps them essentially kick a product's proverbial tires. They measure its Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. You should take a leaf out of their book and do the same.

Of course, you might be working on a brand-new IP that—for better and worse—doesn't bring with it the baggage found in established game series. One upside of this is that you will have a great deal of creative freedom. The downside is whatever you come up with is untested and doesn't come packaged with a preinstalled fan base. Games like *Destiny* (2014), *Battleborn* (2016), and *Anthem* (2019) show us how creating a new IP

can be damn hard as each came out the gate and, for different reasons, stumbled. They serve to remind us that there's a reason a lot of games announced have numbers after their titles.

8.4 STORY SIZE AND COMPLEXITY

A bigger game will feature a bigger story. This can simply mean your first-person shooter is longer and will need more time to write. *Wolfenstein: The New Order* (2014) is a linear affair, which allowed the developers to deliver a linear, not to mention excellent, story. But a AAA title often features branching, nonlinear narrative avenues and might take place in a sandbox environment that lets players tackle either the main story or any number of side missions first. You need to allow for that.

Keeping track of a game that features a large cast of characters, lots of in-game scenes, and thousands of lines of in-game dialogue can be a real challenge. And don't forget a game's narrative requirements might change a great deal over the course of its development, which makes it all the more important to keep your team's work organized.

Before you start writing in earnest, define and safeguard the game's story intent that should seamlessly mesh with the gameplay being delivered. What experience are you trying to deliver to players? If you know from day one what your vision is, you can regularly check to make sure you're still on-track to deliver it. A large studio should designate a vision holder whose job is to make sure all teams, not just narrative, stay on the path to delivering this goal. This can change as a game changes, but having someone maintain vigilance is crucial. This role is usually, officially or unofficially, carried out by the creative director in partnership with the narrative director. There are a variety of tools you can use to keep track of things. This is a huge and worthy topic all on its own. Still, here are some suggestions to get you started.

As alluded to above, one of the first documents your team should create is the story outline, which details the broad structure of the game's narrative. It's typically less than a page in length and will help provide a reference point moving forward. After this, create a treatment. This is a longer document that expands on the initial narrative outline but goes into greater detail. If you need more information on these two crucial pieces of the puzzle, read Chapter 3 on Documentation. Both of these documents will help you keep track of the story your development team is trying to tell. Now that has been said, here are ways to maintain control of your story over the months and years of a typical AAA project.

8.4.1 Character Documentation

Create individual documents to help keep track of your characters. Knowing who they are is important. That might sound obvious, but discovering a year into production that you don't know what you wrote about a suddenly important secondary character can be painful. A centralized, curated, set of documents that covers each main and secondary character will help you ensure not only everyone on the narrative team is on the same page but also that art, design, audio, marketing, and so on are aligned too. These should cover anything the project needs but should, at a minimum, include a character's physical description, vital statistics, story background, visual samples, and sample dialogue to help nail their tone. In addition, find out if other departments have their own versions of these, and be sure they align. Finally, if your story contains factions of any kind, they should be treated like characters of their own and carefully documented.

Relationships between characters can also be important to document. A character matrix with each character name across the top and side can help document how their relationship has developed. For example:

	Jane	**John**	**Jo**
Jane's relationship with	Self-confident, self-assured, almost to a fault. No self-doubt. Doesn't waste much time on self-reflection	Brother/sister relationship, friendly not flirty, very comfortable with each other's foibles	Jo is eager to please Jane and easily gets caught up in wild adventures driven by Jane
John's relationship with	Generally comfortable with Jane, but tends to put the brakes on Jane's wild ideas. John is the more sensible one of the pair	Enjoys self-reflection, and as a result, struggles with self-doubt and questions his own motives, while generally behaving in thoughtful ways	Jo and John can sit and have long philosophical discussions late into the night, but they mostly consist of Jo asking John questions
Jo's relationship with	Jo is a little bit star-struck by Jane, always eager to please, but not annoyingly so	Jo wants John to be happy but doesn't really understand him. Thinks more highly of him than he does of himself	More interested in others than self. Defines self in relation to others, so left in a room alone might be bored

8.4.2 Lines

To help keep track of your lines, you first need to know what type you need to keep track of and organize accordingly. Do you have cutscene lines? In-game dialogue? Will characters speak using on-screen text only, or will there be audio lines? If yes to the latter, then be sure to keep track of which lines have yet to be prorecorded (i.e., professionally recorded), which *have* been prorecorded but need to be rerecorded (i.e. picked up), and which might feature temporary amateur human or robot voices (sometimes called "scratch"). Does your game feature secondary narrative text that can be read by the player? These are typically documents and emails found in the game world. How much of that is there and where will it be placed in your game? Decide what format or formats to use. Excel is still, at the time of writing, popular due to its flexibility, though teams also often use a mixture of Google Docs, Word, Final Draft, and Scrivener as well. In the AAA world, developers often also use bespoke software written just for that team, something I will return to later.

8.4.3 Plot

To help keep track of your game's plot, be it linear or branching, I find it helps greatly to find a way to track it visually. Individual sticky notes tacked to a cork board that each list a scene's name and briefly what happens in it can really help a team create, organize, and change, a story's flow. If you want to keep things digital, then software like Twine can be used as virtual, linked sticky notes.

This visual representation can be very helpful for collaborating with other writers and developers. It gets the story out of your head into a space where others can interact with it and provide feedback. It's a great way to catch plot holes, better tie-in underdeveloped ideas, and identify overly complex or out-of-the-blue plot twists. Adding pictures, maps, and string between related items can help convey your ideas to other team members. It can end up looking a bit like the walls of newspaper articles and photos pasted up in cop movies, so some people call these "murder boards" even if there is no actual murder depicted.

8.4.4 Documentation

I'd be remiss not to also mention the value of making an organized, curated home for all narrative documentation that can be updated by designated owners and consulted by anyone on the development team. This can be

as simple as a set of folders broken into logical subjects or as involved as using industry software like Perforce or Confluence.

Use a clear naming convention. This means different things to different teams. At the very least, make sure that scenes you write are clearly marked with the scene and act and, if necessary, dated. I have personally taken to using dates instead of version numbers in document file names. I used to only use version numbers to mark which version of a scene or set of dialogue I had just finished working on. This sometimes resulted in me, days later, trying to figure out which version was the latest… was it 07? Was there a 08 somewhere I'd forgotten about? I found using dates instead really helped, e.g., Scene Four_12 December 2020. If I end up doing multiple edits in one day, I usually then add a version number, e.g., Scene Four_02_12 December 2020.

8.4.5 Creative Control

On a smaller project, you might be the only game writer. This can make for a lonely experience but also allow for a high degree of control. In the AAA space, you will be part of a large development team that, if you include all stakeholders, means you're one of quite a few narrative-oriented voices in the room. This is normal as many disciplines feed into the AAA story process (and vice versa): the narrative director, writers, narrative designers, designers, creative director, art director, executive producer, cinematic director, audio design, and external stakeholders, if you have any. Depending on your job title, some of those voices might come from higher up the food chain than you. In short, chances are you'll have less creative control of the writing.

So how best to navigate what can, over the years needed to make a demanding game, be some choppy creative waters? Firstly, have a clear sense of where you fit into the creative structure of both your team, and the studio as a whole. Knowing what your boss (perhaps the narrative director) expects from you will help you deliver it.

Communicate clearly. Keep emails as short as you can, and make sure the subject header is relevant to the content. If the subject of a thread changes, either clearly rename the thread or start a new one. You'll thank yourself in six months when you're trying to track down an old discussion to answer a suddenly pressing question.

At the beginning of meetings, be clear about the goal. What are you covering and how long have you got to do it? If you start to get off course, maybe that's a sign you need to "break out" over a subject with someone

one-on-one rather than involve the whole room. At the end of meetings, be sure all action items have been logged (usually a producer does this, but it doesn't hurt to keep your own notes) before leaving. Do you know all four edits the creative director's expecting to the level dialogue? Ideally, these items are tracked in a networked tool like Jira. I'll come back to that nifty piece of software shortly.

Don't be afraid to speak your mind if you disagree with something that's squarely in your writing bailiwick. You're on the team for a reason, and being nervous to create a fuss doesn't help anyone. Saying that, where possible, have an alternative solution ready to propose. It's far easier to point out a story problem than it is to also have one or more practical solutions ready to help solve it.

Be open to story feedback, initially from a broad section of the team. Larian Studios, while making their hit RPG, *Divinity Original Sin 2* (2017), initially invited feedback from their entire studio before, sensibly, limiting it to key developers. This gave them a lot of raw material to work with, though they probably had to wade through a lot of unsuitable content in search of narrative gems.

Navigating a constant headwind of feedback can sometimes be exhausting, but it can also help you strengthen the narrative. One thing I found especially challenging early in my career was being open to feedback from someone I thought of as professionally distant from narrative (e.g., a coder) or someone I didn't really get on with. Or both! The trick is to actively listen to the feedback being given, and ignore your feelings about its source. I've had a lot of solid feedback (and one or two plot holes pointed out) from surprising avenues.

External user tests (sometimes called UTs) can provide another source of narrative feedback. How to run one is, by itself, a topic worthy of its own book. I wanted to mention that they exist and are a useful way to get a snapshot of how the public would respond to your game's story, as well as gameplay, art, audio, and so on, if it was released at that point in the development.

8.4.6 Office Politics

A game studio is, at the end of the day, a large group of people striving to make the best game they can. Everyone has strengths, weaknesses, foibles that some might love (singing at their desk), and hate (singing at their desk). Try to avoid office politics and navigate relationships with as much grace as you can muster. While this might seem like an obvious piece of

advice, I've met industry people who have said they don't care that much about team relationships and they care more about amazing results. I'd say that to get the latter, it greatly helps to cultivate the former. Plus life's too short not to make brilliant friends or at least enjoy being around people!

Be aware you will be part of a complex web of professional and personal interdependencies. Be someone people enjoy working with. Actively engage with creative and personal problems. If dealing with the former, be open to input from others; if dealing with the latter, don't forget that the HR department is there to help ensure the smooth running of the company. They can sometimes help deal with interpersonal issues.

Be aware, and respectful of boundaries. Know that the joke you told your old friends last weekend might offend someone at work. If in doubt I've been told to treat being on-site like being in a church. In other words, be respectful. This isn't to say you have to be a robot, just smart.

8.4.7 Timelines and Schedules

The average AAA title will usually be in development for 3–6 years, a long time by anyone's standards, and we're not even including possible postrelease content. But what does that mean for you, the intrepid game writer? It means you need to treat working at a large studio on a long project, like you're running a marathon and not a sprint.

Manage your time wisely. Production will normally break the days and weeks and months and years into shorter sections that parcel out the work into manageable chunks. I currently use a popular industry tool called Jira (touched upon in the previous section) to help manage my time. It's a fairly intuitive piece of software that tracks workloads and game bugs. Jira helps my producer and leadership balance workloads and track progress across teams and individuals. To be honest, I wasn't much of a fan of this tool to begin with, but I've come to understand that tracking hundreds of people across multiple teams and across multiple time zones while making a game with ever-evolving needs is a massive task. Without Jira, the studios would be flying by the seat of their proverbial pants production-wise. So get to know your way around a tool like Jira. Used in conjunction with Perforce, you have two powerful tools that help you track and manage your workload.

It would be remiss of me not to talk about the important, and quite thorny issue, of crunch. Crunch is defined by many as a set period of time a studio pushes hard to finish one or more tasks vital to the completion of a game title. While this used to mean "finish the game," today crunch

can occur at any point in a title's development cycle, not just the end. To some, crunch is something to be avoided at all costs, while others view it as a point of pride (i.e., they're passionate development warriors ready to spend as many hours as necessary to make a game as awesome as it can be). Some feel that crunch is a sign that leadership has failed to accurately manage teams' workloads. The truth is that all these points are valid. Creating something as large, complex, and mutable as a video game is a monumentally hard task to manage. This often leads to the call to crunch. Troublingly, the past few years have seen a number of articles on popular game news sites that expose "cultures of crunch" at some well-known AAA studios.

What's *my* advice regarding this? Life is, if nothing else, about balance. So is working on a game. Pushing hard to get something finished to quality can actually be a rewarding experience. I crunched (along with a lot of other developers) to get the *Borderlands Claptastic Voyage* DLC written to a very tight schedule. Both my cowriter, Maurice Suckling, and I feel the resulting story is one of the best we've written for games, but that effort took months and certainly a toll on our health.

Today, I'll occasionally crunch but only if (1) it doesn't negatively impact my relationships or health, (2) I'm clear about the goal or goals, and (3) it's for days, maybe weeks, but not months. Saying that, what's clear from those articles is there are talented folks working in the industry who don't feel their management gives them a real choice. It's crunch or get out.

Crunch is not always the answer for a number of reasons. For one thing, working a 12-hour day doesn't result in 12 hours of productivity as folks get tired and need to take a break. Multiply that by weeks and months, and you get a lot of wasted time and a lot of negative consequences building up. Don't let anyone tell you that you're not "passionate" about the title you're working on because you won't cancel dinner plans with friends and family in deference to a sudden scene change that needs to be implemented RIGHT NOW! Of course, you might be in your twenties and just landed your dream game writing job at a studio that says it needs you there long into the evening and right now that's truly what you want to do. It's totally your call; just don't hurt yourself, or those you care about, through crunch.

Ultimately, you need to decide where you draw the line and what's important to you. Leaving on time most days doesn't mean you're lazy, it means you cultivate a life outside the studio. And healthy life relationships and general balance also means you're going to be a better, more enthusiastic member of the writing team, who is less likely to be off sick.

In addition, writers with a broader life experience tend to bring more original, interesting, creative stories and dialogue to games. Granted, there might be times when you do need to change plans because something truly important has come up last minute that needs you to stay at the studio and help the team get "the thing" done. Ultimately, balance, like writing, is simple but not easy.

8.5 TEAM STRUCTURE

Naturally a large game will usually involve larger teams though how they're narratively structured can vary from between studios. Typically, top of the creative pile is the studio creative director, who oversees all the IPs being worked on in the studio. They work on a game's big picture, in particular the gameplay, look, tone, and story, and how they mesh. As mentioned earlier, they're often the ultimate vision holders involved in essentially all aspects of a game, they are also important conduits to external stakeholders.

Next down, if a studio is large enough, are the creative directors. They are similar to the studio creative director, just normally tied to a specific IP. They're sort of the ship's captain instead of an admiral. Beneath them often sit game directors, one of whom is the narrative director who is in charge of all aspects of the story. Often a creative director will work closely with the narrative director. Below these folks might be lead writers and narrative designers, and then senior flavors of the same job, who are all ideally responsible for a lot of the writing and narrative implementation. Under them are the standard and junior level developers.

In addition, AAA teams are often spread across other studios (sometimes called sister studios if they're owned by the same game publisher), countries, and time zones, which adds another layer of challenge to creating a compelling, and coherent, game story.

How do I ensure I work as effectively as possible across all teams and studios? Once again, making all communication clear and not too verbose is vital. If, for example, I'm working on delivering updated dialogue for a level in partnership with a designer based in Canada, I make sure we've both agreed on the content, tone, and the deadline, hopefully in a Skype chat, before confirming all this in a mail in which I cc all relevant parties. I'll also make sure the work is tracked by my producer in a Jira, as they need to know which tasks have been completed and which remain to be done. Producers often work across a large number of developer teams and are sometimes aware of key dependencies that I am not.

For example, a storyboard artist could be waiting for me to finish writing a scene before she can move forward with boarding it, my producer might need to decide if me unblocking her is more important than me finishing a set of character documents, which makes it important I keep him updated on my work.

Weekly scheduled meetings can really help keep everyone on-track and help the creative flow. Designing levels and story works best when everyone gets on and feels like they can talk. Never underestimate the value of working physically side by side. I've worked as the writer for a team based in Canada while I lived in California. Making sure all parties in both studios were in the loop was a challenge, but it was much easier once I'd visited the team in person. Being able to put faces to names and talk in person was invaluable. Working together after that was easier. It's worth repeating that tools like Jira and Perforce (as well as Slack, and Skype) can be everyone's friend. They facilitate collaboration and help track issues so everyone's on the path to solving them.

8.6 THE WRITE TOOLS

When it comes to entering the AAA space as a game writer, don't assume you're going to find finely tuned narrative software waiting patiently on your computer for you.

While game designers often use either Unreal or Unity to build their levels, there remain precious few game writing tools used across the board by narrative teams. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, some studios still use Word to write their scripts and Excel to print out barks ready to be recorded. To be fair, you can get by on these in a pinch, but as game narrative becomes more complex, we need more powerful solutions. Things are changing though. Software like articy:draft and Chat Mapper have recently appeared on the market, both aim to provide something of a one-stop solution for a narrative team. In addition, studios are starting to use Google Docs and Google Sheets (e.g., Tripwire Interactive and Sketchbook Games) to enable teams to work online collaboratively.

My studio uses its own proprietary writing tool, which, on some levels, is pretty decent. It can output content into a variety of common formats and is also able to create robo lines, which can be plugged into a level before any scratch is recorded. We'll talk more about scratch in just a moment. The tool isn't perfect, but the takeaway of all this is that you should be ready to learn proprietary company software to get your words into the game.

8.6.1 Working with Scratch

Recording voices with professional voice actors in a large game gets very expensive very fast. Pay rates for your average voice actor run from around $250 per hour, and that's before factoring in buyout (i.e., the fee you pay for said actor to sign over their rights to content created for the game, allow at least $1000 for this) and minimum time you can hire them for (usually 4 hours). But you need to hear words in your game as levels are built and evolve.

One solution is you generate robo voices that speak the lines you write. As mentioned earlier, the writing tool I currently use can do this. It's free and fast, and lets you iterate quickly. The downside is, no matter how funny, sarcastic, sad, wry, or angry your line is meant to be, a robo voice will murder it. Ideally, this just means that developers will have to squint for a while until human voices are in. This is a term sometimes used by a broad spectrum of developer teams when work is rough and requires the person viewing it to essentially "squint" through time to see its final, polished form. But your mileage will vary as judging a line based on a robo read can be tricky at the best of times.

A solution to robo voices murdering your lovely lines is to record scratch VO. As touched upon earlier, this is the process where you record nonprofessional human voices, usually using your fellow developers. It can be quite fun hearing yourself in the game you're making! This side-steps the robo voices issue, giving you real human people who can try to inject some of the emotions you want to convey in a level. But there can be a huge difference in the line delivery of a professional voice actor and Rowan, who might be a kick ass designer, but isn't able to deliver the hilarious one-liner you spent an hour thinking up. You might get lucky and have some on the developer team who record pretty solid scratch lines. Where possible, save them for your most important characters. At the end of the day though, people will still have to squint until it's time to wheel on the big guns, your superbrilliant voice actors.

8.7 POSTRELEASE CONTENT

Gone are the days when an AAA title going gold meant the development team was ready, after a well-earned break, to move onto something else. There might well be a chunk of DLC (downloadable content) to write, ready to refresh player interest in three months, or GaaS (games as a service) content to chip away at. Titles like *Fortnite* (2018), *Division 2* (2019), and *League of Legends* (2009) all provide always-on, persistent game worlds that add a steady stream of content over time for players to enjoy.

Identifying the narrative content road map is vital as early in the project as possible and is done ideally during the early days of preproduction. For you, our game's writer and, let's not forget the rest of your narrative team, this means you might need to design and write a story that will structurally facilitate the needs of postrelease content. If you know DLC will be needed, seed your main game's story with characters and plots and backstories that can be spun out into their own chunk of content without—and this is important—preventing the main game experience from feeling like a complete one in and of itself.

If GaaS is going to be part of your game, then look for ways narrative can support that. Typically, a GaaS title will feature a world in conflict designed to carry on once the main story is complete. You should populate it with interesting groups, stories, and conflicts that will provide an endless supply of ideas for both narrative and design to weave content from.

It's worth noting that the advent of postrelease content changed the relationship between game developers and players. Some studios move their game story forward after having gauged player feedback. CCP Games famously created a democratic Player Council who represents players in *Eve Online* (2003). Game and game story is becoming an increasingly collaborative endeavor for some developers and their player base.

8.8 CONCLUSION

I think of studios as boats and ships traversing a vast development ocean full of dangers and possibilities. Some are tiny skiffs, and others are vast ocean liners; all are capable of sinking. Sailing on a metaphoric ocean liner means heads turn when it passes and the world pays attention, but there are downsides too. For one thing, you're part of a much larger crew (a benefit too, it must be said) and, even if you're relatively senior, yours will be one voice among many. Ocean liners don't turn on a dime either. Changing course will take time and require agreement. Smaller craft, while not as impressive or capable of taking travelers on transatlantic voyages, are far more agile affairs that can navigate tricky waters and change tack quickly, though they're more prone to sink in choppy financial waters.

It's somewhat glib to say both large and small studios are both the same and different. Both come with advantages and disadvantages, which might go some way to explaining why so many game developers move between them. And remember, different studios will do things differently. Ultimately they're all a collection of talented people working together to make what everyone hopes is a fantastic game.

8.9 WRITING EXERCISES

1. Make your own murder board. Represent the structure of your story, either visually in a digital format or physically on a wall. Use pictures, sticky notes, maps, etc. Test your results by having someone unfamiliar with the story look at your board and tell you how they think the story goes.

2. Play a AAA game, and write an outline of its story, to practice communicating a game story of that scale in the succinct format of an outline.

3. Break down your workflow into individual tasks that could be added into task-tracking software like Jira. Use these tasks to estimate how long your project will take to complete; then as you work, keep an eye on how you are tracking against your estimates.

CHAPTER 9

Writing for Indie Games

Wendy Despain

NCSoft, Quantum Content, International Hobo

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There are basically two ways of working as a writer for smaller-scale independent games, and they both have the same reasoning behind them. Indies are on a tight budget and usually can't afford a full-time writer on staff. As a result, they sometimes hire freelance contract writers—often remote—to deliver specific assignments as they're needed. The other way of working as a writer for an indie game is to be a full-time employee but do the writing work when you're not doing the rest of your job, such as level design, marketing, or technical support.

9.1 GAME WRITING ON THE SIDE

Most employees at an indie company wear multiple hats, depending on what skills they have. There are artist/designers, owner/programmers, community manager/QA, general admin/marketing, every permutation of those combinations, and more. In fact, you're more likely to be hired for one of these other jobs and then asked to "write a little bit of dialog between phone calls" when they find out you're interested. Few AAA game

companies try to double up on jobs like this now. There's usually enough work to keep a writer busy full time, whereas writing duties can be spotty enough at indies that there is enough time for two responsibilities.

One of the challenges—as well as opportunities—about this arrangement is that you'll need to be highly skilled at two different job families. Most indies can't afford to hire someone who is just okay at their primary responsibility. They need strong designers, or artists, or whatever they're hiring who can work independently in a scrappy environment, hungry for greatness. This works well for people who enjoy more than just writing and have a strong portfolio for both skills.

When trying to do both at the same time, it can sometimes be difficult to juggle all the responsibilities. Things sometimes fall between the cracks you wish you could have taken care of. There is also a cognitive load to context switching that shouldn't be underestimated. If there's enough to balance out right, consider working as a writer 2 days a week (say, Monday and Tuesday) and then as an artist the rest of the week. That way you can stack similar jobs together and move more quickly between them.

Don't short-change your employer, though. If you get in over your head on a writing project, raise your hand and admit it. Talk about the possibility of outsourcing that work, as it's often easier to outsource the writing than whatever else you were hired for. Know your strengths, weaknesses, and limitations, and work with others to guide priorities.

If you're thinking of this as a way to sneak into game writing from another discipline, don't let your employer be one of the people who is surprised about your interest in writing. Be up-front about that skill being something you'd like to develop. You'll be more likely to get the writing tasks when they come up, and you can work with your team to develop your skills instead of trying to do it on your own.

9.2 OTHER WRITING ON THE SIDE

If you're more interested in writing for indies as a contract writer, read Chapter 10 about game writing remotely. Indie game companies can be anywhere, and it's rare to be an on-site contractor for them.

Since this work can be short term and unpredictable, you may need more than just indie game studios as clients. Contract work for AAA game studios can fill in some gaps between indie projects, but those aren't easy to count on, either. So, it's likely that you'll need to have clients in other industries to even out the patchwork paychecks. Writing news articles,

marketing copy, and movie reviews can keep the bills paid. As a freelance writer with multiple clients, the underlying skill being used is consistent day-to-day, and the broader writing experience can help make your game writing richer and more fluid with all the practice.

Indie game writing contracts can also be a way to learn about the industry if you're trying to break in. Some experience can be gained by volunteering to write for indie game projects that are unable to pay any of the contributors, but keep in mind that these kinds of arrangements rarely pan out into paid work for those same games. It can happen, but don't work for free unless you can genuinely afford to do it and find it fun. Life is too short, and as a contractor, your time is too valuable to waste.

9.3 BENEFITS OF WORKING FOR INDIES

Smaller companies often have more freedom to innovate than their larger cousins. With fewer people to convince that an idea is worth trying—and a smaller audience to please in the end—indies often end up being bold enough to try that thing the AAA companies think will never work. Sometimes they discover why the AAA companies never do it, but sometimes they make something amazing because they were willing to go places nobody else would. Indies can work in niche genres and call their own shots.

This also means they can release the game when it's ready rather than being beholden to someone else's timeline. Final polish can take as long as it takes, or at least as long as the company bank account holds up. There's not a set AAA shipping schedule with an opening in just one part of the year because of all the other games the same company is working on simultaneously.

There are also smaller teams for indie games generally, so individuals working together can know each other better and can partner with each other in ways that the larger, more distant teams never quite achieve. This gives them a unique, memorable voice that can be very loud if it hits a nerve. That can mean big rewards.

Those monetary rewards can be even bigger when they're split between fewer people, so there's a substantial up-side to trying new things and making a splash.

Unfortunately, the monetary rewards don't always follow the critical acclaim, and those big indie hits are few and far between, considering how many indie games get made every year.

9.4 DRAWBACKS OF WORKING FOR INDIES

Being independent and not having to share the profits with a big publisher also means, however, that they usually don't have meaningful financial backing. Going through hard times can be fatal for small companies—whether those hard times are because of poor planning, unforeseen eventualities, or even just a bad economy that is no one's fault in particular. This means having a personal "rainy day fund" and other personal financial backstops can be even more important when you work for indie companies. Sure, some indies have been big hits, getting a huge return on their personal investment, but many others do catastrophically worse than that. Naturally, there are some companies chugging along right in the middle, just making ends meet, but that has its own stresses.

And for all the benefits a small team provides, there's the flip side. A company that can't afford even one full-time writer can't afford a writing team or story editor. So although you may have more creative control over the details of your work, there may not be anyone available to spot the plot hole, or break it to you that this brilliant "new" idea of yours actually became cliché before you were born. Fewer team members mean that the Internet comments section may become your chance to catch gaps in your story, and that's never fun. This is where trusted friends and good contractors can be valuable backup.

9.5 INDIE REALITIES

Another reason some indie companies are independent is because their owners are… shall we say "strong willed." They have difficulty taking direction from anyone other than themselves and sometimes even difficulty working with others. Obviously these kind of people work at AAA studios too, but in a big studio, there may be room to hide from the office politics—and may even be managers who are able to shield their team from them. Larger organizations can sometimes influence or train an otherwise difficult employee to get their problematic behavior into line. And if that doesn't work, these difficult personalities can be moved along to find other jobs - but nobody can fire the owner of a small indie studio. In a small company, you have to work with everyone, and if the culture is strongly political, you'll be forced to play ball or be marginalized.

And even when an indie company is a small unified team, you may find people engaged in seemingly ridiculous workarounds for an owner's biases and/or overconfidence. The first sign of this are quiet conversations

about "saving someone from themselves" or that tasks "have to be done just so" to please someone who isn't in the necessary approval chain at all. More than one colleague has spent hours undoing the work of the incompetent girlfriend or nephew.

These are all more of an issue if you're going to be working at the company full-time. As a contractor, you can avoid most of these unpleasant realities.

9.6 CONCLUSION

Beyond the basic definition of an indie company being one that's independent from large publishers, it's hard to generalize about them. Some founders are motivated by better work/life balance. Others felt jobs at big studios required diluting their creativity by sharing it with a large team. Some indie founders have a game idea they are really passionate about, but which large studios are not interested in. Others don't wish to see their "baby" become "too commercialized." Still others want to live near family or just not in one of the big "tech hub" cities.

All of these factors have a profound impact on the lives of the developers who go to work for them, and finding a company that fits your own goals and priorities is important to your own happiness and quality of work. It can be harder to get good information about what it's like to work at small companies. Long articles exposing their questionable overtime policies don't tend to get published, so a Google search probably won't yield conclusive results. It will be important to socialize and tap into your network to try to get good information about any strong personalities, solvent financial backing, and degrees of creative freedom before moving across the country to join a small studio.

9.7 EXERCISES

1. Practice self-editing a piece of your own writing, at least three paragraphs in length. First edit the piece immediately after writing it. Try to get it down to just one paragraph that still has the important points, but with fewer words. Then let it sit for 3 days. Come back to it with fresh eyes, and try again to edit the piece. Compare the results to see if getting time and distance gets you better results.

2. Edit someone else's writing to cut it by two-thirds, as above. Note which exercise was easier for you to get good results.

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CHAPTER 10

Game Writing Remotely

How to Pay the Rent Working from Home

Tracy A. Seamster*

Independent Contractor

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10.1 WHAT'S REMOTE WORK?

We live in an era where the "gig economy" means a fresh look at full- and part-time work. Instead of commuting daily to a job with long hours away from home, we can choose to work on our own couch in our pajamas and with our pets clamoring for attention.

Remote work may require nothing more than an Internet connection and a laptop. It might require much more. With remote work, you aren't at an office each day. Instead, you apply your skills to a job primarily located elsewhere. You may even have contract work for more than one client at a time.

As Linda Carlson, perhaps better known in the games industry as Brasse, says, "I have the opportunity to learn far more, daily. Multiple clients with multiple issues (and differing potentials) drive a constant

* All interviews in this chapter were conducted by the chapter author for this book.

learning curve and innovation in best practices. I freaking LOVE exploring and pushing my own boundaries; it satisfies my need for challenge."

The personal benefits for remote work vary from person to person and job to job. Be sure to take advantage of resources made available to you by your employer or client. For example, your employer might offer reimbursement for utilities, or a client may provide equipment or software needed for your work with them.

In the games industry, as with other modern workplaces, remote work is on the increase, not just because employees want it. There are significant benefits to the employer as well as the employee.

As infrastructures have increased bandwidths on many levels, remote work is a viable option for many disciplines, which previously could only function within the confines of an office. There are positives and negatives to this trend, but overall, the benefits of working remotely indicate it's an option not going away soon.

Generally speaking:

- Remote work is:
  - Work off-site as an employee for a company.
  - Work off-site as an independent contractor.
- Remote work is *not*:
  - Being on-call 24/7/365.
  - An endless vacation.

10.1.1 Upsides

Unless otherwise specified in your contract, you don't have to answer email at 3:00 a.m. until normal business hours. You're still accountable for your work product, and it must be produced on time and to the company's satisfaction, but at reasonable hours.

There's flexibility in remote work that's not always the case for in-office jobs. You'll be home for mail deliveries. For those of us living in rural areas, this is a joy unlooked-for! You can make appointments for weekdays. Your new puppy won't need the expense of a daily dog walker. According to a 2018 survey by website FlexJobs.com, 86% of workers report they would be less stressed with the flexibility that remote options would provide.[1]

[1] https://www.flexjobs.com/blog/post/flexjobs-2018-annual-survey-workers-believe-flexible-remote-job-can-help-save-money-reduce-stress-more/

Writing and editing are portable jobs that can be ideal for remote work. Like artists, we can work independently once given a description of the desired outcome. We can find a place that meets our idea of comfort, whether it's our own kitchen, a coffee shop, or library.

Benefits to your employer are covered in the next section.

10.1.2 Downsides

Working off-site removes the inspirations that come from chance meetings in hallways or the break room. Projects may shift, leaving you surprised to learn of changes, which were spoken of but not documented.

There are fewer interruptions by coworkers because you're working alone. While this is a benefit, it can also be a drawback. Loneliness was reported as an issue by 19% of remote workers in a 2019 survey. The largest struggle reported was unplugging or separating work from other activities. Unless otherwise specified in your contract, you're not paid extra for responding to emails at midnight, yet many remote workers feel that it shows their commitment rather than their lack of boundaries.

If you work in a different time zone from your team, you may find yourself adjusting to fit their schedule. When I worked as a remote narrative designer for a Beijing-based company, I was 12 hours behind them. A deadline of Thursday meant it was actually my Wednesday. I ended up shifting my working day and sleep schedule to more closely match Beijing, which led to insomnia where I remained awake for 18 hours at a time, unable to concentrate on work or sleep.

10.1.3 Take-Away

The decision to accept or ask for remote work should be approached carefully, weighing personal needs, the company's requirements, and your flexibility. It might be helpful to make a list of your own pros and cons to see where you can compromise and what items are necessary for success.

10.2 HOW TO FIND REMOTE WORK?

There are several options for finding remote work. In the games industry, many companies now provide various work-from-home options. The easiest way for an employee to check is to ask their supervisor or Human Resources department.

For those of us who aren't traditionally employed, there are other resources. Though remote work is available, it's not often within the games industry, and remote narrative positions can be rarer still. That said,

writing of any kind until a suitable position comes up can help us keep skills sharp and bills paid. Once one is more established, it becomes easier to translate availability into writing contracts.

10.2.1 Ask Your Employer

Telecommuting is no longer uncommon. If you're already an in-house employee, just ask. Your company may already provide options such as flextime, part-time remote work, or full-time remote work.

Flextime (which may be called by different names at different locations) allows employees to have schedule flexibility without a guarantee of scheduled off-site hours. This may be used when employees or someone in their families has an appointment during normal business hours. If the employee can still complete work scheduled for that day, the employer may allow them to consider it remote work rather than using paid time off (PTO).

While convenient for the employee, flextime is usually a short-term event, scheduled in advance, which does not conflict with the employer's needs. The employee is not guaranteed use of flextime; it depends on the company.

Part-time remote work allows the employee to work remotely on a regular basis. The employee may go into the office for necessary meetings but spends time each week working off-site. This is an ideal situation for many employees who prefer the structure of daily office life but also want predictable off-site scheduling.

Full-time remote work means the employee works off-site, coming into the office only as required. In many cases, full-time remote workers are not employees of the company but independent contractors. However, it's no longer unusual for company employees to work long distances from their employers.

10.2.2 Benefits to the Employer

Should your company not already have a remote work option, present your case by explaining to your employer what's in it for them. Ka-ching!

First, decide what sort of remote work option you would prefer. If you'd prefer to never see your coworkers unless absolutely necessary, be clear that you're asking for a full-time remote option. Then, figure out which fact would be the most persuasive to your employer. When you're asking for a new-to-them option, you'll need to couch your requests in terms of benefits to the employer, not to yourself.

Telecommuting benefits to the employer include the following:

- Increased employee productivity
- Increased employee job satisfaction
- Potential lowered real-estate expenses (office overhead)
- Reduces traffic congestion
- Reduced absenteeism
- Demonstrates environmental consciousness
- May offer access to government grants or incentives

Visit research-based websites such as https://globalworkplaceanalytics.com/pros-cons or www.flexjobs.com/blog/post/remote-work-statistics/ for specific details and numbers, which will appeal to your particular employer. If they've never had remote workers before, they'll question everything… and they should! In making this request, you're challenging a preconceived notion about the effectiveness of on-site work.

"I *love* remote work, especially in the era of big noisy bays of people where it's hard to concentrate," says Melissa Shaw, writer on *DOTA2* and former editor for *Halo 4*. "My home office is quiet, and I can achieve a deeper level of focus and concentration there, which is great for working with trickier concepts. I do some of my best work (technical writing and editing) remotely."

Freelance writer Heidi McDonald adds, "Writers' rooms can still happen using Slack and Skype and be just as effective! Companies like to promote the idea that they NEED things to be done the way they've always been done...but this just isn't true. The fact is, companies would save money on ridiculous perks at the office by just letting people work from home, and the people would sometimes be happier."

Facts are persuasive with employers. Be prepared to counter employer concerns with them. Your research will prove the seriousness of your request.

If your employer is still reluctant, ask them to consider a limited 2-week trial plan. Your employer needs to know their employees will continue to produce quality work as scheduled and without potential company data leaks.

10.2.3 For Independent Contractors

I've been an independent contractor on and off for nearly 20 years. This section is designed to give you a basic idea of how independent contractors could locate potential contracts rather than focusing on the difference between employees and contractors. It's a big difference worth an entire chapter of its own.

All of my contracts have come from networking contacts. Whether they're former coworkers, friends, fellow conference attendees, or family, networking is the best way to find work. If you're gaining a foothold in the industry, don't think you haven't already been networking. Your classmates, guildmates, DMs, instructors, and associations are all potential leads.

Keep in contact with others who share your desired job title. This doesn't mean you immediately sign into LinkedIn and invite every other narrative designer or writer at random. Most of my colleagues and I will delete unsolicited invites; you need to craft your request as honestly as possible.

Provide enough information in your request to evoke a memory, but keep it short: "Hi, we met at the industry mixer last night. You said you may need design interns soon. May I join your LinkedIn network to keep in touch about that?"

Where did we meet? Did we engage in conversation, or did you attend the same conference? Was I a speaker there? Were you? Do we know people in common who mentioned my name? Did we attend the same school? Whatever your connection, be sure to mention it in your request.

If you have a portfolio, be sure to provide a link. Make sure everything in there is high quality. If you don't have your own website, you can always use a document sharing site such as Dropbox, OneDrive, or Google Documents. Create a Twine game that demonstrates your ability to write branching dialog. Check that your documents are up-to-date before you send a link to a potential client or networking contact.

Join your local chapter of the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) (https://igda.org/) or Women in Games International (WIGI) (https://getwigi.com/). Volunteer if you have time. I volunteered for both organizations in the past and am still reaping the benefits of the friendships I formed then.

If you need to simply pay bills while searching for your dream job, you can also check out other remote work websites such as https://weworkremotely.

com/, www.flexjobs.com/, or www.fiverr.com/. While not games specific, they are potential opportunities for networking. If you're writing for a non-profit, you could find yourself at the forefront when they need a narrative designer for a learning game they're planning.

10.3 TOOLS OF THE TRADE

You've found the perfect remote position! Yay! Now what?

Your contract or employer will specify what tools you'll need specific to the job. There are a number of ways for you to communicate with your team, and communication is key.

Remote work will require a degree of communication, which may mirror your office environment. As workplaces seek to reduce constant (and sometimes useless) meetings, various platforms allow employees across the workplace to communicate either in real time or as needed.

Telecommuting can feel isolating. Kate Edwards, Executive Director at Global Game Jam, says: "…I ensure I stay engaged with communities and keep my lines of communication open (even if virtual) so I still feel connected. Traveling as much as I do for industry events helps fill the gap of interpersonal connections that one normally gets in a workplace."

If you're still looking for the perfect assignment, you can still use some of these resources. Some are free, and some require a subscription. Take a look at as many of them as possible, so you're familiar with them. As these resources change rapidly, I won't go into details about each one.

10.3.1 Feeling Connected

These applications allow discussions between team members. Some incorporate project management tools, whereas others are primarily communication tools.

- Skype
- Discord
- Slack
- WeChat
- Line

- Messenger
- Teams

10.3.2 Staying Connected

There are so many ways clients and employers keep projects on target. While these may include chat options, they are intended to provide deadlines, expectations, and assignments for the team.

- Email
- Project management
    - Asana
    - Trello
    - Jira
    - Basecamp
    - Microsoft Project

Sanya Weathers, a self-employed freelancer since 2006, uses Timeular (https://timeular.com/) to track her hours. "Combined with being naturally more productive owing to the lack of distraction, it's possible to spoil a client a little too much," she says, "So keeping track of the hours is absolutely paramount."

10.4 SUCCESS STRATEGIES

Set yourself up for remote work success by knowing your strengths and weaknesses. Not everyone can successfully navigate the challenges of remote work. Some things can be learned; others are more a part of human nature.

Ask yourself these questions, rank them from most important to least, and be honest. You're the only person who will know how you responded.

1. Am I able to work independently?
2. Do I know how to budget my time?
    a. Can I meet deadlines?

   b. Do I need specific directions to complete a task?

   c. Can I take an instruction and make things happen?

3. Am I easily distracted or a procrastina… squirrels!
4. Do I know this game/style/narrative?

   a. Will I be able to voice my concerns and wait for answers?

   b. Do I know how to advocate for the narrative vision?

5. Can I afford to compromise benefits/pay for the ability to work remotely?

   a. Do I know what my value is as a narrative designer?

   b. Will I ask for appropriate compensation?

6. Do I want to work remotely or just not in *this* office?

Of these questions, the last is the trickiest. If you primarily view remote work as a way to escape from irritating coworkers or management, surprise! You will need them more than ever when you're off-site!

"Remote works for pretty much everything so long as the team plays by really basic rules that benefit office bound and remote teams. The biggest one is being respectful of everyone's time," Kathleen Sanders, formerly of 343 Studios, says.

Be on time for meetings, especially virtual ones. No one will comment when you slink into a conference room, but everyone will hear the audio tones of a call connecting. Know what's on the agenda, and help the team stick to it; save unrelated questions for email or Skype.

My personal favorite freelance tip is from Kel Bachus, Assistant Professor with Champlain College's Game Design track: "Set a timer for 20 minutes. Work until the alarm sounds. Set the timer for 10 minutes and do something else; play games, knit, whatever. When that goes off, set the timer for 20 minutes again and work."

This helps those of us who answered "Yes!" to question 2 above. When I know I will be rewarded in a short while, I can concentrate on my task. There are apps you can download or set up on your workspace to do the job, but a simple timer works just as well.

The main thing is that if you answered negatively to the majority of the questions on the list, you might not be ready for full-time remote or

freelance work yet. When you are comfortably answering affirmatively (except maybe for the last question), you'll be set up for future success.

10.4.1 CORE

Acronym time!

Communication will be key to your success. While you should not be jumping to answer every message as it comes in, do your best to be available during the company's normal business hours. For this reason alone, it's best if you can work remotely for a company within your own time zone. Add new tasks to your Asana projects as soon as you can. Got a new question? Write a new email or thread.

Own your work. Make sure you get it where it needs to be on time. If there are unforeseen delays, tell your team. Reestimate how long it will take. Be flexible but not a push-over. You need to understand your own limits and boundaries. Made a mistake? Apologize, ask for details, and fix what you can as soon as you can. Turn in the best work possible.

Rely on redundancy. Install the tools you'll need on more than one device. If your cell phone crashes, you'll still be able to work on your laptop or iPad. Add deadlines to your calendar(s), so you won't forget. Sticky notes are still our friends. Confirm conversations with emails to clarify due dates and details of a discussion.

Enforce boundaries. Be clear about your work hours and how you can be contacted. Use a Do Not Disturb function outside of the hours you are contracted to work. Be clear about how much extra time you can give to a project. People who work remotely actually spend more time working than those at an office might because the boundary between work and not-work may not be consistently enforced. Every project goes through some overtime expectations. Meet those expectations. Go above and beyond when there's clear urgency. But for normal work weeks, work normal hours.

10.5 CONCLUSION

Remote work is on the rise and has many benefits to employers and employees. I started my games career as an independent contractor, and I'm back at it with my love for game narratives driving me forward.

The best advice? Ask for the work. The worst that can happen is a client or employer will say no. Keep honing your skills, and eventually, you'll find the job of your dreams.

10.6 WRITING EXERCISES

1. Think carefully about the environment you need to work most productively, and write a list of requirements. Does chatter from people around you help you or hurt you? Do you need a comfortable chair, or a desk at just the right height? What helps you focus vs. distracts you? For some, the answers to these questions will make it clear whether working remotely is a real option, or if you really need to be physically near teammates to help keep you on task, feel like a member of the team and be most productive.

2. Write an email to your boss (fictional or real) asking to work remotely for a short or a long time. Be specific about how much time, what you will be working on, and how you will stay in touch with the team.

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CHAPTER 11

Game Writing On Staff

Samantha Wallschlaeger

Monolith Productions

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11.1 INTRODUCTION: GAME WRITING IS A TEAM EFFORT

You take a sip of your coffee as you listen to the leaves rustle in the breeze outside your window. Your laptop with a custom vintage typewriter keyboard rests on the reclaimed barnwood desk you picked up from that flea market last year. With a gentle sigh of contentment, you lean forward and begin to write, wrapped in the peaceful quiet of complete solitude.

If this sounds like your ideal writing environment, joining a game studio's narrative staff is *definitely* not the career path for you. Being a staff writer at a studio means constant communication, collaboration, and adaptation. It can be chaotic and exhausting but also incredibly rewarding to those who take advantage of its unique opportunities. If you have the patience, energy, and dash of extroversion it takes to thrive in a studio environment, being a part of a writing staff can grow you into the best version of yourself.

This chapter is intended to help you navigate your place on a writing team, from collaboration to stress management to career growth. With a little effort and skill, you can become the kind of writer others can depend on and make the most of every advantage an in-studio gig offers.

11.2 JOINING A WRITING TEAM

Whether you're just starting in the industry or transitioning to a new studio, it's easy to be intimidated when first joining a writing staff. There may be a cacophony of questions running through your head: "Will I mesh well with the team?" "Can I learn their proprietary tools quickly?" "What if I'm not cut out for this?"

It's important to understand that everyone has these same worries, and they're completely normal. And luckily, there are ways to help ensure your first few months on a new team are smooth and productive.

11.2.1 Interview a Potential Team

The best match between you and your new writing team starts in the interview. Just as a studio is looking to discover whether you're a good fit for them, it's in your best interest to make sure *they're* a good fit for *you*. Ask about the narrative team's process. How is content split up among writers? How much content are you typically expected to deliver, and how often? Do writers ever work on a piece together, or is work done individually? Will you be getting support from an editor? Ask as many questions as possible, and think about whether their answers are conditions you feel comfortable working under. If not, move on.

11.2.2 Know What's Expected of You

Within your first week of joining a team, sit down with your lead or manager to discuss their expectations of your first few months. Ask how quickly writers typically learn how to input dialogue and text into the tools, how soon you're expected to generate content, and whom you should talk to if you need help. Ask if there are resources for getting up to speed on the project you'll be working on, and how long you have to ramp up. Getting concrete answers to these questions will help alleviate your fear of the unknown.

11.2.3 Communicate Your Comfort Level

Understanding your team's expectations is a great way to give yourself concrete goals, but it's important to remember everyone ramps up at a

different pace. While freelancers typically have to hit the ground running, staff writers often have the time to explore their abilities. If you don't feel comfortable jumping into writing a character-driven cinematic scene right away, ask if you can cut your teeth on ambient dialogue or a side quest first. Or ask to cowrite a scene or quest with another writer before tackling content on your own. Create an environment where it feels safe to find your footing without the fear of failure.

In that same vein, be bold if you want more responsibility. If you'd like to try writing that action-packed sequence or touching romance scene, ask to give it a shot. Many leads and managers assume their new hires will take some time to get comfortable. If you're ready sooner than their timeline dictates, it's up to you to communicate that.

11.2.4 Be Kind to Yourself

For your first few months on a new writing team, it's easy to feel overwhelmed. You're joining a group of people who have worked together for months, if not years, and have fallen into a practiced rhythm. You might feel exhausted at first, like you're running daily mental marathons just to catch up. This is normal! Soon enough, you'll be hitting your stride and blending perfectly into your new team. Be patient with yourself, and remember you were hired for a reason.

11.3 COLLABORATING WITH YOUR WRITING TEAM

When you join a narrative staff, your most important asset will be your fellow writers. Collaborating with your writing team will not only make your work stronger but also enable you to hone your craft and develop better techniques.

11.3.1 Team Dynamics

When we create a piece of narrative work alone, we inject it with a heavy dose of our own perspective. This can sometimes be a strength, leading to a highly personal work that resonates with a specific audience. But many cases, especially large, multimillion-dollar projects, call for much more than a single writer with a single perspective. A writing staff's true advantage lies in its abundance of voices and strengths, each writer bringing something special to the table.

The best writing teams know this, and they keep it firmly in mind when hiring new writers. On any given staff, one writer may be especially skilled at highly emotional cinematic moments, whereas another excels at

peppering a world with fun little ambient conversations, and yet another enjoys creating highly scientific lore entries for players to stumble across. While every team member is expected to be well rounded, a good writing staff will play to its members' individual strengths—including yours (this is why it's so important to be vocal about your goals and comfort level).

But a truly great writing staff doesn't just have a variety of skills—it also has a wealth of perspectives. However skilled they may be, a team composed of a single gender, race, religion, or sexuality will produce content that hits only a single note. By assembling a group of writers with diverse backgrounds, you ensure the stories you tell will be rich and multifaceted, with authentic characters who have believable motivations.

Your perspective, too, is a vital part of this process. Take some time to think about your personal experiences and what makes your voice unique. Ensure that your voice is heard and that the diverse voices of your teammates are allowed to shine. By combining your varied skills, preferences, and backgrounds, you're coming together to create something much stronger than the work of any one writer.

11.3.2 Matching the Team's Tone

But while it's vital to have a unique voice and perspective, joining a writing staff is a commitment to contribute to a cohesive product. A game doesn't necessarily need to feel like it was all written by one person, but it can't fluctuate wildly in terms of tone and style. This means when you join a staff, you need to learn the existing voice of the game and adjust your style to match it.

This doesn't, of course, mean you need to throw away your personal writing style, but it may take some time to figure out how your style fits within the context of the game you're writing. You'll likely be writing dialogue for several existing characters with defined voices, and depending on the game, fans may already be intimately acquainted with these characters. You'll need to learn these characters' speech patterns, mannerisms, and personalities in order to carry their stories forward. Luckily, you have a team to help you with the learning process, and once you feel comfortable, there's plenty of room to inject your own personal flavor into the dialogue and text.

11.3.3 Table Reads

The best way for a narrative team to improve a game's story and dialogue, and to help each other grow, is through table reads. At a table

read, a writer brings a piece of written content—a story mission, side quest, set of combat barks, etc.—to a scheduled meeting with the rest of the narrative team. The team—which can include writers, editors, the narrative director, cinematic directors, and designers—read the script out loud from start to finish to get a feel for how the lines will sound when spoken by a voice actor. Afterward, the group gives feedback on the script, ranging from large structural issues to minor dialogue notes. The writer then has the opportunity to make changes to the script based on the feedback and may have the chance to resubmit the piece for a second round of table reads. Occasionally, a team will even make changes to a script as a group, editing lines together on the fly during a session.

Though it may seem intimidating at first, a table read is an integral part of the game writing process, especially on a writing staff. This is the step at which writers can really get a feel for their dialogue—does it fit the style and tone of the game? Does it sound like a particular character's voice? Is it clean and concise? A table read will be your best opportunity to use your team's collective wisdom and talent to make your script the best it can be.

11.4 COLLABORATING WITH OTHER DISCIPLINES

In most cases, a game cannot be created by a single person. Games are products of close collaboration among many disciplines, often with conflicting needs and goals. As a member of the narrative staff, your job is to represent your team's best interests and be a champion for quality story content. But at the same time, it's your responsibility to collaborate with other departments in a respectful and positive way.

11.4.1 Set Narrative Pillars

In the preproduction phase of a game, developers create pillars—a set of words or phrases that represent what the ideal version of the game will look like. For example, *God of War* (2018) followed three design pillars during development: Combat, Exploration, and Father/Son. This meant that any content that didn't fall within at least one of those three categories—and certainly any content that directly conflicted with a category—didn't belong in the game. In the end, Sony Santa Monica released a focused, high-quality game with polished combat, rich exploration, and a design that worked in sync with the narrative theme of what it means to be a father.

That last one is important, because it protected the writing team from needing to severely compromise their ideal narrative. Because Father/Son was a pillar, content could not directly conflict with the primary narrative theme. Even better, designers were encouraged to create mechanics that solidified the bond between Kratos and his son, creating synergy between design and narrative and strengthening both in the process.

But not all games have pillars that protect the writing team's work as solidly as *God of War*'s (2018) did. That's why it's important for the writing team to set their own narrative pillars and to make them available for all departments to see. For example, a narrative pillar for an RPG could be "Strengthening Bonds," meaning all interactions with other characters result in the deepening of a personal bond. Setting narrative pillars not only helps the writing team stay focused in terms of narrative content but also allows other disciplines to see what's most important to the story. In the example above, if a designer wanted to implement a relationship decay system (meaning your actions could actually diminish your bond with a character), they would have a hard time justifying such a drastic break from a major narrative pillar. Setting narrative pillars may not prevent a conflict like this from happening, but it will certainly make it easier to begin the conversation.

11.4.2 Give Respect to Get It

In the creation of a game, every department comes to the table as a group of experts in their field, all of them wanting what's best for the finished product. But many times, opinions on what's "best" for the game are in constant conflict. When you work with designers, artists, or any other discipline, it's guaranteed you won't always agree. And since writing departments are only just beginning to form at many studios, your collaborators won't always understand the importance of your role.

That's why it's important to approach interdepartmental collaboration from a place of mutual respect. You may believe the story is a vital part of the game—and it is—but it is by no means the only thing that matters. Every component of a game, from the dialogue to the combat to the sound design, is just as important as the others. Every time you have a discussion with another department, *especially* if it includes opposing views, approach it with an understanding that everyone wants to make the best game possible. Present yourself as a good collaborator, and other disciplines will want to include you in their decision-making.

11.4.3 Understand Your Collaborators

When you write a game, you're delivering just one component in a product of countless moving parts. Your best work will be done in tandem with other disciplines, blending your narrative seamlessly into design, art, and sound. Therefore, the best game writers have a solid understanding of every other department's work. A writer who grasps design and art principles will be able to communicate effectively with the people bringing the game's world to life. Make a point to read books and watch GDC Vault talks outside your own expertise. If you can speak your collaborators' language and understand every tool in your development toolbox, you'll be able to create a stronger narrative experience together.

11.4.4 Become a Narrative Evangelist

As mentioned earlier, a narrative department is a relatively new concept at many studios, and the developers you work with may not be used to working with dedicated writers. It can take some time for other disciplines to understand the importance of including writers at every step of the development process. Luckily, this can be fixed with patience and effort.

You and the rest of your writing team need to become narrative evangelists. Take the time to teach your collaborators about what makes a good story, and how attention to dialogue and character can help players immerse themselves in a game's world. If your studio allows it, give a presentation to the other departments on how your team can be used as a resource, and why the game will be stronger for it. The more visibility you and your fellow writers have, and the more educated other disciplines are about narrative principles, the more likely you are to make your voice heard.

11.5 GIVING CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK

A vital component of joining a writing staff is critiquing the work of your fellow writers, whether it's during a table read or through written feedback. Constructive criticism is what takes a script from passable to polished and from good to incredible. But giving productive, helpful feedback is an art—one that many creatives haven't quite mastered. Luckily, the golden rule we learned as children still applies: critique others as you'd like to be critiqued.

11.5.1 Don't Try to Solve the Problem Yourself

When giving feedback, your goal should always be the enrichment of not only the script, but the writer. Use it as an opportunity to help the writer come to their own conclusion rather than attempt to fix the issues yourself.

Instead of "this line doesn't work—here's my version," try "I don't really feel this character's sorrow." You're highlighting an issue while giving the writer an opportunity to find a solution in their own style.

11.5.2 Highlight the Good

It's easy to focus on the problem areas in a script, especially when reading a first draft. But remember to also highlight the things you love about it. Did the creator nail a character voice? Deliver a particularly sparkling line? Let them know! Some creatives suggest framing your criticism as a "sandwich," beginning and ending your feedback with praise. Regardless of the format, offering positive feedback helps your fellow writer hone in on what they can set aside for their second draft, so they can focus on improving areas that need it most.

11.5.3 Focus on the Creation, Not the Creator

When creators open themselves to feedback, they're showing you the result of an incredible amount of time and effort. Keep this in mind as you offer your criticism. If you highlight a problem area, make sure it's clear you're critiquing the script, not the writer. "This line doesn't sound like the character's typical voice" sounds much better than "you didn't get her voice right." Remember: a writer who submits a script for feedback wants to deliver the best finished product possible. It's your job to help them get there and to do it from a place of empathy and caring.

11.6 RECEIVING FEEDBACK

As a member of the writing team, everything you create—from quest outlines, to dialogue scripts, to in-game scrolls, and to datapads—will go through several rounds of feedback. It may come in the form of a table read, or it could be as informal as a designer or artist approaching your desk with concerns. In all cases, how you receive this feedback will determine your relationships with your fellow writers and other disciplines, as well as the quality of your finished product.

11.6.1 Learning to Let Go

When you write for something as big and intricate as a video game, your story never really belongs to only you. Your fellow writers—as well as editors, designers, artists, sound designers, and even voice actors—contribute to the realization of a game's narrative. After the first draft, your script will likely be tweaked, stretched, and molded into a much different shape

than when it started. So when you receive a critique suggesting you cut the sparkling dialogue line you've grown attached to, realize it's part of the process. What you personally love about your script may not always be what's best for the game.

11.6.2 Managing Emotions

Writing is a highly emotional activity. We often express our own personal experiences and feelings through the stories we write. We grow to love characters and form attachments to certain scenes and bits of dialogue.

But writing a game—especially a big game with many moving parts—is a technical craft just as much as an emotional one. It's inevitable that you'll receive a directive to cut or alter your favorite scene because it doesn't fit within technical limitations or budget. And while this can be painful, it's important to keep in mind that this is not a reflection of the quality of your work or your worth as a writer. The feedback you receive is not intended to hurt you.

If you find yourself upset or uneasy by a critique you receive, take a private moment to reflect on your emotions. What you're feeling is a valid result of pride in your work but should not control how you act toward your collaborators. Process your feelings, and then let them go.

11.6.3 Actioning Feedback

While all feedback should be listened to and processed, not every critique requires action. Sometimes a note from a fellow writer directly conflicts with one from the designer working on your content. Often, a suggestion is outside a project's scope or budget. But much of the feedback you receive will be helpful and valid. It's your job to sift through the critiques you're given and determine how much you can reasonably action. Consider who the feedback is coming from and why the change is important to them. Would addressing this feedback create budgetary concerns or put unnecessary work on another department? Do you feel this note will help or hurt the story your team is trying to tell? Sorting feedback into actionable and nonactionable categories will make the process of writing a second draft easier and less stressful. And explaining the reasons behind not addressing a particular critique will make your collaborators feel heard.

11.7 THE LIFE OF A DIALOGUE LINE

As mentioned before, the moment you finish the first draft of a line of dialogue, it's no longer only yours. So what happens to that dialogue line during its journey from your hands to the player's eyes and ears?

11.7.1 Concept Stage

Most scripts begin as a discussion among writers and designers. An outline is written for the scene or quest, and often it's pitched to the narrative director and/or game director, and may go through several rounds of changes before it's approved. Only after approval will the writer begin writing the dialogue itself.

11.7.2 The First Draft

The writer sits down and drafts the dialogue script in a writing program like Final Draft or Scrivener. It may be done alone, but often it requires constant communication with designers and other writers in order to properly lay out the pacing and plot beats.

11.7.3 Feedback and Iteration, Part 1

After finishing the first draft, the writer submits the dialogue for feedback from the writing team and other disciplines (if applicable). This may be done in a table read, or as written feedback using script notes. The writer returns to the script to make changes based on the feedback. This feedback and iteration cycle may repeat several times until the lead writer or narrative director signs off on the dialogue.

11.7.4 Implementation

After the dialogue on paper is approved, it's time for the writer to implement the script into the game itself using the engine's dialogue tool. This is often done in collaboration with the content's designer, who needs to hook the dialogue up to an in-game character and create triggers for the dialogue to play. Many times, a game's engine will be able to play voice-acted dialogue lines using robotic voices, so writers and designers can hear an approximation of the line in-game.

11.7.5 Feedback and Iteration, Part 2

After implementation, the content can now be played in the game. Design leads and the game director will play the content and give feedback on how the dialogue impacts the overall design of the level or quest. This is also a valuable time for the writer to play their own work in-game to see and hear the dialogue they've written. Often a line that sounds fantastic on the page falls flat in the context of gameplay. After playthroughs, the writer and designer of the content work together to address the feedback, which often happens in several rounds. Changes to the dialogue based on

design concerns need to be approved by narrative leads, so additional narrative feedback rounds and table reads may occur at this stage, too.

11.7.6 Editing

After design and narrative leadership approve a script in-game, some studios employ editors to give the dialogue one final polish for grammar, punctuation, and clarity. Editors work directly in the game's engine, making small tweaks before passing the script off for recording.

11.7.7 Recording

When a script is ready to record with voice actors, it's assembled into a readable format and sent off to a recording studio. A voiceover director (employed either by the game studio or by the recording studio) works with voice actors to get the perfect delivery for every line. Often, the writer and narrative director or lead are also present to give context to the dialogue and offer opinions.

11.7.8 Final Tweaks

When the voiced dialogue lines return from the recording studio, they're hooked up in the game, attached to the dialogue text files. Often, this is also when localized versions of the dialogue are written recorded in other languages. With the final voiceover in the game, the writer and designer work together to make final changes to pacing, timing between lines, and processing. The narrative and design leads play the finished product and approve the dialogue.

11.7.9 Shipping

This is the scary and exciting part—when your dialogue leaves your hands for good. After all your hard work, you get to sit back and watch players enjoy it.

11.8 FINDING YOUR JOY

Writing on-staff at a studio means you're in it for the long haul. While freelancers keep things fresh by jumping to a new gig as an old one winds down, a staff writer is embedded into the same project for years. You will likely have to contribute to this project long after it ships in the form of downloadable content or updates. And when you finally move to a new project, chances are it's a direct sequel to the project you just finished, with little to no downtime to recharge. There are times when your work may

feel like a marathon with a constantly moving finish line. But being part of a writing staff is also incredibly rewarding and can be a rich and fulfilling career if you treat yourself with care and find your joy.

11.8.1 Take Ownership

Taking ownership of the content you create doesn't mean saying "this is mine and no one else can touch it." Rather, it means always putting your full attention to the task at hand. It's inevitable you'll be occasionally tasked with writing content you don't particularly love, but it's important to find something that inspires you in it, no matter how small. Treat every quest, every scene, and every journal entry with the care, and respect it deserves. If you take pride and ownership over your work, you'll not only write better content but also keep yourself from burning out on tasks you don't enjoy.

11.8.2 Make Your Voice Heard

It can feel intimidating to speak out about your needs and opinions, especially at a studio of anywhere from dozens to several hundred talented professionals. But as a staff writer, you're a talented professional, too, and you deserve to make your voice heard. If you feel a cinematic scene or quest is heading in the wrong direction, bring it up in an empathetic and respectful way. If you feel overburdened or anxious due to a faulty process, let a producer know. Staying silent when you feel something is wrong will lead to mental and emotional exhaustion, and the issue will never be fixed. You create your best art when you're happy, so do everything you can to ensure your happiness.

11.8.3 Inspire Your Collaborators

You may feel the most important factor in determining your happiness at a studio is the project you're working on. Nearly every writer has a "dream studio" in mind at the start of their career, usually chosen because they love the games that particular studio has developed. But what keeps developers—and especially writers—working at a studio for many years is the relationships they have with their collaborators. Game developers are at their best when they inspire each other to be creative, push boundaries, and put care into their work. Strive to inspire the people around you, whether they're fellow writers or developers in other disciplines. The work you do together will be that much more rewarding if you all feel the spark of creativity.

11.9 CONCLUSION

Being part of a narrative staff can be draining, hectic, and at times a little confusing. But it also allows you to learn from some of the best writers in the business and to fully understand every facet of game development. If you value collaboration and think the whole is always greater than the sum of its parts, you'll find a rich and rewarding experience where you can grow into a much better writer than you would on your own.

11.10 EXERCISES

1. Write a dialogue-heavy section for a game. Get a group of friends together and do table reads of your work. Assign each person a different role, and take notes on feedback provided during the session.

2. Study an existing game and determine what their narrative pillars could have been. Identify ways through which they supported these pillars or undermined them.

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CHAPTER 12

Keeping Localization in Mind

When Game Narrative Travels Abroad

Ross Berger

Electronic Arts, Amazon

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12.1 THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCALIZATION

Most, if not all, game writers and narrative designers will perform duties that are outside of their job description. And, as the race toward content lock is in clear sight, these requests will snowball day after day. One such responsibility is localization.

Localization experts are tasked with translating a game's on-screen text and/or performed content that requires subtitles and then culturally adapting them to international regions. Narrative designers and writers are often the default intermediary between the localization team and the

developer team, mainly because they are so close to the written content and have the most comprehensive insight into its pipeline. This is not a chore, as one might think; it's an opportunity.

A game writer or narrative designer's knowledge of how much content is written, what needs to be written, and what types of content will be written will influence the localization team's deliverable schedule and weekly output. It will not suffice for the game writer or narrative designer to be a passive facilitator and just hand off a massive spreadsheet of dialogue. No. They will need to be a proactive force that guides the localization process by establishing content estimates, deliverable schedules, and revision updates as well as managing databases to prevent content bottlenecks.

Contrary to popular belief, localization is not an afterthought. Nor is it a necessary evil. It is, rather, an extension of your writing. It expands your reach as a writer by making your work accessible and inclusive for millions of players. Localization, as I will indicate later, is good business. But more importantly, it is also the right thing to do. By making the language of their country accessible to play in, you'll give players around the world something they've always deserved: respect.

12.2 TRANSLITERATION VS. TRANSLATION VS. LOCALIZATION

Localization and translation often get confused, so it's good to set some definitions. Let's start with a term that is seldom heard of in game development.

Transliteration is the raw word-by-word conversion from one language to another. For example, take the Spanish expression, "Claro que si." Word by word, the English transliteration is, "Clear what yes."

This is nonsensical and does very little to convey the intent of the writing. Transliteration's purpose is critical, however, when a word or a phrase from one language doesn't have an equivalent in another. The localization team will then need to read the raw transliterated text, get the original intent, and provide new translated text that conveys that same intent in the localized language.

Translation, on the other hand, can involve the word-for-word conversion from one language to the next as well, but the process takes it one step further by seamlessly adapting idiomatic expressions into the equivalents of the new language.

So, while "Claro que si" is utter pablum in its transliterated form, it makes perfect sense in its translated form in English: "Of course."

Localization is a subset of translation, and its main capability is leveraging cultural nuances of the demographic of the speaker and of the region to which the language is being translated. These nuances include colloquialisms and cultural norms.

Localization also leverages the traits of the character to yield a more accurate translation. Before the process begins, the localization expert will ask themselves: *Does this character come from a privileged, middle class, or challenging background? What's their gender identity? How old are they? What race and ethnicity are they? What sexuality are they? What business are they in? What are the unique linguistic traits of the speaker? Where does the conversation take place? What year does the game take place?* All of these factors will alter the translation in order to achieve optimal authenticity of the speaker, the moment, and the environment.

Here are some examples of how the description of the character would dictate the end result:

Character Type	Localized Result of "Claro que si"
1980s Valley Girl	"Totally"
Stodgy male professor around 65	"Certainly"
Sarcastic jerk from 2009	"Totes ma goats"
Snoop Dogg circa 2003	"Fo Shizzle"
Gen Z Twitter user in 2019	"ofc"

A smart localizer needs to be in tune with the culture of the region they are localizing for. New idiomatic expressions, memes, and personality types will be taken in consideration while the text is being converted into the other language. But understanding character and a writer's style will also inform the process, so that intent and artistic nuance will persist from language to language.

12.3 BAD LOCALIZATION

It's been around for a while and still remains with us. The 1977 sports comedy *Slap Shot* was translated into Hebrew for Israeli audiences as *Paul Newman and His Gang*. Upon first blush, this might make sense for a country made up of one giant desert where you'd be hard pressed to find hockey rink, let alone ice. But naming the actor in the title undermines the fiction of the movie, which is not *about* Paul Newman, but rather *stars* Paul Newman. If there is no cultural equivalent in one country as there is in another, the localization team needs to dig into the fiction of

the intellectual property and pull from it something relevant that doesn't reveal its plot points. In the case of *Slap Shot*, a callout to the lead character (Reggie Dunlop) might've been appropriate, so something to the effect of *Reggie* or *Reggie and His Gang* would make for a more effective (albeit serviceable) title than *Paul Newman and His Gang.*

Failure in finding a cultural equivalent from one language to the next crosses the line when the final translation is offensive. In Japan, MTV's *Jersey Shore* was translated into *Macaroni Rascals*. I'm not sure why the localization team had to go there. Couldn't the original title be left as is? It is a real location, after all.

Luckily, most poorly localized titles don't tilt toward the culturally offensive or inappropriate; instead, they often miss the artistic thrust of an intellectual property. The Portuguese version of *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* was localized as *It Never Rains in Philadelphia*.[1] The new translation undermines the intent of the original title, which is a sarcastic take on the saccharine and cliché usage of the sun as a metaphor for optimism. A show with such cynical humor and mean-spirited characters is underserved with *It Never Rains in Philadelphia*. This shifts the tone and genre of the show from a dark comedy to a dour period piece that possibly (and therefore, unintentionally) hearkens back to a rare moment in the city's history, where it could've been hit by a drought… as was the case in 1980–1981.[2]

Perhaps a more egregious result of poor localization comes from the Spanish translation of the Ridley Scott classic *Thelma and Louise* (1991): *Un Final Inesperado*, or in English, *An Unexpected Ending.*[3] Viewers of the movie know how crucial the ending to that film was. Two women action heroes—a tragically rare occurrence in cinema up to that point—decide to ride their car off the edge of a mountain instead of surrendering to police. It is the ultimate act of freedom, a smack in the face to the oppressive patriarchy that kept them down. Why break the fiction in the translation and foreshadow the final moment of the film? No matter how vague an "unexpected ending" is, it spoils the ending by alerting audiences that the final moment is the most surprising, most compelling moment in the entire film. This is something that audiences need to discover on their own.

[1] Wang (2017).
[2] Perkey, Young, and Kreitzberg (n.d.).
[3] Dicker (2012).

As one can see, poor localization becomes a problem when it shifts the meaning and spirit of the content into something inaccurate, irrelevant, or culturally insulting. Moreover, when it breaks the fiction, it can undermine the creator's vision or spoil the consumer's experience.

In games, the most popular example of bad localization comes from the 1992 Mega Drive port version of *Zero Wing*. "All your base are belong to us" became a popular Internet meme in the early 2000s among the gaming community, thanks to GIF animation and the rise of Internet forums.[4] At first, it was derided as an example of poor translation from the Japanese market to the American one. But it then became a beloved cultural touchstone, an insider's reference that connects gamer to gamer, just like the playful misspelling of "owned" now referred to as "pwned."

"We have taken all of your bases" would have been a serviceable, baseline translation, but in 1992, games didn't have that degree of polish or scrutiny. Nor were they the massive, global business they are today. With more countries gaining access to technology and with increasing global purchasing power, game companies can no longer afford to underserve international communities.

12.4 MAINTAINING A HEALTHY PROCESS

It's important to maintain an achievable and reliable stream of content that a localization team can expect week after week. This way, the localization team can staff appropriately. But a smooth process is seldom the case in game development. Feature changes, rescoping issues, and last-minute coverage requests happen frequently and often disrupt the localization pipeline.

In addition to creating a reliable, effective pipeline, it's also important to empower the localization team as subject matter experts. Again, localization is not word-for-word translation from one language to another; it's customization of those translations into a region's and character's linguistic and cultural specifications. Before you write, you might want to seek the team's advice on how to inform story beats, character backstories, and character interactions that would better appeal to the regions the team is localizing for. This will make your work more accessible on a global scale, but accessible not through translation alone but also through regional relatability.

By inviting the localization team to be cultural advisors, you're making them stakeholders in the creative process and enhancing your storytelling through larger global appeal.

[4] Benner (2001).

To maximize the localization process, narrative designers and writers should assert their role as intermediary between game developers and localization by following a few tenets.

12.4.1 Itemize Early and Effectively

Get estimates on the content that has been written, what will be written, and what will likely change. From those estimates, isolate the cutscenes and live-action FMVs (full motion videos) and then determine if they are required to have subtitles or voice-over recordings in other languages. The latter may include not just a simple pro forma "dubbing" of the language it's being localized for but also an actual separate set of performances of the voice-over by professional actors fluent in that language.

If the content is instructional—as in, does it teach the rules of the game and/or how to use the controller?—then it is required by many countries (France especially) to have that content provided in that country's language. If you ignore this rule, expect to incur a heavy fine.

If the cutscenes or FMVs are not instructional but are story centric, then it is ideal—but not required—for them to be at least subtitled. To assure that they will be, provide the scripts of these scenes early to the localization team. Cutscenes and FMVs are often the hardest to subtitle because for many game engines, once they are sealed in game, they cannot be changed. They are a separate, immutable asset, whereas on-screen user interface (UI) text is flexible and can be shaped and inserted in game at any time before content lock.

Keep in mind: a line of text corresponds to a string of code. Once that string is inserted into the game, it displays the text when triggered in gameplay. The code ensures that the text will correspond to the player's language preferences. While the code string is immutable, the text is not. Therefore, text translations (and small revisions) can continue till the very end of production. However, it takes time to create good translations, and although the technology allows for last-minute text tweaks, the human pipeline does not. Even minor revisions in the primary language cause a cascade of time and effort as translations in every other supported language need to be created and inserted.

It's important to prioritize what writing assets are the least flexible and require the most scrutiny, so that they can be provided to localization early on. At the same time, it's equally as critical to get a count for on-screen text lines. This number can be in the thousands or tens of

thousands. Obviously, the more granular you can make the estimate the better. Lastly, add 20% buffer to your estimates to account for rewrites and feature additions.

12.4.2 Create a Schedule

Always set a clear list of weekly deliverables, and communicate these to the developer and localization teams. Each side needs to know what to expect and how to plan accordingly. Add these deliverables to your team's sprint schedule. For those who create content that needs to be translated (mainly designers and writers), make them aware of and accountable for what needs to get done, and prioritize accordingly. Then, assure that they make those deadlines in order to avoid any last-minute translation requests or content dumps that can overwhelm and bottleneck the localization team.

The schedule will also inform the localization team on what kinds of content will be delivered every week as well as the quantity of the deliverables.

As always, make sure the schedule you create is flexible to accommodate scope creep. Things change all the time in game development. Think ahead and prepare for revisions. It's up to the localization team if they want to handle these changes as they come, or if they want to dedicate the last few weeks of the production cycle to address them.

12.4.3 Quick Rule of Thumb

It's best to start the localization process as soon as possible. Content always comes in at the last minute and will overextend the localization team. A narrative designer or writer can ease this process by giving them as much content as early as possible. This means *do not wait for production to start.* If you have work in pre-pro that's ready, send it along. While wholesale rewrites often occur, cosmetic changes to scripts, in-game dialogue, or on-screen text may not always require a retranslation because the gist of the original text remains intact. But it's better to have the option of retranslation if the localization team is given enough time.

12.4.4 Maintain Vigilance

The localization process can take a few left turns, depending on the curveballs that get sent their way from the developer team. It's important, therefore, to consistently keep track of the localization team's progress. If it looks like they could be a bottleneck that could delay content lock, alert your internal developer team leaders. This should not be your

responsibility; it should be that of the localization team lead. Nonetheless, it's critical to be a second pair of eyes in case the process is in a compromised state. Weekly check-ins will be a good indication. A narrative designer should lead those and should require a weekly status update from the localization team. Status should include how much content they've localized so far, how much more remains, and what the potential risks are. Monitor their progress carefully to determine if you need to alter the pace of your own writing output.

Also, it's important to "manage up." Project managers and producers will be watchdogging the metrics for the development of every single feature from every single discipline. Take preemptive action, and share the localization team's weekly status up the chain of command. At the same time, confirm their progress by drawing parallels to your own completion of writing deliverables. These status reports provide the necessary transparency for leadership to see what staffing and budgetary changes are needed to assure the completion of deadlines.

12.4.5 Be the Gatekeeper of the Content Pipeline

As a narrative designer or writer, you should be one of a select few who has access to your team's translation database. This is often a proprietary tool of a studio, and it's one that you'll be busy contributing to, either writing the lines that will go into it or editing those from other designers. The open access to this tool can easily lead to chaos for localization, especially if designers won't stop adding content into it.

Even if you set a content quota for weekly deliverables, designers may not necessarily heed your requests. Therefore, you'll need to assign a gatekeeper to the database. Either you require all new lines to go through the gatekeeper after it's been locked; or you'll need to set specific blackout times where additions to the database are locked but can still be contributed during "open" days. This might seem fascist, but this type of discipline will assure that the localization team is not overwhelmed by an onslaught of last-minute translation requests.

12.4.6 Review Translations as They Come In

This is a stretch goal, and it often depends on how busy a narrative designer or writer is when racing toward content lock. But it is ideal to have the localized text retranslated into English, so that a narrative designer can determine if the localization has maintained the integrity of the original text.

I have seen spreadsheets where one column is devoted to the original English text and the subsequent columns are devoted to the languages for which the content is being localized. A narrative designer can use tools like Google Translate to reconvert the new text to see if it falls in line with the original. This can get tricky, especially if the narrative designer isn't fluent in the other languages. However, there's no harm in translating the content to see if the proximity of the translations is close enough to the original text. If so, there's no cause for alarm. But for those lines that are outside of the original intent, they should be flagged and brought to the attention of the localization team for further discussion.

Again, this is a stretch goal. This is an effort that can be time-consuming and should not be a priority for the narrative designer or writer in the final days of crunch mode. One should trust that the localization team is capable enough to understand your written words and perform their duties at the highest level. But if there's time, everyone can use a final edit by someone close to the original material.

As a final layer of protection, a localization team should task their quality assurance (QA) analysts to play the game and make sure the localized text is both aligned to the original intent and is triggered properly within game.

12.4.7 Other Things to Watch Out For

Censorship is never a good thing; however, cultural accommodation is necessary once your game becomes global. What this means is that certain cultural norms that are innocuous in one country might be offensive in another. You might be required to alter your content to accommodate the sensibilities of the country that the game is being localized for. In Germany, for instance, any visual symbolism of Nazism is not permitted. What changes will you need to make if you're working on a World War II game? Or, if you're writing a game that has visual depictions of skulls and bones, it's likely that content will be removed in China, especially if it's deemed as an assault against a religion or religious rituals. This is exactly what happened to *World of Warcraft* in 2015.[5]

Visual imagery as well as written or voiced content will have to be screened for potential regional infractions. Writers and narrative designers should lean heavily on the localization team to provide guidance on

[5] Reyna (2017).

what cultural landmines to avoid and to seek suggestions that can replace your written content without undermining the spirit and integrity of the work.

On a separate note, also be mindful of the amount of text that you write. Otherwise, your words (such as subtitles or UI text) when translated and presented on the screen could get cut off. An English character (be it a letter, a space, or a punctuation mark) is modest visually, but when translated into German, for instance, the length of the localized text will bloat up due to the length of many German words.

To prevent this, you must work closely with UI designers to determine a character count for each line of text. You might find it constricting at first to write under these confines (60–80 characters per line in English, for instance), but you will find that this concession is a small price to pay for seamless translations in multiple languages.

12.5 THANKLESS JOB

Localization brings a lot of magic to game development. They make the words that you write understandable to millions around the world. Yet, this is often not appreciated by everyone along the game development chain, ranging from a QA tester to a studio head. Often, the localization team is given little time to do their work, as it doesn't involve gameplay pyrotechnics. This is a very naïve and cruel view of localization, especially since the global market is growing exponentially.

In 2019, it's projected that the games industry will generate $152.1 billion in global revenue. The United States will make up just $36.9 billion of those sales, which means an overwhelming majority of that revenue will come from international markets.[6] There is a huge financial opportunity to make games more accessible to larger audiences. Localization is the necessary step in closing that gap.

Localization is often a thankless job. Many times, the teams are not embedded with developers. They can either work remotely as a centralized unit, even overseas, where they localize multiple titles at once for the entire company. Or, they can be a separate company, independent of the studio, to whom the work is "outsourced." In either case, game developers don't typically have a lot of exposure to the localization team and may not understand the burden of their job. That's why the

[6] Wijman (2019).

narrative designer and writer will need to advocate for them during content planning and assure that there is ample time for their work to get done.

12.6 CONCLUSION

Never underestimate the impact of localization. With this team's help, your words will reach out to countlessly more players. Their work makes your game more relatable to people who are seldom part of the conversation when the game is created. It is rare that creative directors, producers, and marketers discuss the fan-bases of (for example) France, China, and Mexico when defining the IP. These regions are afterthoughts.

Localization makes sure that people from China, India, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and others can play a game that they understand, not only in how to play it, but also in how the story unfolds. The joy of victory, the pain of defeat, the humor of a sidekick, the menace of a villain—the blood, sweat, and tears you put into dramatizing these moments can now be appreciated in their fullest capacity because of localization. When the development cycle is over, acknowledge these unsung heroes. They just made your game more enjoyable to countless new players.

12.7 WRITING EXERCISES

1. Select a paragraph of narrative text you have written. Paste that paragraph into Google Translate or other automated translation program. Translate your text into another language, ideally one that you or someone you know can read and provide feedback about how the automatic translation worked out. Alternatively, translate the paragraph back into English. It will give you a sense of how much art and skill goes into localization.

2. Compare two English translations of a narrative work written originally in another language. If your local library doesn't have more recent examples, try looking up English translations of Homer on Wikipedia. Resources there provide first lines of the Iliad and the Odyssey, showing many different translators conveying ancient Greek poetry in English. Imagine this were the first line of an opening cutscene for a new game similar to *God of War*. How would you write this opening line of narration?

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CHAPTER 13

Writers in the Recording Studio

Haris Orkin

Independent Contractor

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13.1 DOES GOOD VOICE ACTING EVEN MATTER?

Nintendo's Zelda games tell their stories with text and sound effects. There's no voice acting other than the occasional grunt, groan, or excited fairy laugh. Yet the stories are still epic, emotional, and immersive. If those games are just fine without voices, why do we need voice acting in games

at all? Well, to be honest, we don't. Not in every game. But as technology marches forward and games become more complex, sophisticated, and immersive, so can the stories they tell. Just as visuals have improved exponentially, so has sound design, and those more sophisticated games require greater care in the writing, the dialog, and the voice acting. The days of drafting voice actors from the ranks of artists, programmers, and level designers are long gone. It makes no sense to spend millions of dollars developing a game, only to spend too little time and money on the voice acting. We've all played popular best-selling games with mediocre if not outright cringe-worthy voice acting. We grit our teeth and get through it because the game itself is so much fun. But who knows how many more units they would have sold if the acting and story rivaled the quality of the game play? Luckily, more and more developers understand that gamers now expect top notch voice acting in games.

The best designers have always known the importance of good writing and voice acting. Their mission is to create immersion and one way to help that process along is to create strong, complex, and engaging characters. We want the player to form an emotional attachment just as they would be watching a movie or reading a novel.

Good voice acting can instantly create indelible characters. Bad voice acting can have exactly the opposite effect. Nothing can wrench a player from the reality of a game world faster than a beautiful elf princess who sounds like she grew up in Newark, New Jersey (unless, of course, it's a fantasy adventure set in Newark, New Jersey).

13.2 WHY DO SOME GAMES HAVE SUCH TERRIBLE VOICE ACTING?

Audio Atrocities is a website dedicated to "the study and enjoyment" of terrible video game voice acting. Clearly, this was a problem since the first audio file was inserted into the very first video game. When I first broke into the business 15 years ago, a huge percentage of games had stunningly bad voice acting. Sometimes the problem was the dialog itself. If it was stiff or stilted or so awkward, not even a great voice actor could save it. Of course, even snappy, witty, and believable dialog can be ruined with a bad performance. How did this happen so often back then? Well, for one thing, quite a few game developers and producers weren't experienced or educated in the area of acting or directing. Some of them

probably didn't believe it was all that important. They knew people didn't buy games for the voice acting, so why sweat it? Of course, the biggest problem back then was probably the budget. Many publishers only allocated a tiny part of the budget to that part of the process. They didn't want to spend the money necessary to hire union voice talent. They didn't want to hire a casting director or a professional voice director, so they made do with either the audio engineer or one of the designers. All those decisions affected the final product. Of course, some hired a slew of Hollywood stars, rented the best studio in town, spent a fortune, and still ended up with lame voice acting. Blowing money doesn't necessarily guarantee quality.

13.3 GAMES WITH GREAT VOICE ACTING

Now I'm not saying every game back then caused players all over the world to wince. Many games had fantastic voice acting, and a few of them are what inspired me to get into the business. Some of these include the following:

- *Grim Fandango* (Lucas Arts, 1998)
- *No One Lives Forever* (Monolith, 2000)
- *Max Payne* (Remedy, 2001)
- *Kingdom Hearts* (Square, 2002)
- *Ratchet and Clank* (Insomniac Games, 2002)
- *Splinter Cell* (Ubisoft, 2003)
- *Knights of the Old Republic* (BioWare, 2003)
- *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar Games, 2004)
- *God of War* (Sony, 2005)
- *Psychonauts* (Double Fine, 2005)
- *F.E.A.R.* (Monolith, 2006)
- *Company of Heroes* (Relic, 2006)
- *Bioshock* (2K, 2007)

- *Uncharted Two: Among Thieves* (Naughty Dog, 2009)
- *Dragon Age: Origins* (Bioware, 2009)
- *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (Rocksteady, 2009)
- *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar, 2010)
- *Mass Effect 2* (Bioware, 2011)
- *Portal 2* (Valve, 2011)

What all these games have in common besides fantastic voice acting is superlative writing. Great voice acting doesn't happen without great writing. I've played all of these and recommend that you do the same (or at least watch gameplay videos online). More recent games (and fairly recent games) that were praised by critics and players alike for doing it right include the following:

- *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013)
- *Life is Strange* (Dontnod, 2015)
- *Firewatch* (Campo Santo, 2016)
- *Mafia 3* (Hangar 13, 2016)
- *Uncharted 4* (Naughty Dog, 2016)
- *Oxenfree* (Night School, 2017)
- *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow, 2017)
- *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (Ninja Theory, 2017)
- *God of War* (Sony, 2018)
- *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar, 2018)

Voice acting in games has improved dramatically since I first started in the business. Publishers understand its importance, because they know it affects their bottom line. Now it's almost a given that any AAA game will have AAA voice acting, but as is evident in the list above, some of the best voice acting in recent years has been in indie games.

I know I neglected to mention many other fine games with great voice acting, but at least this list will begin to point you in the right direction.

It's hard to know how to judge your work without a standard to measure it against.

13.4 CASTING 101

Academy Award–winning director John Frankenheimer said, "Casting is sixty-five percent of directing." Pick the right voice actor, and you're most of the way home. But where do you find the best voice actors? Hopefully, the producer will hire a qualified casting director to facilitate the process, but the writer still needs to be involved. No one understands the characters and tone better than the writer.

Most professional voice actors in the United States belong to SAG/AFTRA, the recently combined actor's union. In the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand, voice actors belong to Actors' Equity. In Canada, they're members of the Alliance of Canadian Television and Radio Actors (ACTRA). For union members to work for your company, your company needs to be a signatory to the union. This costs nothing in itself, but down the line, if for any reason your company decides to use non-union talent, they could eventually find themselves in hot water. For this reason, game developers/publishers often contract with production studios/entities who are themselves signatories. You can contact SAG/AFTRA (or ACTRA) directly for information on rules and minimum fees for actors.

The biggest benefit of using union talent is probably obvious. The best voice actors in the business are union actors. This includes, of course, stars and celebrities. Union members aren't supposed to do non-union projects, so if you want to hire a star or a celebrity, every other voice you cast will have to be union talent as well. Union voice-over actors are consummate professionals. They're quick and they're good, and you'll be out of the studio much faster than you would if you used less experienced talent. They can usually play multiple roles, and the chances of having to recast or rerecord will be greatly reduced. So, even though you may have to pay union talent more up front, you could conceivably save quite a bit of money on the back end.

The other benefit of using union talent comes during the casting process. The top voice-over agents handle mainly union talent. Agents make the entire casting process much less work intensive. You can email them audition scripts (also known as sides—a sample is included in Appendix D), and they will take care of the auditions. They will audition the actors they feel will best suit the roles. They will then email you a link or an MP3.

There are voice agents all across the country (and the world) and in most of the major cities. The largest agencies with the top talent, however, are in Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Vancouver, Toronto, London, Sydney, and Auckland. More recently, there are agents that handle non-union talent, so it is now possible to cast non-union actors through some agencies. There are also a number of online services that allow you to audition union and non-union talent. One of the largest and most successful is www.voices.com. You simply go online and post your job, upload the sides (audition scripts) and the casting specs. Casting specs describe the character's age, sex, accent, and backstory. This service isn't free, but it can be very convenient and cost-effective.

Another option is to rent a small recording booth and hold your own auditions. In Los Angeles and New York, you can place an ad in one of the local casting publications. Currently, the most well-known are *Back Stage* and *Back Stage West*. Both have online sites. There are also a number of other online casting resources. One of the most widely used is http://www.breakdownservices.com. Then there is always the ubiquitous http://www.craigslist.org. You will have no problem finding willing actors by going this route. The problem will be separating the wheat from the chaff. One way to do this is to hire a casting director who is knowledgeable in this area.

13.4.1 Casting and Audition Materials

Whether you hire a casting director or handle it all on your own, you're going to need to do the proper preparation and put together an information package. This should include the full script and a breakdown of the script. The breakdown delineates the number of characters in the script and the number of actors required. Many times, actors will play multiple roles. The current SAG/AFTRA interactive agreement allows actors to play three roles for each half-day they are contracted (with additional fees for additional voices). Unions in other countries have their own rates and rules. For instance, in the United Kingdom, voice actors are hired by the day, not by the voice. You'll need to figure out how many lines each character has and whether they will be doing them alone or as part of an ensemble. This will help determine how long you'll need each actor in the studio and how much he or she will need to be paid. These information packages should also include detailed character descriptions and artwork to show the talent what the characters look like in-game. A short biography of each major character is essential. If the character is supposed to

sound like a particular star or celebrity, that should be noted as well. You will also need audition scripts (sides). These are monologs that bring out all facets of each character. No more than one or two monologs per character should be included. Keep the monologs fairly short. The longer each audition is, the more time it'll take you to record it and listen back.

13.4.2 Casting for Performance Capture and Facial Mo-Cap

Motion capture is a technology designed to digitally capture an actor's full body as they create a performance. Facial mo-cap captures the actor's facial expressions. Most AAA games use both techniques to aid the animators in creating nearly photorealistic animations. Performance capture is shot on a sound stage, and dialog is often recorded simultaneously. It's very much like shooting a film. In fact, it's exactly the same technology they use for creating CGI magic in many films. Cutscenes can be shot and blocked using green screen, allowing the scenery and backgrounds to be filled in later. With facial mo-cap, an actor wears a helmet that videotapes their every expression as they play the part. If actors will be performing on camera, they need to be auditioned on camera. Because of that, it's important to audition actors who are experienced and comfortable being on camera. Stunt men and women, martial artists, gymnasts, and athletes are often hired for performance capture, while oftentimes an entirely different performer will be hired for the close-ups and voice acting. If facial mo-cap is part of the process, you'll receive video auditions and will need to judge the full range of the actor's performance. Because the actors are on camera, they can't read off a script. The audition needs to be memorized, and that requires more lead time for auditions.

13.4.3 Choosing the Talent

As the writer, you may not be consulted on the final casting decision (especially if the publisher wants to go the celebrity route), but if you are, here are some things to keep in mind. You should be there for the callbacks. Have the actors show you all the different characters they can do. You're usually not casting one actor for one part but for multiple parts. You'll want a vivid contrast between different characters and different voices within each scene. Keep in mind what the in-game characters look like. You want the voices to match the artwork. But remember that these are voice-over actors: they don't have to look the part and, in fact, rarely do. Young can play older, old can play younger, women can play boys, and men can play women. The only limit is your imagination. Since you know

the script, you know which characters interact with each other (something the casting director may not be cognizant of). You usually don't want to cast an actor in two roles where they have to perform against themselves. Also, ideally you don't want the same actor playing different characters in contiguous scenes. So how do you make the final choice? If your casting or voice director has worked with the actor in question and recommends them for their professionalism and talent, I would take their advice. Just as you have to trust your gut when you're writing, you have to trust your gut in terms of casting and acting. Do they feel right? Do you believe them? When you close your eyes, do you see the character you imagined in your mind's eye? Or maybe the voice talent is doing something far different from what you imagined, but much, much better. Be open to that as well. In the final analysis, it's a leap of faith. When you've had more experience, it's less of a leap, but casting is not an exact science. It's an art.

13.5 CREATING SCRIPTS FOR VOICE-OVER ACTORS

Great voice acting starts with good material for the actors to work with. A talented voice actor can take bare bones lines and make them sound amazing and deep. Have faith in your actors. Allow them room to fill in the layers of emotion in the dialog. Instead of being really on-the-nose, like saying "You make me so angry," write lines for your actor that move the story forward and provide context for these lines so the actors know they should be delivered with anger or frustration. An otherwise dry line, like "Supplies have arrived," gains new depth if that's where the anger is conveyed.

Having story spoken instead of read off the screen changes how stories are conveyed in games, and the scripts need to take this into account. A novel isn't written the same way a movie or radio play is, and your game script should be adjusted depending on how much voice-over is being done. For those sections, take cues from screenwriting books more than novel or short story advice. Keep lines short—players will often skip through long soliloquies if they can. Games are about action and interaction, and if listening passively gets in the way of that interaction, it's a problem.

There is no set format for a game script. Each company has its own way of doing things. I've written game scripts in Final Draft, Fade In, Word, Excel, Celtx, Articy Draft, and Google Docs. Many companies have their own proprietary software. When it's time to record the dialog, however, the script is usually ported into a spreadsheet like Excel. Every line has its own specific code number to facilitate placement by the audio team.

Voice actors will need their own version of the script. It should be clear, simple, and easy to read. It's possible to reformat an Excel script and enlarge it to make it more actor-friendly. For more discussion of this topic, see Chapter 3.

Whatever format is used, the point is to make the recording process easier for the voice actor. The recording session will move faster, saving both time and money. This script is also intended to facilitate the voice director's job. For each line of dialog, the writer must indicate the intended intensity, volume, intention, and sometimes even the context. Should a line be whispered? Should it be shouted? Is the character angry, sad, determined, or sarcastic? That all should be indicated for the voice director. There should also be room to allow the director, the audio engineer, and the writer to make notes on each take. Oftentimes a note taker is hired just for that purpose. Nowadays, most recording studios project an enlarged version of the script on a monitor in the booth, so the actor can read it easily.

13.6 WORKING WITH A VOICE DIRECTOR

If the developer/publisher hires a professional voice director, there's still an important place for the writer in the recording studio. Some developers, publishers, and voice directors prefer not to have the writer present. They're afraid the writer will complain and ask endless questions and request useless takes and slow the whole process down. Don't be one of those writers. If you do your job correctly, the recording process will go smoothly and quickly, and the quality will improve exponentially.

First, remember that you are not the voice director. If you have a note or a concern or a suggestion, give it the director. The director should be the only one who talks to the actors. It's confusing for actors to hear notes from multiple sources. Let the director do the directing. You're there to be the guardian of the truth, the tone, and the story. Ernest Hemingway said, "The most essential gift for a good writer is a built in, shock-proof shit detector." As a writer, you need to know when your writing isn't good enough or rings false. You need that same internal compass when you're listening to actors deliver your lines. Academy Award–winning actor James Cagney once offered a nervous young actor the following advice: "Walk in, plant yourself, look the other fellow in the eye, and tell the truth." Acting is about truth. Whether the actor is playing an alien from another planet, a dwarf with a battle axe, or a fairy princess with a lisp, the player wants to believe. As the writer, one of your jobs is make sure every

line rings true. Yes, it's subjective, and you can't get obsessive about this or you will be booted out of the studio, but you can definitely help keep everyone on the right path. One concrete way you can help is to give the voice director and the actor the context of the scene. The basic context and intent for every line should be indicated in the script, but often it's helpful to offer more detail. Make sure the actors understand exactly who they are, where they are, who they're talking to, and why they're talking to them. Are they outside? On a horse? In a saloon? In a bathtub? Are they talking to one person? Are they talking quietly, so as not to be overheard? Or are they addressing a crowd? Are they chasing someone through a forest? Through a sewer? How far away is the person they're addressing? Five feet? Ten feet? Fifty feet? By setting the scene and describing the context, you can help to ensure a more believable and powerful performance. Some actors, especially older actors, aren't very video game savvy. They have no clue what the finished product will look or sound like. As much as you try to explain it, they can't quite grasp the context. The best thing to do is to show them videos, trailers, and an actual game demo, if it's available. If not, you can demonstrate (and show them how to play) a similar game. This can get them excited and help them to understand the final result everyone is working toward.

Beyond the truth, the writer is also the guardian of the tone. What exactly is the "tone"? It's the story's personality, and it's reflected by everything in the world. Usually the lead designer, lead artist, and writer will come together to collaborate on a consistent tone. If the tone changes through the game or movie or book, the effect is jarring. It pulls the player/audience out of the story and derails the suspension of disbelief. Consider the tone of *Battlefield 1 (EA Dice, 2016)* compared with the tone of *Wolfenstein: The New Order* (Machine Games, 2014) and *Borderlands 3* (2k, 2019). All three are first-person shooters, but each has its own specific tone. *Battlefield 1* is an action-packed recreation of World War 1. *Wolfenstein* is alternative history mixed with sci-fi and wry satire. *Borderlands 3* is a sci-fi comedy with crazy weapons and crazier characters. Your job is to make sure that each voice actor is playing a consistent part in the same story. If the performances are getting too maudlin or too broad, too silly or too serious, you need to let the voice director know. A good voice director should already be on the same page, but sometimes an actor can be so entertaining and charming that the voice director is seduced into accepting a performance that doesn't fall within the tone. As the writer, you are one of the few people keeping the entire equation of

the story in your head. The voice director only knows what you tell them and can never know the script as intimately as the writer. At all times, you should know what is happening visually, physically, and emotionally. Since in most cases, you're only recording one voice talent at a time, the actor needs to know not only who they're playing against but the intention and emotion of each line. When all the audio is inserted in the game, you want the characters who are conversing to sound like they're in the same room…or cave or submarine or rooftop. They need to inhabit the same physical and emotional space. It's also important to make sure the characters stay consistent throughout the length and breadth of the story. Sometimes an actor is playing multiple parts, and it is easy for them to let their accent slip and become some other character. The voice director obviously needs to be cognizant of this, but so does the writer. You also need to be vigilant in the area of relationships between the various characters. All the relationships must make sense and stay as consistent as the individual characterizations. If Bill hates Sally at the start of the story and always gives her an attitude and that attitude changes as he learns to respect her, that change needs to be reflected in the performances. As the writer, you know better than anyone how each relationship changes and grows, and you need to make sure that it all stays on track.

Every story has its own rhythm and momentum. Excitement builds. Characters change. They grow braver or more cowardly. They pull together. They splinter. Your job is to make sure that the actors are reflecting the reality of the story as it progresses. Since most of the dialog is recorded out of sequence, it is easy for everyone involved to veer off the continuity highway. If that starts to happen, you need to grab the wheel and get it back on the road. Occasionally, actors will improvise additional lines, and that's to be encouraged. When actors make the lines their own, they often make them feel more real. This is great, as long as they don't derail the story or turn a three-word exclamation into a long monolog.

It is the writer's job to note the changes and include them in an as-produced version of the script. In most games, dialog is not just spoken but shown on the screen in subtitles. The subtitles need to reflect any changes made during recording. For all those reasons, the writer's presence at the recording session is essential. The writer can often be an exceptional resource for the voice director and the recording engineer. Just remember that as the writer, you're not the one running the show. Time is money, and your job is to help speed things up. If your presence starts to slow things down, next time you may find yourself persona non grata.

13.7 WHEN THE WRITER IS THE VOICE DIRECTOR

Occasionally, the writer may also pull double duty as the voice director. Sometimes, they have experience in this area, but for the purpose of this chapter, I'm going to assume that the writer reading this knows bupkes. David Mamet, the award-winning playwright, screenwriter, and director, had this to say about directing. "What is the scene about? What does the protagonist want, what does he or she do to get it? The scene is over when they get it."

To play a scene properly, the actor needs to know what the character wants and needs. Someone only says or does something when they want something specific. It doesn't have to be a selfish want, though it often is. It doesn't even have to be concrete. The character could want revenge, a cup of coffee, a legendary treasure, acceptance, sympathy, love, or a bathroom. Whatever it is…every word, every statement, every action is made for a reason. Even if a character only says, "Hello," he or she says it for some purpose. Maybe they want the person they're greeting to like or fall in love with them. Maybe they want to sell the person a used car. Maybe they just want to capture the other character's attention at a party. Every word needs to be motivated. If the actor is doing a monolog, they need to know who they're talking to. Give them someone specific. Or let the actor choose someone specific. Their mother. Their brother. Whoever and whatever will elicit the proper emotion. The actor needs to know their motivation before they can begin to deliver a believable performance.

13.8 TIPS FOR ELICITING BELIEVABLE PERFORMANCES

Constantin Stanislavski, cofounder of the Moscow Art Theatre and one of the fathers of modern acting technique, said, "The language of the body is the key that can unlock the soul." Stanislavski focused on the development of artistic truth onstage by teaching actors to "live the part" during performance. He created a system designed to train actors to work from the inside outward. One way to find this truth is to physically manifest actions, and those actions in turn elicit emotions. This is a very effective technique for voice actors. Voice acting is about using not just the voice but the entire body. The best voice actors are very expressive and physical. They bring that physicality to their performances.

You can help a voice actor by telling them where the character is located and where the action is taking place. Give them a physical space that they can create in their mind's eye. If they're on top of a mountain, they need to feel the cold, hear the wind, and experience the sensation of standing over

the edge of a precipice. If the actor uses their senses (or sense memory), the truth of the situation will come across in their voice. If someone is chasing them, they can run in place to get their heart racing and create the physical sensation of fear and flight. If they're supposed to be eating, give the actor something real to eat. If they're supposed to be reading, give them a book. You don't need them to create the actual sound effects; what you need is verisimilitude. Sometimes an actor will get nervous and tighten up and fall back on their bag of facile tricks. Every actor has them. Sometimes they can be useful, but often they can become a crutch that causes the performances to become less visceral and more superficial. If an actor is tense, you want to help them to relax. A relaxed actor is more likely to be in touch with what they're really feeling inside. And those emotions are the gold you are trying to mine. There are numerous relaxation techniques, and most experienced actors will know the ones that work for them. Some of the most helpful are vocal exercises, focused breathing exercises, and physical movements such as stretching, running in place, rolling the neck, and anything to loosen up and relieve the tension. How you communicate with an actor will have a direct bearing on their level of relaxation. The director should always stay calm. Keep a sense of humor. You want to keep all pressure out of the recording booth. If you're frustrated, if you're nervous, don't let it show. Be positive. Be encouraging. Try to keep negativity to a minimum. Don't frown when the actor delivers something that isn't working. Everything you say or do will affect their confidence and tension level. The exception to this is when you purposely act a certain way to elicit a specific response from the actor, for instance, if you purposely try to anger the actor to elicit believable rage. This can often work, but it can also be difficult to bring the actor back from that emotion. The technique should be used very judiciously, if at all, especially if you don't like getting punched in the nose.

You want your actors to be good listeners. Whatever they say needs to reflect the imaginary conversation they are having with either another character or the player. You want their responses to sound spontaneous. This requires the actor to play moment to moment. They shouldn't anticipate what they're going to say next. "Happy accidents" are when the actor veers from the text, or even flubs a line, and creates a genuine emotional moment. The actor has succeeded in elevating their performance beyond the page. You want to encourage those happy accidents by not always being a slave to the text. Improvization can also be a great tool to help your actors to relax. They'll try the unexpected and may just come up

with something brilliant. The end result can be a more believable, vulnerable, and emotional performance. As the director, your job is to tell the actor what to do, but this must be done in an oblique manner. You need to direct…indirectly. The idea is to lead the actor toward their performance, not push them. If you give them line readings or tell them how to say it, all they'll do is mimic you. You want the performance to come from an authentic and emotional place within the actor.

Every writer hears a line a certain way in their head when they write it. As the director, you have to let that go. You have to be open to a fresh approach. If that actor can do the line as you imagined it and still be believable, then great. But prepare to be surprised and be flexible enough to be okay with that. Most voice-over actors use headphones, but a few prefer to avoid them. They'd rather not hear their own voice in their heads. For some actors, hearing their own voice as they perform can be a problem. When you hear radio broadcasters with that deep studied and clearly phony announcer voice, you are hearing someone who spends too much time listening to themselves annunciate. Sometimes simply asking an actor take off the headphones can really bump up the performance.

George Burns said, "Acting is all about honesty. If you can fake that, you've got it made." He was being funny, but facetious, because it's not hard to tell when actors are faking it. You don't want them pretending to be afraid, you want them to literally be out of their mind with terror, and it's your job to take them there. A good voice actor will ask you a lot of questions. "Who am I talking to?" "What do I want?" "What is my subtext?" Don't panic if an actor asks you that last question. As the writer, you should know the subtext better than anyone. Good dialog often has another level to it, an underlying or implicit meaning. For example, a woman could ask a man to come inside for some coffee after a date, when in reality she's asking him to come inside for a reason that has nothing to do with hot caffeinated beverages. A scene in Woody Allen's movie *Annie Hall* (United Artists, 1977) in which subtitles explain the characters' inner thoughts during an apparently innocuous conversation is an example of the subtext of a scene being made explicit. As the voice director, you want to make sure that the subtext is coming through.

13.9 HOW TO DIRECT CELEBRITIES

Celebrities come in all shapes and sizes and temperaments. Some are just regular folks who want to be treated like everybody else. They'll stay and work until the job's done and will give you no attitude at all. Others are

all attitude. It's always good to be deferential without necessarily being an ass kisser. But always be prepared to pucker up. Celebrities usually come with handlers, don't be surprised when they show up with an entourage. It's often helpful to befriend the handlers. If you get them on your side, they'll do a better job of helping you out with their meal ticket. Some celebrities are a little prickly about being directed. You need to handle celebrities with a large and cushy pair of kid gloves. Often you may not be able to request many takes. Be prepared to get what you need in one or two. A few celebrities regard video games with disdain, like they're slumming. Don't take it personally. Stay professional. The more you can get them excited about the game, the better their attitude will be. Show them videos, artwork, and the actual game if it's available as a demo. Mainly, you just want them to understand the context of the game world and the character they'll be playing. Usually, you can't expect that celebrities will return to make any corrections, so you need to be especially diligent to get it right the first time. Don't act like a fawning fan. Don't invade their personal space. Personally, I don't even think you should ask for autographs. If there's a voice director there, you may not even need to engage the celebrity at all, except perhaps to offer to answer any questions they may have about the script.

13.10 HOW TO DIRECT NON-ACTORS

Non-actors require the same kid gloves you were using for the celebrities. First of all, they'll probably be very nervous. Step in a recording booth sometime with ten people watching you through the glass. It's intimidating. So, you need to relax them. Take the pressure off. Talk to them for a bit. Show them artwork. Show them the game. Get them excited about the process. Sometimes it's helpful to direct them from inside the booth, so that you're not talking to them through the glass. This is especially true when you work with children. With young children, it's sometimes helpful to arrange the microphone very low, so they can stand or sit on the ground. Sit next to them. Have their parents in there as well. If the kids are too young to read, you're going to need to read to them and have them repeat the line back to you. With preschool kids, it's perfectly acceptable to give them line readings. It's often helpful to have non-actors turn the script over and forget about it. Have them ignore the words on the page and simply talk to them. This is a very useful technique when you're working with professional athletes. Basically, all you're doing is interviewing them. Subtly steer them toward the main ideas in the script. Get their responses

in their own words with their natural inflection. (This technique can also work well with regular voice actors who are having a problem sounding natural.) Sometimes after they've done this for a bit, they can bring that same attitude to the words on the page. You usually won't be able to do many takes with non-actors. The more takes they do, the less spontaneous they sound. Plus, they just start getting nervous, because they feel they're screwing up. You will either get what you need quickly, or you won't get it at all.

13.11 MICROPHONE TECHNIQUES

Professional voice-over actors already know how to use a microphone properly. If you're directing a novice or a non-actor, you may need to offer a little instruction. Here are a few of the more basic techniques to remember. Actors should stay between four and six inches from the mic. If they're too far away, you'll pick up too much ambient room noise, and the actor's voice will sound thin, distant, and hollow. The closer on the mic, the more intimate the sound. The exception to this is when the actor isn't talking directly to the player but to another character on the screen. If a character is supposed to be shouting to the player from a distance, they need to back off the mic and turn their head slightly before they shout. This will create the impression of calling to someone from a long way off. They should not position the mic dead center in front of their lips. It needs be slightly to one side or the other. This helps reduce breathing into the mic and the dreaded popping of the P's. (It also allows a clear view of the script.) Certain words that start with a P or a B can create a popping sound. The actors need to be conscious of this and so does the recording engineer. Some microphones will have a wind screen to help reduce popping. The actor can move their body all they want as long as their mouth stays the same distance from the mic and their head remains relatively stationary.

13.12 DIRECTING BARKS WITHOUT KILLING YOUR ACTORS

No, I'm not talking about directing the actors to bark like dogs (not that there's anything wrong with that). I'm talking about unit responses in real-time strategy games, taunts in first-person shooters, or death screams in virtually any game. Short interjections like "Attack!" "Pullback!" "Head Shot!" "Enemy spotted!" "Regroup!" "Arrgggghhh."

The simple rule for directing barks is this: save your screaming for last. Don't fry your actor's vocal cords until the end of the session. Do the

in-game dialogs or monologs before you get to the shouting. You can actually record these "barks" very quickly. Just make sure you identify each one as you proceed. Actually, the audio engineer should be putting an identifying tag on every take of every line you record. He or she will be taking notes as to favorite takes, and you should as well (or a note taker you hire for just that purpose). This will prevent having to listen through every single take from every single session again. You'll be able to quickly play everyone's favorite takes and then make a decision.

13.13 EDITING AND POSTPRODUCTION

Once the recording is finished, the job isn't done. Editing and postproduction are required. Writers are rarely present for this part of the process, though I believe they can contribute quite a bit. All the best dialog takes have to be chosen and edited for insertion into the game. Often, two or three different takes can be combined to create the best take of all. The writer should be there to double-check everything and make sure no words or dialog is dropped or missing. When you're dealing with thousands and thousands of recorded lines, it's very easy for something to be lost. If the character is a machine or some fantastical creature, sometimes dialog needs to be processed with a special effect. The writer can help determine if this effect adds to the performance or fits within the overall tone. It's often said in Hollywood that a movie is written three times: once when the writer creates the pages, once when the directors and actors collaborate to create the scenes, and a third time, by the editor, when he cuts it all together.

13.14 ACTING 101

Since this is just one chapter, I'm not about to get into a detailed description of all the schools of acting. But the more you know, the better you'll be able to communicate with actors. If you really want to direct voice-over, it's important to learn something about acting. I advise every would-be voice-over director to read books on the various schools of thought and take acting classes. Here are some recommended books on the subject written by some noted teachers.

- *Acting: The First Six Lessons* by Richard Boleslavsky (Martino Fine Books, 1899).
- *Respect for Acting* by Uta Hagen (Wiley Publishing, 1973).
- *An Actor Prepares* by Constantin Stanislavski (Theatre Arts, 1936).

- *Sanford Meisner on Acting* by Sanford Meisner, Dennis Longwell, and Sydney Pollack.
- *Audition: Everything an Actor Needs to Know to Get the Part* by Michael Shurtleff.

One reason it's helpful to learn about acting and directing is so that you can effectively communicate with your voice-over talent. You need to speak their language. There are words and directions specific to acting; a shorthand that facilitates the directing process. There is also jargon specific to recording studios and directing voice actors. The website www.voices.com/blog/glossary-of-voice-over-terms/ has a list of voice-over terms that would be helpful for a novice to look over. It'll help with directing the talent as well as communicating with the audio engineer.

13.15 CONCLUSION

There's an important place for you as the writer in the recording studio. Whether you are directing or assisting a voice director, your job is to be the guardian of the truth, the tone, and the story. To hear your words finally come alive can be inspiring and exciting (and sometimes horrifying). It's the moment of truth. You'll see what works and what doesn't, and by you being there, you'll be able to fix things on the fly. It's one of the more gratifying and terrifying parts of the writing process. And since it's all part of the process, the writer belongs there as much as anyone else. I'll close with a quote from Stanislavski. "In the creative process there is the father, the author of the play; the mother, the actor pregnant with the part; and the child, the role to be born."

13.16 EXERCISES

1. Pick two or three characters from a book, a movie, or a game, and create casting specs that will explain the characters to actors auditioning for the part. You'll need to include basics like sex, age, and accent as well as specifics such as point of view and personality. It should be no longer than five sentences.

2. Find a game (or movie or animated film) that you believe has bad voice acting. Pick out a particularly egregious character, and write down directions you feel would help the actor adjust their performance. Be concrete and specific. Find the language and those metaphors that

will illustrate what you're looking for and get your point across. This is exactly what you need to do when you're in the studio.

3. Take one of the script samples in the appendices, and create a break-down for a voice-over recording session. List all the characters in the script. Then list the number of actors you'll need to play those characters. (Remember that SAG/AFTRA actors can play up to three characters for the same fee.) Figure out how many lines each character has, and create a rough recording schedule.

4. Bonus: Go to www.voices.com and find actors for the roles in Exercise 3. (You'll need to pick actors who can play multiple parts.) Select House Reels, click on an agency, and listen to voice-over demos. Make a list of actors you feel would be perfect to play those particular characters.

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CHAPTER 14

Writing for Existing Licenses

Heidi McDonald

Independent Contractor

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Game writers are often hired to work on an intellectual property (IP) that already exists, whether that is a popular film or television franchise that is being converted into a game (like the *Marvel Universe*), or a long-standing game franchise you are writing new material for (like *Call of Duty* or *The Elder Scrolls*). This kind of writing can differ from cases where you are writing for a completely new, original IP, and this chapter aims to help you understand and prepare for those differences. Writing with a license can be both daunting and exciting at once.

14.1 CANON OR NON-CANON

One of the things you will need to establish right away with your lead is whether your work will be in canon or non-canon. If the content you produce will be fully incorporated into the franchise and made part of

its standing lore going forward, that is called being "in canon." In this case, there will usually be more levels of approval and continuity checking involved for your content both within the company employing you and with the company who owns the IP, and more rewrites will likely be expected. Know this going in, and don't take it personally. Loremasters (also sometimes called IP Representative, Story Editor or Lead Narrative Contact) are to games as continuity people are to films and television (although most Loremasters wouldn't leave a Starbucks coffee cup on the table in front of Khaleesi during *Game of Thrones*). It is their job to know whether something fits, or does not fit, within the canon. While some writers can choose to view a loremaster as intrusive or annoying, it's far more helpful to use that person as a resource when immersing yourself into the IP.

The guardians of a major franchise work hard to make sure that all their products are consistent across the board, so that a character is presented similarly across games, shows, movies, etc. and consumers generally know what to expect. Users know that if they watch a *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie, Captain Jack Sparrow will talk and act similarly in the game and in the books. Conversely, Captain America wouldn't suddenly be sarcastic or change alignments from lawful good to neutral without that affecting everything else about him in all other media. JK Rowling decides, years after the *Harry Potter* books and movies are out, that Dumbledore is gay. Then Dumbledore is gay. She owns the IP and decides what is and is not in canon. In-canon requirements will be stricter about how your characters are to look and speak, as well as rules about things they can and cannot do. What's rewarding about writing things that are in canon is that while there are more rules to obey, you are adding to a vast array of lore for that franchise, and your work can be referred to and built upon in future works. You will have affected the overall life of the IP in some way.

If your content will occupy a space parallel to that franchise's lore, it is considered "non-canon." You will still likely have approvals and guidelines, but there may be less of it (for instance, there might not be a loremaster, or the IP owner may not be as deeply involved), and what's good about this is you may have slightly more freedom to think outside of the box. You should know that if your work is noncanon, it will not be recognized as part of the ongoing lore for that franchise but will exist outside of that. A character you invent will not show up in other products in the franchise, for instance. You might invent new types of droids for your *Star Wars* game, but those droids won't be seen in any other *Star Wars* property

or incorporated in other products going forward as something that now exists in the *Star Wars* universe. This does not mean that you can't create stories that are enjoyable and memorable, and you should do your level best to deliver that!

14.2 MUST YOU BE A FAN?

It will honestly help you to have some preknowledge of, or even be a fan of, the license you will be writing with. If you aren't very familiar, have no fear! This will not exclude you from being able to write well for this IP. We are primarily storytellers who focus on our craft. It is said that a good salesperson would be able to sell ice in Alaska. Similarly, a good writer should be able to write competently on any topic they're given, provided they are willing to put in the work to learn about it.

There is a difference between writing fan fiction and writing professionally for that IP. When you write a fan fiction, typically you are completely in charge of the purpose, the story, and everything about it…and often, characters in a fan fiction can get away with doing things in fan stories that would never pass muster with the holder of the original IP (note the number of sex fantasy, or slash, stories that exist on a site like fanfiction.net). This is not to say that having written fan fiction with a specific set of characters might not serve as helpful when professionally writing with those same characters…it's practice, anticipating and exploring who the characters are and inhabiting each of them for a bit. Practicing your craft is always a good thing. However, recognize that as a professional, you will have to observe established conventions for the characters. If a character in an IP is gay, you're not going to be able to write them as being straight if their being gay is canonically a part of who that character is. Fan fiction allows you to bend that world and its characters to your own will. Writing professionally for that IP requires you to leave that expectation at the door, adhere to guidelines, and accept guidance.

When the television show *Lost* ended in 2010, I was furious. I didn't care for the ending at all, because it took the story in a religious direction and I am not religious. I was so upset by the way things had been resolved that I decided to write my own ending and post it for my friends to read. (I didn't start petitions demanding that the ending be reshot or harass the people who wrote it.) The exercise of writing things happening in the way I would have preferred to see them happen was pretty soul-cleansing, but in no way would this work influence the actual show. It was something I did for my own enjoyment, which I chose to share with a group of others

who I thought might also enjoy it. Was it good? I like to think so. Some fan fiction can be wonderful to read. This does not mean that what happens in my fan story actually now exists in the canon of *Lost* for everyone (mainly because I don't own the world or its characters). If I then went to work on a *Lost* game, after having written my alternate ending, I would have to abide by the ending I didn't like because it is canon. I do feel as though I would be helped by having practiced using familiar characters and writing dialog in their voices.

If you are not as familiar with the IP, it is easy and important to immerse yourself. Watch the movies, read the books, and play the previous games. Ask your lead for resource materials, as usually there is some combination of a content bible or a document that dictates character voice and personality for existing characters. If you're dealing with a very old franchise, the sheer amount of existing material can feel overwhelming. Decide what is most important for you to know and pursue only those things at first. Don't waste your time learning every Marvel villain's costume variations throughout the years (that is the loremaster's job)…but do learn about the four or five villains you may need to write with as far as who they are, what their motivations are, and what led them to become a villain. Do keep a document with a list of questions that arise as you learn about the IP; you will have questions, and it's important to get them answered by a loremaster, a lead, or even by a Google search. This will save you time in the long run and help you understand the universe a bit better.

14.3 EXPECT CHANGE

Especially if you are writing for an IP that is releasing other media content simultaneously to the content you are producing for a game, you will need to expect frequent and sometimes drastic changes being requested of you. You may suddenly need to delete all mention of a certain planet, because the television producers have plans for that planet later in this current season that you won't be told about. You may write an entire game and then be told you need to change villains. You might not even be told why. Perhaps you include a character for which the actor does not give permission to use their likeness, so then the character must be never pictured, only mentioned—or deleted entirely from your game. There are tons of reasons driving change requests that can have absolutely nothing to do with you or what you've written.

Remember that if the call comes down from the IP holder that you need to change something, it does not necessarily mean that what you have

written is bad. It may merely mean that what you've written has conflicted with other plans currently in motion for the franchise, which need to be prioritized, or that there's some decision that's been made in canon that you are not aware of yet (and may not be told about). The better you can cheerfully roll with these types of changes, the higher the likelihood that you will be thought of as easy to work with, and the better your chances of getting your contract renewed or getting a positive reference. There will also be a better chance of your material being used in the future of the franchise, because if you're easy to work with, it's more likely that your work will fit in with other material and continue to have a long life, picked up by other writers in the future.

14.4 KEEPING IT NEW AND INTERESTING

License holders of popular IP's usually have very clearly defined parameters regarding how their characters can be visually displayed or otherwise represented in text, art, or audio. For example, in the *Star Wars* universe, Wookies can never speak English. Disney usually exacts the right of approval on all aspects of their characters' use, from speech patterns, to color palettes and wardrobe, to character behavior. I once worked at a studio that was developing a project with Tinker Bell, a character from the Disney-animated movie *Peter Pan*. Before Tink could be placed in the game, the art had to be approved by Disney, and the exact RGB settings used for the colors of Tink's skin, eyes, hair, and clothing were checked against a chart to make sure they were consistent with the established guidelines. Her eyes needed to be a specific shape and proportional size, and her clothing had to look a specific way before the art was able to be used in the game. There were other guidelines about the way she was supposed to move and the visual effects that accompanied her movement. Sometimes you will be provided with guidelines as you begin, with varying levels of restriction. Other times, depending on the franchise and the license holder, these guidelines will emerge during the iterative process.

While you may be bound to differing degrees as far as what you can and can't do with characters, take heart. As a writer, what you get to explore are important themes, conflicts, and questions, using these established characters and seeing how these are interpreted within that universe. Themes are ideas that repeat within a work of art or literature. Think about themes in terms of the universal human experience, and go from there. Take a concept such as motherhood. It's universal.

Every human who is biologically alive has had a mother, whether they know that mother or not. Some people will never experience motherhood even though they want to, or maybe they won't want to; some experience motherhood biologically but not emotionally, or vice versa; relationships with people's mothers can be strained, complicated, or non-existent. But everyone has had a mother because it's a biological human fact. Will you explore some aspect of motherhood in your work, or will you change something about the nature of motherhood in order to ask questions about what it means?

San Diego State University developed a list of universal themes, which they decided were in some way relatable to every human being's experience. This includes things like peace, courage, survival, coming of age, beauty, peer pressure, and others.

Jim Curry and John Samara, from the Texas Association for the Gifted and Talented, took these universal themes a step further in their writing curriculum. They posited that each universal theme, when explored, can result in "revelations that are stated as generalizations." For instance, taking the concept of generalizations from Curry and Samara and applying it forward to a theme I come up with might look like this:

- Theme: Slavery
  - Generalizations:
    - Slavery is inherently immoral.
    - Slavery represents an uneven power dynamic.
    - Slavery allows one group to profit or benefit at the expense of another group.
    - Slavery is the opposite of freedom.
    - Some people who engage in slavery harbor the idea that treating slaves kindly and with respect makes slavery okay (it doesn't).

These generalizations might lead me to ask questions about how slavery presents in the world that I am writing about.

- Does slavery exist there, in what forms?
- Is it considered acceptable, and by whom?

- How to the people in power benefit, and what are the types of expense incurred by the slaves?
- Is there a movement among slaves to resist or end their slavery, or do they accept it, and for what tangible reasons?

Taking yourself through a process like this may help you to find compelling topics to write about and interesting questions to explore, in the world that you're adding to.

An exercise that may be helpful is to make your own list of universal themes and come up with a list of generalizations for each one, as above, and then think about the generalizations in terms of the license you are writing for. What would this look like, expressed in this universe, with these characters? Will you seek to uphold the generalizations or disrupt them? How?

Another great source for your new material can be current events and the issues presenting in society's current state of affairs. Things like civil rights, the question of when does a life begin, the question of how leadership can and should be chosen, themes of equality and capitalism versus other frameworks of society, the role of religion in both positive and negative extremes—these are things that have been written about for decades in science fiction. Issues are explored using aliens and other planets, or futuristic versions of Earth. This can make your work relevant to the time you are living in, and it may resonate well.

Think about stories you have really enjoyed. What were those themes? What questions did they undertake? For example, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* dealt with these themes, among others:

- Resilience
- Resourcefulness
- Adventure
- The role of trust and friendship in a romance
- Good versus evil
- Getting a relic before an enemy does
- What motivates people to explore?
- Respect or disrespect for foreign cultures and how that plays out
- The importance of teamwork

Writing a story using one of these themes does not necessarily mean you are ripping off *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. If you think about themes in works you respect, do some solid thinking about how these things manifested in the world of *Raiders*, and how it will need to manifest in the world you are writing about. It's okay to be inspired by great material and to borrow *themes* from it; it is *not* okay to borrow direct story beats or plot lines…unless that material is in the public domain, and even in that case, you should seek approval before trying that. Trust your ability to be original, and tell your own story instead of copying so faithfully from somewhere else.

In independent IP's that you might write with, if you discover that another game did something similar, then there is automatic pressure to produce something very different from what already exists in the landscape. However, if you're dealing with a franchise and you find that "this idea or question was already dealt with in an episode in 1966," this is not a source of discouragement, but *a gift*. It means you have precedent and *can use it*. You even have the ability to use that original material as a throwback to existing lore. What twists will you put on the former, and to what end? There is a lot one can do with revisiting a planet or a relationship between characters that appeared long ago, which has more story there to tell.

14.5 NAVIGATING BIG CHANGES AND DIFFERENT AUDIENCES

Historically, there have been moments with popular IP's when a major change or update has happened, such as the new *Battlestar Galactica* television series writing the Starbuck character as female when he used to be male in the 1970s original show, or the 13th version of *Doctor Who* being a female instead of male for the first time in its over 50-year history. These kinds of changes can be daunting for writers but also present a great opportunity to do something historic and enduring with the franchise. Many times, changes like this are handed down from the powers that be, for you to implement. Other times, you might think that it's a good idea to update characters for a new audience; if it's a change that's your own idea, you will more than likely need to make it with the approval of your lead and/or the licensor who owns the IP.

In those cases, make sure you learn what fans really love about the franchise and characters, and endeavor to stay true to those things. Do they really care that the character is male? Or do they care that they are

rebellious, irreverent, heroes? Those kinds of changes can be really risky, but sometimes they pay off big time as you update a franchise for a new audience. This is one way to approach directives like "take this all-male, white cast in this franchise, but make sure there's a diverse group."

The best way to write a character very different from yourself is to get input from someone within that group. My first game project was a studio's original IP for which the expected audience was 11- to 14-year-old black children. As a middle-aged white woman, I recognized that I am the furthest thing away from that audience and didn't want the dialog to be patronizing or offensive coming from me to them. What I did was write the broad story beats on index cards and go to an afterschool program our team was partnering with for playtests. I read out the story beats, and the kids acted them out. It was fun for them to do because they enjoyed the roleplaying and helping with something as cool as a video game. It was helpful for me as the writer on the project because I was able to glean speech patterns and phraseology for the characters that would make the material more relatable to that audience. If you're writing a romance between characters who have different sexual orientations than you do, run it past someone of that sexual orientation to make sure you are being authentic and respectful.

Diversity consultants can be a huge help in situations like this, and they should be paid for their time, whether that's buying pizzas and drinks for the kids at the afterschool center, giving a friend a gift card for their help, or seeing if the company will directly compensate them as consultants. Using a diversity consultant is only half of what's important, however. It is important to take their advice and apply it to the material. There's a difference between working with a diversity consultant so that you can say you hired one, versus actually listening to them and iterating on your work based on their advice. Listening will make your work better, and the audience will appreciate it more.

14.6 FANDOM CUTS BOTH WAYS

Fans of an established franchise are passionate people. This is great because it assures the longevity of the IP, but it can also make writing with an IP daunting. They have certain expectations that they expect to be met, and they want to see that writers are taking good care of the people and places they have grown to love. This is a complicated balance…fan service, and creativity. Narrative Designer James Pianka once said, "Your responsibility is to give them both what they expect and what they do not expect."

When writing for a franchise with a passionate fandom, your work has often been made a lot easier due to the diligence of passionate fans. You no longer need to look up every race of aliens ever encountered in the 50+ years of *Star Trek*, or every planet ever mentioned in *Doctor Who*, or every spell ever used in *Harry Potter*…there are Wiki's for this online. Bookmark these, and use them! The amount of research time it would take to assemble this stuff yourself is daunting, and some passionate folks have done that part for you, simply because they love this world and its characters. Remember to thank them in the acknowledgments.

Sometimes fans are not particularly kind when consuming your work, whether that's because it doesn't meet their expectations of "what was supposed to happen" or simply because they don't have any control over the direction of the work. (Again, like how I felt about the ending of *Lost*.) You may wish to insulate yourself from reviews because it can be disheartening. Don't think first about "will the fans get angry?" Think first about "am I doing this world, and these characters, justice to my level best?" For some fans, your best will never be good enough…so you can't let yourself get bogged down in that thinking. Your *primary* duty is to the world, to the characters, to the story. If you have the ability to throw fans a fanservice bone here or there, and it makes sense to do, then do it (but *only* when it makes sense!). If you are being harassed by a fan because of your work on a franchise (which unfortunately can happen), tell your employer and see what their advice is. Also, take steps to protect your online information and identity. In extreme cases where there are credible threats, you will need to work with your employer and also the authorities. Hopefully, this will not happen, but it would be dishonest in such a chapter not to mention that toxic fandom does exist, and you should be aware of what it looks like and what to do about it.

14.7 CONCLUSION

Writing for licenses comes down to some basic responsibilities and opportunities.

- Honor your deadlines and agreements.
- Know what role your content plays in the overall scheme of the franchise before you start.
- Make changes as requested, gracefully and with a professional attitude.

- Educate yourself about the franchise, and do ask questions when you have those.
- Remember that writing fanfiction and writing professionally for a franchise are different.
- The loremaster is your friend. Pay attention to the rules of the franchise.
- Use universal themes, modern societal issues, and media you like as inspiration.
- Updating an older franchise with more diverse characters should happen in partnership with the IP holder and with an eye toward the spirit of the original work.
- Include your audience, or diversity consultants, when writing unfamiliar characters or for unfamiliar audiences. Pay and thank those people for their time.
- Fan-created information caches can help a lot but be aware of toxic fandom.
- Have *fun*!

This chapter will have prepared you to write for any existing IP. Again, this can be a lot of fun, and writing on a well-known IP can go a long way toward establishing your portfolio and your credibility as a game writer.

14.8 EXERCISES

1. Choose an existing game using well-known characters and write a side quest for that game. Match the tone, style, and game systems in the game. Include all dialog and in-game text such as quest logs or story journals necessary for that game.
2. Find an old movie, TV show, novel, or comic without a current game, and write a pitch for how you would update that IP for a modern audience to enjoy in a video game format. Research what fans of the IP would expect to see in the game, and address those in the treatment. Highlight ways in which the stories would have to change to work for a modern game.

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CHAPTER 15

Writing for New IP

Rhianna Pratchett

Independent Contractor

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15.1 THE GAME WRITER AND NEW IP CREATION

New intellectual properties (IPs) in the game industry have become very much of a double-edged sword. They are eminently desirable from a player's perspective and to an industry press that often rails against sequelitis.

But if new IPs do overcome the struggle to be born, and wobble, Bambi-legged, onto the market, they are often crushed by lack of support from the press and consumers who demanded them in the first place. While the AAA publishing climate still remains relatively risk averse, the indie development scene has the opposite problem, as distribution platforms such as Steam are becoming rapidly oversaturated to the point where it becomes hard to both stand out and sell.

The chances of succeeding in either the AAA market or the indie scene with new IPs has always been incredibly slim. Steve Allison, then Midway's Chief Marketing Officer (not to mention their Senior Vice President), claimed that "93 percent of new IPs fail in the marketplace" in a 2007 interview with N'ai Croal for *Newsweek*'s *Level Up* blog.[1] "While the 90-plus review scores and armfuls of awards create the perception that titles like *Psychonauts, Shadow of the Colossus, Okami* and other great pieces of work were big successes... they were big financial disappointments and money losers. The truth is that there is no correlation between review scores and commercial success." What Allison says still rings true now. Even if you are greeted with open arms, the chances of an IP making it to financial success, and more importantly (as far as publishers are concerned) making it from IP to franchise, are incredibly slim.

However, there is a bright side for writer and other narrative professionals in all this, as successes in both arenas are proving that narrative, world building, and strong characterization are pivotal in increasing your chance to survive and thrive. When Crystal Dynamics and Square Enix rebooted *Tomb Raider* in 2013, they focused on a younger, more inexperienced Lara and her journey to become the titular *Tomb Raider.* This focus on characterization (which I was lucky enough to be a part of) helped the game become the fastest selling title in the franchise's history. It went to spawn two more sequels, new *Tomb Raider* comics with *Dark Horse*, and became the basis for a new movie franchise. Other narrative success stories in the AAA arena include the *Bioshock* titles, *The God of War*, *Uncharted* and *Assassin's Creed* franchises, *The Last of Us*, *Horizon Zero Dawn*, *Life is Strange*, and *Dishonored.*

In the indie space Stoic, developers of the *Banner Saga* trilogy have often attributed their success to their strong narrative, which has kept players

[1] *Newsweek*'s *Level Up* Blog, 2007, quoted in Chris Faylor, *Shack News*, "Midway's Allison: 93% of New IPs Fail, Reviews Don't Matter," May 9, 2007, https://www.shacknews.com/article/46874/midways-allison-93-of-new.

invested throughout. “When you have the sequel conversation with triple-A games, it’s always, ‘Wait till you see these updated graphics,’” says Steve Escalante, the founder of Versus Evil, the publisher of the trilogy. “That’s the case even with Dark Souls. From 1 to 3, there’s a visual conversation there. Banner Saga paved the way for this unique visual style in this space, but it’s this extension of this amazing story, as opposed to doing it bigger, badder or better. That’s our sequel conversation.” Alongside the Banner Saga, other indie narrative success stories have included *80 Days*, *Thomas Was Alone*, *Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice*, *The Walking Dead*, *Gone Home*, *The Stanley Parable*, *What Remains of Edith Finch*, and *Firewatch*.

The need for coherent worlds and, just as importantly in an industry that loves its icons, magazine covers, and front-page stories, the need for strong characters (that are actually characters with character rather than just pretty avatars) are more important than ever. So although new IPs still struggle in the marketplace, game writers are well placed to increase the odds of success. We are needed now more than ever as narrative doulas for the IPs of the future (Figure 15.1).

Okay, let’s get down to the nitty gritty. As writers, we all want to contribute as much as we can to the narrative development of a new IP. Unfortunately, the point at which you’re brought on board can have a big impact on how much you can bring to the party. While sadly this factor is often in the hands of your employers, here’s a guide on what to expect and how to make the most of it.

FIGURE 15.1 Rock giants and dwarves—all in a day’s work for the Minions in the world of *Overlord*.

15.2 THE STARTING LINE—IN-HOUSE

So, a writer in on the ground floor, eh? Can't get much earlier on than that. Oh, the bliss! Get ten writers in a room, and although they might differ on everything from story implementation to interactivity versus cutscene to character development, the one thing they'll agree on is that the sooner a writer is brought on board, the better. If you are an in-house writer (and although nonindustry-wide by any means these are becoming more common), then you're probably used to being there at the start, ideally taking an active role in concept meetings, brainstorming story and character ideas, and liaising with the other teams on a regular basis. Lucky you! This is an ideal situation to be in, as long as the studio you're with values your contribution and ideas. And the fact they've employed a full-time, staff writer (or team of writers in the case of companies like BioWare, Obsidian or Ubisoft) in the first place is a pretty good indication!

15.3 THE STARTING LINE—FREELANCE

Freelance writers, on the other hand, won't be quite so accustomed to this luxury. This is mainly because a depressingly large amount of freelance game writing is still comprised of projects that fall into the we-didn't-think-we-needed-a-writer-but-now-we-do-and-we-have-no-budget-left-and-six-months-until-we-ship category. If, as a freelance writer, you find yourself being included in original IP creation at the start of a project, it's usually because (1) the game in question is part of a would-be franchise that you've previously worked on in some capacity (i.e., a staff-to-freelance gig, freelance-to-freelance, or work within the same development studio or publisher) or (2) the right people have realized they need a writer at the right time and actually found, through random googling, an agency (although these are still few and far between for game writers) or, merely through positive word-of-mouth, you. Either way, it's still a fantastic opportunity to help shape a game world, get involved in narrative design, and generally prove that writers, even freelance ones, can be a valuable addition to a game project in its early stages.

In fact, many teams are switching toward a mixture of both in-house and external writers and narrative designers. This is because while in-house writers can be there on-site and interact with the rest of the team, the office environment is not particular contusive to a calming working

space. Off-site writers have the luxury of not having to worry about endless meetings, questions, or office politics and can focus on the work itself.

15.4 THE GOLDEN WINDOW

It can often be the case that developers who know they are going to need a freelance writer will choose to bring them onto a project during what I call the golden window phase. This is a period that usually falls somewhere between story preproduction and first-draft script. In this window, certain elements of the game world will already have been decided—certainly the core gameplay, and often many of the environments, levels, and even some of the characters (at least visually). Yet in many cases, these elements are not joined together to form a coherent story or a complete world. It's rather like a half-completed jigsaw puzzle. In this situation, the writer will be expected to work within the given boundaries and often retrofit a story around what has already been established.

Despite sounding quite restrictive, these boundaries can actually allow for a lot of creativity and often filter into the various facets of IP itself—especially elements that are likely to spill over into possible sequels and downloadable and expansion content (something a new IP writer always has to keep in mind). In short, this is where a freelance or possibly a short-term in-house contractor can still make a real and lasting difference. The following are a few things to keep in mind to make the most of your golden window.

- Get to know the team, particularly the level designers. You will need to work with them quite closely to get the most fluid and well-executed level dialog. If your employers aren't encouraging this, then gently suggest it.
- Make sure you focus a lot of time on getting together a strong story doc and world vision. This will not only help you when you come to write the nuts and bolts dialog but also be informative for everyone else, from production to design to marketing.
- Become familiar with every one of your characters before you even write a line for them. Profile your characters—their journeys, their backgrounds, even the way you imagine them walking and talking. Most importantly, think about how elements of their character can further the gameplay and story themes.

- Focus on looking at the different ways that narrative can be embedded in the world, from interactive and noninteractive cutscenes right through to ambient and level dialog. Also, think about how visual aspects of the world might further the story—newspapers, letters, billboards, TV spots, radio/TV broadcasts, etc.
- Make sure your employers are aware of your range of skills. If you have experience with localization prep, casting, audio direction, manual writing, marketing, or writing advertorial copy, then these can all be utilized to strengthen the narrative production.

15.5 PARACHUTED IN

We're not just writers when it comes to games. We're narrative paramedics, parachuting in with our magic word bandages to patch up an ailing story. Outside of the golden window, there's no guarantee just how much influence a writer will be able to have on a new IP. At best, you might get a couple of months in which to polish a game's story and dialog, possibly sew up a few plot holes, and if you're lucky, turn no-necked space marines or buxom, sword-wielding wenches into actual characters. At worst, you'll have a couple of weeks to merely polish up the dialog. In either case, you can usually still do some good with honest, diplomatic, and constructive feedback. Most developers/publishers will listen, but you still get the occasional case where they just want you to tick off the story they've already written, rather than actually put your writer's skills to good use. My personal motto used to be that of Commander Peter Quincy Taggart in the very fine *Galaxy Quest* (Dreamworks, 1999), "Never give up, never surrender," but now, after more than a few head bangs against walls, it's more like "Pick your battles!"

You should also be aware that many writers do hike up their rates for short-notice, short-running gigs, as the stress and turnover rates are greatly increased. This is up to the individual writer to decide, based on a client-by-client basis.

15.6 OVERVIEW: THE ROLE

Whether you're in-house or freelance, the tasks that await the game writer when working on a new IP will be more or less the same. Where it differs from other forms of game writing is that you don't just have the challenge of building the narrative world but also help create the bricks you're going to use. It's a task that is as much about narrative story design as it is about

dialog creation, namely defining how and where narrative is dispersed throughout the story, as well as the content of that narrative. These days this role is sometimes fulfilled by specific narrative designers, but these duties can often fall to the writer as well.

More often than not, there will be ideas for the central gameplay already in place (even for an in-house writer), and the writer will have to work with the design team to create the best story and characters to complement and enhance the gameplay. Although the needs of narrative and gameplay rarely run along exactly the same path, there needs to be a fusion there to avoid the feeling that the story has merely been poured on top of the gameplay like some kind of narrative custard. What you're really looking for is a narrative trifle, where the player is equally invested in both story and gameplay, and gameplay challenges and losses are reflected in story challenges and losses, bringing the player and the player character more in-line.

15.7 OVERVIEW: THE SCOPE

Perhaps more than any other kind of game writing, working on new IP requires a good working knowledge of game creation and the development cycle. While external writers with little experience with games can wing it as long as they have firm briefs and good lines of communication, anything that requires story design, preproduction, and the creation of narrative tools needs a solid understanding of how those tools should be working within the individual game world. This will usually be predominately defined by the genre, platform, and gameplay. However, genre blending is often utilized in the search for new gameplay experiences—for example, *Overlord* mixed together action-adventure, role-playing, and strategy elements.

Now more than ever, game writers need to be fully aware of the medium they're writing for. It's a tall order, especially if you didn't grow up playing games, but it can be an immensely rewarding one. The fact that you are interested in writing for games and have picked this book up suggests that you already have some interest in games and gaming. If not, then go away and do your homework.

When it comes to project lengths, then writers on a new IP will be looking at quite a meaty time commitment. Depending on the genre and importance of narrative within the game, this can be spread over anything from 6 months to several years (particularly for AAA games) for the bulk of the story work, with a couple of extra months for recording,

pickups, and ambient-dialog writing (if you're lucky). If a writer is brought onboard quite early on, then they may be only required to roughly scope out a story and characters and then return to a project further on down the line when the story needs properly embedding into the game and production schedule. Some writers do charge more for anything that falls into the IP creation/world creation workload, given that often they are helping create the building blocks of a franchise, rather than just a standalone game. It's certainly worth both writers and developers checking with the Writers Guild of America or Writers' Guild of Great Britain (both of which represent games writers) to see just what the current rates are for early-stage narrative work. However, it usually falls to the individual writer and their employer to define exactly where early-stage IP creation begins and ends.

New IPs fall into two rough categories: complete, standalone, original games such as *Horizon Zero Dawn*, *Overlord*, *Psychonauts*, and *Heavenly Sword* and games related to an existing (or upcoming) IP particularly movie-tie games such as *Chronicles of Riddick*, *Marvel's Avengers*, and *Spider Man*, TV series (*South Park: The Stick of Truth*), comic (*The Darkness*, *Rogue Trooper*), or old game license revamped (*World of Warcraft*, *Tomb Raider*).

15.8 STANDALONE IPS

A new, standalone IP isn't any cast-iron guarantee of gameplay innovation, although this is the place you're most likely to find it. From a writer's point of view, much of the project will be geared toward delivering on the gameplay experience, as should be the case. The story and narrative can sometimes take a back seat until the gameplay is considered a solid and enjoyable experience. While this can be frustrating for a writer at first, it's ultimately for the best. You're unlikely to be able to cram a great story into a title with poor gameplay and stop the game from the inevitable press and player pounding, but solid gameplay gives the writer a great basis from which to build an immersive narrative world and avoid the aforementioned narrative custard effect. For the most part, we are writing for games; games aren't gameplaying our stories. Needs of the gameplay do need to come first, especially if a new, standalone IP is to have longevity in the marketplace. But, as established earlier, strong narrative is also important for investing players and keeping them coming back for more.

Creating new worlds and compelling characters (covered in more depth later) are incredibly important with standalone IPs precisely because they

do help bolster a single game into a burgeoning franchise. If you are given free, or at least freer, rein to create your own characters and world structure, then pretty much every narrative and character creation technique is at your disposal, as long as it conforms with those old game-narrative bugbears of pacing, gameplay, and memory requirements. Whatever you create, keep one eye firmly on the extension of your world (the sequel, the downloadable content, the ports, the comics, the animation, even the movie) because you can be damn sure that your publisher will have. And being a few creative steps ahead always helps come contract renewal time.

15.9 EXISTING FRANCHISE IPS

New game IPs attached to another franchise really aren't the kiss of death that they used to be. As the rest of the entertainment world becomes a little more savvy about games and game development, there's thankfully less pressure to turn out a fourth rate game, and hope the name alone will sell it. From a writer's perspective, franchise IP can often come with its own restrictions piled on top of the existing game-related ones. This is especially true if the game is tied to an upcoming movie, which may well dictate not only the content but also the release date. It is also likely that any script or story work will have to be passed through the franchise holder for signing off (such as J.K. Rowling, in the case of the *Harry Potter* games).

There's also the added benefit (or curse, depending on your viewpoint) that as far as characters and world go, a lot of the work has already been done for you. Of course, that doesn't mean the end of creativity for the writer/story designer. Even realizing the same story in an interactive world is a whole different ball game. However, allowing a game to cover an element of the franchise world that isn't necessarily covered in, say, an upcoming movie is starting to become quite popular. Just look at the success Starbreeze had with *The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay*, which ran as a prequel to the movie *Pitch Black*, which was released alongside the original movie's sequel, *The Chronicles of Riddick*. Arguably, the game was much better received than the movie. Starbreeze also went on to follow this up with another franchise tie-in, *The Darkness* (originally a Top Cow comic), which also received the twin golden kisses of critical and sales success.

15.10 BUILDING NARRATIVE WORLDS

The narrative elements of a game have their own preproduction phase, too. This is unlikely to run alongside the rest of the game's preproduction phase, unless the studio has a dedicated narrative team as part of their

day-to-day staff. In the case of *Heavenly Sword*, there was actually a first draft script in place when I came onboard, which had been written by Tameem Antoniades, the game's Creative Director. The story, or at least the spine of it, had been conceived before the gameplay, and levels had been completely nailed down, which almost never happens in the game industry. My role was to help flesh out the world, the characters, their relationships, backstories, and character arcs through the game, as well as doing a full, page-one rewrite on the script.

15.11 FLESH ON THE BONES

The important thing to remember when faced with creating a narrative world is that there are usually a lot of team members who will also need to be involved in this process; predominately art and design, because narrative world design is rarely just about the words. *Bioshock* and *Half-Life 2* are great examples of where the story is told as much through what you see as what you hear, demonstrating one of the greatest rules of visual narrative: "show don't tell." Unfortunately, as desirable as that is, the game industry is in the rather unfortunate position that showing can often cost just as much as, if not a lot more than, telling!

I've always found it beneficial to flesh out the world as much as possible for my own benefit as a writer, even if it never gets further than a Word document. In all likelihood, like the proverbial iceberg, the players will only see the actual tip of it in the game. Nevertheless, that narrative support structure is vital for a writer. Not only does working out things like the politics, socioeconomic makeup, power structure, industry structure, and world history actually help develop your characters and support level design and narrative, but it also provides great fodder for expanding the world further down the line. Story, character, and even gameplay can be far better supported in a world that feels real, or at the very least coherent, in its structure.

If a game has a heavy story element, then it may be part of your role to create a story bible for that world that is easily accessible by all members of the team but with its content controlled by you. This should contain information on the main story arc, character profiles, casting notes, and concept art. It should also contain information on the narrative side of the world. They could include elements such as the political makeup, gang structure or culture, prehistory, slang used, relationship networks, companies, organizations, etc. It should be the go-to guide for anyone seeking information on the story and narrative world, which will frequently include you, the writer.

15.12 THE STORY WITHOUT AND THE STORY WITHIN

One aspect of game narrative that makes it unique among entertainment forms is that it has the ability to allow players to tell the story, or at least part of it, to themselves. This is done with clever use of design, environment, and narrative markers. It is also something that any writer or story designer needs to be especially aware of when they are shaping a new IP world, as any additions along these lines will greatly increase the game's narrative strength.

Again, this works on the "show don't tell" principle. But because a player is moving around inside and shaping this narrative world, what we're talking about really is self-narration. Sometimes this can be spun out of a certain feeling elicited in the players, for example, the feeling of isolation in *Shadow of the Colossus*, the sense of loss in *Ico*, or the feeling of vulnerability in *Fatal Frame*. Sometimes, it can be in the little details in the world: the burnt-out playgrounds and sad tic-tac-toe games on the walls in *Half-Life 2*, the macabre arrangement of corpses in the Fort Frolic level of *Bioshock*, or the *Deb of Night* radio show in *Vampire: Bloodlines.*

What is really demanded of writers on new IP is to help create the world not just with text and dialog but also with vision and feel. It's a task far more akin to part director, part set builder, part writer, and part actor. Any game writer who truly loves the medium should learn to be a skilled interactive narrative designer as well—bricks, mortar, and walls, the whole shebang!

Game writing is a young enough writing discipline that there are no hard-and-fast rules yet. There is merely good, solid advice born out of success, failure, frustration, and elation. Part of the reason for this is that every game is different, in demands, expectation, and time frame. So to invoke the "show don't tell" principle, I'm going to help convey how to deal with world creation and new character creation for a new IP by showing you how I tackled it in *Overlord*. Okay, so technically, I'm showing you in words, but the game is available from all good entertainment retailers should you wish to see it yourself (end of blatant plug!).

15.13 CASE STUDY: THE WORLD OF OVERLORD

15.13.1 The Home of Evil Deeds

When I arrived aboard the good ship *Overlord* (published by Codemasters and developed by the Holland-based Triumph Studios), the game had already been in development for a year (Figure 15.2).

FIGURE 15.2 Ransacking cute villages and setting fire to halflings proved to be very popular in the *Overlord* world.

The basic story of this action-adventure title was that the player assumed the role of a newly appointed evil overlord tasked with bringing the smiting stick down hard upon the seven heroes who killed their predecessor and looted their dark tower. The gameplay premise, namely that the player would use an ever-expanding army of gremlin-like minions to do their evil (and not so evil) deeds, was already pretty solid and fun to play. Many of the levels were already in development and had been designed around the fall of the seven heroes, who had fallen from grace in the manner of the seven deadly sins. So the halfling hero (who represented greed) had eaten himself into this disgusting blob, enslaving the inhabitants of his realm to perpetual food-farming in the process. Meanwhile, the holy Paladin's trips to the local brothel and weakness for succubi had caused a city-wide plague. He, unsurprisingly, represented lust. You get the idea.

Although the game itself never shouted about it, the use of deadly sins made a nice, easy-to-grasp framework for the heroes (handy when explaining things to the press) and also bled through to the environments and the quest and level design.

The environments themselves were deliberately quite typical fantasy fare: rolling green meadows, magical forests, war-torn cities, scorching deserts, and ruined castles. And since the mood of the game was very tongue-in-cheek, the level design and sheer exuberant joy of heading up a rampaging horde of angry minions gave the world more of a dark twist, as

much in gameplay action as in looks. So the player could well find themselves setting fire to halflings, performing genocide on the elven race, battling drunken dwarves, and generally giving the good, bad, and ugly of fantasy land a good, solid thrashing.

15.14 WRITER ONBOARD

I was very lucky that *Overlord* already had a wonderfully fun sense of humor instilled in its gameplay and level design. When I started on the project, my role was really to help enhance that through the creation of a coherent story that held all the levels and the player's journey together, plus help create a cast of suitably mad, bad, and dangerous-to-know characters. From a world-creation perspective, it was about giving each domain its own unique narrative feel, its own story-within-a-story, based around the particular hero who dwelled there.

Though hardcore RPGs are less common than they used to be, the benefits of creating story webs (mini stories that link back and forth to other stories, as well as helping describe the arc of an overall story) still reverberate across the genres and are particularly important in anything that has quite a definite level-by-level, linear structure. Although in the case of Overlord, you could go back (and were, in fact, encouraged to) and revisit previous levels. This was both through the needs of the gameplay (harvesting the various colors of life force to keep your Minion horde topped up) and built into the story, such as when the player has to pursue Kahn, the Barry White soundalike warrior hero, as he rampages through several domains.

I also had to make sure that the less linear aspects of the world—for example, when the player had a choice of domains to go to next—could be reflected in a flexible storyline. In that instance, the narrative had to be constructed so it could be experienced in various orders without confusing the player. Giving each level its own feel and individual story was probably the most useful tool in achieving this. That way, the game had an encapsulated mini tale, along with nonlinear nuggets of narrative about the overall story. What makes this particularly important for new IPs is that it's all about creating a narrative world, rather than one single narrative path.

The desire to create a specific feel to the different areas was also echoed in our casting choices. The halfling domain was populated largely with both American and British rural voices, the elves became annoying American emos (a very deliberate move, since I felt that elves get far too much good press), and the more urban areas had tougher, American and

British semicity accents. Despite the fact that the Overlord world is a fantasy one, we really wanted it to feel as coherent to the players as any real-world franchise, yet still keep the fun and humor elements very much in the foreground.

Ambient and level dialog is also very important for capturing the essence of the world and, perhaps more importantly, giving the player narrative feedback on the results of their chosen path through it (just how evil they'd chosen to be). Some quests, such as the much sought-after "maiden collection" quests, were deliberately triggered as the result of the player marching around being very nasty to everyone they met. Although it's often left until last, the role of ambient dialog as a feedback mechanism, and a world-coloring tool, should not be underestimated. There's always a certain percentage of players that may skip cutscenes (the brutes!), but almost every player will hear ambient narrative (Figure 15.3).

For this very reason, it's often where dialog and story nuances have the most impact. So do not neglect your ambient dialog—it can really be an interactive writer's best friend. As mentioned earlier, we cast our NPCs very specifically for our different domains to help create this world idea and also to create a feel for the races within it. So now an *Overlord* player would go into a future *Overlord* game expecting the peasants to be affable but rather foolish, the elves to be sulky and deliberately overwrought, and

FIGURE 15.3 *Overlord* allowed Minions to wear all sorts of items, like these natty pumpkin hats.

the dwarves to be little more than angry beards on legs who'll do anything for a pint of beer and a pocket full of gold.

15.15 EXPANDING THE WORLD—OVERLORD: RAISING HELL

When we came to creating the expansion content, *Overlord: Raising Hell*, we spun out the story by introducing a hell-themed sub-domain where the previously defeated heroes and their cronies were going through perpetual punishments. The elves were being forced to watch a play about their downfall, the halfling hero was forced to eat and eat until he exploded, and the gold-obsessed dwarf king had been encased inside a golden statue. Both the narrative themes and gameplay were created with the desire to kick up the dark humor and evilness a few notches. This was in part a reaction to some player feedback on the main game, namely that they didn't think you could be quite wicked enough. The solid base we'd established in the first game made it much easier to spin off new mini stories that felt coherent and linked to the original game, rather than just being tacked on. Gnarl, the Minion Master character in the game and the player's always on-hand guide, had proved very popular with players (thanks to the vocal talents of Marc Silk), so we decided to make him play a central narrative role in the expansion. My role as writer and costory designer went very smoothly on *Raising Hell* precisely because I'd spent so long helping to flesh out the narrative parts of the world and characters in the original game. It meant I could worry less about coloring and building the narrative world and more about creating fun stories and dialog that complemented the gameplay.

15.16 IMPORTANCE OF CHARACTER

In the past, iconic game characters have been predominately defined by their looks: Mario, Sonic, Samus Aran, Gordon Freeman, etc. They haven't had any real character traits or arcs either because it was deemed unnecessary or, in the case of Mr. Freeman, they weren't even given the luxury of speech.

When it comes to singling out one area not related to gameplay that will make a new IP stand out from the rest, then it's in addressing these areas of character and character development. In every other entertainment form, characters and their experiences are vital for bringing a story to life, and games should be no exception. Obviously,

strong visuals are still important. The marketing and coverage of Heavenly Sword was certainly helped by the strong artistic look of not only Nariko, the red-haired lead character, but also the rest of the (relatively small) cast. Small casts are often a lot more fun for a writer to work with because there's much more opportunity to shape and grow them as distinct personalities. Often, games with a larger cast of characters suffer from the same character voice being split between multiple characters, even main-cast characters. If new IP characters are going to stand out and help bolster the IP and franchise, then they need to have unique and individual voices that will require time and attention from you, the writer to create and communicate to the audio/dramatic direction team.

As with any other entertainment medium, you need to love your characters, at least a little bit. Love all your characters, even the bad guys—in fact, those tend to be fairly easy to love. If you don't care about your characters, how do you expect players to?

15.17 CHARACTER CASE STUDIES: OVERLORD—MISTRESS ROSE AND MISTRESS VELVET

Rose and Velvet were NPC characters that the player encountered at various points during the game. Initially, Rose joins the player's little tower community after the completion of a mandatory quest to find a Mistress for your tower. Later on in the game, you meet Rose's younger sister Velvet and get the chance to swap sisters, each sister giving you different Minion upgrades as a possible incentive for choosing them. While the Mistresses' main role was to provide ambient feedback on the way the player has been progressing through the game, Rose and Velvet also came to play quite a significant part in the overall story—more than was originally envisaged before I came onboard. The following extras from the characters' original bios detail a little bit of insider information about the creation of these two virtual ladies.

15.17.1 Mistress Rose

- **Gender/Age**: Female, late 20s (Figure 15.4).
- **Keywords**: Reserved, sharp, diplomatic, charming at times, bossy, classy, slightly soothing voice (girl next door rather than vamp), rather cold sometimes, kindly (towards Minions), twisted Mary Poppins.

FIGURE 15.4 (a) Mistress Rose in concept-art form. Note the sensible neckline and hemline. (b) Rose in the game, ready for some organized and orderly evil action!

15.17.1.1 Rose's Background

Rose is the older sister of Mistress Velvet. Rose and Velvet are both the daughters of the Good Wizard, born to him before he was taken over by the old Overlord. While they share the same father, Rose is not so immediately inclined toward evil deeds as her sister is. She is neither completely good nor completely bad.

Rose and Velvet were raised together, but their father was somewhat of an absentee parent, always far more focused on going out adventuring, questing, and smiting evil than raising his own children. Rose ended up looking after her sister and trying to cover up Velvet's naughty childish ways until she got fed up and left home to make her own way in the world. Since then, Velvet has left home, too, and fallen in with a dark crowd. Neither of them have had much contact with each other for years.

15.17.1.2 Rose during the Game

Rose is the first of the two Mistresses that the player will encounter. She is practical and sensible, she's a great planner and strategist, and she knows how to make things run properly no matter whether they are good or evil. She dislikes sloppiness and bad management wherever it might appear.

Rose could be a great asset to either side, should she actually make the choice between good and evil once and for all, but Rose prefers to go where she sees the work, regardless of alignment. Rose acknowledges killing as a

necessity (just a necessity for other people), and if there's to be evil in the world (and Rose understands the need for balance), then it should at least be done properly.

Although Rose is attractive, she does not use that to get what she wants, as compared to the gushing and flirting of her sister Velvet. Rose does have a soft spot for the Overlord's Minions, though, and speaks about them in a much more kindly way than she ever does about the player.

15.17.1.3 Rose's Vocal Requirements

Rose has a pleasant but somewhat teacherish voice, like a slightly twisted Marry Poppins. She is quite well spoken (think Kate Winslet) although not to the extent of sounding too posh, as that is likely to be off-putting. Her tone goes slightly cutesy when she's talking about/to the Minions.

- **Example Lines to the Player**
    - Rose: "Sire, that girl that William the Paladin was going to marry. Well…she's my sister, Velvet."
    - "We don't speak. Speaking usually means she's got herself into some kind of trouble…again. Judging by this place, Velvet's in it up to her silly little neck."
- **Example Lines to Velvet**
    - Rose: "Sir William summoned an over-sexed demon, started a city-wide plague, and now he's dead. I can see why you might be emotional, but stay out of my business!"

15.17.1.4 Rose Postmortem

Rose's character was quite a hard one to voice, as we wanted to make sure that her character traits came off as amusing, rather than annoying, and that her voice was still pleasant to listen to. We had to go through a couple of voice actresses to get the right tone and performance.

Lots of players seemed to think that Rose was the "good" sister, rather than the "less evil" one. I think this is in part because players are used to thinking in quite black-and-white terms when it comes to the representation of evil in games. Rose would actually make one hell of a dictator, given half a chance. However, unless players kept Rose in their tower for the whole game, they wouldn't see her more Machiavellian

side emerging. In retrospect, I probably should have made her even more openly evil.

Rose's character was very much an attempt on my part to get away from the typical "wench" character that's so often seen in fantasy games and to create a character who was strong but still had the fun, dark spirit of the game. She came together well in the end, thanks to the vocal talents of Fay Maillardet.

15.17.2 Mistress Velvet

- **Gender/Age**: Female, mid-20s (Figure 15.5).
- **Keywords**: Naughty/flirty, sexy, seductive, a little unhinged, calculating, ruthless, charming, classy (or at least thinks she is!), decadent, selfish, spoilt, slightly snobbish.

15.17.2.1 Velvet's Background

Velvet is the younger sister of Rose. She craves attention, adulation, and wealth and doesn't care how she gets it. She was always a naughty child but was used to being protected and covered for by her Rose, since her father wasn't around very much (constantly off thwarting evil, having adventures, etc.). But when Rose left home seeking her own life away from her demanding little sister and her absentee father, Velvet spiraled downward, fell in with the wrong crowd, and became a Mistress of Evil.

FIGURE 15.5 (a) Mistress Velvet in concept-art form, working the sexy-evil look. (b) Velvet gets a bit of a wiggle on in the game.

15.17.2.2 Velvet in the Game

Velvet is very attractive and sexually alluring. This is 100% deliberate, and she knows how to manipulate men, especially the Paladin. Rather like an evil soccer player's wife.

Velvet is attracted to the monetary, esthetic, and amoral trappings of evil. When we meet her, she is the spurned about-to-be-bride of the once heroic Paladin who has given himself over to his lustful side. Even worse, his relations with the succubi at the local brothel have caused a STD-like zombie plague throughout Heaven's Peak. The wedding has been canceled, and the Paladin has locked up his ex-would-be-bride in his private bedroom, while he and his followers have somewhat dodgy parties in the main Citadel.

Rose doesn't like her sister that much, but she's still worried that she may be in serious trouble. When the player and Rose rescue Velvet, Rose remembers exactly why she doesn't get along with her sister.

Once the player kills the Paladin, Velvet will join up with the player if the player forsakes Rose. Velvet is very flirty (but with an undertone of making sure she gets what she wants) toward the player, although she doesn't like the Minions much and constantly refers to them as "pixies."

15.17.2.3 Velvet's Vocal Requirements

Velvet should sound very much like her name, namely the sultry seductress voice (think Liz Hurley in Bedazzled). This is partly for effect as much as anything else, because when she's angry, frustrated, or caught off guard (such as when she's arguing with Rose), the seductress voice drops a little, and she can sound more like a petulant, stubborn child. But she tries to maintain the act at all times because she's pretty convinced that this is what evil mistresses should sound like.

- **Example Lines to the Player**
    - Velvet (shouts from the bedroom): "I'm in heeerrre! And tell that greedy dwarf King that he can't have his wedding presents back! If I'm not going to have a wedding, I at least want presents!"
    - "Well hello…dark stranger. The rumors do not do you justice."
    - "You've brought me a gift…some little pixies? You really shouldn't have! Next time make it something shiny…and expensive! Now…let me thank you properly."

15.17.2.4 Velvet Postmortem

Velvet was deliberately meant to be the sexy, slightly goth, fantasy wench, but the difference is that she knows it. This was what I tried to build into her character, as well as her looks. She was an easier character to write than Rose but still a lot of fun, as I could offset her flirtatiousness with a more spoilt, childish side. This was expertly captured by the lovely Jonell Elliot—a former voice of Lara Croft.

Overall, the sisters made a nice pairing, and their scenes together were a lot of fun. Given more time, we would have definitely involved the Mistresses more in the general gameplay. However, in the creation of Rose and Velvet, I in-build a few narrative hooks that would allow them to have a role in possible sequel. In fact, at the end of *Overlord: Raising Hell*, it's strongly suggested that your chosen Mistress will have a very literal role in spawning future evil! This eventually came to fruition in *Overlord II*, in which Rose had a small, but important, role.

15.17.3 Rose and Velvet Narrative Character Hooks

- They had distinct personalities, voices, and ways of looking at the world, as well as very different visual looks. There's certainly no mixing Velvet and Rose up.
- Both had conflict with each other, the player (depending on who the player spurned), and other characters in the game.
- The chosen Mistress has a special bond with the player, which remains unbroken at the end of the game.
- They are both alive at the end of the game. Death, especially in video games, isn't always the end, but it's not too easy to get back from!
- They both have a strong insight into and about the gameplay—namely being evil. And there's certainly the indication that if they managed to get along and team up, they'd be a formidable force.

15.18 CONCLUSION

I've been very lucky that a lot of my early game writing and story design work was for new IPs. New IPs may be the greatest risks, but creatively they can be the biggest wins. This is really where the metal meets the meat, and it's a fertile area for writers to get involved and do some good.

There are worlds out there for you to create and populate and stories to be spun. Go forth, good writers, and be narrative gods!

15.19 EXERCISES

1. Take a game you've enjoyed, and create (in document form, unless you're feeling really creative) a new area of the game world that has a particular emphasis on narrative and storytelling. This could be to create more interest in a particular character or event, or even to cover what you see as a plot hole in the original game. Keep it small and think about narrative features such as cutscenes, interactive dialog, and combat dialog within that area.

2. Create your own backstory for an NPC character of your choice, either an existing NPC or one of your own making. Think about how the character's backstory could be folded into the game world.

CHAPTER 16

Script Doctoring

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In a perfect world, game writing follows a defined process that establishes room for creativity. The writer works with the team start to finish, provides the dialog, story, and other writing elements that the game requires, and is able to satisfy the needs of the project while still carving out a satisfying space for creative endeavor. The process flows smoothly, the schedule is reasonable, and the needed content is appropriate to both the needs of the game and the capability of the writer or writers producing it. Unfortunately, this doesn't always happen. Things go wrong, or at least go differently from the initial plan. Scope changes. Deadlines shift. The need for five thousand extra lines of dialog suddenly materializes. People roll onto and off of projects, levels get redesigned, features get added or cut, and so forth. In other words, stuff happens, and stuff happening is the main reason that game writers are sometimes called on to fill the role of script doctor. Technically, the term isn't quite accurate. After all, a writer

coming onto a project mid-development cycle may be asked to do anything from polishing up the dialog to getting involved in major reworking of the story (and, by extension, gameplay). The script is a large part of a game writer's focus under those circumstances, but it's not always all of it. Sometimes, it's not even the most important part.

16.1 WHAT IS SCRIPT DOCTORING?

Script doctoring for video games is a catch-all term for coming onto a project to assist with any and all writing-related tasks. It can be as light as polishing the dialog to make sure all the slang is appropriate, or as heavy as doing a complete story and character overhaul. It can be a couple of days of in-and-out, or it can be a commitment requiring months of work. What it is not is an entirely original task. A script doctor's work is to get a game's writing where it needs to be, and that implies that there's already a script in place to be doctored. And if there's a game in place, odds are that there are characters, levels, and suchlike, elements that pin down what a writer has to work with. Even if your mandate as a script doctor is to tear the whole story down and start again, odds are you won't be allowed to toss the main character or the game's central concept. Depending on how far along the other assets are and how close ship date is, you may even be asked to try to make a narrative out of previously existing assets, putting them into some kind of logical order. If that doesn't sound like a boundlessly creative task, that's because it isn't. It's task oriented, not necessarily art oriented, and the most important thing to focus on is making sure the game gets done.

16.2 THE BASICS

The most important thing any game script doctor can do is to figure out what they're actually there to do. Going in with a mistaken idea about their mandate, authority, or permitted scope of change is a recipe for 180-proof disaster. After all, if a new writer is being brought in, there's a good chance that they're being brought in for a particular reason. Sometimes that reason is as broad as, "The last writer didn't work out"; sometimes it's as narrow as, "We need to you take a pass on this to add some humor to a couple of the characters." But nobody randomly says, "We need to bring another writer on now," without a very good reason, and without knowing what that reason is, the script doctor is setting themselves up for immediate, spectacular failure.

16.2.1 Craft, Not Art

One of the things you have to deal with as a script doctor is recognizing that you're doing a very different job than the game writer who's on the project from the word go. You are often there to fix something, to do rewrites, or to plug holes, not to create art. And while you may perform Herculean feats of prose in the service of your project, nine times out of nine and a half, that's not going to be on a level playing field with a game that's had tight story and writing development since its very beginning. Just getting a game to "decent" from "unlistenable" might be the work of ages, but nobody outside the development team will know that, nor will they care. The players care about the end product, not what might have been, and there are no writing prizes for "best patch job." So, instead of focusing on art, script doctors need to focus on craft—plugging plot-holes, getting things done, and making sure all of the game's needs are met. This is an honorable approach to the work and has done much to make many games playable, but it's not the sort of labor that's necessarily going to be easy on the ego. That's not to say that script doctors shouldn't try to do the very best work they can, but the demands they're likely to face—lots of work, short turnaround, existing assets to be dealt with and incorporated—mean that there's a lot less wiggle room for creativity and art.

16.2.2 Scope

The first thing to find out is the scope of the work being asked for. This is both harder and more important than it sounds. It's harder, in that the people remaining on the team may not actually know what is wanted or needed. After all, many of them were probably on the team when the circumstances requiring a script doctor's attention were created. On the other hand, they may have just been brought on themselves, which means their grasp of the project may be imperfect.

16.2.2.1 Establishing scope

Without knowing how much there is to do, you can't get started. Without knowing how much work there is to do in the time available, you can't prioritize your time appropriately, and you risk spending either too much time or too little on the first deliverable you tackle. That means that the first thing you have to do is figure out what you have to do.

16.2.2.2 Find Out What the Actual Assignment Is

"Fix the writing" sounds great on paper, but in real life, it's spectacularly unhelpful in providing direction. What any script doctor actually needs to know is the answer to one simple question: What am I expected to do? Without getting a definitive answer on that question, you're going to have tremendous difficulty in going forward with the actual work of writing. So it's vital to get your actual expected deliverables mapped out and agreed upon.

16.2.2.3 Find Out the Assignment Parameters

What anyone doing script doctoring needs to know can be measured with numbers: How many lines overall? How many variants on each line (if necessary)? How many cutscenes? What's the total word count allowed? Find out parameters before you start writing, or you may end up throwing out work when you overwrite a strict guideline. That, incidentally, is the one thing you absolutely cannot afford to do: waste time on work that can't or won't be used.

16.2.2.4 Time

Knowing how much time you have is key. Knowing exactly when each chunk of what you're doing needs to be delivered is vital prioritization. When you're on a tight deadline—and script doctoring deadlines can be as tight as, "We're in the studio now, can you think of a better way to say this?"—organizing the tasks at hand by priority is an absolute must. Having a firm schedule to order your workflow around will make your life easier; not having one will make your life impossible.

16.2.2.5 Number of lines/scenes/etc.

The quantitative side of what you're doing is important, as well. Knowing how many lines/scenes/missions you have to write tells you how much time you can give to each one. Getting those numbers laid out for you by the person you'll be reporting to serve another purpose, as well; it's protection in case someone else suddenly decides to add an extra thousand lines when nobody's looking. If you have a list of deliverables, you can use it to ward off excessive, ill-thought-out, or impossible requests.

16.2.2.6 Existing Assets

By definition, a script doctor is playing with someone else's toys. Something—levels, characters, mission designs, you name it—is already in place in the game and would cost too much time or money to replace.

That means that you have to suck it up and work with it, for good or for ill. On one hand, it can be a situation where there are twenty levels built, and you get to craft a storyline putting them in order; on the other hand, it may be "Here's all our gameplay and mission design. You get to write the dialog to support it because the last writer couldn't stop complaining about the plot holes." On the bright side, finding out what's already in place that you can or have to use helps you build a structure for your work. It also answers questions about what you have to work with and potentially gives you something to match your work against, providing a useful standard.

16.2.2.7 Other Restrictions (Rating, Number of Voices, Etc.)

There are a lot of hidden restrictions on writing that you may not know about. For example, the character pipeline may be tapped, or the voice-recording budget may be stretched thin, so you might not be allowed to add any new voices or characters. The game's motion set doesn't include, say, smoking a cigarette, so you can't write a cutscene where your dastardly villain lights up and blows smoke in the captured hero's face. The publisher may have mandated a certain rating, either the United States or European, and that places definite restrictions on the sort of language you can use. Finding out what all of these secondary parameters are before you start writing helps focus your efforts, and it keeps you from being frustrated later at having to chop stuff you thought was good to go. There's nothing quite like having to go back through a 80,000-line script taking out every instance of profanity worse than the word "darn" to make you appreciate the importance of getting the boundaries of what you're doing straight before you start.

16.3 INTEGRATING WITH THE TEAM

In video games, no one works in a vacuum, and a writer called on to script doctor is no exception. And because time is generally short for a script doctor, there's precious little room for the sort of extended getting-to-know-you period that might otherwise have taken place. A script doctor needs to integrate with the team seamlessly and immediately, or they're already behind. On a basic level, that means being introduced to everyone you might be working with, getting shown the tool set you'll need to use, and otherwise finding your way around. Everything from security badges to knowing where the coffee machine is falls under this particular rubric. In a broader sense, it means getting yourself ready to work immediately. On the other hand, there are certain particulars that need to be addressed first

that aid in the larger integration of the script doctor into the team. Find a point of contact. Ideally, there should be one key point of contact for a script doctor. While it's fine to talk with other folks on the team for informational or social purposes, there really needs to be a dedicated point of contact: one person to report to, one person to give tasks, one person to funnel requests or concerns through. Otherwise, you run the risk of getting hit from all sides with requests, complaints, feedback, and ideas, none of which will help you do what you're actually there to do.

16.3.1 Set Up a Chain of Communication

This goes hand in hand with finding a point of contact. You need to establish how your docs are getting out and whom they're going to, or else your work may just fly off into the ether. You also need to know who has approvals on your work, whom you should be talking to about particular characters or features or levels, and generally establish whom you'll need to talk with and why. If there's a clear chain of communication in place, then the set-up cuts down on the number of potential surprises heading your way. It also lets you prioritize your email and other messages; the person who sounds utterly urgent and desperate may not be in a position to actually ask you to do anything. Set up a chain of command. It can't be said often enough: Game writing doesn't happen in a vacuum. Multiple people are going to be clamoring for writing deliverables, or giving them out, or commenting on them, and that's just during the normal chaos of game development. Add in the caffeinating factor of script doctoring, and you have the potential for a snarl that looks like a wad of taffy in an industrial loom. It is vital, then, to establish very clearly whom you report to and who gets to tell you what to do. It's equally important to lay out who needs to see your work and who doesn't. This isn't an attempt to hide your writing from the team, but if every single team member has final cut on the script, then the script's never getting done. Instead, it's best to solidify a relationship with a single-point person. All deliverables go out through them; all requests come in the same way. And together with them, you can figure out who needs to see each deliverable so that proper workflow is maintained. Ultimately, this comes down to two clear lists: who gets to make assignments and who gets signoff. A subset of signoff is who gets the right to edit, but once your work is approved, the editing process should be over anyway. Keeping both lists short, clear, and public saves you from distraction and saves the project from the horrors of having a writer being pulled in multiple, possibly contradictory, directions.

16.4 PRIORITIZATION

Knowing what to do first is almost as important as knowing what to do, period. Sadly, script doctoring is generally done under serious time pressure, and that means you can't agonize over and polish each line. It also means that, more than ever, some stuff is more important than others. Going the extra mile to make the bark pools twenty lines deep instead of seven is admirable, but if that means you don't get to two characters' main dialog before recording starts, you've made a bad time management decision somewhere. Instead, work out with your point of contact what your schedule should be. What gets done first, what gets cut first, and who needs what when—these are the things that you need to know.

16.4.1 What Gets Done First

What gets done first is, by necessity, most important. Odds are this is the stuff that the most other features/work schedules are hanging on, so it's that much more important to get it nailed down and handed off. This, too, is where knowing team schedules is vital. If the developer doing the cutscenes needs the scripts to block the sequences and feed the animators, object builders, etc., then you'd better get those scripts to them quickly. Conversely, if the people following them in the pipeline aren't ready, you can reprioritize.

16.4.2 What Gets Cut First

Because there are always unexpected delays, mishaps, and other catastrophes lurking in the shrubbery, you always need to figure out what can go first. This isn't a decision that you can make solo, but mapping your intentions and getting them approved means that there are fewer tears and faster reactions when the axe inevitably comes down.

16.4.3 Style

Almost without exception, shorter and cleaner is better when it comes to script doctoring. Clear and concise should be your watchwords. There isn't time for potentially confusing or ambiguous phrasings, no time for multiple loops of revision. Instead, you need to make things as clear as possible the first time to make sure there isn't a need for a second—or a third, or a fourth. (Here's a quick litmus test. If you can't say a line of dialog you write in a single breath, mark it as suspect. Not every one needs to go, but it's a handy red flag for when time is short.) This works from a logistical standpoint as well. Write shorter lines and fewer lines, and there's much

less work in the recording studio, for the sound engineers, the localization team, and so forth. Not only are you making your life easier, but you're making the lives of a lot of people down the line easier as well—not to mention the player who has to listen to the dialog over and over again.

16.5 SCRIPT DOCTORING IN THE RECORDING STUDIO

Sometimes, the writer is asked to tag along on voice shoots. This can be for a variety of reasons, ranging from providing context and character motivation to, inevitably rewriting lines on the fly. Simply put, not every line works as written. Sometimes the actor can't make it work, sometimes the rhythm's better for the written word than the spoken, and sometimes it's just plain off. When that happens, you may be called on to do a rewrite on the fly, and if that happens, there are some things you can do to make life easier for all concerned parties.

One, don't fight it. If the actor can't read the line, the actor can't read the line. Be willing to make changes for the sake of getting a better reading. If you've got a good enough relationship with the voice director and actor, you can even volunteer it when something's not working, and the admission that your stuff isn't deathless prose may win you some respect. On the other hand, don't do this too often. Save it for when the line, or the actor, is really floundering. Otherwise, it's easy to slip into artiste-ville, and you should have thought of that before you stepped into the very-expensive-per-minute studio.

Two, listen. There's usually one spot in the line where the actor is obviously having trouble. That's where you want to make your change. Your ears should tell you what your fingers should change.

Three, chopping is usually winning. The shorter a line is, the less chance there is for something to go wrong with it. When in doubt, throw words out. And finally, remember that you're not in charge. It's the voice director's show, not the writer's, and your role is to support, assist, and inform. Keep to that, and establish a good working relationship with the voice director, and everything else is details.

16.6 QUICK-AND-DIRTY SECRETS

The basics aside, there are certain tips and tricks that you can use when script doctoring to make your life easier, your work come out better, and your inevitable panic attacks end more quickly. While nothing replaces the basics of being organized, efficient, and open, there are ways to shave time off the corners of what you're doing while strengthening the quality of the work.

16.6.1 Break Assignments into Manageable Sizes

Trying to tackle everything at once is foolhardy, not to mention potentially very depressing when you constantly look up and see how much is left to do. Instead, you're better off taking some time at the start to chop the work into manageable chunks that you stand a good chance of finishing quickly. The sense of accomplishment that comes from wrapping up a discrete piece of work is often vital fuel in powering on to the next one, and the next, and the next. Furthermore, it helps your coworkers. If you're completing stuff in chunks, you can hand it off in chunks, and the people down the deliverable chain can get working on it that much sooner. Sitting on the entire script until it's done means that other folks are potentially twiddling their thumbs waiting for you, something that no project can afford. Writing in easily handled units also helps with setting up feedback loops and with helping to make sure that problems get tackled quickly and before they get out of hand. After all, if the team cuts a level, it's a lot easier to make the necessary adjustments a few hundred lines at a time, as opposed to a few thousand.

16.6.2 Set Up Quick Feedback Loops

Figure out who needs to sign off on what you're doing (as opposed to who just wants to get their fingers in the pie), and make sure you set up a clean and easy process for getting feedback from them. This is imperative for producing a fast workflow; otherwise one party or the other is going to be sitting around waiting, unable to move forward. Building the loop means building the parameters—who gets it, how much time they have to turn it around, and what happens if they don't. The number of people involved should be pared back as far as possible; the more people involved in any given feedback process, the longer it takes, and the rate of increase is most decidedly not linear. Be merciless in chopping unnecessary names, and get the producer or the equivalent to back your play. Otherwise, you run the risk of getting bogged down in endless review meetings and revision cycles, as everyone needs to get their two cents in. Instead, what setting things up like this means is that everyone who's appropriate is in the loop but that there's a mechanism built in to keep the system from bogging down. Getting feedback fast means making corrections fast, which hopefully everyone can get behind. It also shortens the time until final version and allows for fast, on-the-fly adjustments to what you're doing instead of waiting until the end and making one titanic change.

16.6.3 Have Something to Show Fast

The sooner you get feedback from the appropriate team members, the sooner you know if you're doing things right. If you're not doing things right, the sooner you know, the less work you have to redo and the less time gets wasted. If you are doing things right, getting the confirmation early lets you charge ahead with more confidence, knowing you're on target. So, setting up a quick deliverable—even just a few lines per character to make sure you have tone and voice right—for key team personnel to look at can save a lot of time and heartbreak on the back end. Getting a small chunk of work into the right hands quickly and setting a short deadline for turnaround on the feedback ensures that you're in sync with the team's needs and that you're not plunging ahead with an incorrect mental image of what you should be doing. In other words, it's a great safety feature for both you and the team.

16.6.4 Ask Questions as Needed

If you don't ask questions, you don't get answers. If you don't get answers, you can't do the job right unless you're very, very lucky at guessing. So, if you have a question—any question at all—ask it. Making bad guesses simply means lots of backtracking and repair later. Sitting there and hoping that someone magically answers your question by reading your mind generally doesn't cut it and doesn't get you your answer, either. Don't be afraid of embarrassment; the other team members would generally prefer you ask rather than get something wrong. If you have a lot of questions for one individual or workgroup, it might be best to schedule a sit-down meeting to make sure you work through everything. Otherwise, there's no reason not to throw your issue out there as soon as it makes itself known as a problem. Email it out, walk over to someone's desk, write it on a paper airplane, and toss it over—it doesn't matter. What matters is asking the question quickly and cogently, so that you're not sitting there for months waiting on an answer.

16.7 WHAT NOT TO DO

Oddly enough, sometimes the most important thing in a script doctoring situation is knowing what not to do. With so many potential pitfalls, having a good sense of at least the obvious ones that can be avoided goes a long way toward establishing smooth relationships with the team and getting into a good working dynamic as quickly as possible.

16.7.1 Don't Come In and Insult the Work That's Been Done Already

Odds are that some of the people you will be working with have contributed to the material that has been deemed unsatisfactory, and they may still have an emotional attachment to it. Remember that they've been asked to believe in that material for months, if not years. Or, they may still be friendly with a writer who is no longer on the project and feel the need to defend their work. In either case, trying to establish yourself by putting down what has already been done is a sure-fire way to make enemies and to make your job harder. Remember, your job is not to come in to pass judgment on the work that's in place. It is to figure out what's needed to move forward, and one of the best things you can do toward that end is to examine what's been done for its good points. Being respectful toward the work that's been done shows respect for the people who did it.

16.7.2 Don't Try to Reinvent the Game Unless You're Told to Do So

A corollary of the need to discover the scope of work you're empowered to do, this axiom is about as straightforward as it gets. Everything you do—add characters, rewrite lines, add cutscenes—has the potential to cause other people to have to do more work or spend more money. Throwing your creativity around willy-nilly will create confusion about what assets are actually needed, not to mention who's doing them and whether there's room for it in the budget. More to the point, doing a complete overhaul of the game based on your vision is fraught with all sorts of peril. Chances are good you don't understand the asset pipeline and schedule completely, so demanding new assets, motion sets, cutscenes, and the like isn't going to endear you to people you're going to be working with. It might not even be possible at all, and if you're relying on those new assets to make your stuff work, you'll be out of luck. And the project will be, too.

16.7.3 Don't Set Yourself Up as the Final Authority

As seductive as the fantasy of coming in at the last minute to save the day can be, it shouldn't be confused with the reality of the situation. The odds of a writer being handed complete control over a project to make sure everything else jibes with the story are somewhere between "low" and "nonexistent." Instead, make sure you set up working relationships with

the point people on the team so that you're in the loop on decisions that relate to story. This can work just fine and makes sure that writing concerns are taken into account when changes are made. What won't happen is everyone else bowing to writing's needs, and if you expect it to go that way, you'll look foolish. It's perfectly sensible to expect to be in the loop when changes affecting story get decided on. And yes, this can include everything from level design to seeing which motions are included in the animation set. But expecting story—and by extension, yourself—to be the final arbiter over what goes in the game is asking for trouble and a very short working relationship with the rest of the team. Don't prioritize your agenda over the team's. There are a lot of people working on a game at any given time, and ideally, they all have the same agenda: to make the best game possible under the constraints of time, resources, and technology. The only way that goal is achievable is if everyone is pulling in at least roughly the same direction. That means that the game comes first, not the writing.

The writing is an element in making a good game, one of many. It's an important element, but it's still just one piece of the puzzle. Trying to prioritize your tasks over the rest of the team's, when in many cases team members are waiting on your deliverables, has the potential to derail the development process significantly.

16.7.4 Don't Be a Jerk

This one should be self-explanatory. As in any professional situation, when you join an established team, you have a professional obligation to integrate yourself with that team so that everyone feels comfortable working with you. For one thing, it's the right thing to do. For another, it helps the project. A prima donna script doctor is going to make it that much harder for everyone else to get their work done. If you slow the rest of the team down, it doesn't matter how good your dialog is, you're hurting the project. That's precisely the opposite of why you're there, after all, and thus is a circumstance best avoided. And if that weren't enough reason to leave the jerk juice at home, there's the simple matter of self-preservation. If you're disrespectful, rude, and no fun to work with, the team won't want to work with you—and there's a lot more of them than there are of you. So, it's in everyone's interests—the project's, the team's, and yours—for you to approach the team as well as the project with respect and good manners.

16.8 THE SCRIPT DOCTORING SECRETS OF THE HIDDEN MASTERS

- Do not expect perfection. If you do, you will be disappointed.
    - Do the best job that you can, but recognize that you are working under constraints. Art is the enemy of deadlines. You will need to balance your creative skill and perfectionist intent with the need to get things done, or you won't get things done.
    - Some stuff, you just can't fix. Learn to live with this, or you'll drive yourself crazy.
- Chop your deliverables up into discrete chunks—and do them.
    - It's easier to get something smaller done.
    - It's tangible progress, so you'll feel better along the way.
    - You have something to hand off relatively quickly for feedback.
- Solicit feedback on one chunk while you're working on the next one.
    - This lets you know early if you're on the right track.
    - It gives the people watching you something to do.
- Schedule regular check-ins, so you can…
    - see how you're doing so far
    - see what's changed since the last check-in—and something always changes.
- Be consistent in the changes you make.
    - Keep character voice consistent. If you're pulling all of the contractions out of one character's speech, do it all the way through.
    - Consistent spelling and capitalization go a long way toward reducing confusion and making you look professional.
    - And of course, consistency in formatting is essential.
- What you are there for is the difference—the changes you make. Therefore, make it easy for people to find those changes and comment on them.

    - Highlight changes you make for easy identification.
    - Summarize what you've done, so readers can look in the right place.
- Find reference points for what you're doing.
    - Actors, video clips, sequences in well-known books or movies—all of these make it much easier to communicate the changes that you're making.
    - It's much easier than making the folks you're working with hunt through line by line to get a sense of what you have done.
- Reference for yourself is important.
    - Pull together the "definitive" traits and lines of the characters you'll be writing for.
    - Refer to them to make sure the doctoring work you do blends seamlessly with the rest of the dialog.
- Don't give yourself closure until the box is on the shelf.
    - If you tell yourself that you're done, it will be that much harder to get into gear once the inevitable last-minute request comes up.
    - And if it's hard to get into gear, it's hard to do the work, which means it takes that much longer.

16.9 CONCLUSION

How you go about your work as a script doctor is as important as what you do, because in large part how you do it helps define what you're doing and how well you're going to be able to do it. Assessing the task and setting up the systems and mechanisms to enable your success are essential steps to actually doing the work. Master that, and you'll put yourself in the best place possible, giving you the maximum available time and attention for writing, which, after all, is why you're there in the first place.

16.10 EXERCISES

1. Rewrites:
    a. Look at the following line of dialog. Rewrite it so that it flows like actual conversation without losing any of the factual

information: "Hi there. I'm in charge of Earth's planetary defenses against the aliens from Glorzorp. You're under my command so do what I say."

b. Look at the following paragraph of dialogue, which suffers from an excess of personality. Rewrite it so that it's half its current length without losing any of the key factual information it contains: "All right, you've been drafted into the Earth Space League to defend our planet from the alien menace. The aliens come from the planet Glorzorp in the Scorpio sector, and they've been pushing us hard on all fronts. But human ingenuity and technology, not to mention determination, are going to win the day. You've got it, or we wouldn't have added you to this elite unit. I'm your commander. In fact, I'm the commander of all the Earth defense forces, so you'll be taking orders from me like it's the word of God almighty. "

2. Writing barks: You have 10 minutes to write as many variations on "Reloading!" as you can. At the end of the 10 minutes, count how many you have and make sure each of the ones you've written is unique. Read them out loud to see how many sound good. Then try the exercise again.

3. Adding characterization: Imagine that you've been asked to work on a science fiction RPG. The helper NPC character is a gruff old space marine, but the dialog that's been written for him so far doesn't display any personality. To make him less skippable, do the following.

   a. Come up with a list of ten words or phrases that he uses that define his speech patterns. Think about why he always uses these ten.

   b. Come up with a list of ten words or phrases that he'd never use—this also helps define his speech patterns and diction.

   c. Write a one-paragraph monolog for the character in which he discusses aliens. At the end, look at what you've got and determine if the character's diction, rhythm, syntax, and other speech patterns are consistent and distinct. If they aren't, try again until you're satisfied you have the character's distinct voice down.

   d. Once you have the character voice nailed, write a ten-exchange conversation between the character and a senior officer wherein both characters are happy.
   e. Now try it if the space marine is angry.
   f. Now try it if the officer is an old friend.
   g. Now try it if the officer doesn't like the space marine.

4. Story pitches: You're doing a game based on the Seven Deadly Sins when suddenly word comes down that there's only enough time in the schedule for four sins. How do you change the story? Write up three distinct one-paragraph pitches detailing new approaches that will make use of what you've got to work with.

5. Putting a story together: You've come onto a project, and they've already built a series of mission spaces: an airport, a mansion, a mountain tunnel, and a meat-packing plant. Come up with a story that includes all of these locales.

CHAPTER 17

Writing Compelling Game Characters

William Harms

Narrative Director, Hangar 13

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17.1 INTRODUCTION

As recently as 10 years ago, it was enough for a video game's player-character and archnemesis to be little more than broad caricatures. The villain would do something horrible, and the hero would spend the game going after them while uttering quippy one liners. Any secondary characters that appeared along the way were even less defined and were there solely to deliver mission exposition and updates. Usually, they barely even had a name, let alone any discernable characterization.

Those days are over.

Video game audiences have grown increasingly sophisticated and now expect the same level of character development as you'd find in TV and film. Characters in video games need to be fully developed, with

identifiable wants and needs, and feature dialogue that's as good as what you'd see in any other medium, and tolerance for anything that falls short of that quality bar is quickly vanishing.

It's impossible for a single chapter to cover everything you'll need to know about creating and writing compelling characters, so I'm going to focus on a few high-level concepts and how they specifically related to creating video game characters. Throughout this chapter, I'll be using characters from *Mafia III*, *The Last of Us*, and *God of War* as examples.

17.2 GOALS AND WORLDVIEW

One of the first questions you need to fully understand is "what does this character want?" because the answer to that question directly ties to the game's primary narrative and should reflect both the players' and the player-character's goals (something I'll talk about in more detail in a later section). In the case of *Mafia III*, Lincoln Clay's goal is to exact revenge on a mobster named Sal Marcano, who betrayed Lincoln and killed his family. In *The Last of Us*, Joel's trying to get Ellie to the Fireflies in Salt Lake City. In *God of War*, Kratos' wants to fulfill his wife's final wish and spread her ashes from the highest peak of the nine realms. It's important to have this goal in mind when creating your player-character because it provides the framework for the entire game, helps center the character within the world, and because your character needs to have the background that lets them complete that goal.

For the three examples mentioned earlier, Lincoln was a member of the special forces in Vietnam, so when he wages war on the streets of New Bordeaux, his character is aligned with the core gameplay. Joel survived for years between the prologue and main game in *The Last of Us*, and it's clear that he often did horrible things in order to survive. And Kratos is, well, the god of war so he can do pretty much anything. Nothing the player does while playing the game seems out-of-bounds for the character they're playing.

Your character's background needs to be more than just window dressing, though, or an excuse that explains their proficiency with a machine-gun. It needs to form an integral part of their identity, including how they view the world. Because of his background, Joel has a full understanding of the horrors awaiting them as he and Ellie journey west, and the lengths that he'll need to go to in order to survive.

Of course, in order for your character to have a worldview, they need to have an opinion on the world. The key is to have that opinion act as a

natural extension of the character's background, which is an effective technique for not only the player-character but also the secondary characters.

In *Mafia III*, John Donovan is a CIA agent who served with Lincoln in Vietnam. When Lincoln decides to wage war on Sal Marcano, he enlists Donovan's help, and from that point on, Donovan provides Lincoln with logistical and tactical support. And as the game's primary mission giver, he also explains vital gameplay and mission exposition to the player. When conveying this much information, it's tempting to fall into the trap of having it be dry and matter-of-fact in order to get it across as quickly and efficiently as possible, but that wouldn't make for an interesting character. Here's how I approached writing Donovan, specifically his background, worldview, and how the two informed each other.

- **Background**: Lincoln, and by extension the player, needs relevant gameplay information on a regular basis. Just as the player-character must have a background that helps contextualize the pursuit of their goals, mission-givers like Donovan have the same requirement. By making him a CIA agent, Donovan immediately has that background. He's spying on everyone, collecting intel, and providing Lincoln with regular updates, all things people would expect from a CIA agent. And by having a shared history with Lincoln from their time together in Vietnam, there's an immediate familiarity and intimacy between the two that bolsters their characterizations and creates a sense of comradery that extends across the entire game.
- **Worldview**: When creating Donovan, an important aspect of his character was his place within real-world history. At that time, CIA agents were white, upper-class, Ivy league-educated men from the northeast. Since the game's set in the American South, that creates immediate tension between Donovan and the people of New Bordeaux, who he despises because of the Civil War. This is what makes Donovan an interesting and compelling character and keeps his mission exposition from being one note. Instead of simply telling Lincoln "here's what you need to know," nearly every conversation features insults and a rolling commentary about the South. When telling Lincoln about a judge named Holden, Donovan uses derogatory language to insult the people who voted for Holden. He regularly refers to the people of New Bordeaux as "traitors" and says that they should've been executed after the Civil War.

Donovan's background and worldview also directed his characterization and actions in the game's final cinematic, where he shoots and kills the Senator who's been interviewing him. Because of his experience in Vietnam, and the lack of a clear victory against the Communists, he's deeply skeptical of the government. If you couple that with his deep sense of patriotism and knowledge that the Senator was involved in the assassination of President Kennedy, you get one of *Mafia III*'s best-known scenes.

17.3 STRENGTH AND WEAKNESS

An additional strategy for creating compelling characters is centered around the idea that their greatest strength is also their greatest weakness. Because of its impact on the character, this is something that needs to come very early in the character-creating process.

In Lincoln's case, his greatest strength/weakness is his loyalty. At the beginning of the game, he returns home intending to say goodbye to his family but decides to stay and help them deal with some problems they're having with a rival gang. This characterizes Lincoln in a positive way because loyalty is an admirable trait.

The downside to Lincoln's sense of loyalty is that it creates blind spots—perhaps he should've noticed that the mob was setting him and the others up—but most importantly it defines his actions after the mob betrays him. He sets out to get revenge because he's still loyal to his family, but he takes his revenge to an extreme length, which is where it becomes a weakness.

This same approach can be applied to the other major characters in your story. As I mentioned in the previous section, Donovan is extremely patriotic. It's his strength in that it means he's willing to do whatever it takes to protect his country, but it's his weakness for the same reason, because in the pursuit of that goal, he's willing to do things that are abhorrent.

Sal Marcano, the primary antagonist in *Mafia III*, wants to provide a legal way for his family to make a living. He loves his son Giorgi and desperately wants to get him out of "the life," but like Donovan and Lincoln, he takes things too far. In order to achieve his dream, he robs a Federal Reserve and is responsible for the murders of countless people.

Once you've identified the strength/weakness for each of the major characters, whenever possible it should help determine their actions while being consistent with their background and worldview, which can also be determined by their strength/weakness. Taken together, everything outlined above forms the framework for your character, and as you add additional characters, you can refer back to that framework to maintain consistency.

This latter point is extremely important, because if you deviate in your characterization, players are sophisticated enough to notice. Any missteps threaten to create separation between your player-character and the player.

17.4 ALIGNING PLAYER AND PLAYER-CHARACTER MOTIVATIONS

One of the most difficult parts of writing a video game is aligning the players' motivations with the player-character's motivations. What this means broadly is that as players play the game, they are in general agreement with what the player-character's trying to accomplish, and they understand and agree with the rationale behind the player-character's actions. Your goal should be minimal dissonance, specifically a moment where the player thinks "This doesn't make any sense. I wouldn't do that, I'd do this."

The path toward this alignment really begins at the start of the game and the agreement you reach with the player. Is the game going to let them shape and drive the story? Can they approach the content in the order they want? Or is that defined by the game's player-character? Is it the player's story or is it the player-character's story?

In games like *Destiny 2*, you create your own character, including their appearance and their class, and through your playstyle and choices, you define how your "character" views the world of the game. Roleplaying games like *Skyrim* have a similar approach—there's an overall plot that you must follow, but there's little in the game that defines the protagonist as a character. This is completely up to the player and the choices they make.

The agreement games like this are making with the player is simple—the player-character is truly the player's avatar, so they get decide what they're going to do and how they do it. Any violation of that agreement, such as a moment of characterization that conflicts with how the player views their character, is going to feel false and rip the player out of the experience.

On the other end of the spectrum are games where a clearly defined protagonist journeys through a curated story and the player is allowed minimal agency as it relates to the character and the overall narrative. *The Last of Us* is clearly Joel's story, and he drives it forward in a way that's consistent with who he is as a character. At the end of the game, when he kills everyone in order to rescue Ellie, it's because he's unwilling to endure the loss of another daughter, the fate of humanity be damned. The player has zero input into that decision.

In games like this, when you're asking the player to go on a journey with a rich, clearly defined character, the player is viewing the game world

through that character's eyes. This is why alignment between the player and the player-character is vitally important.

With *Mafia III*, it wasn't enough to simply say "the mob killed your family, get revenge." In order to create an emotional connection between the player and Lincoln Clay, the player had to experience that loss the same way Lincoln did, which meant spending time with Lincoln's family and friends before they're betrayed and murdered. Each character in Lincoln's circle of friends and family was specifically characterized, so that their affection for each other was evident, which helped heighten the emotional stakes for Lincoln and the player.

17.5 PLAYER-CHARACTER: DRIVING THE STORY

A final note on creating your player-character—it's important to ensure that they're an active participant in the story and that their actions provide the forward momentum that moves everything forward. Unfortunately, achieving this in games can be challenging as you have to factor in mission givers, side quests, the game's structure, and countless other considerations.

There are strategies you can employ, though. From the very beginning of development, approach the game's story and structure (including gameplay structure) from the point of view of ensuring that the player-character is always driving things forward. In *Mafia III*, this was Lincoln telling Donovan explicitly what the plan was and how they were going to achieve it. Donovan may have acted as a mission giver, but the player always understood Lincoln was ultimately behind everything.

In *God of War* (2018), Kratos is determined to fulfill his wife's final wish. Other characters "tell" Kratos what to do from time to time, but ultimately they're simply reinforcing the quest that Kratos gave himself. They're not directing the player-character; they're helping them.

In both cases, making it clear that the player-character is the driving force behind their story—they're taking action, as opposed to being acted upon—deepens their characterization because it provides additional opportunities for them to express opinions on the game world, the story path that they're on, and allow for reflection on their own actions.

17.6 ANTAGONIST: HERO OF THEIR OWN STORY

There's a saying that what makes a great protagonist is a great antagonist. Imagine Batman without the Joker, Spider-Man without the Green Goblin, or Mario without Bowser. Unfortunately, it's far too common in video game stories for the game's antagonist to be underdeveloped and

improperly utilized. They're often little more than a mustache-twirling villain who shows up from time to time to remind everyone of how evil they are (the exception being Bowser, where his cartoony villainy is the point).

True antagonists don't view themselves as "bad" or "evil." They view themselves as the hero of their own story, and every action they take reinforces that belief. Sal Marcano doesn't think he's evil; he's simply a father trying to leave a lasting legacy for his son. David, one of the antagonists in *The Last of Us*, is the leader of a group of people who are struggling to survive in a world where civilization has collapsed. It just so happens that David, like the scavengers he leads, is a cannibal and is willing to resort to extreme, horrific violence if that's what it takes to put food on the table. It's not the desires or goals of the antagonist that place them in opposition to the player-character; it's the specific actions they take in pursuit of those goals and the negative impact it has on the world and the characters within it.

Because video games often rely on combat-focused gameplay as their primary player verb, it can be difficult to properly reveal the antagonist, and therefore the player. (There's only so many times the antagonist can "escape" defeat, for example.) This is why it's important to develop, understand, and incorporate your antagonist from the very beginning. Your goal should be to find ways for them to have meaningful interactions with the player-character throughout the story. In *Mafia III*, we used a faux documentary to provide additional exposition, and since Donovan has wire-tapped the entire city, it was a nice vehicle through which to observe Marcano and see his reactions to what was happening around him.

17.7 THE IMPORTANCE OF ACTORS

Regardless of whether your video game features voice-over-only performances, or full motion captured cinematics, it's important that you bring the actors into the creative process and let them explore, develop, and deepen the characters that they're portraying. Since they're actually bringing these characters to life, you should view them as partners as opposed to someone who "simply performs the lines."

Sal Marcano was portrayed by the actor Jay Acovone, and we originally thought of Sal as a typical Italian mobster—big, gruff, and always chomping a cigar. But Jay approached the role from another way. He gave Marcano a natural humor and charm, which opened the character up in ways we hadn't expected. In the scenes prior to the betrayal, there was still

a hint of menace, but Marcano was also surprisingly disarming in that you wanted to like him, you wanted to trust him. Jay's performance made the eventual betrayal even more impactful.

17.8 CONCLUSION

Many of the storytelling and writing techniques from other mediums are directly applicable to video game writing, specifically when it comes to creating and writing characters. However, you always need to keep in mind that games are an interactive medium, and this means there are additional considerations that don't apply to writing for TV or film.

17.9 EXERCISES

1. Write out three games that successfully align the players' and the player-character's goals and why they were successful. Then write out three examples of games that weren't as successful, along with the reasons why they failed to align.

2. Create a sample game plot and a character whose background aligns with the game's plot. Outline their worldview and how it impacts their characterization.

3. Create a player-character by defining their strength/weakness, which should be the same thing. Write out three ideas for how that strength/weakness could manifest in the character's characterization.

4. Write out a sample plot breakdown that shows how the player-character drives the action forward, including a sample of how they'd interact with a mission giver.

5. Create two different antagonists and define their goals and how they'll approach the pursuit of those goals.

6. Bonus: Write a document that features one of the player-characters from #2 and an antagonist from #4 and explore how they'll inform and impact each other.

CHAPTER 18

Hiring Philosophies

We Can Do Better

Tom Abernathy

Studio Narrative Director, ArenaNet

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18.1 JOB POSTINGS FOR WRITERS

Most game industry job postings for writers, and most of the hiring managers behind them, value a certain, to my mind rather narrow set of criteria. If you're applying to work on a first-person shooter set in a sci-fi IP, for example, or a third-person fantasy MMORPG, they want to see evidence:

- Primarily, that you already have experience making something as similar to that as absolutely possible
- Secondarily, that you play their game, have boundless and nearly indescribable passion for it, and know it inside out

- Tertiarily, that you have a couple (midlevel) or 5 years' (senior-level) experience in the game industry in the role they're hiring for

And that's pretty much it: Those criteria, in descending order of urgency, are the principles 98% of the game industry uses to decide who to hire. Whether the candidate's work has actually been any good is not listed among them; assessing quality is hard, especially in a collaborative medium, which explains the default reliance on tenure in the industry. If they're hiring a coder or a creature artist, the first and third probably take precedence, whereas if they're hiring a content designer, for some reason, the second often seems to shoot to the top of the list. Some studios won't even consider a candidate for any position—artist, e-sports broadcast director, human resources, whatever—unless that candidate has played x-number of hours or achieved x-amount of progression in their game.

For some roles in some disciplines, that approach might make sense. Most companies don't want to have to spend a lot of time training you, so the more you already know everything you need to come right in and be productive, the happier they're going to be. I get it. However, at least when it comes to game narrative, I think they've got it all wrong.

18.2 THE WAY I SEE IT

Everyone working in game narrative has a unique story to tell about how they got where they are. There's no established path into game writing and narrative design. There are also fewer jobs in game narrative—entry-level or otherwise—than in programming, art, animation, or design. So if you're going to make a career in game narrative, you'll not only have to beat considerable odds but most likely have to blaze your own trail, figurative machete hacking away, through the game industry jungle.

That being the case, it's always seemed to me like the smart way to approach competing in this business is to play a little *Moneyball*. Michael Lewis's seminal 2003 account describes how Oakland A's general manager Billy Beane, hamstrung by a perennially low payroll, exploited market inefficiencies in Major League Baseball to build a team using players with useful abilities the rest of the league undervalued. Beane's teams consistently made the playoffs (and still do), even as other teams caught on and tried to emulate his unorthodox strategy—partly because it took some of them quite some time to believe that much of the conventional wisdom that had ruled baseball for 130 years turned out, per sophisticated data mining and analysis, to be grossly overstated, if not flat-out-wrong.

Beane's basic insight, then, was that one can overcome competitive disadvantages by identifying and leveraging resources the market tends to underrate. Simple, elegant, demonstrably true.

I'm a game narrative professional (I've always liked the word "dramatist"), which means I had to find my own way into an industry that, when I first started trying to break in in the late 1990s, didn't even employ professional storytellers. (It didn't think it needed them. In some quarters, it still doesn't think so.) But I recognized, even then, back before *Moneyball* had even been published, that the people deciding who to hire onto their game teams were making what, to me, was a clear mistake: They were underestimating the relevance, and thus the value to their enterprise, of storytelling skills used in other entertainment media like film and television.

18.3 THE WAY I GOT IN

A thumbnail of *my* path to becoming a game narrative professional: I grew up in the theater as an actor and director and earned a master's degree from one of the best film schools in the world. By the age of 30, I had accrued a wealth of knowledge and skills pertaining to the craft of creating dramatic narrative experiences for audiences. And, in those salad days, as I sat night in and night out playing PS1 games with my friend, Joseph, bitching good-naturedly about the wretched writing and storytelling in most of them, he—at the time an entry-level production assistant at Activision Studios—thought I "could do a lot of good for us over there." He was certain my skills as a dramatist would be directly portable to the young medium of narrative video games. I couldn't disagree.

I was of the first generation that grew up with video games—and consider some of the titles I grew up with: *Pong. Mattel Electronics Football. Space Invaders. Pac-Man. Dig-Dug. Asteroids. Centipede. Joust. Dragon's Lair.* That last one proves my point: When I was growing up, I never dreamed of becoming a video game writer because no such thing existed—*video games didn't tell stories*. They didn't have the technology. *Dragon's Lair* was an attempt to transcend that limitation by borrowing conventions from linear filmed entertainment—a running theme in the evolution of games as a medium.

Point being, in the late 1990s, graphics-intensive games had progressed technologically to the point where substantive, sophisticated storytelling in a 3-D graphical environment was doable. The industry itself was starting to explore that possibility (ladies and gentlemen, I give you Bruce Willis in *Apocalypse*!), but I felt certain that someone with professional

dramatic storytelling skills like mine could add real value to any game experience that involved narrative at all.

So I set out banging on game studio doors all over Los Angeles and the Bay Area, asking for time with anyone who would give it, to explain my insight and ask for an opportunity to prove my case.

It took *5 years* to convince someone to take me up on it.

Why so long? I have a theory.

18.4 HOW THINGS GOT THIS WAY

The technology sector has a specific culture, a particular ethos, born of a spirit of innovation and independence. The early decades of software development (and, to some degree, hardware development) generally looked like this: a guy, maybe a couple of guys (too often guys, sigh) or three, in a garage, making stuff: mother boards, home-built computers, programs. Since the early 1950s, engineers had been creating simplistic computer games to demonstrate what their machines could do: checkers, tennis, chess. By the late 1960s and 1970s, the Stanford- and U.S. military-planted seedlings of Silicon Valley were really beginning to sprout: Hewlett-Packard, Shockley, Xerox PARC, ARPA, etc.

So: one guy, maybe a couple of guys or three, in a garage, making a thing; learning as they go; thinking their way around obstacles; innovating their way through challenges; treading new ground with every keystroke. There are no textbooks for what they're doing at this point. They're explorers on terra incognita, and there's no rescue if something goes wrong; they survive on the merits of their minds and their wits alone. (At least, that's how they see themselves.)

Point being: these guys don't feel like they owe anyone anything. They feel like their brilliant minds have always been more than sufficient to solve any problem they encounter. They are the engineer kings; they can do anything.

In a nutshell, that's tech culture, specifically, for our purposes, software development culture.

Now, the day I started my first real gig at a game company (after I wrote *Destroy All Humans!* for the late, great Pandemic Studios as a contractor, they brought me on full time to be the lead writer on *The Saboteur* and *Destroy All Humans! 2*), I confess I harbored certain naïve assumptions. I had done 10 years as a screenwriter in Hollywood before spending the last year writing *DAH!*, and I felt I was gaining a strong grasp of both the similarities and differences between film/television and games as storytelling

media. (Although I also knew I had a lot more to learn. I still do. It's an inexhaustible topic.)

Maybe my biggest misimpression, related to my conviction that screenwriting skills were relevant to storytelling in games, was that I was entering a hybrid industry that was 50% software development and 50% entertainment industry. Once I was working full time in the industry; however, it quickly became apparent that the real ratio was more like 90%–10% software-to-entertainment. (I'd say today it's maybe 85%–15%. Maybe.)

That realization *shocked* me. And to be clear, I'm not saying, as many a "Hollywood writer" dabbling in games would assert, that film/TV is a clearly superior medium and game developers should be grateful for every pearl of wisdom Hollywood folks deign to dribble out. Far from it. I never would have moved full time into games if I thought that.

But that's not the same as saying we (games) don't have things we can learn from them (film/TV), in any number of areas. To suggest otherwise is simply arrogant. It would be reasonable to expect that tribal knowledge from the film/TV world about story structure, characterization, and dialogue written to be spoken by actors would be relevant to storytelling in games, as, 20 years in, I can assure you they are. A notion like that is anathema to many game developers, however. *We don't need anything from anybody!*

18.5 PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Anyway, that's my theory. And if you combine it with my penchant for a *Moneyball* approach to competition, you may see where I'm going with all this.

Let's logically extrapolate from what we've learned so far:

1. Video games are a form of entertainment. They compete with other entertainment media, especially including movies and television, for consumers' time and money.

2. To be competitive with quality products in those other entertainment media, therefore, video games must be comparable with them in quality as perceived by the consumer.

3. In this competition, video games have inherent unique advantages, such as interactivity, nonlinearity, and player agency, which movies and television either cannot feature or are poorly suited to.

4. By the same token, just as both cinema and television started off by aping the conventions of theater, games have long attempted to utilize conventions from those other media (such as cinematics, story structure, and actor performances), with mixed success. That history suggests that, a few exceptional titles aside, video games as a medium have yet to achieve the same dramatic storytelling quality, certainly in the estimation of the culture at large, as prominent and successful examples of storytelling in film and TV.
5. Therefore, while we (video games) have some unique advantages, we have not as an industry learned the lessons we need to in order to compete equally, quality-wise, with other dramatic experiences in the entertainment marketplace.
6. The *Moneyball* part: anyone who recognizes #5, and who can identify skills that may help improve the dramatic quality of a game experience but are currently undervalued by the market (i.e., other game developers), will gain an advantage in the market.
7. Similarly, any game narrative professional who wants best to position themselves not just to get a job but also to excel in it should look to acquire and develop such skills.
8. After careers as an actor, director, and writer in theater, film, and video games, I believe I have learned enough from all of those roles about all of those entertainment media to identify such skills.
9. If I look to hire for those skills no one else values as much, two things should happen as a consequence:
    a. I should be able to find and hire candidates who other companies might not see the same value in.
        i. At the same time, I should also be prepared to have to work harder to find these candidates, since, not being highly valued by the industry as a whole, they themselves may not realize the value they bring, especially if they're from underrepresented groups. For example, women are statistically less likely to feel confident enough to apply for a given position than men with equivalent or inferior résumés—or, as my colleague, Novera King, puts it, "there are a whole lot of overconfident white boys out there." (Reader, I am here to testify.)

b. I should see a rise in the perceived quality of dramatic storytelling entertainment in the projects my hires work on, which is the whole point.

The above train of logic leads us, Dear Reader, to this moment: my theory of the case; my hiring and team-building philosophy. You may not like it. You may not agree with it. But the player response and completion/satisfaction metrics we saw from *Guild Wars 2: Path of Fire* and most recently Season 4 of *Guild Wars 2: Living World* suggest you might at least want to ponder it.

And if you want to get a job—on one of my teams, at least—consider this a road map that can position you to do so.

Having established the logical foundation for my team-building philosophy—let's call it the context, the premise—it is now time to spell that philosophy out. I also want to give credit to Bobby Stein, my Number One at ArenaNet, who not only served as a sounding board for these ideas but also contributed significantly to their development.

18.6 TOM & BOBBY'S PRINCIPLES FOR NARRATIVE TEAM-BUILDING

(Or, if you're a game writer, putting yourself in a position to get on a good narrative team.)

First: hire for what you can't teach. (At least, not quickly or readily.) The writer's version: *Focus on developing skills that can't be learned quickly*.

Quick reminder of the criteria many hiring managers in games use:

- Primarily, that you already have experience making something as similar to that as absolutely possible
- Secondarily, that you play their game, have boundless and nearly indescribable passion for it, and know it inside out
- Tertiarily, that you have a couple or 5 years' experience in the business in the role they're hiring for

The problem: those criteria are not the best ways to know if someone is a good narrative hire, they're just *easy to quantify*. Ever worked on a game like ours? No? *Rejected*. Played a thousand hours of our game and know it

backward and forward? No? *Rejected*. Have other companies thought you were a person worth hiring? No? *Rejected*. Put bluntly, if that's the way the hiring manager is doing it, they're doing it wrong. (You can tell them I said so.)

Why? Because the particulars of almost any genre or game can be taught and/or learned, fairly easily, in 6 months or less. (Not the finer details, maybe, but the broad strokes for sure.) The existing story/lore of a given game can be learned, quickly, either by playing it or by watching any of the copious number of streamer videos. (The current Narrative Lead on *Guild Wars 2* as of this writing, Julia Nardin, made herself an expert on GW lore within a few weeks, and that's as labyrinthian a backstory as I can imagine.) Even a new I.P. can be learned, via documentation and/or discussions with designers. And, anyway, 5 years in the business isn't worth as much if you weren't working with people who knew what they were doing and could help you evolve in the right ways.

What can't be quickly or easily learned by a writer who doesn't already have them are what I call *writer muscles*. You can learn what the specific skills needed to produce strong narrative content are by reading a book or going to a seminar or even just analyzing other people's narrative work. But knowing them isn't the same as applying them. To do that, they have to become second nature; you have to feel them in your bones. And you can only learn to do that by applying them, over and over, day in and day out, over time. In other words, by *writing*, which, frankly, one doesn't do enough of in most game writing situations to develop those muscles.

The analogy to the process of working out and getting stronger makes the logic obvious. No matter how much iron you pump, you can't make your body look like Dwayne Johnson's in a week. It's a slow process that can only happen as you build up your repetitions and the amount you're lifting over time, as you change your diet to fuel that process in the right way, and as you learn how to manage the fatigue and plateauing that comes along with it. *There are no shortcuts.* The only way to build muscles is over time by getting your reps in, day in, day out, over years.

The writer/producer John Wells wrote that it takes most writers 10 years, and many flawed scripts, to finally write a screenplay worth reading. What makes it even harder for people who want to work in game narrative is that you don't generate enough dramatic material in the course of working on most games to get enough reps to develop your writer muscles to

any great degree. (For instance, a fair amount of game writing involves barks—short combat chatter, e.g., "Reloading!"—which is a required skill for writing video games, but holds little value in helping one become a better dramatist.) Also, new game writers are also more likely to work on mobile or indie projects and thus to be the only writer on a project, which may limit the availability of helpful feedback regarding craft. Not to mention, examples of really good dramatic writing in video games tend to be the exceptions, not the rule—so if you're looking to existing games as your bar for what good is supposed to look like, your taste will be attuned only to game storytelling, not storytelling in film or TV, which is, as discussed earlier, a more effective standard.

A live-operations game that drops new episodic content on a regular basis like *Guild Wars 2*, on the other hand, does provide a rapid enough cycle that we see our writer/narrative designers' dramatic writing skills level up at an astonishing pace. In the current "always-on, games-as-a-service" environment, that's a real boon for developing writers—and the good news is, the whole AAA industry is moving in that direction anyway, which means more opportunities for you to level up quickly.

Which leads us to our next principle:

Second: since what you can't teach/learn quickly is writer muscles, which usually aren't developed writing for games, experience writing in other entertainment media is often key.

And some are better for the purpose than others. There are exceptions, for sure (the great novelist/game writer Richard Dansky comes to mind), but usefully strong game writing is something I find I'm more likely to see from a candidate with a screenwriting, TV writing, or even a playwriting background than from a candidate whose writing experience is mostly in prose fiction.

Why? Prose fiction tends to benefit from the description of rich and copious details—it's a bottom-up creative process for most fiction writers, in which one vomits up a first draft and then sets about figuring out what the thing wants to be and culling and reshaping it in subsequent passes. Also, as taught in the American academy for the last 60 years, literary fiction often eschews structure and shape as bourgeois constructs imposing fascist order on the otherwise liberated, postmodern, deconstructed mind, or something. (I don't know; I dropped a lot of those classes.)

Screenwriting, on the other hand, requires some skills that are more directly transferable to game writing and narrative design. For one, as my

hero, William Goldman, wrote, “Screenplays ARE structure.” Without a solid, top-down structure—and it doesn’t have to be Hollywood three-act, by any stretch—most movies and TV shows will collapse in on themselves, limp and seemingly directionless.

Know what else is all about creating structure? *Game design*. Especially level design and narrative design. The overall structure of a game—the opening sequence, say, then you unlock a hub, and then you can go on golden path missions from there, and side missions connect like *so*—is vital to the players’ enjoyment of it, and content designers, narrative and otherwise, spend a lot of energy on making that strong and compelling.

Two more skills successful screenwriters have to master that have direct application in game writing: dialogue and brevity. In screenwriting, unless your name is Aaron Sorkin or Quentin Tarantino, using fewer words is better. Always. (I know, I hate it too. Accept it and move on.) A trait I dislike in some RPGs, for example, is a tendency toward overwriting, especially in unvoiced lore text. Not having a line budget doesn’t mean you can and should write reams and reams of lore; lore is not story, and more is not better—it’s just more. I know some players eat it up, but that doesn’t make it good writing form, and it certainly doesn’t make it compelling or dramatic.

Concision is an especially essential ingredient of strong dialogue, whether text or voiced. Think of the first 10 minutes of any given Clint Eastwood western, in which few lines of dialogue are heard, but the entire story is set in motion. Think of the *John Wick* movies, which proudly display Keanu Reeves’s deep understanding that, for whatever reason, his polymathic offscreen verbosity is the antithesis of what works best for his onscreen persona. Two assassins, one recently forced out of retirement, spot each other at a massive rock concert in the ruins of Rome:

> “Hey, John.”
> “Hey.”
> “You working?”
> “Yeah.”

Beat.

> “Sorry to hear that.”
> “Yeah.”
> (I’m paraphrasing, but you get the idea.)

I mean, that is some Pinter-level taciturnity right there. 95% of what they're saying is in the subtext, as it should be—not the text, which is admirably brief. Fewer words are always better, and that goes double for dialogue.

The third principle by which Bobby and I build our team (it's an ongoing process, so I should stop talking about it like it ever ends) may seem only superficially unrelated to the first two, but bear with me.

Third: hiring people with developed writer muscles gives freedom to make a team more diverse, which makes for better products—so use that to your advantage.

The current pool for game developers in general (and narrative is no exception) is a lot more male and white and straight than the population at large (in America, anyway). There are a lot of reasons that's true, and I'm not going to bother to enumerate them here, because either you already know or it's going to take more than this essay to convince you. And the more homogeneous any group is—the more homogeneous their backgrounds, experiences, perspectives, and voices—the more likely it is that whatever they produce will fall within a narrower range of concept and execution. That's just logic, and it's potentially true no matter what the product is.

I don't know about you, but that's not what I want out of a piece of creative entertainment (which is what games are, dammit), either as a consumer or as a developer. I want a broader range of perspectives and voices, because that makes it more likely that they'll come up with something different and unexpected. And audiences *love* different and unexpected. (Subverting expectations is another dramatic writing principle William Goldman preached.) A broader range of perspectives and voices is more likely to come from people who don't all have the same backgrounds and experiences.

So if it's me, the last thing I want is a bunch of straight white dudes making games for a bunch of straight white dudes. That describes too many of the games out there, and, by many accounts, dudes of any sort aren't even a majority of the gaming market. So no. I want women and people who identify as nonbinary. I want LGBTQ folks, people who identify as queer in whatever way they choose to define it. I want people of color. I want people from all sorts of different cultures. I want the most heterogeneous team I can possibly assemble, because that's a team that's gonna come up with ideas nobody else has.

Example: Novera King, an African-American, Muslim woman, and one of our writer/narrative designers on *Guild Wars 2*, was handed as two of her first assignments the creation of stories for a raid that takes place in Elona, *GW2*'s ersatz Africa, and, later, the Icebrood *Saga* prolog episode that involved a group of renegade charr (*GW2*'s big cat demon species). In the first instance, Novera unearthed themes about the legacy of colonization in the raid story and, even more impressively, wove them into the raid organically in a way that supported the gameplay experience. (After its release, players started discussing the raid's story on our forums. Unheard of.) In the second case, Novera took the subtext about racial nationalism inherent in the episode's planned story and foregrounded it, giving the episode an urgency and real-world relevance that, let's just say, isn't easy to pull off in a fantasy IP about dragons and big cat demons.

In all candor, I'm not sure either of those notions would have occurred to me. Certainly, Novera did more with each than I probably would have been able to do, because colonialism and racial strife are relevant to her in a more immediate and personal way than they are to me; she's thought about them a lot more than I have. And the result is some of the best and most singular narrative game content I've ever seen.

Now, I know some of you reading this are thinking to yourselves, "Yeah, Tom, but you started out admitting that developers who aren't straight white dudes are hard to come by." So I did, and so they are. If you are one, you can use that to your advantage: *you* are the market inefficiency waiting to be exploited! (That sounds weird, but you know what I'm saying.) Make the case to hiring managers that the things that make you different and unique are strengths they should want to leverage. (Give them my Twitter handle if needed and I'll help explain it.)

For the hiring managers out there, however, I will admit that building a diverse team, and hopefully changing our industry in the process, isn't a thing that happens without some effort. Part of the reason there are fewer women and queer folks and developers of color working in games is because some of the ways into a career in games aren't as easy for them to come by. Even if I put out a job posting that explicitly invites people who aren't straight white dudes to apply, the majority of the applicants are still going to be straight white dudes.

How does one breach this gap? By getting proactive. Don't just settle for the people who apply of their own volition. Don't just look on LinkedIn. Look in other places. Reach out to game developer groups like Blacks in Games or Women in Games, and spread your invitation among their

membership. Seen a comic or TV episode or stage play that impressed you and was written by someone who isn't a straight white dude? Get in contact with them. Remember, you're looking for developed writer muscles—and you're more likely to find them in folks who aren't yet working in the industry, for all the aforementioned reasons. Everything else, you can teach.

And, if all else fails or you just want to be the change you want to see in the world, you can do what Bobby Stein did and start a mentorship program specifically for people from underrepresented groups who want to get into the industry but need some extra info or help to put them onto a level playing field. Bobby invited such people we encountered in our searches to come to the studio once a week and get an actual course in how to prepare yourself to apply for a game narrative gig—everything from networking and résumés to screenwriting and game design. Armand Constantine coached the attendees as they developed writing samples; ArenaNet designers gave them workshops that prepared them to collaborate effectively with game designers. It was such a success that we hope to repeat it next time with the participation of narrative folks from other local studios. (Oh, and remember Novera King? She was in that first mentorship class, at least until we realized she was totally ready for an actual job as a game writer. We couldn't hire her fast enough.)

The last criterion isn't just for narrative folks, it's all-purpose:

Fourth: develop, and/or hire people with, strong collaboration skills.

If you fall under this description, you get it. If you don't get it, I'll put it succinctly: There are too many people in creative industries who think their brilliance justifies them acting like an asshole. They're wrong. Life is too short—plus, there are seven billion people on this planet, which means one can most assuredly find someone just as good who *isn't* a pain in the ass to work with. If you're an applicant, be that nonpain in the ass. If you're a hiring manager, don't settle for the asshole; look harder for the person people actually enjoy working with.

18.7 CONCLUSION

So let's review:

1. Hire for what you can't teach. If you're a writer, focus on developing skills that can't be learned quickly.

2. Hire people with existing writer muscles, usually developed in other entertainment media. If you're a writer, spend time developing your writer muscles in other media, especially film/TV.

3. Hire people from underrepresented groups, because a diverse team makes the work and the industry better. If you're a writer who's a member of an underrepresented group or groups, recognize that as a strength, and don't be afraid to explain why in a cover letter or interview.

4. Hire people with strong collaboration skills. If you're a writer, develop those same skills; learn to be flexible, to take feedback well, not to be precious with your work.

And that's basically it. You may not share all the values I've described, and that's fine. But this philosophy is what Bobby and I have learned over time makes for a team, and for creative work, that embodies our values—what will create the changes we want to see, in the quality of narrative in games and in the industry as whole. These principles define the kind of people we look for when we're hiring. We're constantly refining and improving our approach, but basically, to borrow from the song, this is how we do it. This is how we think everyone should do it. We spread this gospel to anyone who will listen.

And if the worst thing that happens is that there starts to be more competition to hire the kind of candidate we value? We can live with that.

I'm betting you can, too.

18.8 EXERCISES

1. Read along on a printed copy of a screenplay as you watch the final movie. Study what changes were made, and try to understand the reasons for those choices.

2. Transcribe dialog from a favorite TV show or movie. Compare this dialog to dialog from a novel and game in the same genre. What are similarities and differences?

3. Write a play for a local school or community theater.

CHAPTER 19

If It Works, Break It

Game Narrative Tropes and Innovation

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19.1 INTRODUCTORY TEASE

Tropes become tropes because they work. They are functioning narrative design devices we can employ knowing they have worked in the past and have a high likelihood of working again. Audiences are familiar with them, and, for all that video games are, of course, rooted in software and

hardware, the real locus for the story, the real medium within which the story is developing, where it is being experienced, is in the audience. So knowing tropes is a way to know how to know an audience, a way to know how they are likely to respond within a certain narrative context.

There are a great many tropes this chapter might list and discuss. But to give it some shape, and some limits, it will explore just a few of the tropes I consider among the most commonly utilized. This isn't a quantitative assessment on frequency, more a subjective reflection. Nor does this reflection proselytize for the utilization of tropes, nor against them. It adopts an agnostic position. Tropes work because they work. Until they don't.

19.2 I CAN'T REMEMBER WHAT I FORGOT (AMNESIA)

Final Fantasy VII (1997), *Planescape: Torment* (1999), *Fahrenheit/Indigo Prophecy* (2005), *BioShock* (2007), *Alan Wake* (2010), *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* (2010), *Beyond Two Souls* (2013), *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (2013), *Amnesia: A Machine for Pigs* (2013), *Thief* (2014)…

These are some of the games where amnesia features prominently in the plot. Why does being a character in a video game make characters so forgetful? But first—does it? *Memento* (2000), *Mulholland Drive* (2001), *24: Season 1* (2001), *The Bourne Identity* (2002), *What Alice Forgot* (2016), *Forget-Me-Knot* (2015), and *Amnesia* (1997) show us that being a character in a movie, a book, a play, and a comic can be problematic too. Perhaps, there is an imbalance in video games but, as I said, this isn't a quantitative analysis, so I'm not prepared to argue that there verifiably is. There are, after all, an awful lot of other video game stories not about amnesia—but about dragons, or dangerous weapons, or betrayal, or aliens, or redemption. However, if there actually is an imbalance, a greater propensity of characters in video games suffering from amnesia than characters in other media, then I think we ought not to be surprised. And I think the reason isn't necessarily laziness or bad writing but may have as much to do with thoughtful narrative design.

Developers often make much of the player/avatar connection, and how keeping an avatar blank and undefined without specific detail, and especially without detail the player hasn't defined, helps players feel engaged with that avatar. There's much to be gained from retaining this connection, ensuring there's minimal cognitive dissonance between player and the imaginary projection—the suspension of disbelief—they're embarking on. But there's a drawback too. With no definitive character, it means

your story is unquestionably restricted in all manner of ways. With an in-character sullied avatar, your story must track closely along the emotions you expect your player to experience. For simple shooting games, such as *Time Crisis* (1995 onward), this really might be enough. There the brief ventures into characterization don't help the experience—other than through knowing audiences mocking the dialogue.

So then, if you want what characters can give you—the possibility of more complex story experiences—or perhaps you need them, because you're working with a license—then a different issue rears its head. When players begin a game, they usually want to start actually playing that game as soon as possible. They toggle thumbsticks, or jiggle a mouse, maybe put fingers on keys and are ready to DO! But then the game doesn't let them. Not yet. There are loading screens. Menu screens. Maybe an opening cutscene (or more than one). Maybe some audio to be tolerated before they're finally unleashed into the game world.

Writers see the imperative to get players playing as soon as they can. But a player's knowledge of their playable character can only reliably begin the moment the game begins—and, in any case—player experience is worth more than knowledge. So to have a game that's playable as soon as possible, and to have a story with any depth means often either a player/avatar disconnect (the player knows less than their avatar but doesn't even know how much less) or flirting with the amnesia trope. Since games do story as discovery so well, then why not have them experience the discovery? Again, another good reason to buy the amnesia hat and put it on again.

As we see from other media, even without the compulsion to get players quickly playing, amnesia can be an effective dramatic tool for giving deeply buried character-focused revelations, like *Dead Again* (1991). So, add the narrative design implications, and there's little wonder game writers like this tool. Then there's the fact that it works, and we know it works, and so we use it. Repeatedly.

19.3 WHERE IS EVERYBODY? (THE (MOSTLY) EMPTY GAME WORLD)

Dear Esther (2012), *Gone Home* (2013), *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* (2015), *Tacoma* (2017), *What Remains of Edith Finch* (2017) …These are some of the games where you wonder—*where did everybody go?*

With this canvas of solitude, these games start adding a sense of presence or recent presence. Maybe you hear characters. Or maybe you see them in some frozen-state form, showing where, and often when, they

were here. Maybe both. *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture (EGTTR)* has light shimmering presences with audio that materialize when players get close enough, and keep delivering their story content—their designated theatrical performance in the round—until they're done, then pop back out of existence. Similarly, *Tacoma* has spectral overlays with scrubable audio files playing out scenes that might have been witnessed earlier in more corporeal form. A steaming coffee cup, a ringing telephone, a radio switched on, all give the sense of a dynamic presence. Someone is here—but you can't see them yet! Or someone was here—and you might see them soon. You might even soon be tasked with finding them…

Developers like this approach because there are evident production wins—with fewer characters to animate, or even none, your art/animation costs can be controlled. Without lip-synching, you can make late revisions to VO scripts without having an impact on the art pipeline. *Where is everybody?* gifts you a free mystery story: why have they gone? What took them? Where? Why were they taken? Are there any survivors? What clues can the world provide to help answer these questions?

The sense of dynamic presence keeps things interesting. Can you find them? If you do—how did they survive? What can they tell you about the mass disappearance? And then you have a character bond forged through dramatic action—dramatic action forged by the player, *through play*.

On the downside—when there are so few characters for players to engage with—visually—it puts a great deal of pressure on those interactions to deliver on expectations (in terms of modeling, animation, and, most of all, narrative). When there are no characters at all to engage with visually the storyworld risks seeming cold and barren. With, essentially an audio cast, players can find it difficult to get a sense of character, and it puts pressure on casting, direction, and performance, as well as writing, to be of sufficient quality. These are far from insurmountable problems, as any who enjoy radio plays can attest. Nevertheless, quality is connected to budget, and a game may be cheaper with fewer characters to look at, but to be of the highest quality is still unlikely to be cheap. Nor is it likely to be that unusual. This *Where Is Everybody?* approach is a (wholly understandable) popular creative/production decision for indie developers.

19.4 SECRET SECRETS HERE! (AUDIO LOGS, ETC.)

Metal Gear (1987), *BioShock* (2007), *Borderlands 2* (2012), *Tomb Raider* (2013) *Dead Space* (2013), *Army of Two: The 40th Day* (2010), *Batman: Arkham Asylum*(2009), *Rage 2* (2019)…

These are some games where audio logs or written biographic details are strewn around the world for players to discover and piece together. The big win here is story isn't stopping the game. The story, through the act of discovery, in some sense *is* the game. Add to that—the player is having to work, not just to find these pieces of detail, but also to make sense of them, to interpret and extrapolate meaning. This is another huge win. Players are not just recipients of the story, now they feel like active participants in it. Furthermore, these logs serve as story real estate where we can give coverage to subject matter we couldn't or didn't cover elsewhere because of time and/or money, or pipeline issues, or perhaps we forgot or someone found a plot hole we can fill this way at the last minute. Of course, we want to use this tool! It's effective, efficient, self-selectively engaging, and can save our blushes! Players who don't care about that stuff aren't being made to care against their will (as if that were really possible anyway). They can (usually mostly) ignore it and keep playing the game, driving toward its main (surface) objectives. (*Rage 2,* for example, takes the approach of incentivizing players by awarding XP for listening to the logs.)

But—*gosh*! What a lot of people committing a lot of extremely personal information into recordable form there are! Seemingly only equaled by the number of people who are careless with this information and leave it so improbably distributed about the world! What, even, is the logical diegetic justification for the recording in the first place? As an audiolog in *South Park: Stick of Truth* (2014) has it:

> Day 2...So hungry. I've searched for food but the only things I've found are other people's annoying useless audiologs. Why did they bother when they were clearly in terrible danger? Each audio log is more irrelevant and boring than the last.

I don't know if we're overusing this tool. I don't know if players are tiring of it. I don't know if the way people use social media now means that concerns over verisimilitude and the lack of privacy are misplaced. A deeper exploration of this topic would need to examine player responses to specific games in specific contexts and need real data to work with. Perhaps the kind of approaches we see in *Tacoma* and *EGTTR*, where the narrative detail is tagged to a specific place and so feels enmeshed in its discoverability, are more digestible. Maybe we just need to use it a bit less. Or use it more when we can justify both the recording in the first place and how it became lost (and perhaps distributed so broadly, and into specific locations). Maybe we're best off using it in more "cartoony" worlds where the

dramatic tone is less likely to be unraveled. Maybe it's fine just the way it is, and there's really nothing to worry about. I mean, sure, I can stop anytime I want. Right?

19.5 BREADCRUMBED TO PERFECTION (GUIDED CRITICAL PATHS)

Firewatch (2016), *Silent Hill* (2006), *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (2009), *Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor* (2014), *Spider-Man* (2018), *Detroit: Become Human* (2018)…

These are games where the player is led through the world by carefully nonintrusive hand holding, guided by environmentally appropriate clues signaling the direction in which to travel. Breadcrumbing. The beer cans in *Firewatch* when you first find the drinking teenagers, the trails of blood leading to Pyramid Head in *Silent Hill,* the footprints you follow in *Shadow of Mordor* when tracking Gollum. They show the way diegetically—within the logic of the storyworld. Instead of breaking immersion with a game design instruction, these breadcrumbed signs feel logically part of the world the player is projecting into. Better even than that, they task the players with interpretation. Stay vigilant, and the game will help you. Stay alert, and you will see the game isn't talking to you—you're talking to each other. The more you give, the more you get. Now you're doubly immersed and doubly engaged. Sure, it's been purposefully designed to make you feel this way. The designers don't want you to have to work too hard for these guiding signs, or they're no longer guiding signs—which is their primary function. But this tool just makes so much sense!

When/how much to use these breadcrumbs and the particular presentation of them is the issue. Too many footprints (or too effective a tool in showing them in a special vision mode) are always clear, and players fixate at the ground (or on the special vision mode), missing the rest of the game. Worse, they feel as if their agency has gone. Now they feel like rats obediently following droplets of cheese. Where's the fun in that? There aren't any decisions for players to make here. You're putting a lot of pressure on the end of that journey to be worthwhile, and, as all wise people know, the pleasure is always—or should be—far more in the journey than in the destination. Players need space to put *themselves* into the game, to speculate, even to be wrong, and to feel smart about how they look beyond the obvious. Maybe different types of breadcrumbs, perhaps different footprints depending on the type of creature a player wishes to pursue is something to explore—making them feel like a hunter, giving player choice, and

even being suggestive of the type of gameplay that might be connected to the end of the hunt. Big footprints, big creature at the end of them. Unrecognized footprints, something never seen before at the end of them.

19.6 I AM BOTH HELPFUL AND ABSENT (WALKIE-TALKIE VOICE)

Portal (2007), *BioShock 2* (2010), *Portal 2* (2011), *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel* (2014), *Wolfenstein: The New Order* (2014), *We were Here* (2017), *Far Cry 5* (2019).

These are games where players hear “real-time” guiding instructions meshed in with contextual narrative triggered by place, meshed in too with backstory and character development. Distinct from audio logs, the “walkie-talkie” diegetic voice isn’t a fragment of the past, it’s audio played in the present moment, triggered by spatial and/or temporal context. As with audio logs and breadcrumbing, the game isn’t stopped, it’s facilitated by this narrative design tool. Again, it aids immersion and engagement. Players aren’t taken out of the world—no need to check a menu screen for where you’re supposed to be going or to have ugly nondiegetic instruction text (GO X! DO Y!)—the voice is telling you—and the voice isn’t just a voice, it’s a character developing in front of your ears (note to editor—I say roll with it) developing in line with the way you push deeper into the story. But it’s a character that needs no lip-synching or AI pathing, or keeping annoyingly alive in perpetual escort missions. Huge wins! Sure, these voices seem to know an awful lot and might choose to talk over intense combat, which can make it hard to focus on nuance. And maybe they could be more useful if they were getting their hands dirty down in the weeds with you, but they’re company, right? With some care, these problems (*why you so knowy? why you only help from afar? Or if you’re here, why do you not look like a human?*) are ones writers can often deftly side-step. If the framework is set up right—like *Portal*—what’s there to side-step? There you can just lean into your set up.

But the problem to be most wary of is, I think, the rat following cheese problem outlined above. If there’s an *Avengers* game (there is) and Thor is in it (it looks like he is) and you are playing as Thor (seems likely) and you are told “Go to X! Collect Y! Do more stuff! And more!” there’s a real danger you might start to feel not very Thorlike. *I’m an ancient Norse god with the power to wield lightning! I can do anything I want, so long as I’m obeying orders from someone else.* Fetch little Thor doggie! Fetch! Now I don’t mean to cast aspersions. For all I know this is a problem, the writers

of that game are well on top of. But I'm pretty certain it's something they have considered and had to contend with—applying care and skill to finesse. That's also not to suggest this is a problem with a main character who is a god. It's no less important for Lara to be felt to have agency. Even in *The Stick of Truth*, players don't want to feel as if they are carrying out instructions.

19.7 MIDPOINT TRANSITION

If knowing tropes is a way to know how to know an audience, then the audience knows this too. Contemporary audiences are voracious consumers of story, in many different forms. Contemporary audiences are busy discussing tropes on forums and exploring them on web searches (https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/OverdosedTropes). Popular culture is highly populated. If your audience is familiar with the tropes you're working with, some part of the satisfaction you think you're giving them is unavoidably lessened. The trope can get worn out from overuse. At which point, what do you do? Change them up? Yes. Retire them for a while? Yes. Use others? Yes. Innovate? Yes.

We can look to innovate on existing tropes. We could explore audio-logs that are solely or mostly found in places we logically expect them to be found (buried in personal technical devices, or workstations, or servers) and are found (solely or mostly) as a single cache. Perhaps they're encrypted (maybe even meaningfully so with gameplay attached to that) and only become decrypted piecemeal over time, perhaps in relation to being at specific locations (because technology)—retaining the sense of player agency and spatial connection bound up in their revelation. Perhaps we later find another single cache or two belonging to other characters, which can also only be decrypted piecemeal over time through spatial connections, which casts a whole new light on the original story we'd been following through a different character. Essentially the kind of thing we're doing now, but with more robust logic and finding a way to keep the hard-won benefits of this narrative design tool.

We could look at what amnesia does to retain a player–avatar connection and look at other ways to uphold that connection while still keeping the avatar-to-player information route constrained (see Press X to Maybe Move below). But we could also try to innovate along less well-worn paths and see what new tropes we can devise—for others, in turn, to innovate away from in future. Below are some thoughts on potential innovations in a variety of areas.

19.8 PRESS X TO MAYBE MOVE (CONFLICT BETWEEN PLAYER AND AVATAR)

In *Octodad* (2010), players fight with the controls in order to try to get their octopus, disguised as a human dad, to perform everyday tasks like walking across a room to open a door. An octopus is not best suited to a human body or environment, and so much of the play involves a kind of battle with the controller. But what if we explored this further? Beyond merely controls, what if we developed avatars that weren't always responsive?

What if the avatar was only partially compliant, and had their own psychological agendas the player was attempting to negotiate. I've recently been developing some analog wargames (for Worthington Publishing) where one of the key design elements in play is the sense of chaos in battle, and only the partial responsiveness players might expect from their units. This, it seems to me, explores a key facet of conflict in history. Units in battle seldom did exactly what commanders wanted them to do exactly when they wanted them to do it. Lines of communication, preparation, initiative, and unexpected events are all hallmarks of battle at least as much as unit numbers and capabilities. In effect, commanders are managing resources and expectations. What if we imported some of that philosophy into narrative-driven games? We might find an intriguing source of conflict between character and avatar and give the player some engaging problems to wrestle with. This would recast the player away from the sheepdog, to the shepherd.

19.9 DRILLING DOWN INTO THE SANDBOX

Sandbox games operate on the axis of spatial exploration. Go far! See much! Perhaps even try to see all! (Do not attempt this if playing *No Man's Sky* (2016).) But what if we drilled down into the sandbox instead of roaming for breadth? There we might operate on an axis of connections rather than on accumulation. It's not true that sandbox games are only concerned with accumulating breadth. They are also concerned with connections; they would struggle for any kind of dramatic payoffs otherwise. But what if we detached from the breadth to bring the connections into finer focus? This is the kind of approach Sam Barlow effectively advocates with the narrative design of *Her Story* (2015). It's also the kind of approach he articulated at a narrative design panel I hosted in Albany NY in April 2019. This is an approach we see in *The Return of the Obra Dinn* (2018). It's the approach I've taken in my own in-development *Super Upbeat (It Isn't)*. AAA may have become fixated with the visual elements of storytelling,

but narrative design tools are coming into play in indie development for us to focus on conceptual elements. *Papers Please* (2013) might have been made many years earlier than it was. It didn't need technology to open up doors for us. It needed us (well, let's be honest—Lucas Pope) to stop and think more clearly. Same with *Undertale* (2015). It wasn't a concept being dragged around on a leash by expensive art. It was a concept in full control of its art. We see this in *Oxenfree* (2016) too. We don't need those close-ups. The voices, the dynamic dialogue system, and the occasional photographed stills (in conjunction with the actual writing and game design) are enough.

But this is to tangentialize a little. What I think is special is this narrative design focused on giving player agency through exploring preexisting connections—connections the player uncovers, rather than forges. This isn't to be confused with mystery story structures that we've had in games at least since *Myst* (1993). We now have structures that are more than linear paths. *Wait—we've had this stuff in analog for ages—haven't you played the board game Sherlock Holmes: Consulting Detective* (1981)? *In that game, you make choices on where to take your investigation, and that is tiered—meaning you can't access certain story nodes without passing through others. It's still a path, but it's multilinear (at points) and gated.* Yes. And you (me?) are right. But we didn't previously have a player-facing digital visual language to accompany that kind of multi linear and tiered narrative design. Did we? Even if we did, perhaps what *Her Story* gives us is more search engine than a visual narrative design tool. Nevertheless, I see a throughline from *Her Story* narrative design into *The Invisible Hours* (2017), and *Obra Dinn.* More importantly, I see more games where the narrative design is working in sympathy with the medium of games, instead of to one side, or against it.

19.10 REALLY TIME? (EMBRACING REAL TIME)

Real time is a key design metric in real-time strategy games and MMOs. But what about narrative-driven games? *Take this McGuffin to Planet X superfast or the whole universe will collapse! You have a chance to save Love Interest if you get to Y in the next 2 minutes! You can join our gang of baddies if you can beat the track record—if you don't, never come back because we're strikingly mean.* And then proceed to pootle around the galaxy doing side quests leveling up for as long as you want. Or fail to save Love Interest or complete the course in time and try the missions again. Why not? It's your game! Plus these are well understood and reliable conventions for players and designers. Messing with them comes with all manner of risks.

It's not as if this has never been explored. *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask (*2000), and *Lifeline* (2015) are two examples that come to mind. But it feels as if there is still plenty to explore here. What if we more broadly embraced those risks? We might conceive of games where we could deliver on concepts like urgency and single-shot deals. Sandbox games might "come find you" and force you back into the main plot flow. A tight time-frame might encourage replayability, so game time might still balance production/business concerns. For sure, the issue of "dead man walking" would need consideration—a game that has been lost some time ago and the player unknowingly has no idea and keeps playing anyway unable to catch up against the clock. But a real-time clock doesn't necessarily mean at all points racing against it. It might mean working with its constraints, perhaps with a limited duration to skill up or gear up for the main quest: a quest you can make easier for yourself but will still never be impossible at the point you finally embark upon it. And even if the game is a race, there are solutions to throw at the dead man walking problem. But this is to get too far into the specifics. The point is that we might be able to do more with real time than we do and find aspects to innovate on.

19.11 CUT TO SHAPE (EDITING)

Games such as *Thirty Flights of Loving* (2012) and *Virginia* (2016) remind us: We Can Cut. We don't always have to walk (sometimes literally) players through the continuity to get them from something of interest at A to something of interest at B. In fact, we have a convention for this too: teleporting/quick travel that may have, to a greater or lesser extent, a narrative wrapper—like a train, a subway, a carriage, Timmy from *South Park*. But here, these are systemic elements the player decides when to activate. No wonder we like them: player choice. But sometimes, we can get something from invasively controlling the narrative-driven experience, to deliver something with a greater control over pacing. No wonder we have been reluctant to do this. Plenty of design-minded readers may have felt a ghost walking over their grave at the notion of players losing control and with little or no warning. (Mind you, cinematic teams still do this in many games, just not always with aggressive cutting—usually within a sense of continuity.) I don't wish to dismiss this. Cutting to continuity is a practice that does court considerable risks. But then so does never doing it. *BioShock*'s big moment when the player loses weapons and power-ups would never have come to fruition without some risk taking and thinking like a writer.

Ultimately, there are many different types of games to make, and many different types of players, so we should be wary of formulating design mantras that ossify impressed by their own sense of aphoristic completeness. Editing gameplay, making editing, storytelling part of gameplay, and sharpening the story as a result is not a tool to use without caution. Nor is it a tool for every, or perhaps even most games. But it is a tool. And it can be useful. And I think perhaps we might use it more than we do.

19.12 NO ONE WINS TOGETHER (COLLABORATIVE PLAY)

Analog games, "story games" as tabletop games like *Fiasco* (2003), *Microscope* (2011), *Downfall* (2015), and *Dialect* (2017) are often termed, show us a kind of game where players tell stories together where there is either no express winner, or winning really amounts to enjoying spending time together and telling a story that brings satisfaction. In fact, we are also seeing this in board games like *Fog of Love* (2017). It may be hard to see how this type of arrangement might work within the medium of video games, but that doesn't mean it isn't worth consideration. We have co-op games, often in the form of team shooters, such as *Fortnite* (2017) and *Overwatch* (2016). We have analog games, such as *Werewolf* (1986) that we can imagine existing in VR. We also have games like *A Way Out* (2018) that explore collaboration between two players. But what might a story game in digital form look like? Would it only ever be a second best option to combat distance between friends, or might there be advantages in hiding backend admin systems within the game—in the same kind of way that we see in analog–digital hybrids like *Mansions of Madness* (second edition, 2016), *Chronicles of Crime* (2018), *or Detective: A Modern Board Game* (2018)?

19.13 WHAT WAS THAT ALL ABOUT?

Tropes exist. They work. We use them. After a time they may not work quite so well—we wear them thin. We develop new tropes. Perhaps even better ones. Perhaps far better suited to games than other media. They work. We use them. We wear them thin. Stories, games, and experiences take place in the consciences of humans. With humans, things are always changing. Life does that to us. Art, if it's to have relevance (and I'm not sure it can be art if it doesn't), must change too. It must change with people: Culture is a dynamic operator.

Stories break down when audiences get ahead of them. Something that worked on an audience in the 1960s will not necessarily work in the 2020s,

and certainly not necessarily in the same way. Try rewatching Hitchcock. Some of this is about being a victim of his own success. People take, borrow, use, are inspired by…and storytelling techniques shift in their cultural value and their effectiveness with audiences. Audiences need to be engaged—thrilled—surprised. If you only ever use what works, it won't always work. Your audience sees where things are going. Audiences are smart these days. We devour more media than ever before. We know how stories work. We have other distractions. Capture us or lose us. So, if it works, use it. But also, if it works, break it. Because someone else will.

19.14 EXERCISES

1. What other tropes in games writing can you identify not outlined above?

2. Explore the five tropes outlined above. How might some, or all of the problems they seek to address be confronted or downplayed but in a fresh way, to breathe new life into the tropes, or to side-step the tropes entirely?

3. What other areas can you see the potential for innovation?

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CALL OF JUAREZ: GUNSLINGER Script Sample *Screenplay Format*

FADE IN:

(The cutscenes are depicted in sepia-colored dime novelstyle illustrations.)

CUTSCENE - ABILENE, KANSAS - DAY

One hot summer afternoon a DRIFTER appears on horse-back in Abilene, Kansas. He's dusty from the trail and his clothes are old-fashioned and threadbare. He looks to be from another era as he rides past tall, turn of the century buildings

He slowly rides down a paved street, his horse startled by the horn and roar of a Model T as it rumbles by.

SUPER - ABILENE, KANSAS - 1910

He arrives at the Bull's Head Saloon, an old ram-shackle structure that dates back to the previous century. He ties his mount to an electric street light and limps inside.

INT. THE BULL'S HEAD SALOON - DAY
The bartender looks at him with surprise and dim recognition. The place isn't very busy.

There's a card game going on between a twenty-year-old named DWIGHT, a thirty-year-old self-professed tough guy named JACK, and an older, inebriated saddle tramp by the name of STEVE.
MOLLY, a pretty barmaid pushing forty, looks bored as she watches the game.

All stare at the dusty bedraggled drifter as he bellies up to the bar. The bartender, BEN, a weathered man in his midsixties, squints at him.

BEN
Don't I know you, sir?

DRIFTER
Don't believe so. I haven't been here in many years. Name's Silas Greaves.

DWIGHT
(thrilled)
Silas Greaves? The Bounty Hunter?

SILAS
Used to be.

Ben narrows his eyes with suspicion.

BEN
What are you doing here in Abilene?

SILAS
Just passing through. Got a little business to take care of.

DWIGHT

Well, sir, it would be an honor if
you would allow me to buy you a
beer.

SILAS

Hell, son, it would be my honor to
drink it.

Silas sits at the poker table and Molly hands him a beer and offers him a smile.

MOLLY

I'm Molly.

DWIGHT

I'm Dwight, sir. That's Jack and
Steve. Ben's behind the bar.

Close on Ben as nods to Silas.

Young Dwight can barely contain himself he's so excited.

DWIGHT (CONT'D)

I bet you got some great stories.

SILAS

A couple.

JACK

Any of 'em true?

MOLLY

Jack, be nice.

SILAS

A few.

DWIGHT
(excited)
What about your shoot-out with
Henry's Plummer's gang. In Bannack,
Montana!

Dwight holds up a book and the pages turn, showing illustrations of a young Silas Greaves facing down a half dozen men.

DWIGHT (CONT'D)
Is that where you started as a
bounty hunter? That’s what it says
here in this dime novel.

SILAS
Don’t believe everything you read
in those dime novels, boy. First
man I hunted was back when I was
riding with Billy the Kid.

DWIGHT
You knew Billy the Kid?

Cut to an illustration of Billy with a big shit eating grin, guns in both hands.

SILAS (V.O.)
Damn right. That scrawny son of a
bitch had no fear. Wouldn't back
down for nobody.

Cut to Billy pulling the badge off a dead lawman.

DWIGHT (V.O.)
I heard he collected the tin stars
off any crooked lawmen who crossed
him.

Cut to Billy and his Regulators riding into battle, dust kicked up by their horses as they blast away with their pistols.

BEN (V.O.)
It was a war, boy. The Lincoln County war and Billy promised his Regulators would take the life of every bastard who helped bushwhack John Tunstall.

Cut back to the Saloon where Silas regales the group with his tale.

SILAS
The Kid had a big chip on his shoulder and a hair trigger temper. That made him dangerous as hell.

FADE TO BLACK:

SUPER: CHAPTER ONE: ONCE UPON A TIME IN STINKING SPRINGS.

FADE IN:

GAMEPLAY

EXT. A DIRT ROAD - DAY

From the first person perspective of Silas Greaves, the player makes his way up a dusty road past an abandoned barn overgrown with weeds.

SILAS (V.O.)
It was about 30 years ago. Billy was hiding out in an abandoned farm near Stinking Springs.

SUPER - Stinking Springs, NM. Dec 23, 1880

The sky is a deep blue and dotted with cumulous clouds.

SILAS (V.O.)
I threw in with the Kid because the man I had sworn vengeance on was riding with Billy's enemies. But before I tell you why I wanted that son of a bitch dead, let me tell you what happened that day. I was heading back to the hideout when suddenly I had this funny feeling…

STEVE (V.O.)
Funny ha ha?

SILAS (V.O.)
No, Steve, the other kind of funny.

There are distant gunshots then two voices on the road ahead.

POSSE MEMBER 1
You heard Pat. We need to stay here and keep an eye on the road!

POSSE MEMBER 2
That’s not fair. We’re missing all the fun.

SILAS (V.O.)
I knew those two morons would never let me through. I had no choice.

Silas approaches the two look outs and they reach for their guns.

POSSE MEMBER 1
Who's that? Is he with us?

POSSE MEMBER 2

What the hell?! Shoot that son of a bitch!

Silas dispatches the two shooters and approaches a ridge that overlooks an abandoned farmhouse. The GUNFIRE is louder now and interspersed with ANGRY shouts.

BEN (V.O.)

Was it Pat Garrett's posse?

SILAS (V.O.)

Indeed it was. Garrett and his army of deputies had surrounded the entire homestead.

POSSE MEMBER 3

Keep on shooting! Don't let them catch a breath! Fire!!

SILAS (V.O.)

I decided to help Billy and the boys out.

Silas starts shooting.

POSSE MEMBER 4

Hey! We have one behind us!

POSSE MEMBER 3

They’re coming from the rear!

Silas grabs cover and battles the posse as they turn and engage him.

SILAS (V.O.)

As the Governor of New Mexico was paying for the Kid’s apprehension, Garrett was able to hire every gun hand in Lincoln County.

Silas fights his way closer twowards the farmhouse.

SILAS (V.O.)
I knew that going through that
front door meant putting my butt in
a shooting gallery. So I decided
to get sneaky.

Silas sneaks around from the other side, ducking through some broken wood slats on ramshackle stable. He catches his enemies from behind and they run for cover, panicked.

SILAS (V.O.)
Garrett's men were running around
like a bunch of chickens with their
heads cut off.

POSSE MEMBER 5
Watch out! He's one of them!

POSSE MEMBER 6
Goddammit! He's right behind us!

POSSE MEMBER 7
Where the hell's Garrett!? He's
never around when you need him!

As Silas fights his way forward.

SILAS (V.O.)
Luckily, these shooters Garrett
hired weren't the sharpest tools in
the shed. A lot of them were
saddle tramps or sodbusters or
drunken drifters looking to make a
few bucks. Still, one of them
reached the water tower.

A man with a rifle shoots at Silas from on high.

SILAS (V.O.)
Not a bad idea. It would be a turkey shoot from up there.

After dodging the shot, Silas cuts down the man in the tower and climbs up to get a better vantage point.

SILAS (V.O.)
The right position is very important. Personally, I prefer to be on top.

Molly figures that Silas is flirting with her and flirts back.

MOLLY (V.O.)
Oh you do, do you?

SILAS (V.O.)
Indeed, darling, but where was I? Oh, yeah.

Silas battles his way forward and around to the back of the farmhouse.

SILAS (V.O.)
Then I heard a friendly voice, yelling at me from a window.

BILLY THE KID
Back door! We'll cover you!

SILAS (V.O.)
(mimicking Billy's voice)
Head for the back door! We got you covered!

As Silas reaches the rear of the house...

SILAS (V.O.)
Truth be told, things weren't much better behind the house.

POSSE MEMBER 8
Try aiming, you idiots!

POSSE MEMBER 9
Get 'em!

POSSE MEMBER 8
Watch your flank!

SILAS (V.O.)
I cut their numbers in half, but that just made the ones that were left twice as mad.

Three members of the posse unload on Silas, but don't manage to hit him.

SILAS (V.O.)
They made up for their lack of skill with a seemingly endless supply of ammo.

When the last member of the posse in the rear area is planted...

SILAS (V.O.)
It was a bit of a slog, but I finally fought my way to the back door.

Silas enters the house.

SILAS (V.O.)
And like that, I was inside, none the worse for wear.

Silas heads up some stairs and sees a man shooting from a rear window, shouting invective at the men he's blasting.

SILAS (V.O.)
I passed Dirty Dave.

DIRTY DAVE
You'll all be dead, you sons of bitches!!! Deader than a rat in a trap! How about that?! You like that?!

Silas continues to the second floor and opens a door.

SILAS (V.O.)
And upstairs I found Billy and Charlie Bowdre. Billy looked at me and said, "About time amigo. Grab a gun and get to the window!"

Billy throws a Winchester to Silas and for a moment the image freezes, the Winchester hanging in mid-air.

JACK (V.O.)
Wait! So you were friends with Billy the Kid?

Movement begins again as Silas catches and aims his rifle out a window.

SILAS (V.O.)
Yeah. Sort of.

Silas starts picking off enemies from the second floor window and there's a lot of them.

SILAS (V.O.)
Anyway, we were surrounded by
dozens of deputized shooters who
wanted to do us harm.

As fast as he takes them out, more deputies come running up, blasting the house.

SILAS (V.O.)
I'm telling you, Garrett's men were
dropping like flies but they just
kept on coming.

POSSE MEMBER 10
Billy's worth five hundred dollars!
Dead or alive!

POSSE MEMBER 11
Where'd the hell Garrett get to?!
He's missing all the action!

SILAS (V.O.)
That's when Charlie got hit.

The camera focuses on Charlie Bowdre as he's hit, blood splattering in slow-mo. Back to regular speed as Charlie quickly drops to the floor.

SILAS (V.O.)
"They're catching us in the
crossfire!" shouted Billy. "Get to
the other side!"

Silas hurries to the window that Charlie recently occupied and fires on Garrett's men.

SILAS (V.O.)
I don't know how many of those
cocksuckers I personally put down,
but it was pretty clear, even to

Billy, that maybe discretion was
the better part of valor.

DWIGHT (V.O.)
What's that mean?

SILAS (V.O.)
It means, that it was time to cut
and run.

A huge volume bullets suddenly tear into the house, ripping everything to shreds.

SILAS (V.O.)
"They got a gatling!" Billy
shouted. "Get the horses and bring
them round back. I'll draw their
attention." He directed that order
at me and I thought why the hell do
I have to do it?

Following Billy's orders, Silas heads down the stairs.

SILAS (V.O.)
But I went anyway. Dumbass that I
was back then.

Silas bolts out the back door and a couple of gunmen are waiting for him.

POSSE MEMBER 12
He's making a run for it!

As Silas cuts his opponents down...

SILAS (V.O.)
Many would have fled in my place.
But I had that false sense of
invincibility that many young men
have. Like Jack here.

JACK (V.O.)
(Angry)
What are you saying, old man?

STEVE (V.O.)
Jack, he's just joshing with ya
now.

JACK (V.O.)
He better be.

MOLLY (V.O.)
Mr. Greaves, please continue.

SILAS (V.O.)
Please call me Silas, ma'am. Now
where was I?

DWIGHT
You were heading for the horses.

SILAS (V.O.)
Right. Making my way past a passel
of fallen foes.

As Silas fights his way to the stables...

DWIGHT (V.O.)
Sounds like Garrett hired a whole
regiment of hired guns.

SILAS (V.O.)
Yeah, and just when I thought I was
done with 'em, more of these
hapless bastards would pop up.

Silas finally enters the stables.

SILAS (V.O.)
Finally I reached the stables. And that's when I met Sheriff Pat Garrett.

DWIGHT (V.O.)
I read that you went toe to toe with him, sir. That backstabbing bastard with that tacked on tin star.

Cut to a shot from high above as we see Greaves and Garret face each other down below, slowly circling, hands hovering over their guns.

DWIGHT (V.O.)
You challenged him to a showdown.

SILAS (V.O.)
You read that in a dime novel?

DWIGHT (V.O.)
It said he showed no fear as he took your measure with eyes like a rattlesnake.

Cut to the SHOWDOWN. The player faces Garret from Greaves' first person perspective.

The player can decide to wait until Garret reaches before he draws. (To draw first would be dishonorable.) After the player successfully guns Garret down...

DWIGHT (V.O.)
And that you killed him in a fair fight!

SILAS (V.O.)
Is that what that penny dreadful said? No, boy, that ain't what I meant when I said I MET Pat Garrett. So let me start again…

The scene freezes and becomes sepia-colored. It looks like film rewinding as Silas walks backwards in fast motion away from the stables.

The forward action continues again as Silas, once more, heads into the stables.

SILAS (V.O.)
I finally reached those damn stables, stepped inside and…

Thunk! Silas is hit from behind and knocked sideways. As his vision begins to dim...

SILAS (V.O.)
Last thing I heard was Garrett's voice: "That's not Billy."

DWIGHT (V.O.)
And? Go on! How did it end?

SILAS (V.O.)
End? Boy, that was just the beginning! My throat's a might dry, however, and I'm in need of some lubrication.

CUTSCENE - BULL'S HEAD SALOON - ABILENE, KANSAS - DAY

Silas continues to spin his tale for the folks in the saloon after he's handed a fresh drink.

DWIGHT

So what happened? Did Garrett arrest you?

SILAS

Yeah, after I came to. Bastard had clocked me with his Colt.

JACK

And the Kid surrendered?

Cut to Billy the Kid in chains and surrounded by armed deputies. Still there's a cocky smile on his face.

SILAS

When he realized there was no getting out of there alive.

JACK

So they locked you up in Lincoln?

Cut to Lincoln's main drag and the gallows that are under construction.

JACK (CONT'D)

Indeed they did. Sentenced me to hang right along with the Kid.

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APPENDIX B

Bratz: Forever Diamondz Script Sample *Modified Screenplay Format*

SF3–5: Special Feature 3–5 – Fashion Show Gameplay

Task Detail:
Player will need to enter the fashion show from the now open backstage door. Player will then complete the fashion show gameplay mix of posing and photography.

Dialogue:
(The task dialog for the fashion show will play over the actual gameplay, in the style of a show commentator. Byron Powell will not be visible for the duration of the task.)

Model 1 approaches pose point#1
BYRON POWELL
Alright, let's show these people the hottest fashion in Manhattan.

Model 1 approaches pose point#2
BYRON POWELL
They need to see all the angles – hit it.

Model 1 approaches pose point#3
BYRON POWELL
Own the stage, girl. You look great.

Model 2 approaches pose point#1
BYRON POWELL
Okay, time for you to show us what you've got.

Model 2 approaches pose point#2
BYRON POWELL
Spotlight's on you!

Model 2 approaches pose point#3
BYRON POWELL
This is it – make it a good one!

[Successful pose dialogue will be randomly selected from the following selection every time the player succeeds in performing a pose move from the current pose list]

Successful pose#1
BYRON POWELL
Nice!

Successful pose#2
BYRON POWELL
Woo!

Successful pose#3
BYRON POWELL
Gorgeous!

APPENDIX C

Barks and Task Spreadsheet

Wendy Despain

C.1 MINIGAME BARKS FROM *BRATZ: FOREVER DIAMONDZ*

MGD: Mini-game dialog
MGDP: Pairs

Successful pair matching—Cloe#1
CLOE
Great!

Successful pair matching—Cloe#2
CLOE
Yes!

Successful pair matching—Cloe#3
CLOE
Sweet!

Successful pair matching—Cloe#4
CLOE
Oh yeah!

Successful pair matching—Jade#1
JADE
Woo!

Successful pair matching—Jade#2
JADE
Hey, yeah!

Successful pair matching—Jade#3
JADE
I can do this.

Successful pair matching—Jade#4
JADE
Yay!

Successful pair matching—Sasha#1
SASHA
Right on.

Successful pair matching—Sasha#2
SASHA
I knew it!

Successful pair matching—Sasha#3
SASHA
Phew!

Successful pair matching—Sasha#4
SASHA
Hey, nice!

Successful pair matching—Yasmin#1
YASMIN
Perfect!

Successful pair matching—Yasmin#2
YASMIN
Sweet!

Successful pair matching—Yasmin#3
YASMIN
Alright!

Successful pair matching—Yasmin#4
YASMIN
Woo!

Unsuccessful pair matching—Cloe#1
CLOE
That's so lame

Unsuccessful pair matching—Cloe#2
CLOE
Oh no!

Unsuccessful pair matching—Cloe#3
CLOE
Oh man!

Unsuccessful pair matching—Cloe#4
CLOE
Bummer!

Unsuccessful pair matching—Jade#1
JADE
Oh, come on.

Unsuccessful pair matching—Jade#2
JADE
Hey, wait!

Unsuccessful pair matching—Jade#3
JADE
No way!

Unsuccessful pair matching—Jade#4
JADE
Awww.

Unsuccessful pair matching—Sasha#1
SASHA
Wait?

Unsuccessful pair matching—Sasha#2
SASHA
But I?

Unsuccessful pair matching—Sasha#3
SASHA
Argh!

Unsuccessful pair matching—Sasha#4
SASHA
Hey!

Unsuccessful pair matching—Yasmin#1
YASMIN
I say?

Unsuccessful pair matching—Yasmin#2
YASMIN
No!

Unsuccessful pair matching—Yasmin#3
YASMIN
Come on.

Unsuccessful pair matching—Yasmin#4
YASMIN
Ouch!

Unsuccessful pair matching with only four cards remaining—Cloe#1
CLOE
Noooo!

Unsuccessful pair matching with only four cards remaining—Cloe#2
CLOE
I'm so gonna lose!

Unsuccessful pair matching with only four cards remaining—Cloe#3
CLOE
That's so uncool!

Unsuccessful pair matching with only four cards remaining—Cloe#4
CLOE
Whatever!

Unsuccessful pair matching with only four cards remaining—Jade#1
JADE
Wait a minute!

Unsuccessful pair matching with only four cards remaining—Jade#2
JADE
Hey!

Unsuccessful pair matching with only four cards remaining—Jade#3
JADE
But I thought?

Unsuccessful pair matching with only four cards remaining—Jade#4
JADE
Oh no!

Unsuccessful pair matching with only four cards remaining—Sasha#1
SASHA
Gasp Can't be!

Unsuccessful pair matching with only four cards remaining—Sasha#2
SASHA
No way!

Unsuccessful pair matching with only four cards remaining—Sasha#3
SASHA
Hrm. I can still do this.

Unsuccessful pair matching with only four cards remaining—Sasha#4
SASHA
Uh oh!

Unsuccessful pair matching with only four cards remaining—Yasmin#1
YASMIN
Oh dear!

Unsuccessful pair matching with only four cards remaining—Yasmin#2
YASMIN
(worried) Oooohhh!

Unsuccessful pair matching with only four cards remaining—Yasmin#3
YASMIN
(sanguine) Bad karma!

Unsuccessful pair matching with only four cards remaining—Yasmin#4
YASMIN
No way!

Cloe wins#1
CLOE
I can't be beat!

Cloe wins#2
CLOE
I'm too good!

Cloe wins#3
CLOE
I'm so sweeeeet!

Cloe wins#4
CLOE
I'm unstoppable!

Jade wins#1
JADE
I rock!

Jade wins#2
JADE
Whoohoo!

Jade wins#3
JADE
Winner!

Jade wins#4
JADE
Oh yeah, I'm good.

Sasha wins#1
SASHA
You know it.

Sasha wins#2
SASHA
Take that!

Sasha wins#3
SASHA
That's what I'm talking about.

Sasha wins#4
SASHA
Exceptional!

Yasmin wins#1
YASMIN
Perfection!

Yasmin wins#2
YASMIN
Alright!

Yasmin wins#3
YASMIN
squeals with glee

Yasmin wins#4
YASMIN
Watch me win again!

Cloe wins perfect#1
CLOE
That's embarrassing

Cloe wins perfect#2
CLOE
Perfection is my middle name

Cloe wins perfect#3
CLOE
I'm just too good

Cloe wins perfect#4
CLOE
Perfect!

Jade wins perfect#1
JADE
Way cool!

Jade wins perfect#2
JADE
Perfect!

Jade wins perfect#3
JADE
I'm the best!

Jade wins perfect#4
JADE
All the way.

Sasha wins perfect#1
SASHA
Exactly!

Sasha wins perfect#2
SASHA
I knew I could do that.

Sasha wins perfect#3
SASHA
Way to go me!

Sasha wins perfect#4
SASHA
(hushed voice) Stylin'

Yasmin wins perfect#1
YASMIN
Wow, I'm good.

Yasmin wins perfect#2
YASMIN
Look at me go!

Yasmin wins perfect#3
YASMIN
Oh, wow!

Yasmin wins perfect#4
YASMIN
Woohoo!

C.2 Sample Task Spreadsheet

Task Description	Time Estimates (hours)	Milestone Deadline	Approval #1 JD or ZS	Approval #2 AS or ZS	Contacts
6 episode summaries	12	December 15	JD-12/6	AS-12/10	jd@somewhere.com
6 episode summaries	12	January 10	JD-1/3	AS-1/9	as@somewhere.com
2 episode scripts	20	February 29			zs@somewhere.com
2 episode scripts	20	March 15			
2 episode scripts	20	April 15			
2 episode scripts	20	May 15			
2 episode scripts	20	June 15			
2 episode scripts	20	July 15			
Revisions	20	August 1			
Pick-Ups	20	August 15			

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APPENDIX D

Casting Sides for *Call of Juarez*

Haris Orkin

REVEREND RAY

For 20 years, I followed the light and denounced the darkness. Day in and day out, I labored to save lost souls. All for you, Lord! So why have you forsaken me? How could you let this happen? Help me, Lord! Please! Tell me! What do you want from me?

BILLY CANDLE

I'm Billy. Ma would never say who my father was, so... I don't got no last name. She gave me this medallion before I could talk. It's engraved with a candle stick, so that's what kids called me. Candle. Beats spic or pepper gut. Yeah, my Ma's from Mexico. The town I grew up in is just over the border and the folks there are mostly white. Like my stepfather. Thomas. A big, mean son of a bitch who would just as soon backhand me as look at me.

JUAREZ

Don't you see the resemblance, muchacho? I'm your padre. Seventeen years ago, your mama ran off with another man. You were still in her womb. My only son, my pride and joy. I've been searching for you ever since.

JONES

Hey! You wouldn't shoot 'ol Jones, would you? I got nothing against you... We don't need no trouble now!

SHERIFF TIM

My, my... Billy Candle! Been a long time, boy. I don't think Thomas 'll be too pleased to see you. You come back to set things right with him? Fine... (sarcastic) Welcome back. Just don't do anything stupid, son.

UNDERTAKER

Billy Candle! Is that you? Boy, you're growing like a weed! Stand still... Let me take a measure... Hm... Just in case... Well now. Looks like you're as tall as Reverend Ray. If it comes down to it, what do you prefer? Pine...or Oak?

SUZY

Well, Billy Candle! Ain't you a sight for sore eyes! Here in town and you don't come see your old friend, Suzy? Get your skinny butt up here 'fore I change my mind.

CHARACTER LIST AND CASTING SPECS FOR *CALL OF JUAREZ*

Fifty-six characters

One thousand twenty-seven lines of dialog

- **Reverend Ray**—Age 45–55. Intense, gruff, dangerous. Texas accent. A reformed gunfighter who now preaches the word of God. Think Tommy Lee Jones or Sam Elliot. A fire and brimstone, holier than thou son of a bitch who believes he's the Lord's instrument of justice. Underlying all his self-righteousness is a prodigious amount of guilt and pain. (131 lines)
- **Billy**—Age 17. His mother's Mexican, his stepfather's white. He grew up in Texas, so he has a Texas accent with a touch of his mother's Mexican influence. He's angry, he's afraid, he's full of bluster, he's insecure. He's a rebel without a cause and he's right on the cusp of becoming a man. (182 lines)
- **Juarez**—Age 45–55. Hispanic. A Mexican warlord. He can be charming when he needs to be, yet he's clearly an evil son of a bitch who can explode into a rage at any provocation. (81 lines)
- **Jones**—Age 35–55. Farmer. Texas/rural accent. (19 lines)
- **Sheriff Tim**—Age 35–45. A small-town Sheriff. Earnest and reasonable, but can lay down the law when he needs to. (16 lines)

- **Undertaker**—Age 35–55. Unctuous and a little too cheerful, which makes him kind of creepy. (5 lines)
- **Suzie**—Age 18–25. A dance hall girl/prostitute. Older than her years. Bitter and cynical, but can turn on the charm to make a buck. (13 lines)
- **Buck/Clyde Forrester**—Age 40–50. Dangerous, mean, uncouth, but not stupid. A bully. Runs the local saloon. Texas accent. (21 lines)
- **Crazy Frank**—Age 55–65. A Civil War veteran who hasn't been the same since Gettysburg. Talks to his rifle. Calls it Lucy. (11 lines)
- **Marisa/Intro**—Age 25–30. Billy's mother. Mexican accent. Warm and nurturing. (2 lines)
- **Mrs. Powell**—Age 25–35. Sheriff's wife. Proper. (5 lines)
- **Ned the Plague**—Age 30–45. A hired gun. A psychopath. A perfect Jack Palance role. (18 lines)
- **Lieutenant Parker (Officer)**—Age 35. By the book military guy. (5 lines)
- **Train Driver/Engineer**—Age 30–50. Overly talkative. Nervous. Afraid. (6 lines)
- **Train Boss**—Age 35–45. Blustery. A fast-talker. A horse trader. Not up for a fight unless he doesn't have a choice. (3 lines)
- **Farmer**—Age 55–65. Kind of a geezer. Gruff. Like Walter Brennen. (16 lines)
- **Chat**—Age 35–40. Ranch Foreman. Pushes a little too hard. A quick temper. Doesn't take any guff. (8 lines)
- **Ferguson**—Age 50–60. Ranch Owner. Molly's father. Rigid. Protective. (7 lines)
- **Molly Ferguson**—Age 18. Young and a little spoiled. Idealistic and blunt in the way teenagers can be. (10 lines)
- **Ty Stewart/Butch**—Age 40. A hired gun. Veteran of the Civil War. A hard case and pragmatist who doesn't believe in anything but gold. (11 lines)
- **Tom Manson**—Age 40–50. A Civil War era officer from Virginia who lost all sense of honor. A gentleman with the soul of a killer. (23 lines)

- **McClyde 1**—Age 33. Just as mean, but slightly smarter than his brother. Hails from Nebraska. (5 lines)
- **McClyde 2**—Age 34. Mean and stupid. (2 lines)
- **Calm Water (Hermit)**—Age 45–65. An American Indian. Wise and kind in a zen master/Yoda sort of way. (32 lines)
- **Outgrowth (Boy)**—Age 10. Mexican. Outgoing and smart and full of anger and hurt. (20 lines)
- **Narrator (for Introduction).** Grounded and real, Texas accent. (1 line)
- **Bandit 1**—Age 25–45. Gravel voiced, American. (88 lines)
- **Bandit 2**—Age 25–45. Mexican accent. (84 lines)
- **Bandit 3/4**—Age 25–45. Blustery, southern accent. (43 lines)
- **Citizen of Hope 1**—Age 30–50. An Easterner who came west. (5 lines)
- **Citizen of Hope 2**—Age 50–60. Small-town guy, Texas accent. (3 lines)
- **Citizen of Hope 3**—Age 25–35. (2 lines)
- **Cowboy 1**—Age 45–60. Grizzled saddle tramp. (1 line)
- **Cowboy 2**—Age 25–30. On the stupid side. (1 line)
- **Hyena 1**—Age 25–35. A low-life drifter. (3 lines)
- **Hyena 2**—Age 35–45. Whiny, high-strung. (4 lines)
- **Hyena 3**—Age 35–45. Aggressive, pushy. (3 lines)
- **Woman**—Age 30–40. Farmer's wife. (3 lines)
- **Drunk 1**—Age 30–50. Hayseed. (2 lines)
- **Drunk 2**—Age 30–50. Mexican. (1 line)
- **Dying Soldier**—Age 25–35. (2 lines)
- **Passenger 1**—Age 30–50. (4 lines)
- **Passenger 2**—Age 30–50. (2 lines)

- **Passenger 3**—Age 30–50. (2 lines)
- **Woman Passenger**—Age 25–35. (4 lines)
- **Soldier 1**—Age 21–25. (5 lines)
- **Soldier 2**—Age 25–35. (6 lines)
- **Soldier 3**—Age 21–25. (3 lines)
- **Female Hostage**—Age 21–35. (1 line)
- **Dying Officer**—Age 35–45. (3 lines)
- **Rustic 1**—Age 25–30. (23 lines)
- **Rustic 2**—Age 35. (21 lines)
- **Rustic 3**—Age 20–25. (21 lines)
- **Thug 1**—Age 35. Mexican. (4 lines)
- **Thug 2**—Age 25. Mexican. (4 lines)
- **Whore (terrified scream)**—Age 25–35. Excellent screamer.
- **Bandit Shouts**—in voices tab. (27 lines) (Give to Bandit 3 or divide up)

CALL OF JUAREZ SCRIPT SAMPLE FOR AUDITIONS

EXT. NORTHERN MEXICO—DAY

The camera slowly moves forward over a desert landscape. An old Mexican Church can be seen in the distance, obscured by waves of heat rising off the desert floor.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

The legend of the Lost Gold of Juarez has been passed from one generation to the next since the time of Hernando Cortez. It was said to be the ransom for Montezuma, held hostage by the Spanish in the great Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan. The treasure disappeared

soon after the sacking of the city and some believe it's buried near the border town of Juarez. The legend relates that the Aztec Sun God put a curse on the treasure and that all who seek it will find only madness and their own perdition. This avaricious madness has come to be known as... The Call of Juarez.

The camera comes to rest on a headstone over an old grave.

EPISODE ONE

LOADING SCREEN SHOWING AN ARTISTS RENDITION OF BILLY.

He's nineteen, tall, wiry, with dark eyes and hair. He looks part Native American, part Hispanic. His voice has a Texas twang.

BILLY (V.O.)

I'm Billy. Ma would never say who my father was, so I don't got no last name. She gave me this medallion before I could talk. It's engraved with a candle stick, so that's what kid's called me. Candle. Beats spic or pepper gut. Yeah, my Ma's from Mexico. The town I grew up in is just over the border and the folks there are mostly white. Like my stepfather. Thomas. A big, mean son of a bitch who would just as soon backhand me as look at me.

EXT. MOUNTAIN SPRING—DAY

Billy is hiking home, crossing over a stream, and down a trail. The player controls Billy from a

first-person perspective. As the player navigates his way down the rugged trail, we continue to hear Billy's voice.

BILLY (V.O.)

I grew up in a town called Hope. Pretty much the most hopeless place I've ever seen. It's full of drunks and drifters, thieves and liars. And those are the leading citizens. Like my 'dear' step-father who knocked the tar out of me at least once a day, rain or shine. Said he was teaching me how to be a man. But all he taught me is how to take a beatin'. The last time he laid a hand on me was over two years ago.

Billy (the player) continues to work his way down a steep mountain trail.

BILLY

I took off and didn't look back. I left to find my fortune. The legendary Gold of Juarez. Wanted to prove to that S.O.B. that I could be more than he ever was. But the world's a hard place and I didn't find squat. So now I'm back. Hungry. Broke. I don't have nothing. Not even a last name.

When Billy (the player) sees the town of Hope in the distance.

BILLY

Well, there it is...Hope. A haven for outlaws, assholes, and hypocrites.

When Billy (the player) sees Jones' Cabin just down the hill.

BILLY

Jones' cabin! Good place to practice some shootin'...

When Billy gets caught walking onto Jones' property, old JONES, a crusty old farmer chases him off.

JONES

What the heck are you doin'!? This is private property!

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