Play's the Thing: The Art of Video Game Writing

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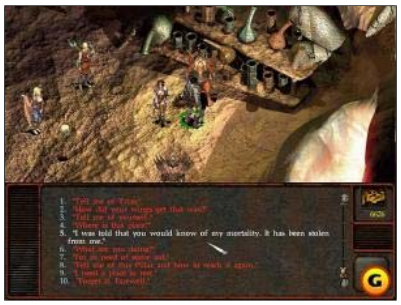
As more gamers begin to come from older and varying backgrounds, one of the biggest complaints that is being leveled at the medium is the absence of good stories. Most critiques continue to complain that video games will never achieve cultural relevance if they continue to trap themselves in the realm of pulp fiction. So why don't game companies just hire a talented writer, print out a few dozen scripts, and make a game with a brilliant plot? The problem is, unfortunately, a bit more complicated than that.

The first issue is that many game designers don't even think their games need plot. Griping about the story of a game is like complaining about the lack of story in chess. Greg Costikyan argues in his essay "I Have No Words & I Must Design" that the two are inherently separate things. A game should be non-linear, with the player choosing if he goes left, right, kills, or runs away. A story does not do this. A story is a linear progression of events, and the more you shoehorn a video game into that, the less it becomes a game. At the Horseshoe Project conference, whose findings were reported at Gamasutra, a group of developers brainstormed ways to improve the plots of video games. They argued that developers should focus more on making "experience creation" engines, not thinking up better stories. The paper explains, "Story is the tail of what we do as designers, where the mediated experience is the dog." The ultimate objective of a game should be the player experiencing an epic moment and then retelling it in their own way, rather than the designer forcing something down a player's throat. The end result of this is that many of the people who make the video games you play don't like having a plot at all, much less a good one. It constrains their designs and forces them to sacrifice player freedom for something that the player should be doing themselves.



Great game writing can have tons of words…
(From *Planescape: Torment*)

Another factor is that game design does not initially lend itself to telling a great story. Design charts are typically a large series of skill charts and graphs, outlining the skills a player should be using at that point and what they need to master. These charts are also made by people who don't necessarily have a wide range of experience outside of video games or fantasy. Ken Levine, the creative director for *Bioshock*, said in an interview with MTV, "Most video game people have read one book and seen one movie in their life, which is *Lord of the Rings* and *Aliens* or variations of that. There's great things in that, but you need some variety." Unfortunately, the combination of getting the game down on paper and the stereotypical love of pulp science fiction has led to many games telling stories that follow a similar, easily graphed structure. That can work great for simple, by-the-numbers fantasy stories, but it can be tough to get much more depth than that when all you know is science fiction.

You can't put all the blame on the game designers, though, because the writers can cause just as many problems. Despite the fact that video games seem to be able to do and create anything, there are actually a wide range of technical limitations in the average game. When a writer calls for a giant zombie T-Rex to rise out of the ground and attack the player, the game's engine might not be physically able to depict it. In an interview with two designers from the game *Fallen Earth*, they explain that one of the biggest problems with the writers can be a simple lack of communication. As they create and design the elements of the game, they may discover several months later that half their ideas aren't even technically possible. "In the industry, we refer to those as ideas that are 'too cool' for the game," one designer explains. Another issue is that many companies will hire a writer who places plot above game play.

In a brief essay outlining the major complaints with gamewriters at IGDA, it is noted that the incredible expense of a Hollywood writer usually just results in a big linear script. A lot of novelists and screenwriters simply don't understand the technical limitations or the reality that story does not come before game design. Where would *Bioshock* be if the game itself wasn't fun? What would *Max Payne* be like if the 3rd-person sections weren't a blast to play? Almost every game company starts with a script when they make a game, but it's everything that happens later that truly requires the presence of the writer. Marc Laidlaw, chief writer for *Half-Life 2*, explains in an interview with Hollywood Reporter, "I don't just write a script and then someone takes it away and builds a game. I am continually getting input in order to create a big suspension field to hold the gameplay together so that the gamers aren't doing arbitrary tasks, so that they are doing things that seem meaningful."

So what is good video game writing? What are the skills needed? Although on a superficial level video game writing looks a lot like writing a novel or script, they actually aren't very similar. For starters, video game scripts are enormous. A good RPG like *Jade Empire* runs into the range of 340,000 words of dialogue. The current record holder for biggest game script is *Planescape: Torment*, coming in at a staggering 860,000 words. The other difference is that you're not really writing scenes for the game. A script full of character development, epic romance, and expensive cut scenes isn't going to work out because all those things are forcing the player to do something against their will. That's not always a bad thing, but it can easily get in the way of game design when a writer is always demanding things happen their way.

…or almost none at all.
(From *Shadow of the Colossus*)

Good video game writing consists of three basic elements: back story, metaphorical choices, and creative explanations for limitations. The vast majority of a writer's job is going to be designing a good back story for the game. These are the static elements of a game that define the meaning of the player's actions. Who are the people you're shooting? What kind of society does the player inhabit? Giving the characters of a game identities, filling that world with quirks and details and reactions to the player is 90% of what game writing is about. You don't write about what the main character is going to do, you write what they're going to experience. The writer also has to figure out a way to broadcast all of this information to the player. Sometimes it can be through mission objectives, character dialogue, or just cut scenes that establish the back story. In *System Shock 2*, you piece together the story of the ship's fate by reading the crew's e-mails and logs. In *Half-Life 2* the player naturally pauses as Dr. Breen announces over a giant screen why all of humanity has been confined to huge cities. Or, the player doesn't pay any attention to the back story at all. A good game writer has to account for even that.

Game design as metaphor represents the choices in games that have greater significance than the immediate consequences. In *Bioshock*, the metaphorical choice of saving or killing the little sister connects with the larger theme of the game itself: are people inherently going to selfishly take the quick benefit or will they do what supports the whole community? Is Fontaine right about humanity or is Andrew Ryan? An even more esoteric example comes from Suda 51's *No More Heroes*. The player chooses between performing constant menial jobs and chores for better clothes and stylish moves or beating the game with the bare minimum. It's a metaphor for the choice gamers make by shelling out more cash for expensive games that look cool and the things they do for that choice.

Perhaps one of the best game design metaphors ever made comes from the free indie title *Passage*. The player moves through a maze of obstacles while trying to rack up points. One can meet a female in the game who stays by your side, but who, like a mate in real life, will make traveling through the maze more difficult. You both slowly age, and eventually, the woman dies, leaving you to continue alone. Without a shred of written text, the player experiences the choice of taking a wife, the loss of a

companion, and the greater emotions those choices bring about. Although the player ultimately chooses what the proposed metaphor means, it is up to the writer to conceive of the Socratic question that fosters this moment.

The third kind of game writing, creative explanations for limitations, can be found throughout video games. An example would be the narrative structure of *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time*. In that particular game, your character doesn't die; rather, the narrator has made a mistake in the story and picks up telling it from the last save point. It's accounting for the fact that the player will screw up and die every now and then without breaking the connection the player has with the game. Another example would be how, in order to rewind time, you need to collect sand from the monsters that have been infected. Contrast that to a game where you just collect random spheres with no logical explanation. In an FPS, good writers often use a variety of concepts to avoid the inevitable problem of the player shooting the plot's main characters. Villains appear over big TV screens, taunt you on the radio, or there is the brilliant writing behind the confrontation with Andrew Ryan in *Bioshock*. Even smaller touches, like thinking up reasons for the protagonists in *Metroid Prime* and *God of War 2* to lose all their powers, are creative ways to explain the limitations in these games.

Yet even a writer who appreciates the nuances of game writing faces huge obstacles. Games with great plots do not necessarily sell any better than games with terrible ones. If the game itself isn't fun to play, no amount of epic story is going to change that fact. When the budget starts creaking and deadlines aren't being met, invariably, the first thing to get axed is the story. The gameplay comes first when you're making a video game, art second, and plot in straggling third place. The revisions and editing portion of game development does not exactly lend itself to facilitating a great story either. The Q&A teams that go at games before shipping are focused on how fun the actual game is, not how well the story is delivered. If the incredible sequence where the player recognizes his own humanity after he kills a civilian isn't fun or doesn't work in the game, it gets axed.

In a recent study analyzing the emotions people experience and what motivates them to play by XEO design, only one group out of four actually cared about the plot at all. Many people play games for the great communities while others enjoy the difficulty of a good game design. Some even like games for their therapeutic value. A good game writer has to not only know how to write for a video game, they have to know when to shut up and let the video game be a game.

What must be critically recognized is that video game writing is not a script. It is not a story or a message. It is not even world creation. It is the construction of a language. It creates abilities, actions, and skills that you, the player, are taught and then expected to use to express yourself. In *Bioshock* you are taught of the burdens of saviors, about human nature, and the costs of both. You express this through the metaphor of the little sisters and your fight against the Dystopia. In *Half-Life 2*, you are taught about oppression, about giving hope to others by resisting. You express this with both persistence and violence.

To create plot in a video game the writer has to do something very different than a screen writer or a novelist. It is in video games that the age old rule of writing, "Show, don't tell" leads so many people astray. In video games, you tell. It is up to the player to show.

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