

Mata Haggis

A lot of my work is not what many authors might think of as writing. If you write books then you likely work alone, crafting a journey for your reader in a way that is limited only by the application of your wit and vocabulary. If you write for television you are increasingly likely to work with a team of writers, creating a script that will be translated through production schedules and budget meetings into something that, you hope, closely resembles your original vision. The games industry, by contrast, is still learning to work with professional storytellers. Each team has a different set of expectations, and each game demands a different set of narrative tools.

Environmental storytelling

Ten years ago, I worked on a racing game called *Burnout Paradise*. There was no story, but there was definitely a story-world – and it is this world that I was employed to create.

Environmental storytelling is when we use items in the game world to create a sense of history in a location. A wooden crate pushed neatly into a corner, for example, tells a very different story from one jammed up against a door handle. In *Burnout Paradise*, one of my main contributions was to use a very limited number of props to create mini-tableaux that suggested and supported the life of the city. I would set up traffic cones around fake road works, choose cheap-looking and widely spaced lamp-posts in rural areas and expensive mock-Victorian ones in rich ones. In the dock area you might see a lamp-post opposite a junction that's not standing fully upright, as if a lorry driver has knocked into it.

In many games, environmental storytelling informs the player about what they are approaching or investigating. At its simplest, blood on the wall says that there has been a crime, or a trail of slime warns there may be a toxic beast ahead; however, this can be applied with greater subtlety. In the game *The Last of Us*, the story begins in a girl's slightly messy bedroom, and we see the details of her character all around us. Where a novelist would describe the room, the narrative designer has worked with artists to create it in a virtual 3D space. This can be a powerful tool for 'show, don't tell', but it is also limited by the budget of a project: artists need to be paid, and when they're creating all these details they aren't working on making bigger, more obvious contributions. The writer needs to choose carefully where they push for their work to show up in the game.

Interactions

On *Aliens Versus Predator*, a game based on the film franchises, I was a writer on the script, helping to shape an adventure of survival and horror. I was also a game designer working on the systems and gameplay activities that occupy the player. *Aliens Versus Predator* is a first-person game – the player sees the world through the eyes of the character they are controlling.

Unlike most games, the player could go through the game from three completely different perspectives: as a human marine, alien or predator. This required three interweaving characters' stories,

and a lot of writing time was spent creating dialogue to reflect different player actions, many of which the player might never perform. Writing unheard script is part of the joy of writing for games!

Another major challenge was handling conflicts between player freedom and narrative consistency. Writers typically want to create a powerful and compelling story, but game designers want the mechanics to be satisfying. And some of the loudest voices among fans of games, and sometimes in the development teams, quite vehemently don't want a story in their game beyond a setting for their interactions. There are many theories about why this might be the case, but three factors may be at work. First, the stories in earlier videogames were often not written by professional writers, and were not always of very high quality. Secondly, older computers had limited capacity for storytelling and so by necessity typically had simple, weak, or unoriginal stories. Thirdly, games are uniquely focused on interactive, not passive, audiences, and many traditional storytelling methods are essentially passive and can thus feel disjointed from the wider gameplaying experience. This animosity is subsiding a little as we get better at interactive storytelling, but it will definitely still be present for the foreseeable future.

On *Aliens Versus Predator* I was working with international multi-million dollar franchises and rules, writing sometimes by myself, sometimes with other professionals, and sometimes with up to 15 team leaders whose teams would be impacted by my choices. In the end, around 100 people would have a chance to push back or work with the choices that I made, and budgets were tight restrictions over what could and could not happen.

The commentary

Imagine trying to write a commentary for a sports match before it has been played. *PDC World Championship Darts Pro Tour* might not have had a catchy title but it was a fascinating test of my writing skills. Working with a team of around nine people (programmers, 3D graphics artists, audio specialists, myself as the designer and writer, and a producer), we made a digital darts game. I was responsible for the commentary.

It was to be voiced by legendary BBC darts commentators Sid Waddell and John Gwynne, so it had to match their idiosyncratic styles. I went about achieving this the way any other writer would: with research. I watched many hours of darts matches, making notes about common phrases, dialect, banter and other distinctive vocal features, so that when Waddell and Gwynne came into the studio they would be able to record a script tailored for them.

In games a good script is not enough, because it must also be triggered to play at the right time. In the seconds it takes for a hero to say 'I think we're safe now' a monster could appear and bite her head off, and the audio clip would keep on playing! For the darts game, I had to create a system that would check against multiple in-game events to ensure that each line was said at the right moment and would not repeat too often.

Narrative design: creating everything

Beginning in 2013, I collaborated for three years with the two-man game development studio Sassybot to craft a video game that can be best described as a drama. In *Fragments of Him*, which is set in the real world and which drew on my own life, a young man dies suddenly and we walk alongside his friends and family as they come to terms with the loss.

I was in charge of every object the player sees, every interaction the player can perform, every line of dialogue and every sound the player hears, from birdsong to the swish of a shower curtain. This was highly unusual because a videogame writer rarely has such control. I also designed the systems that would convey the story to the player, from motion-captured animations and reference photos of objects and locations, to a specifically written soundtrack and even the detail of the shelves being filled with hundreds of the characters' individually picked favourite books (which would never be listed in a novel describing the same scene).

The work won nominations for Best Writing in a Video Game by the Writers' Guild of Great Britain and for the Matthew Crump Cultural Innovation Award at SXSW. I hope these nominations will encourage similarly experimental, emotionally powerful and writer-led games to be developed in the future.

There is no 'game writer job', there are many

Writers in games can have a highly limited scope, and are often briefly employed to 'polish the script'. In this case they will have almost no power over the shape of the game, but many game-writing jobs require a sliding scale of writing and design skills, where interaction and player choice must be accounted for, or whole worlds must be created and built. Even the job titles and the definitions of these roles frequently change between different companies.

As a medium for writers, videogames are still young. I'm in no denial about the weakness of its storytelling, in many cases, yet there are gems that show how compelling interactive stories can be. If progress in the last decade is any indication, videogames will continue to spread beyond fantasy, science-fiction and horror into being a diverse storytelling medium that allows writers to become involved in many ways in the creation of new kinds of stories. ●

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Making money writing for games

Payment structures for video game writers are currently very varied, with rates and conditions differing dramatically depending on the company and what you are being asked to do. The games industry, like many creative industries, has a habit of listing fees as '£££' rather than giving a number, and then negotiating a figure based on the applicant's experience.

Roles on teams may be paid hourly, for simple script rewrites and polishing, or daily, for more substantial writing jobs (where you are likely to be given outlines for a set of scenes to write). For roles where you have more creative influence over the story, you may be asked to work part- or full-time in the studio for the duration of the project, or even to be employed in-house on a salaried basis. Most non-permanent contract rates for these roles are in the region of £300–£450 per day. Salaried positions are likely to be significantly lower.

It is quite unusual for agents to be used in recruitment for game writers, and more typical for writers to apply directly to game developers for work or to get jobs through networking at videogame industry developers' conferences such as Develop: Brighton. Applying for jobs is often highly competitive, with many young writers expressing an interest in interactive storytelling. Like many creative industries, writers often work with small teams for free, in order to build a portfolio that may lead to higher chances of success in the future, but the effectiveness of this strategy is hard to judge. Never expect royalties from large game developers. If you are doing work for free for a smaller company you may be able to negotiate a royalty, but bear in mind that many games make very little profit, if any.

If you are interested in writing for games, the Writers' Guild offers an excellent guide to get you started: <https://writersguild.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/WGGB-A4-Videogames-2.pdf>.

