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[Taken from Chapter 3: Video Game Story Structure & Work Approach]

Game Story Theory & Dialogue [Excerpts]

Dialogue in Video Games:

Like it or not, you will live or die by your dialogue. Ninety percent of the people you work with think that writing is dialogue. You as a game writer know that dialogue is the tip of the iceberg that starts at the bottom with

- an interesting world.
- a great plot with twist and turns, setups, and payoffs.
- compelling characters that are affected by and create the conflict and stakes.
- an immersive style that depends as much on the entire game experience as it does on the story.
- great challenges (manifested in gameplay) that you encounter and overcome.

In short, to have great dialogue you have to have great characters talk about fascinating things, often in conflict with each other. You might want them always in conflict with each other at some level. Put another way, the greatest characters in the world will be flat if they don't have something interesting to talk about and the greatest plot in the world is a pancake if there aren't interesting characters driving it. On yet another tack, a great script is the omelet that comes out of a chicken or the egg situation. And if you don't like that analogy, rewrite the dialogue.

Alts, Alts, and More Alts:

Great screenwriters and great novelists have suffered horrible fates in the game space because game writing has a unique set of challenges. First of all, a great deal of gameplay dialogue is too expositional. Everyone hates exposition, and

game writers have more reason to hate it more than most. A novelist isn't expected to write compelling dialogue to tell somebody how to use the controller to open a door, or why he is wandering around a barren world. Screenwriters only need to write, "I'll be back" once. They don't have to write twenty alts (iterations) of it. (Let's face it, things get kind of flat around phrases like "I shall return" and "I shall pass this way again.") In fact, the whole concept of alts and verbose dialogue is a battle with the concept of characters, because one of the ways you define a character is by the way he says things. "I'll be back" was perfect for Schwarzenegger characters of the 1980s, but it wouldn't have worked for General Douglas MacArthur in the Philippines in a serious circumstance required gravitas.

Nevertheless, games need alts. Games need a hundred ways of saying, "I'd better check this area again." At the end of the day, game writers have to play the hand they're dealt. We're in a medium that by its very nature demands a lot of repetition, and our job, as dramatists are to conceal this fact.

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Relationships and Dialogue:

Good game relationships and the dialogue that builds them fully engage the players. Like anything else, the best relationships are give and take. Here's Danny Bilson's (our friend who is an accomplished screen and game writer himself) classic analogy: "If you meet a guy in Level 2 and he double-crosses you, then you're going to have very strong feelings about him in Level 3. Now what happens, if this time, he helps you? What's changed? What's his agenda? What are you going to think when you run into him on Level 4?" These are the things you need to consider to make your story more interesting.

What if, in the above example, you decided to kill the guy in Level 3 by shooting him in the back? Would you have a problem with (a) him turning around and saying, "That would be a really stupid move, you are going to need me," or your own character saying, (b) "No, bad idea." In this case, dialogue is determined by a choice of actions that come from the internal motivation of the various characters. Twists and turns and the dialogue that reflects them keep the game

fresh.

Avoiding Stock Text:

One of the least pleasant things to write is numerous variations on stock text. For instance, you show up at the shopkeeper's establishment and have some repetitive dialogue with him, often nuanced with slightly different dialogue either in text or voice-over. The animations are usually re-used. The problem with this is that it tends to show the limitations of the game. Avoid them when possible.

Repetitive situations are almost always better handled automatically and abstractly, without dialogue. The fifth time you hear the same wisecrack from the same character, the game feels stale. The question to ask at any moment in gameplay is: "What choice am I making?"

Style:

The more abstract the style, the more abstract the dialogue can be. Then again, the art might dictate extremely user-friendly, earthy dialogue to contrast the stylized characters. Ultimately, it is what you're personally trying to say.

Sometimes games aren't trying to say much except express the pure joy of being silly games. In that case, the real dialogue is sound effects that merge with music or dialogue that becomes a sound-effectish kind of laugh track. That's okay, too. The point is that you want to know what you're doing and why you're doing it.

The Present Tense:

Game dialogue is written in present tense. Like this. Very present time. Very tense. It's happening right now, right here, right in front of me. See it as the viewer sees it. No sense in thinking that it happened in the past. It's the difference between opening on a smash-cut in your face visual, and opening on an establishing shot that tells us where we are.

This is true of all writing for games, film, and television. Always use the present voice. Describe action as if you are witnessing it in real-time. Never use past-tense descriptions. For example:

Present Tense (Correct): Karl enters the room, flipping the safety off his .45.

Past Tense (Wrong): Karl entered the room. He'd already flipped the safety on his .45

In one example, you are describing events that have already taken place. In the other, you are talking about events that are happening now, right in front of you, and you are relating them to the reader as fast as you can call them out. If you are writing a book, you can use the past tense. However, for a game-script, you are always in the here and now.

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Don't Wear Out the F Key:

Rough language does not instantly translate to tough narrative. Edgy is a four-letter word, too. Effective profanity can heighten action and tension, and is also useful for establishing character, but don't overdo it. Overuse of profanity is amateurish and ultimately distracts from the story. Exceptions are when the characters, world, or tone can use it. Remember your audience and tune accordingly. Create alternates. After all, it is possible that your voice talent may not want to do a rough line as written. Give them a chance to record more than one and then leave it to others to decide.

For some reason, a lot of rookies feel that their writing is going to get a lot better when they say "fuck" a lot in their scripts. They would probably point to Paul Schrader or another great screenwriter, but our advice is that unless you are Paul Schrader you should avoid doing this, because in game scripts it tends to just look like you're a rookie imitating Paul Schrader or perhaps the writers of HBO's *Deadwood*. Without mentioning names, we literally did a "doctor" job on a script in which the first phase involved globally searching and replacing the obscenities and making a couple of minor tweaks. We called this process "defuckification." We shared the script to discuss some other points and people couldn't believe how much work we'd done and how much better it was. Sure, if you're making a game rated "M" it allows you to use rougher language, but having the opportunity doesn't mean that you are required to use it.

Our friend Frank Miller told us that during the filming of Sin City, actor Clive Owen was trying to figure out his character and came to Frank and said, “You don’t like using the word fuck, do you?” Frank, whose work has never been described as prudish, said, “No.”

One fun exercise is to try and dodge the usual masculine clichés. For instance, we always have the tough sergeant telling the player to, “Get your ass in gear.” Try to find a way to say it without mentioning a guy’s gluteus maximus. It’s tough. The most insidious clichés are ones that you do almost automatically. Sometimes you can create interesting characters by simply avoiding clichés.