The Ultimate Guide to Narrative Design

May 16, 2019 by Emma

Storytelling is a cultural activity that brings us together. There's a real sense of inclusion when we talk about story; we use it to connect with others and to create an experience. If you've ever found yourself on the periphery of a conversation about the latest "must watch" TV show, you've thought about joining the hype so that you could be part of that conversation. Like a great TV series, storytelling in video games, and the shared narrative of the gameplay is often what drives us to play them.

During my time at Disney, I managed a team of narrative designers, working on a variety of projects from in-game narrative and marketing to print magazines and book publishing. It was as exhilarating as it was exhausting. But what does "narrative design" mean and how do you do it?

We've got a lot of ground to cover, so here's what we're going to talk about today:

Table of Contents

What is narrative design?

Simply put, narrative design is the use of story to make sense of gameplay in a video game. Like a novelist, the narrative designer focuses on elements such as structure, character, and setting, but the key difference is that the hero in the story is the player and their experience is interactive.

The first narrative designer, Stephen Dinehart

According to Wikipedia, the first-person to use narrative design as a job description was Stephen Dinehart back in 2006 during his time at American game publisher, THQ. Dinehart, who has worked on numerous games including *Cloud*, *Company of Heroes* and *Prey*, is thought of as one of the world's best game writers. But it was Executive Producer Tarrnie Williams that wrote that job description and championed the importance of story.

The narrative designer's role on a team is much more than just being a good writer and storyteller. The narrative designer works with her team to build a world, inventing characters and events, and reconciling mechanics or rules. The job is part writing and part championing the importance of story throughout the process of making a game.

With interactive storytelling, the challenge becomes how to make the player the hero of the story and how that impacts the structure of the narrative. That might start as early as your marketing campaign when you call a player to action through trailers and key game art.

Although not all mechanics need explaining, part of your role may include justifying a mechanical element or giving meaning to rules within the setting of a game. Designer Jurie Horneman describes this as "diegesis," or information

related to the audience from the narrator.

What's the difference between game storytelling, novel storytelling, and film storytelling?

Let's start by talking about what novels, movies, and games have in common — they all take the audience through an experience in time, they all use characters, events take place following a narrative arc, there is a conflict of some kind, and a resolution.

With novels, much of the storytelling relies on the reader's imagination and interpretation. With narrative design in film, we have more of audio-visual experience, which uses sound and the screen to tell a story. With video games, this story is told through the interaction of the player, making them a much more complex medium.

> *"A story well told can change the world."*
>
> *– Stephen Dinehart*

Through video games, the audience becomes the hero in the story, and their actions can change the outcome of the narrative. This means that games are repeatable (often multiple times, depending on how many narrative branches there are to explore) and that players often have entirely different experiences to each other.

Narrative design is all about the intentional use of story and the flow of the game, either linear or nonlinear. More than merely story building, narrative design is about world-building. It's an evolving art form, and with the development of AI and virtual reality, it's becoming much more immersive.

Do all games need a narrative?

No. Not all games need to have a narrative to make them enjoyable. You could argue that there are storytelling elements in a simple game like Tetris (in fact, professor Mata Haggis-Burridge does just that in his GDC talk, Storytelling Tools to Boost Your Indie Game's Narrative and Gameplay), but Tetris doesn't have a narrative and it doesn't need one.

It doesn't mean that you can't create a narrative if you have simple game elements. In fact, you might be doing that intuitively. Take Mario for example. You're in a recognizable world, with recognizable characters, a goal to rescue a princess, and a villain to defeat. Did Shigeru Miyamoto consult a narrative designer to make it? Pretty unlikely.

Around 2012, the heyday of the match 3 game, we saw several examples of games with a theme, environment, and a progression through levels along a world map. Candy Crush Saga and Frozen Free Fall aren't great examples of narrative design, but special attention has clearly been paid to theme and flow. Story elements are everywhere; narrative is not.

Do all narrative games need words?

Absolutely not. But just as silent movies have scripts, a video game without words has deliberate narrative design behind it. Narrative designers are there to answer the 5 w's — where, what, when, and why — and it's essential that they answer those questions before the player starts to ask them.

Thatgamecompany's *Journey* is a fantastic example of a game without a line of dialogue, that's considered one of the best games made from a visual storytelling perspective. Why? Well, it creates an environment (a beautiful sand dune), puts the user as the hero of the game with a goal to accomplish (climbing a mountain) and puts obstacles in his path

(climbing is hard). As the game progresses the player's understanding increases — from I know what I'm doing to — I understand why I'm doing it.

Playdead's *Limbo* is another clever example of a world that's built without dialogue, using art and ambient noise to tell a story. The lack of clarity around where you are and what you're doing leaves enough room for players to speculate whether the hero and his sister are alive or dead, how they might have died, whether they're reliving a dream or an experience, and if the ending of the game is "real."

How do I design a game around a narrative?

You shouldn't. As tempting as it is to write the story before you create the game, but there is a danger that you'll either create a very boring game where nothing happens, or you'll find that you can't do all the things you want because of technical limitations. You'll also find it very hard to convince your producer and team to carry out your plan, no matter how well thought out it might be.

Storytelling in games is there to make sense of game elements and add emotional tone. Using Chekhov's gun theory, every aspect of the narrative should be necessary, and everything superfluous should be removed. As much of the story takes part in the player's imagination. You have to leave some ambiguity for the player to be able to fill in the gaps.

Way back when, writers were brought in at the last minute in a project to put what was thought the final touches to the game. It's happened to me — along with two other writers, I once found myself staying up until the small hours of the morning rewriting a script for a DS game the day before it was due for completion. Miraculously we pulled something together, but we weren't able to make significant story changes. Thankfully, attitudes seem to be changing, and writers are brought in much earlier.

Ideally, a narrative designer needs to be involved from the project kick-off, (and they can make an excellent project lead), but an engaging game needs to start with gameplay. Before you begin, you'll need to know what the player can and can't do and what consequences their actions will take. Storytelling then depends on those actions and reactions and the choices a player can make throughout the game.

What was the first example of narrative design in a game?

Most people say that the first game to have a story in it is*Donkey Kong* (released by Nintendo in July, 1981, but an earlier version of storytelling can be found in *Adventure* (released by Atari in 1979), and even earlier than that, we have the text-based game, *Colossal Cave Adventure* (developed by Will Crowther and released in 1975). These games are very different, so for argument's sake, let's have a look at all three of them.

COLOSSAL CAVE ADVENTURE

Colossal Cave Adventure, also known as ADVENT, *Colossal Cave*, and somewhat confusingly, *Adventure* was developed over two years and released to various different systems, starting off with the PDP-10. In the game, you explore a cave using text prompts and earn points based on how much wealth you find. It's a work of interactive fiction where the player is given various choices at different parts of the game.

ADVENTURE

Not to be confused with *Colossal Cave Adventure*, in this Atari retro classic, you play a small white square. Your goal is to find an enchanted chalice that has been stolen by an evil magician and return it to the Golden Castle. You must find keys to open doors, and you must defeat dragons. Skip ahead seven years, and you'll see similarities in Nintendo's *Legend of Zelda.*

DONKEY KONG

Of these three, *Donkey Kong* is the more recognizable examples of modern narrative in a video game. In the game, Mario (or Jumpman) needs to rescue Pauline from a giant ape who throws barrels at him. There's tension, there's conflict, and there's a satisfying resolution. It's a simple story, and in terms of introducing narrative to games, it's significant.

I could go on… after all, there's *Ultima* 4 and *Zork* to talk about. But don't you have places to be? Let's move on…

Are there any video game stories written by notable writers?

If Charles Dickens were alive today, we'd have him using Twitter, living in LA, and working as a narrative designer for a video game company. Wouldn't he be great at creating cut scenes? Yes, he was an incredible storyteller, but wouldn't the producer have a complete nightmare trying to get him to cut down on superfluous dialogue?

While I can tell you all about novelists who like to play video games (notably Salman Rushdie was a big fan of Mario

World), the number of renowned novelists who went on to make games is surprisingly small.

With his love of technology, it's no surprise that Douglas Adams tried his hand at the text adventure. In 1984, Adams and Infocom's Steve Meretzky released the Hitchhiker's Guide adventure game, based on the classic book. Though relatively unknown today, the game sold a staggering 350,000 copies. You can find the game and play it in its entirety here for as long as Flash still works. Be warned, you will die a lot.

Alex Garland (writer of the *Beach*) co-authored *DmC: Devil May Cry*, a hack and slash adventure published by Capcom for the PlayStation 3 in 2013. A reboot to the *Devil May Cry* series, it takes place in a different reality. You play as Dante, a half-angel, half-demon on a quest to kill King Mundus, who killed his mother and banished his father. According to its Wikipedia entry, the game sold 2.4 million copies worldwide.

Other than Adams and Garland, the landscape of famous novelists as game writers is noticeably empty. However, there are several games spawned out of novels, notably Terry Pratchett's *Discworld*. Books haven't made a great transition into games. Why? Well, it might be because these novelists would want to start with the story and not the game design. It could also be because they aren't very good at collaborating with others. Or perhaps it's just that these writers prefer the page to the screen.

What are considered some of the best examples of narrative design in video games?

Before I answer this question, there are two things to bear in mind. Firstly, the medium is developing rapidly, so anything I call out here should and will change in the next five to ten years. Secondly, if you're looking for an interesting game to play with a great narrative, the first step is to know your player type. If you're not interested in first person shooters, you're not going to care whether one has a great story or not. That said, here are five games with strong narratives that are well worth playing if you're learning about narrative design (in no particular order).

HER STORY

Sam Barlow's *Her Story* is one of the best examples of the mystery genre. (We've come a long way from Icom Simulations' *Déjà Vu*!). The player sorts through footage of a young woman, trying to find out what happened to her husband. As you watch testimonials, you start to realize that there's more going on than just a murder.

Because you're searching for keywords in a police database, each player's experience is entirely different from each other. It's a clever narrative that is executed very well. Is there much replayability in the game? Well, like every story, once you know the ending, you know the ending, but give it a few years, and you might enjoy a repeat experience.

THE WALKING DEAD

True confession. I tried to play *ZombieU* on the Wii U, and I didn't make it outside of the nursery before turning it off, making a nice cup of tea, and settling down to watch *8 out of 10 Cats Does Countdown*. Zombie games are not my thing. But, a lot of people agree that the story in *Walking Dead* is fantastic, and so in the name of research, I decided to grit my teeth and play it. I'm glad I did.

What's clever about Telltale Games' *Walking Dead* point and click adventure is that almost every decision that you make comes back to haunt you. Even when you think you're making the best decision, you find yourself in a moral quandary. The episodic nature is designed to make the player think about the choices they have made, which also makes repeat playability high. There's a LOT of narrative work here, and it really pays off.

Telltale had plenty of outstanding narrative designers.

ALAN WAKE

Alan Wake puts the player in the role an author of psychological thrillers who finds himself stuck in a storyline scarier than he would dream of writing. (Given that I'm a complete wimp when it comes to Zombie movies and games, it might surprise you to know that I have also played this one).

Like *Walking Dead*, *Wake* uses episodic story, giving the player time to digest the narrative slowly, and the suspense to increase. The writing, as well as the storytelling are high in quality, making this an enjoyably tense game to play.

FINAL FANTASY VI

Final Fantasy VI (also known as *Final Fantasy III* to Northern Americans), is a story about the death of magic. In terms of events and conflicts, *FFVI* has got it in spades. There's an interactive opera, a train rides to the underworld, and an epic air battles. Characters have compelling back stories (neither Edgar nor Sabin wants to be King after their father dies) and are often put into difficult situations (leaping down Barren Falls, rescuing Relm in a fire, a continually battling the octopus Ultros to name a few).

Although it's got an interesting ensemble cast, the real reason I've picked*FFVI* is mostly because of Kefka Palazzo, one of the best video game villains I've come across. Why? Well, when you first meet him, he seems relatively harmless. Just a clown. But he turns out to be a sadistic villain, who is much more powerful than you at first imagine.

In terms of narrative, there are some convoluted plot points, but on the whole, it works well, balancing tragedy with comedy. There are some great cut scenes with some clever cinematographic camera pans that make us feel like we're watching a movie rather than playing a game. You might prefer *Final Fantasy* VII (*dubbed the Star Wars of video games, which is currently undergoing a remake*), but *FFVI* helped changed the landscape for video games.

THE STANLEY PARABLE

Although some might say this is 'not much more than a first person explorer game,' Stanley Parable joins this list for two reasons. First, it has more story twists than a twisty twist tie, and second, the narration is delightfully written.

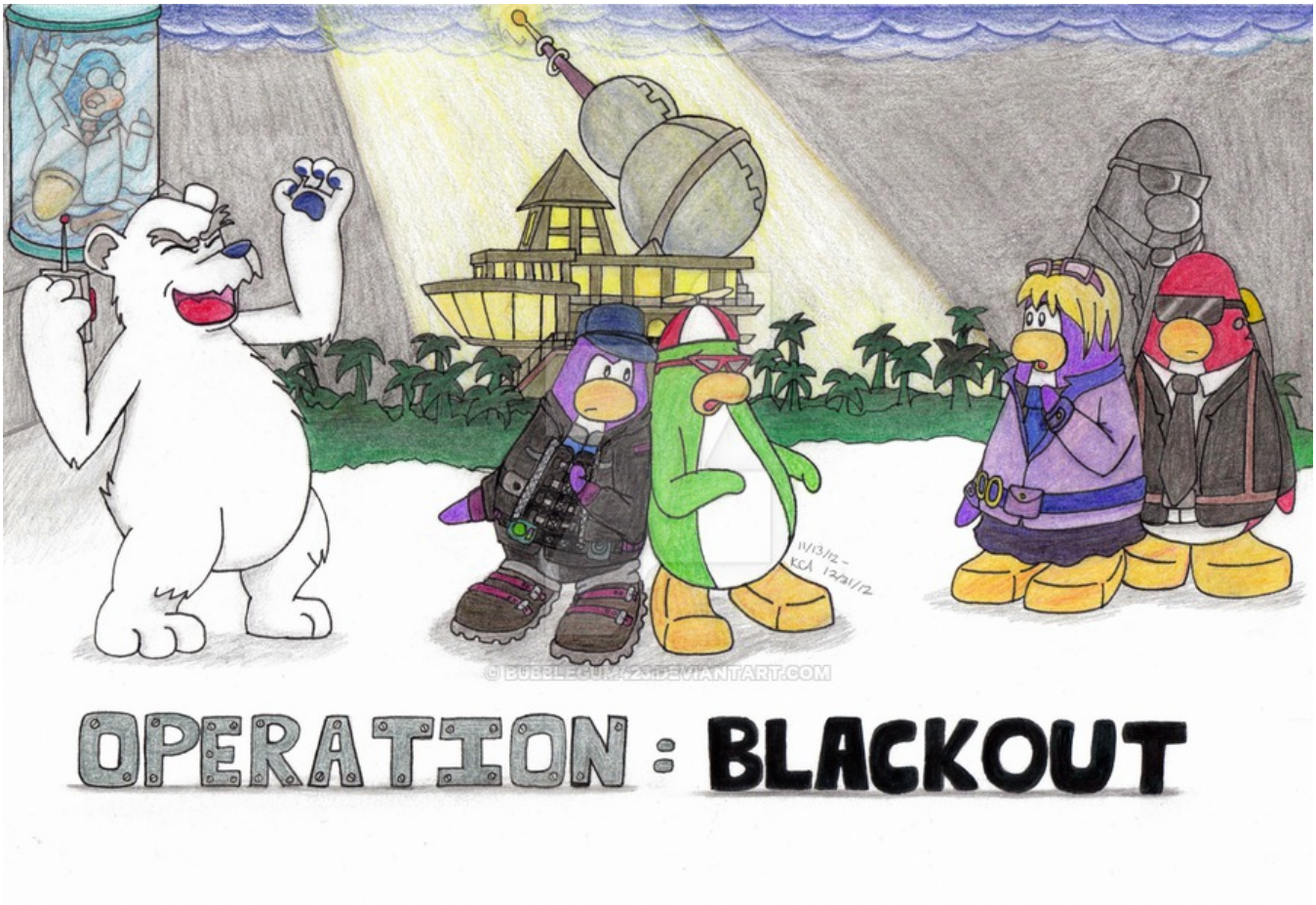
In the game, you play Stanley, whose job it is to push buttons on a computer. On the day when no commands come to push buttons, you leave your cubicle and explore the world around you.

While the narrator tells you what he expects you to do, you don't have to listen, and that's where it starts to get smart — the narrator often gets frustrated and punishes the player for not following the story 'properly,' even going so far as to restart the game. Essentially this game becomes an opinion piece about player choice, even questioning the way we "win" at the end of a story.

Other games that come up time and time again for narrative design include:

- *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*
- *Bioshock*
- *Red Dead Redemption*
- *Portal 2*
- *Chrono Trigger*
- *Life is Strange*
- *Silent Hill*

What is narrative design in an MMO?



In an MMO, we see a lot more emergent storytelling, or rather stories that emerge over time from the interaction between players and the world. It's a call and response where fan theories emerge, and the MMO responds to them.

In the case of Disney's *Club Penguin*, at its best, the game was co-authored by the player and the team. Seeds were planted with the audience, (such as a message in a bottle on the Beach, or words on the screen in the background of an interview), left to grow, monitored by the team watching social media channels and fan blogs, and reacted to. *Operation Blackout* by far being the best example of this.

While your aim might be to transform all players into active participants, MMOs are also where you might have a much wider difference between a game narrative (as in that designed by the game studio) and player narrative.

Using *Club Penguin* again as an example, you could be in the middle of a Medieval Party, but there were still a group of penguins, oblivious to the narrative, pretending to be babies.

As a narrative designer in an MMO, you dance the thin line between immersing the player, and not interrupting them when they are in the middle of something. The best compromise is to allow the player to explore some environments part of the time, interspersed with regular world takeovers in the form of themed parties and events. In an ideal world, you would follow a linear narrative, but it's not strictly necessary.

What skills does a narrative designer need?

It goes without saying that narrative designers should know how to tell a story, but they should also understand how

story structure, character, and setting work. Immerse yourself in stories and read, watch, and listen to as much as you can (both for education and entertainment). Then start to analyze what makes a good story work.

A great place to start would be Robert McKee's Story. (It's a big book so you could take a shortcut by reading an article I wrote about it here).

As a narrative designer, you'll be writing copy. You can get away with poor spelling and grammar if you've got a good editor, but chances are you may be the only editorial team member in your production team. If so, you'll need to be good friends with Grammarly and Hemingway. The bad news is that you're not a genius and that writing is the first thing that gets pulled apart on a project. You'll find yourself doing frequent rewrites to make the story and the copy work.

Narrative designers are still quite a new concept in game creation. Hiring professional writers might seem like an obvious thing to do, but for years developers and producers have been writing storyline and dialogue. There are some old attitudes about the role that can make it difficult for a narrative designer to integrate well into a team. But integrate you must.

People skills are essential to this role, which can be tricky for introverted writers. You'll need to pitch to stakeholders, manage their expectations, and take feedback on your work. I won't lie to you, that part of the role is probably the hardest. But the sooner you learn that taking feedback is something you need to work at, the better.

Working collaboratively is vital so that you can keep up with the latest changes to the game and speak up when you see a potential narrative problem. The narrative designer should have a basic understanding of game design, and be able to speak to audio design, environment, and character design. Speak to as in feed into, but not lead. Maybe you'll do that one day, but as a creative lead or a studio director. Some days you'll love collaboration — a member of the art team will add flair to a character, or a programmer will say "yes, we can do that." And some days, you'll hate it.

There will also be an expectation for you to be creative on the spot. So adaptability is a must. This takes a considerable amount of practice and can come easier for some creatives than for others. A great way to sharpen your skills is by taking improv classes.

So, how do I become a narrative designer?

If you're applying for a role as a narrative designer at a major studio, you'll need to provide an eye-catching portfolio of evidence of previous experience. Whether you're creating a website or a pdf, the best piece of advice I can give you here is to put your best work first and to work with a designer to help you build it. While you may have the chops, they'll help present you in the best light.

But what if you're just starting off? Well, you can demonstrate your storytelling prowess with links to your student work and personal projects. If you're not interested in coding, programs like Twine and Quest can help you showcase your writing and design skills. If you want to create more of an immersive experience, software such as Klynt and racontr are worth exploring.

In the same way that novelists are voracious readers, if you want to write for games, you need to play them. Start with the classics — play through *Day of the Tentacle*, *Final Fantasy VI*, *Chrono Trigger*, *Her Story*, *Silent Hill*. And make notes as you go along. When you're in an interview situation, you'll need to talk confidently about narrative, and you'll need to draw from experience.

More than playing video games, you'll need to read novels and books about writing and story structure. You'll find it easier to defend your work when you do get a narrative design role if you know why a scene works and why it does.

I know as an introverted writer, it's not what you want to hear, but getting a job as a narrative designer will require a great deal of proactiveness on your part. Keep an eye out for job postings, connect with a recruiter, and if you can, volunteer for some experience in a studio. If you're unable to get experience, look out for writing competitions online to build your experience and get your name out there.

As a hiring manager, I can confidently say that if you put in the effort to make your resume and cover letter stand out, it will pay off. Many of the submissions that have passed my desk (and writing jobs get many, many applications) were very similar in style and content.

You need to show that you've done your research about the game you will be potentially working on and convince them that you're worth interviewing. That is to say, you'll want to personalize your resume and your portfolio to the studio you're sending it to. If you are pitching to a studio that does first-person shooter games, your story about magical fairies isn't going to cut it.

> "A *professional writer is an amateur who didn't quit.*"

> *Richard Bach*

Like so many other things in life, the more determined you are to achieve something, the closer you'll get to achieving it. Your persistence will pay off in the end. So if becoming a narrative designer is something you have your heart set on, put your mind to it and best of luck to you.

Visual Storytelling, Written Storytelling

‹ 11 Secrets of Great Storytelling Speech

› Character Types: This Will Help You Remember the Difference!

1 THOUGHT ON "THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO NARRATIVE DESIGN"

Pingback: Over 380 Original Writing Prompts for Adults - Nicely Said

LEAVE A COMMENT

Name *

Email *

Website

Save my name, email, and website in this browser for the next time I comment.

Notify me of follow-up comments by email.

Notify me of new posts by email.

Post Comment

Search ...

Translate

Select Language

Powered by Google Translate