

CHAPTER

One

Game Stories, Interactivity, and What Players Want

The Importance of Stories

Since the dawn of time, people have been telling stories. What started out as retellings of hunts and tales of their ancestors soon expanded, bringing forth myths and legends. Some stories sought to teach, others to warn. Some attempted to solve the great mysteries of the world; others strove purely to entertain. All across the world, all throughout time, no matter how they lived or what language they spoke, every race, every culture, and every tribe has created and passed on a wealth of stories. And while some stories have slowly faded away, others have been told and retold for centuries, shaping our thoughts, religions, philosophies, and the very world itself.

Looking back at our history, few things have had as much influence on human development and civilization as stories. They've driven us to explore, to fight, to hope, and to dream. They've been the inspiration for art, music, technology, and, of course, more stories. Today, thanks to powerful printing presses, TVs, and the Internet, we have access to a nearly endless supply of stories covering every subject and genre imaginable. No matter what your interests are, there's a story out there for you – probably hundreds or even thousands.

Unsurprisingly, having so many different stories at our disposal has made many of us rather picky. If a story isn't well written or if it features characters or situations that we don't like, why should we spend time

reading, watching, or playing it? After all, there are lots of other stories out there waiting for us. Because of this overabundance of stories, modern writers often work hard to attract an audience. Many carefully study what people already like and tailor their settings, plot, and characters to match. Others work hard to perfect their writing and master the many nuances of language, pacing, and character development. Some simply write what they enjoy and hope that it will find a suitable audience. And then there are the brave few who strive to create new and different types of stories and storytelling methods. They push forward with new media and new ideas, many of which challenge the very foundations of storytelling itself. Only time will tell which, if any, of these approaches is the best. Perhaps there is no best method. As long as the author enjoys creating the stories he or she writes and his or her audience (however large or small it may be) enjoys them as well, does anything else really matter?

My name is Josiah and, like most others, I was introduced to stories at a young age. Fairy tales, fables, history ... when I was a child, they filled my imagination and inspired me to create stories of my own. Because my family lived far out in the country, I often wasn't able to spend a lot of time with other kids, so I threw myself into my favorite stories. I read them, acted them out, and dreamed up new ones. Over the years, I created hundreds of stories, many of which stretched into epic sagas of exploration and adventure. Perhaps that in and of itself isn't so unusual, but – unlike most kids, who grow up wanting to become an astronaut or a fireman – I wanted to be an author.

Over the years, that desire waxed and waned as I grew and learned about other people, places, and things. But throughout all that time, I never lost my interest in stories and I always returned to writing. There were two things in particular that drew me back and brought me to where I am now. The first was a book I read long ago. Looking back, I no longer find the story all that different or exciting. I don't even own a copy of it anymore. But I'll always remember that book and be grateful to it for introducing me to one of the most important elements of writing: the plot

twist. Today, that simple twist would likely elicit no more reaction from me than a nod or an “I thought so,” but back then it was enough to make me put the book down and pause in wonder, thinking back over the rest of the story and how that one shocking revelation had changed everything. Since then, I’ve come across countless other plot twists, created some of my own, and become rather good at predicting them long before they take place, but that first simple revelation was where it all began.

After that, looking for more stories with shocking plot twists and big reveals, I gravitated toward mystery and fantasy novels while simultaneously trying to work those elements that so intrigued me into my own writing. Due to a series of unrelated incidents, I also became interested in video games, primarily due to the sheer fun and creativity of Nintendo’s early *Super Mario Bros.* games. Though much different from the stories I loved, games also attracted me, and I began to dream up and draw out plans for my own colorful platforming games. It wasn’t until much later that those two separate interests – games and storytelling – collided, all thanks to a game like nothing I had ever played before: a game called *FINAL FANTASY VII*.



FIGURE 1.1

FINAL FANTASY VII: the game that changed my life. © Square Enix Co., Ltd. All rights reserved.

My Life as a Game Designer

I have been a professional writer/designer in the game industry since 1981, and my stories have been enjoyed by the gaming public from almost the beginning of that career. For a very long time, I did not consider myself a writer, but simply a game designer who happened to use stories in his game designs.

Like many, I had been the GM (game master) in my own fantasy role-playing campaign for years, and, truth be told, it was the fact I was running that very campaign that got me my first game job. I had no inclination to go into the game business at all, as I was making my living as a lighting designer in the NYC theater. I was passionate about games, especially role-playing games, mainly because they were much akin to improvisational theater. I had recently switched the role-playing game I was playing to a new one, called *DragonQuest*, which was published by a game company in New York called Simulations Publications, Inc. (SPI). One Friday night, I had gone into NYC to test one of their new games, as they held open public testing of their new titles every Friday night. I sat down to play a game (a game about the battle of New Market in the Civil War), and at the end of the night, a staff designer came over to chat with me about the experience. His name was Eric Lee Smith. “Well,” he began, “what did you think?”

I described in great detail what I thought worked about the game and what didn’t. Little did I know, but the more I talked, the more Eric became impressed. I suppose I demonstrated knowledge of games and design with my descriptions. Or maybe I just showed him I was more mature and literate than his average tester. Or maybe Eric was exhausted after a long week at SPI. I may never know.

He furrowed his bushy red eyebrows. “What kinds of games do you play?” I told him that I had just switched my fantasy role-playing campaign to his company’s *DragonQuest*. I went into why I liked it and why my group had switched from AD&D.

“That’s fascinating. So you really like *DragonQuest*?” I assured him that I did indeed. I asked him if the designer of that game were in the office that evening. Maybe I could talk about the game with him a little bit?

“Well, funny you should ask. He just resigned from the company this week and we’re looking for someone to replace him.” I was stunned. That particular designer was well known, his games were popular, and the people who played SPI’s games had bought many copies of that designer’s games.

“It seems like you know the game very well, and we need someone to write adventures for the game. Might you be interested in a job as a freelancer writing a *DragonQuest* adventure?” I was stunned again. I had never been to SPI to test their games, they didn’t know me, Eric certainly didn’t know me at all, and here I was being offered a job. Sort of. I told Eric I was interested and came back the next week to meet with Eric’s boss, David Ritchie, who indeed gave me a freelance job to write a *DragonQuest* adventure.

But, see, at that point, I didn’t consider myself a writer. Not at all. My friend Bob Kern, who played in my campaign, now *he* was a writer, and so I asked him to join me in this assignment. Bob and I wrote the adventure (me coming up with the story structure and Bob coming up with the words); we submitted it, they accepted it, and I got a co-author credit.

That was my first taste. I was hooked.

Later on I joined the staff of designers at SPI, helped write the game fiction for their new science-fiction game *Universe*, and then got to head up an effort to redesign *DragonQuest* for a second edition, wrote more adventures (this time on my own), then moved on to a new company called Victory Games, where I won awards for both my role-playing games and my role-playing adventures – all story-based gaming.

Since then, I have written many game stories, been lead writer on a

number of titles, and been Creative Director on two MMOs – and all these games have been story-driven. My reputation in the industry is that of a content-centric designer, and if you need a game that has a deeply rooted engrossing story, you should really consider me, Chris Klug, for the job.

That introductory experience mirrors how I got involved in co-authoring this book with Josiah. I will bring to light how the theories Josiah mentions are applied in the “real world” of game writing. I might use examples of my work; tell how we managed sometimes to screw things up; and reveal how, on our better nights, we managed to make things a little bit better. It’s possible that Josiah and I might disagree on certain points, but hopefully the ensuing discussions will give the reader a deeper understanding of the process of making a story work for the audience, because, after all, that is the only thing we writers should care about, making the audience feel something at the end of the day.

—Chris

Stories in Video Games

Unlike books and film, which can be considered mature forms of media, video games are relatively new, with the first arcade machines appearing in the early 1970s, and are still growing and evolving in nearly every way. Every few years, new game consoles are released promising more realistic graphics, higher-quality sound, and a bevy of new features. On the PC side, changes happen even faster, with newer and better hardware being released every few months.

But gaming hardware isn’t the only thing that’s changing. Games themselves are evolving as well, with new control schemes, gameplay elements, and genres appearing on a regular basis. Like all other aspects of video games, their stories are in a state of change as well. Game stories have evolved from the simple kidnapped-girl plot of *Donkey Kong* to the complex novel-length tales of modern RPGs. In addition, the ability of the player to interact with and affect the story has created many new and dif-

ferent types of stories that are difficult if not impossible to portray in other kinds of media.

Although games are an excellent medium for many types of storytelling, their interactivity makes them far different from more traditional media such as books and film. Interactive stories themselves have many unique and challenging issues that aren't encountered when writing a more traditionally structured tale, which we'll be discussing all throughout the rest of this book. Game writers also need to think about many other factors, such as the synthesis between the story and gameplay and how to maintain a proper pace when the story's progression is, at least to a certain extent, controlled by the player (a subject we'll explore in depth in [Chapter 4](#)).

Old Media and New Media

Although it is true that interactivity creates a new art form, it is crucial to understand that stories in games are *dramatic stories* (akin to film, television, and theater), unlike novels and short stories, which I'll call *fiction*. All these stories are fictional; they are just consumed in a different way. Dramatic stories are performed for the audience; novels and short stories are “read.” Drama = performance; fiction = read. Games, though interactivity does indeed change things, work in the player’s mind in a fashion much closer to screenplays, television, and live theater, and not much like fiction at all. I will talk more about this as we get deeper into the book, but keep it in mind. In fact, it would be useful for you to think about what makes things different between novels and drama. How do you experience both kinds of stories?

—Chris

Make no mistake: whether you’re a novice or an experienced writer, writing for games is a very difficult and challenging experience, though it can also be extremely rewarding. If you’re new to game writing, this book will help you learn about proper story structure, the types of storytelling

methods used, and the particular problems and challenges you'll encounter when creating your stories. Even if you're already an experienced game writer, the breakdown of different story structures may help you more clearly define the types of stories you're called to write and the later sections on the pros and cons of highly interactive stories and the types of stories that players like best should provide some interesting food for thought.

Writer as Emotional Architect

We will, of course, ultimately focus on what the players want, but let us not forget the role of the writer/designer as it meets these desires of the audience. At the end of the day, what any consumer of any kind of entertainment is paying for is to be manipulated into feeling something. Consumers (especially gamers) may not like to admit that they are paying to be manipulated, but that's the truth. The worst thing you can do as a designer/writer is to create something that leaves the player unaffected emotionally. In other words, the last thing you should be is boring. It's better, honestly, for you to create something that makes the players angry than to leave them unaffected, because at least if they are angry, they'll be talking about you, and they cared enough to want something from the story in the first place. Think about the reaction when David Chase ended *The Sopranos* midscene – how the switchboards at the cable companies lit up with complaints at the abrupt ending. Regardless of whether they liked the ending, all people were talking about the next day was how he ended the show. His did his job in spades.

Entertainers are paid to make the audience feel something. This is a foundational concept to understand what I try to do as a writer. It is not only our job; it is our mission.

—Chris

We'll be starting out in [Chapter 2](#) by exploring the history of storytelling in games and how the different storytelling styles appeared, grew, and

evolved over the years. We'll also be examining some of the games that helped define the storytelling styles of their generations and how they've affected current storytelling trends.

In [Chapters 3, 4](#), and [5](#) we'll delve into the basics of any good story: the structure and character development. Important topics include common story themes, maintaining proper flow and pacing, and creating interesting and believable characters. Throughout all three of these chapters, we'll also be looking at a variety of different games to help get a better idea of how these elements work in practice and the different ways they're used in games. If you're new to story writing, pay close attention to the material in these chapters and you may be able to avoid many of the common mistakes made by beginning writers. If you're already an experienced writer (for games or any other medium), think of these chapters as a refresher and a look at how the story elements you're already familiar with are adapted for use in games.

My Approach to the Job

Game stories are drama, and drama is about structure first and foremost and character secondarily. What this means is that unless you are paying a writer to help design the sequence of events in a game, you are only getting a small piece of what he or she can bring. The real work of a writer is to design the setups, the payoffs, the reversals, and the surprises – to design the “gap between expectation and result,” as Robert McKee said.

—Chris

[Chapter 6](#) builds on the previous chapters by explaining what elements really make stories interactive and/or player-driven – things that even many experienced writers have trouble properly defining. It will also provide a brief overview of the different story types and structures used in games, giving you a hint of the things that will be covered later on.

You Can Have Both

We'll talk about how you resolve the conflict inherent in designing a story that makes the players feel something, that manipulates them, and that can be player-driven at the same time.

—Chris

Once you know the basics of story writing and have a grasp of the different types of interactive stories and their histories, it's time to move on and learn how to actually create those stories. [Chapters 7](#) through 11 each take a particular interactive storytelling style and examine it in depth, explaining how that type of story should be planned and structured, its unique advantages and disadvantages, and any unusual challenges you may come across. Throughout these chapters, we'll also be studying a wide assortment of games that use these styles. Those games will show the many different approaches that game writers take with their stories as well as give you a sense of which elements do and don't work well and the things that may need to be improved upon in the future.

Though you'll probably be familiar with many of the games discussed, there will likely be a few that you've never played or possibly never even heard of. Keep in mind that to properly explain and discuss the stories of these games, I'll often have to summarize many different parts of the plot, including big twists, endings, and the like. Naturally, the best way to become familiar with a game's story is to play the game for yourself. Even though I'll be pointing out the occasional flaw or problem section in some of these games, they're all excellent titles and, if you have time, I highly recommend playing as many of them as you can. Although I may have to give away some parts of a game's plot for the sake of discussion, there will always be plenty of surprises left untold. So even if you've already read about a game here, don't be discouraged from picking it up and giving it a try for yourself, even if it's a type you don't usually play. You never know, you may find out that you enjoy that kind of game a lot more than you thought.

As I said before, game stories are an evolving art form and, like any art form, there are a variety of opinions on which styles and methods are the best and which should be discarded, which brings us to the last part of the book.

Interactive Stories vs. Traditional Stories: The Great Debate

The first big game storytelling debate was centered on the question of whether games even needed stories to begin with. However, at this point that debate has all but ended. The answer? Yes, no, and maybe. In the end, it all depends on the game. Sports and puzzle games, for example, focus primarily on their core gameplay. As long as the game-play holds up, little need is seen for a formal story. On the opposite end, even though people often do enjoy the gameplay in adventure games and role-playing games (RPGs), many fans of those genres have little interest in titles without interesting characters and deep storylines. In the end, games don't "need" stories. If a game is fun, people will play it. However, nearly any game can be improved – often significantly – by a good story. Although it's taken time, the majority of the game industry seems to have finally realized this fact, as evidenced by the rising amount of story-focused games in genres that were once known for having very basic stories (first-person shooter [FPS] and action games, for example) or even no stories at all (like puzzle games).

There's a Story Behind Every Game

Man's natural desire to make sense of his world is so strong that if game designers abdicate all authorial responsibility and try to create a game without a story, players will impose a story upon the game anyway, regardless of whether the designers had one in mind. Because of this reality, designers must make story-related decisions (even if it is simply on the level of what the game pieces look like or what the background music sounds like) in such a manner that supports all the other game elements and forms a coherent whole. To do that successfully, they must under-

stand how story works in the audience.

—Chris

However, with the debate on the need for stories over, a new one has sprung up to take its place. Now that it's been decided that stories have their place in games, the question is what types of stories are best? Unlike books, TV, and movies, games are designed to allow the player to take an active role in the story, be it the hero, a group of heroes, or an undefined guiding force. At first, the player's role in the story was only to help his or her heroes succeed by fighting monsters, solving puzzles, jumping over gaping pits, and the like. Assuming that the player successfully got the heroes from Point A to Point B, the story would continue the way it was supposed to and that was that. But it wasn't long before game designers and writers started experimenting with the familiar formula. They sought to give the player control of not only battles, exploration, and puzzles, but also of how the story itself played out. In real life, if the princess were locked in a castle waiting to be saved, the brave hero doesn't really have to save her. He doesn't even have to try. Maybe he'd rather stay home and drink, hook up with her younger sister, or even defect and join her kidnapper, the evil vizier (which is a redundant title, because – in the world of video games clichés – it can generally be assumed that all viziers are evil). In a book or film, that type of interaction is extremely difficult and inconvenient to create. In a video game, however, which is built around interactivity and player choices, the technical limitations all but disappear (though other problems, which will be discussed throughout [Chapters 7 through 14](#), still remain), allowing designers and writers to create many different paths for the player to take.

Over time, there's been a stronger and stronger drive to create games that give players more choices and more control over the story itself. Some of these games have been fairly successful; others have not. Many people in the game industry champion these highly interactive player-driven stories as the ultimate form of storytelling and as the way in which

the industry as a whole must head if it wants to continue to grow and evolve as both a medium and an art form. There are others, however, who insist that putting too much control in the hands of the player is a mistake and that more traditional forms of storytelling are still the best. But, in the end, no matter how much freedom is given to the player, he or she still experiences the story in a linear fashion (even if the player gets to choose which line to pursue).

The debate is ongoing and complex, with proponents on both sides weighing in on a large number of different factors in an effort to prove that their form of storytelling is superior. To get a better understanding of this important debate, [Chapter 12](#) looks at the argument from the point of view of the pro-player-driven storytelling group, carefully summarizing their key statements and points as to why a high degree of player control makes for a better story.

[Chapter 13](#) will do the same for the traditional storytelling supporters, providing a detailed look at their primary points and arguments. If you've yet to seriously explore this issue, these chapters will give you a solid summary of both sides' viewpoints and help you start to form your own thoughts and opinions on the matter. If you're already firmly on one side of the storytelling debate, I recommend that you read through both chapters with an open mind and carefully consider the arguments made not only by your side but by the opposing group as well. Perhaps you'll even find your own perspective shifting when all is said and done.

Although the opinions of the game design and writing community are of course very important, something just as important – if not more so – is the opinions of the players themselves. In the end, games are made for and supported by ordinary gamers, so their opinions need to be taken into account. Many industry professionals claim they know what players want, but how can they be so sure? Having been unable to find any serious research on the subject, I set out on a mission to dig deeper and try and discover just what it is players want from a game story by conducting

a set of national surveys on the matter. Do players want freedom to do as they please or do they want a tightly controlled experience? Do most of them even care? And how do these preferences affect which games they buy? The results of my research are in [Chapter 14](#) and provide answers to these all important questions. Whether my discoveries put an end to the debate is up for you to decide, but no matter which side of the issue you're on, I'm sure you'll find some interesting things to think about.

Finally, in [Chapter 15](#) we'll be taking a look back at all the things we've covered and use them to peer ahead and consider what the future is likely to hold for storytelling in games. Only time can tell whether those theories will be true, but either way, it's bound to be an interesting ride. Whether you want to write for games or just play them, and no matter which side of the debate you're on, it's an exciting time for video games, stories, and everyone who enjoys them.

Summary

Stories, whether read in books, watched in movies, played in games, or heard about from another person, are an important part of our lives. They've inspired us and shaped the ways we act and look at the world since the dawn of mankind and will continue to do so for as long as we exist. Games may be a new and different form of storytelling, but that doesn't make them any less important.

Writing stories for games is challenging and requires thinking about and dealing with many issues and challenges that other writers never have to consider. And although adding a high degree of interactivity significantly increases those challenges, it can also allow the player a unique opportunity to take an active role and shape the progression and outcome of the story, though whether or not giving players that much control is a good thing is a complex issue that is frequently debated by those in the industry. Being a game writer can be fun, but there's also a lot of difficult work involved, so let's get started.

Things to Consider

1. What key events in history have been influenced by stories?
2. How have stories influenced your life? Which stories have had the greatest impact on you?
3. What makes writing for games different from writing for books or film?
4. How much control do you think players should have in game stories and why? Keep a copy of your answers and see if you still feel the same way once you've finished reading this book.

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