

Minnie Wu - Writing Narratives in Games

Writers are Designers

The General Structure and Process

Constructing a game narrative involves being aware of all aspects of the game: is aesthetics, theme, world building, etc. The process of creating a game narrative can follow a certain process.

Pre-Production/Development

This is where ambitions and goals are determined. What is the game supposed to evoke, what feeling does it have? What team will execute on the idea best? What assets are needed to achieve the goal? Questions like this that involve the broader scope of the game's feel and story are discussed here.

The Macro

Critical Path

The critical path is where the player must path through or interact with in order to progress through the story. This is considered the main story or main quest in many games. It could also be fractured into major game 'beats'

Gating

Think cause-effect systems. Its used in level design in order to keep players or people in areas until a certain condition is met

Dynamic/Reactive Presence

How does the world react to the player's presence. Are they one of many strangers that as a whole has no identity? Or does the player appear in a foreign area where the world instantly turns against them. These questions involve the general conflict and reactive presence of the game as caused by a player's location or actions.

Core Aspects of Good Storytelling

- **Show, don't tell**
 - The storytelling itself should be engaging
- **Do, don't show**
 - The player should have a level of agency, otherwise it is no better than them just watching a movie
- **Do, then show, then tell**
 - Allow the player the agency to explore and experience what is happening, with occasionally offering explanation (telling) to the player

Interactivity and the Illusion of Control

In games such as visual novels, branches provide a sense of personal control over the story, even if they have no major impact on overall arcs that have been written. Again, falling into the idea of “do, don't show”, the player should be given a sense of agency which brings the player into the world that is being built or established.

Environmental Storytelling

Environmental storytelling is heavily rooted in showing rather than telling. According to Don Carson, the analogy of theme parks helps provide light to what to do for environmental storytelling:

- Promote player exploration and agency
- The environment conveys a story
 - Accomplished through aesthetics, mechanics, etc.

World Building vs. Orientation

World building provides information about the values in the game, the technologies that are present, what is expected, etc.

Setting

A more honed in picture of the world everything is in. While it doesn't involve exact assets, it conveys a certain feeling and has locality.

Vignette

This is the staging of the scene established by the setting. It involves the actual placement of assets: models, sounds, characters, etc. It is the clearest picture that a player can get of the environment they're in.

Other Elements - Audio

While visual elements have great utility, audio can have an equally important role in storytelling. Base music such as the soundtrack and environmental sounds can be utilized to create a general feeling while specific interactive noises such as thuds or bangs can be used along with varying intensity to enhance or impose a new feeling.

Storyboards

A storyboard is a graphic representation of how a certain interaction scene will unfold, encapsulating general cues, visual elements, text, etc.