JOLIE MENZEL

Design Director • Narrative/Systems Lead • Mission & Level Design

Portfolio: joliemenzel.com • **LinkedIn:** linkedin.com/in/joliemenzel/

SUMMARY

Narrative & Visual Storytelling leader and Design Director with 15+ years across AAA and indie, shipping from pitch through launch and post-launch. Aligns story, systems, and core gameplay to deliver cohesive, readable player experiences, informed by a background in story development, writing, storyboarding, and cinematics. Leads in-house and co-development teams and cross-discipline pods with clear vision and acceptance criteria. Partners closely with Production on transparent estimates, roadmaps, and milestone quality bars to deliver on time and within budget. Invests in mentorship, knowledge sharing, and practices that build team autonomy and shared ownership.

SELECTED PROJECTS

- **Gears 5: Hivebusters** — Shipped well-received (82 Metacritic) standalone story DLC for Gears 5, owning the narrative and mission cohesion of the entire experience
- **Gears 5 (Live Ops)** — Led narrative content creation for 25+ additional multiplayer characters content across multiple releases, including collaboration with WWE and The New Day.
- **South Park: The Fractured but Whole (+ DLC)** — Led narrative and mission development and open world progression across main game and DLCs; IP partner management; designed and shepherded development on a custom dynamic and context-aware dialogue system.

SELECTED EXPERIENCE

Zunzún Studios — Studio Design Director (Jan 2025–Present)

- Authored multi-spec GDD, content roadmap, and milestone quality bars; defined goals/success measures and review cadence with Production.
- Leveraged hands-on implementation experience to spec high-impact tooling and pipeline adjustments to cut iteration churn and reduce regressions.
- Designed delegation-friendly authoring flows, documentation, and acceptance criteria so a lean core team could scale via co-development/outsourcing.
- Drove comp analysis and player research synthesis to choose where to innovate vs. standardize in features.

Probably Monsters — Game Design Director (Mar 2024–Dec 2024)

- Set design vision and evaluated deliverables for a 30+ person co-development team across disciplines.
- Authored GDD, development roadmaps, and milestone quality bars; defined pipelines and tooling; owned key features including 3Cs tuned for cinematic gameplay and encounter readability.
- Represented player experience in the process of development and selection process for new IP by drafting high-level GDDs that framed player fantasy to mechanics, giving the team a concrete target for scope, systems, and content.
- Drove the team through successful Prototype and First Playable gates; instituted build reviews and acceptance criteria that improved signal/noise in feedback and accelerated iteration.

Night School (Netflix Games) — Senior Game Designer (Feb 2023–Mar 2024)

- Designed a cross-platform player movement scheme (controller + touch) for cloud/streaming games, resilient to high latency. Championed a pivot away from traditional free locomotion to a design that preserved tone/atmosphere while avoiding player discomfort.
- Owned world metrics and layout. Produced detailed metrics and authoring guides to guide design and art teams in content implementation.
- Mentored designers in implementation bulletproofing and collaboration.
- Led focused content reviews with explicit go/no-go calls and decision logs; reduced iteration churn and ambiguity in feedback. Facilitated clarity by framing decisions and trade-offs for directors, improving team confidence and focus.
- Broke design work into clear estimates and acceptance criteria, enabling Production to make timely scope calls and align the team on high-impact areas.

The Molasses Flood, A CD PROJEKT Studio— Lead Narrative Designer (Feb 2022–Dec 2022)

- Narrative and mission design owner partnering directly with Engineering, including the tools and procedural generation team, to reconcile authored clarity with procgen replayability.
- Adapted Witcher IP sensibilities to a procedural design paradigm. Worked with loremasters to define constraints, hooks, and an authoring bible for systemic narrative. Produced franchise narrative guidelines to de-risk approvals and keep systemic characters tonally Witcher-authentic.
- Authored missions of varying structure and scope in Unreal 4 and a proprietary scripting system to create a library of templates and best practices for future teammates.
- Invested in Unreal Sequencer integration to achieve authored/cinematic presentation within procgen loops; introduced level zones and spawn budgets so progression and goals could be systemically controlled for consistent pacing.
- Proactively aligned with CD PROJEKT RED in Warsaw on franchise chronology and themes; codified constraints for stories with higher-level franchise considerations, and established tropes/archetypes for systemic characters to maintain brand fit.

The Coalition (Xbox Game Studios) — Lead Narrative Designer (Feb 2020–Jan 2022)

Shipped: *Gears 5: Hivebusters* **(DLC campaign) & Live Ops (***Operations*** 3–8)**

- Led a narrative pod of 3-4 contract writers/designers and producer; primary liaison to Level/Combat/MP Design, Audio, and Localization to align story beats supporting features and content.
- Ran pipelines across 14 voiced languages; supported fully remote recording sessions; coordinated lore/canon reviews with franchise leadership and loremasters.
- **Gears 5 Post Launch:** Delivered Ops 3–6 (~4-month intervals), Op 7 split (P1/P2, 1-month apart), 2-month gap, Op 8 split (P1/P2). Shipped 25+ playable characters on time and within budget. Ensured complete, high-quality combat dialogue sets across new and legacy characters; reviewed reuse viability of prior-game lines for time/budget efficiency and brand fit.
- **Hivebusters:** Narrative lead for a six-mission campaign; coached designers on resilient Blueprint setups; balanced scripted vs. systemic pacing; edited/adapted scripts to match encounter/level realities. Edited and reshaped story beats to protect proven level/combat pacing.

Ubisoft Osaka — Lead Designer (Jun 2018–Dec 2019)

Shipped: *Rocksmith+* **(Dynamic Difficulty & Curriculum initiatives)**

- Led improvements to Dynamic Difficulty by integrating enhanced note-detection diagnostics and designing a visible skills/curriculum map (RPG-style progression) so players could track mastery and plan practice.
- Hired a music educator to co-author curriculum scaffolding with learning outcomes and assessment loops, positioning the feature for potential education/edtech adoption alongside consumer use.
- Primary liaison between Ubisoft Osaka (core dev) and Ubisoft San Francisco stakeholders (Design, Art, UX, Publishing); bridged time zones with structured reviews and frequent onsite visits.

Ubisoft San Francisco — Lead Narrative Designer (Feb 2015–Jun 2018)

Shipped: *South Park: The Fractured But Whole* **and DLC**

- Owned missions & narrative: Defined mission flows and macro campaign progression; integrated writing from South Park Studios and the internal team; oversaw VO recording, ingest, and localization pipelines.
- Managed 4 direct reports and led a cross-discipline narrative pod of 6 (writers/designers + audio partner + contract writer). Narrative/mission point of contact for 24 designers across San Francisco (19) and Osaka (5).
- Designed a context-driven dialogue system so characters could react to the world, party makeup, and progression, simulating show-style banter dynamically instead of relying on brittle, hand-scripted setups.
- Shifted narrative authoring to data-driven rules (party/location/progression), enabling reuse across missions and late changes without level reauthoring; scaled cleanly to DLC party members.

- Implemented an **Excel→DB bulk-edit pipeline** over **60k+** voiced lines, reducing stakeholder feedback cycles to **<1 day** and improving review fidelity.
- Directed collaboration with **Ubisoft Osaka** (levels/puzzles); set mission quality bars and acceptance criteria; provided greybox metrics and early level designs to establish layout/scale conventions.

Telltale Games — Cinematic Artist (with game design remit) (Jun 2011–Jan 2015)

Shipped: The Walking Dead S1 • The Wolf Among Us • Tales from the Borderlands

- Built cinematics in close partnership with designers and writers to execute story beats within interactive contexts.
- Authored cameras and navigation setups to support cinematic exploration and legible player interaction.
- Prototyped new twists on adventure-game mechanics in the proprietary Telltale Tool using Lua.
- Greyboxed environments to validate layout, navigation, and shot composition prior to art pass

---

EXPERTISE & TOOLS

Leadership: Vision setting; milestone quality bars; acceptance criteria; Roadmapping & dependency planning; drop cadence (live ops); Build reviews & feedback synthesis; risk/mitigation & scope control; Cross-discipline alignment; co-dev/outsourcing direction; Mentorship & coaching; team health

Design: Mission Design & Level Design; Systems Design; Narrative Systems; Playtesting & telemetry-informed iteration; Accessibility; Cross-platform interaction design; UX Design.

Tooling/Pipelines: Content pipelines for co-dev/outsourcing; VO/Loc pipelines; build/review rituals; Design documentation

Versioning/Collab: Perforce/Git; Jira/Confluence; Notion; Miro/Figma

Additional: Public speaking; mentorship; IP-holder collaboration; IP development; screenwriting; editing

---

EDUCATION

Savannah College of Art and Design — B.F.A., Sequential Art; Minors in Conceptual Art for Games and Storyboarding