GamesWest 2013 Talk - Getting Into Game Narrative Design

I was invited by Dr Daniel Livingstone [http://www.linkedin.com/in/dlivingstone] and IGDA guru Luke Dicken [http://www.linkedin.com/in/lukedicken] to give a talk to the fabulous students at the University of West Scotland in Paisley. The UWS was hosting the magnificent GamesWest [http://gameswest.net/] event. I have to say, for an event at which to gave my first ever solo talk, it was perfect. Everybody was very kind, the room was packed, and I even got Tweeted thanks from students who had attended.

I promised a few folks that I would post the details of the talk here, and that is what I have done. It's a little sketchy, but I hope it's helpful. If you are already a Narrative Designer (or whatever the current title is for someone who writes and manages the story in games), please feel free to add the story of how you got into games in the comments section. It'll surely benefit those looking to make a start in the business.

Intro –

I'm Iain Lowson, a freelance writer working on a bunch of things including games.

For my games writing, I'm represented by Sini Downing at SideLines UK.

I've written for Midway [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wheelman] , Ubisoft [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Driver:_San_Francisco] , Relentless [http://www.relentlesssoftware.co.uk/games/blue-toad-murder-files] , Squid in a Box [http://www.squidinabox.com/category/waves/] , plus a bunch of cancelled projects (including Square Enix) and stuff still covered by NDAs even though some of it will never see the light of day.

I've done a couple of comics for Games Workshop many moons ago, wrote some LARPs, done some RPG writing, including creating Dark Harvest: The Legacy of Frankenstein [http://www.darkharvest-legacyoffrankenstein.com/] .

The main thing I've done over 17 of the 18 years (atow) I've been freelancing is write for official Star Wars publications (including my current one, The Star Wars Fact File [http://starwarsfactfile.co.uk/]). Some wee fictional bits and pieces are still out there in the 'mythos', which makes me very happy.

More details about my career can be found here on my blog [http://embraagain.blogspot.co.uk/2013/05/youre-never-quite-done-with-exams.html] and on LinkedIn [http://uk.linkedin.com/in/iainlowson/] .

Thanks - Before going on, I want to thank a bunch of current and former colleagues and friends I contacted about writing for the games industry. They are:

Simon Woodroffe, Creative Director at Microsoft/Rare

Richard Rouse III [http://www.paranoidproductions.com/writings.html] , Senior Game Designer at Microsoft,

Kevin Beimers, Director at Italic Pig [http://italicpig.com/]

Sini Downing, head of SideLines UK [http://www.sidelinesagency.com/] , part of Side UK

Andy Payne, head of Mastertronic

Andrew John Smith of Spilt Milk Studios [http://www.spiltmilkstudios.com/]

Ian Mayor, UbiSoft Reflections

How – I asked all of those fine folks mostly the same questions, one of which was 'how to get into the industry'. Richard Rouse best summed it up – there is no set way.

Personally, I got into games because I didn't want to be unemployed anymore, or to live where my family and I were. It was that simple. Not easy, just simple.

I found my first industry job on a recruitment agency site. The description stressed that experience wasn't necessary, but the agency insisted on a minimum two years or so. They refused to put me forward for the position, so I called another agency, got them to track down the folks advertising the job, and the other agency put me up for it. After three interviews, and a couple of writing tests (detailed elsewhere on this blog), I got the job at Midway Studios in Newcastle.

After Wheelman was done, I was contacted by Sini Downing of Side UK, the studios in London where we had recorded the dialogue for the game. They were starting an agency for writers, and I was invited to join.

That's how I got in. It's not typical but, as Richard points out, there are no typical stories.

Advice – I'm painfully aware that isn't that helpful to those of you looking to move into narrative design, or whatever wanky term is currently being used to describe writing for games. That's why I contacted the people I did.

The shape of the industry is changing. We all know that. There are so many different delivery platforms out there, and

so many different ways to develop for them. However, writing is as writing does, as they say in the Shire, and there are commonalities.

Basics – There are things you should focus on. I'm going to run through a quick general list in case I run out of time. So…

* Go make something! Could be comics, novels, sourcebooks, journalism, game mods, screenplays, whatever. Game writers come from everywhere. Be doing things to show you are professional and committed.

* Respect games as a medium - understand why they are different but not worse than writing for other mediums. Be able to talk about why game stories work and which ones are good and bad.

* Recognise that games are a gameplay-first medium. Not story first like novels or TV or even movies. Often as a writer you will be serving the gameplay, not the other way around (though there are exceptions!)

* Be ready to implement! No job is "below" you. Be ready to jump into tools and hook up dialog, script sequences, do prototype camera work, whatever it takes...

Detail – Go make something. Very true that. Very important. I don't think I've ever got or been considered for a writing job on a video game project because of work I did on another video game project. Mostly it's been my tabletop RPG work, occasionally my Star Wars stuff, or maybe because of

something on my blog. My agent looks for quirky things the writers on her books do or have done, because it's more often those things that appeal to a client and that come up in interview.

My friend Ian Mayor said "Too many games writers I know have backgrounds in (writing/playing, etc) Roleplaying games than can be coincidental. It teaches you to think on your feet, narratively, how to deal with the narrative needs of players around you and how narrative and games systems can feed each other."

The basic truth is that, whatever you do, don't just write for games. Even when you do, try not to just write for one game genre. You'll get more work if you can show broader ability through samples and your developing track record.

If you write lots of different types of things, published across different media, you will not be boring and you will not be bored. "Find other passions" as Mr Mayor says. Also - and this is very important if you like eating food, living in houses, and dressing in clothes – if you do lots of writing for other things, you will spend less time being unemployed.

I know exactly one person who makes the overwhelming majority of their money writing for video games. He works as a narrative designer. Even he still does other writing stuff in his spare time. Every games writing freelancer I know spends more time working on non-game projects than they do on game projects and that is NOT because they are rubbish. It's because big, chunky, long-term game writing jobs are few and

far between. Most are very short term.

Detail – Respect and Recognise games for what they are. If you think games are a quick way into film, tv, comics, whatever, kindly leave the room immediately. If you think games and films are the same thing narratively, I respectfully suggest you are an idiot. Or you work in marketing. And you're an idiot.

Early in my time on my first job, an in-studio job, one of the senior designers felt able to tell me to my face that I shouldn't be there. There was, he felt, no place for writers in the games industry.

He's wrong, incidentally.

Let me read something a colleague of mine, an industry veteran, said. It's a conversation he and I have had a few times. It's one that, in fact, I've had with quite a few folks:

"So there are two problems here - the first is that many designers do not understand the narrative structure in the way that writers do (even though they are creating it and the good ones understand it implicitly) and the second is that writers often struggle with the idea of the 'viewer' being an active participant in the narrative. "I can't write 10 endings" is something I've heard before and have empathy for because it's hard enough to write one good one!

"Basically the clash between the designer requirement to push player agency and the writer's need to control the narrative is

where things have generally come unstuck. The uneasy marriage of GAMEPLAY > CUTSCENE > GAMEPLAY is the unsatisfactory solution that many games tend to fall back to. *(He's right. I not a fan of cutscenes, as a player and a writer.)*

"The biggest thing I'd advise new writers is to understand the designer's point of view here. Designers for their part need to understand the experience their players are having on an emotional level rather than thinking about games just as feature and level lists."

Games are to be played, not watched or read. If you can't accept that as a writer, don't get involved in the games industry. Narrative and gameplay should compliment and drive each other. They are different elements, but not separate ones. Not in good games anyway. Accept gameplay's supremacy, but be ready to fight for the narrative. To do that, you need to understand.

Read interviews with writers, designers, producers, even marketing people. Go to events, like this one, and listen and learn. Understand all of the pressures on the people and on the narrative and on the project. Learn to speak the language of the other departments, to understand their problems, and you will do rather well.

Which leads me to…

Details – Be ready to implement! Actually, it's perhaps better

to say 'Be flexible', or even 'Be useful'.

Be flexible. One of the best pieces of advice I've ever received is from an actor chum I have, Angus MacInnes, who is also a writer. He has, in his many years in film, seen a lot of writers fired or walk off because they couldn't play well with others. As Angus says, 'Don't get precious, get paid'.

Again, my agent Sini said something very telling:

"Team players
 They (the clients) don't want to work with writers who are going to be precious about their work.
They want to be assured the writer is going to work with the producer whose baby this is, not fight against him/her.
They want to know that if levels 5-8 are cut, the writer can work the story around the missing levels."

I had experience of this on 'Wheelman' when a string of 8 short missions was cut. It had a big impact on the story, leaving one medium importance character with no real introduction, and the player with no handle on them ahead of their death scene. The character couldn't be removed as they were already in two expensive cut scenes that couldn't be majorly changed or ditched. I had literally half an hour's warning of this ahead of a meeting where I was told I had to present solutions. In the end, I proposed the addition of two lines to an existing cutscene requiring minimal work and the use of a line from the lead that had been cut from another

scene. Job done. Solution accepted.

Be useful. What Richard said, about being prepared and ready to do anything, particularly if you land an in-studio job, is very true. This is also where having written many different things, and learned about many different aspects of the industry, can really pay off.

Example. Here's a short list of many, but not all, of the things I did as a narrative designer on my first job; 'Wheelman' for Midway Studios:

Fiction creation (plot, missions, characters, etc);
Assisting with voice talent auditions, casting and recording (including directing two full sessions and co-directing others);
Working with Animation and Cinematics departments at motion capture sessions (including directing and co-directing scenes);
Creation of minor game cutscenes using Kismet and the Unreal 3 Editor;
Co-ordinating with US staff on all fiction related issues;
Co-ordinating with all on-site departments to manage fiction related issues;
Character creation (writing bios, co-ordinating with Art and Animation, etc);
Writing bark/incidental and in-game dialogue;

Working with Localisation team (FIGS casting, translation, etc);
Mission creation (co-ordinating with Mission and Level Design);

Maintaining fiction related company intraweb pages;

Design document creation and proofreading;

Organising inspiration material (film mornings, etc);

Working with Production, Marketing, Art & Cinematics on product placement;

Writing studio PR material (studio presence on corporate website);

Most of this I had pretty much never done before, but it was great fun to learn from the people I was working with. Every day is a school day. It's part of the fun of the job.

Right, enough talking.

Posted 15 hours ago by Iain Lowson

Labels: GamesWest, narrative design, University of West Scotland

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