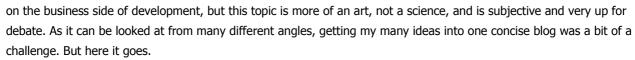# NARRATIVE IN GAMES

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Aphelio's Michael Walker discusses the role good story can play in games, and how developers should approach it

[*Michael Walker began his career working at multi-award winning developer Jagex on the studio's flagship product: RuneScape. Since then he has gone on to form Aphelio, a cross-platform games development studio.*]

I thought this would be the easiest article for me to write out of the three I have written for *Develop* so far - what an assumption to make!

The other two pieces I have written ([Available start-up support for your game studio](#) and [The business side of HTML5 and going cross-platform](#)) have focused for on the business side of development, but this topic is more of an art, not a science, and is subjective and very up for debate. As it can be looked at from many different angles, getting my many ideas into one concise blog was a bit of a challenge. But here it goes.

Narrative in games is a very hot topic right now, and this is why I feel that it's worth trying to summarise the discussion so far and add my own thoughts into the melting pot.

It also helps that I am currently in the middle of designing the narrative around Aphelio's next game, therefore so much of the theory on games and narrative is at the forefront of my mind as I have recently read a lot of articles and watched a lot of presentations on the subject. Having swotted up so much, it only felt right to put finger to keyboard.

I'd like to open by saying I've been pleased to see a large number of articles, blogs and comments on this topic strewn throughout the game industry media over the last few months.

Thanks to all those that have written these pieces and commented on them as I think narrative in games is a fantastic topic, and it has helped me with my current task of designing narrative for games myself. I have experience writing narrative for games at Aphelio and other studios as well, but there is always more to learn.

The main questions which seem to be on everyone's lips are 'What is narrative's role in games?', 'Should narrative be a focus in design and development?', and 'Is narrative being used properly in games?'.

I'd like to focus on these three key parts of the debate as there are many avenues we could explore, but I believe that these questions are pretty much as close to the crux of the discussion as we can get. So let's get started.

'What is narrative's role in games?'

Like many of my developer cohorts, I believe that designing and refining game mechanics should always come first in a game's development, and narrative can be a supporting feature for this and potentially a major focus.

The big upset to this point of view recently is the very intriguing notion that storytelling can be a mechanic in itself, an idea which was demonstrated in the critically acclaimed game 'The Walking Dead' from Telltale Games.

From this, I think it's fair to say then that whilst narrative has always had a role in games, due to technology advances and perhaps more importantly design innovation - story telling in games has an arguably larger and more significant role in games than it used to.

My personal belief is that any pure story or narrative - providing that at its core it has a sound structure, can have a big role in any entertainment media. My important caveat to this though would be that this only truly works when the narrative is adapted to the media it is being written for, whether it be books, comics, movies or games.

There are many examples of this, for example the recent rise of commercially successful and critically acclaimed movies, games and TV series based on comic book heroes. Those stories and characters were modified for new mediums, and rightly so. To summarise, narrative's role in games will only get bigger, in my opinion, as we learn to adapt pure narrative more effectively to our products.

'Should narrative be a focus in design and development?'

This to me depends on many things e.g. the genre of game, the size of the team and what the mechanics of the game are.

Content driven by narrative seems to have traditionally worked better in linear and single player games. However we are seeing 'emergent' narrative become prominent in sandbox and online multiplayer games where players' experiences through gameplay evoke a sense of narrative and storytelling.

This also brings up the argument that narrative's place in games should be interactive and not passive, or vice versa. There can be a place for both, some stories are better told through scripted cutscenes, some are told better through optional dialogue trees, there can be a place for everything.

To answer the question directly, narrative has a place in the development and design of a game but only if it is there for a reason, like supporting a mechanic or a piece of content. It should also only be a focus of development if it makes logical sense based on your game's genre, its features and also your team's resources.

'Is narrative being used properly in games?'

The final part of this discussion, and the one which can attract ire from players and developers alike is that some games are using narrative 'incorrectly' or perhaps in a monotonous, uninteresting way.

My argument to this would be let the market decide what is interesting. Leave it up to the consumers to decide what works and what doesn't work story-wise.

If your community likes your narrative style, it suits your game and you can do it in an effective, polished way then I don't see how there can be a 'right' and a 'wrong' way to tell stories though games. There can only be different ways, and different is interesting.

However, it would be nice to see more games explore new ways of conveying narrative rather than using the traditional ways. So in essence, as ever, the challenge is down to the writers and designers of the narrative and games themselves to be creative and push games design forward into the future.

www.aphelio.com

http://www.develop-online.net/blog/488/Narrative-in-games