

Game Writing's No Game: Why Interactive Writing Isn't Simple

Video games perhaps aren't the first things that come to your mind when you're asked to think of art or literature. In fact, many people I speak to about games writing seem unaware or even surprised that games can, and today often do, carry a narrative and artistic depth similar to or even surpassing cinematic, prose and poetic work.

Having grown up with family in the games industry, and now working in it myself, I wanted to take this opportunity to break through this stereotype. Hopefully this article will show anyone yet to explore games a glimpse as to why I think you are missing out on the biggest explosion of narrative creativity since the invention of modern cinema.

Especially since Surrey, this festival's home, is also home to a world-famous avant-garde heritage of games and developers dating back to 1988 – check out <https://guildford.games/timeline> for more on that!

Before I go any further, I should quickly outline games writing. Games writing is, at its most basic, the design and creation of a story which allows audiences some choice in how they experience the story. That's still quite broad, so I'm going to focus on the games writing in blockbuster video games (called AAA games in the industry) for this article – though I would encourage you to explore the sheer creativity of the independent development scene through portals like <https://itch.io>!

And for reference, an oversimplified explanation of a video game is a piece of software on a computer of some kind which provides the audience – now called players – choices (such as what to say or where to go) through which they can impact an virtual world of some kind.

With that out of the way, we can (briefly) discuss the art of writing for narrative games. The focus of storytelling in the gaming industry has been booming for the last twenty years or so, ever since the discovery that the medium's unique and immersive feature of player agency could be used to impact a narrative.

Already previously described, player agency is the players' ability to choose how the protagonist (called the "player-character" in the industry) will act in the game world. It's the ability of players to choose whether they will turn left or right, will say dialogue line one or dialogue line two, or whether they'll pull the trigger on that gun. And this ability connects players to player-characters and their experience in a way novels and cinema cannot quite replicate.

Because of this agency, games demand a unique, somewhat difficult writing style. Their writers have the challenge of allowing players to meaningfully choose how they act, while also delivering a cohesive story that will (for the most part) be the same regardless of these choices. Unlike prose or cinematic storytelling, games writers are not able to entirely pre-write protagonists and their actions, because part of the players' unique experience of the medium is being able to choose these actions for themselves.

Even the simplest video game storylines which exist only to justify the action scenes must perfect the balance of creating exciting plots within believable worlds, inside which the player-character develops along a character arc, while still allowing players to feel that they can truly have the agency and freedom to make the player-character act as they please without feeling like they've made their player-character act "out of character".

In other words, player-characters need to be relatable and interesting enough to feel like real people, but simultaneously blank enough to feel like they would act in the ways the player directs them to. As an extreme example, players must feel able to profess their love for, scream their hatred at, or even kill a certain character without feeling one of these options wouldn't "fit" the pre-established character of their player-character.

This can make writing major plot-points difficult, and often means games will employ a lot of techniques to guide you to doing yourself what the plot requires, or to make you feel like you've had more of a choice than you have – which sadly I don't have the space to discuss here.

This writing is extremely popular in games, when done correctly, because it enhances the escapism considerably. By making players feel they have the agency to act however they please with a player-character, they come to feel responsible for the character, or can even feel that the player-character is an extension of themselves.

For example, you are more scared for a character's survival in a horror film when you can relate to them and find parts of yourself in their character. Games capitalise on this, by using agency to make it feel as though your thoughts and actions blend into the player-character's. Suddenly, it almost feels like you're trying to keep yourself alive, rather than just a virtual character, and both the escapism and the experience is enhanced.

You take on the player-character's goals and experiences, and are solely responsible for how the game plays out. Consequently, players and the player-character merge in a way yet unreached by other mediums. Thus, writing a game and its characters properly becomes integral to a game's ability to fully immerse its players.

Writing not just the virtual characters, but the worlds these characters live in to be individual yet accessible like this is easily one of the intensive narrative processes in consumable media. Creating universes in which players can easily slip into routinely involves thousands of collective writing hours – the process is akin to creating a sometimes city-sized film set, where every rock, brick, piece of graffiti, character and line of dialogue are designed not only to fit the game's story, but to tell it.

A city built inside a giant skeleton, or a version of London almost identical to our own, and how the inhabitants act, for example, speaks masses about a game's story. To do this well, it's important for the world to feel new and fantastical, but also for things to be recognisable enough that the player feels they understand as much about the world as the player-character would.

For many games, this is aided by almost every prop on these virtual sets being available for players to interact with. By being able to pick up and eat a local delicacy, or read a poster on the wall about a local circus, players can absorb information the player-character already know without breaking immersion.

Some games will go as far to write story-cohesive “flavour text” for each of these objects (the *Borderlands* franchise being a comical example), which feature the player-character describing the object to themselves (and the player) in order to further blend the player and player-character's knowledge bases.

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim is an open-world narrative game on the extreme end of this, with an entire 31.7km² county open for players to freely roam, overflowing with the ruins of several civilisations, feuds between a plethora of races and sub-factions, 1087 unique interactive characters, thousands of interactive objects, and even a collection of 337 full-length, in-universe fiction and history books that players can discover and read in the game. It's so big that players are still discovering new story arcs, ten years after its release.

However, so much work being done on the world and characters around the story rarely means games don't tell powerful stories. The 2018 version of *God of War* is a good example of this modern narrative. The game's story is a tender, fifty-hour following of the player-character trying to repress his violent past, and rebuild his relationship with his son, as they journey together through a fantastical Nordic world to scatter the mother's ashes.

The character and plot complexity easily rivals a common novel, being full of unexpected backstory and plot twists, while playing as the father serves to make the experience all the more poignant. Players partake in every stressful battle to protect the player-character's son, and faces every inability of that character to look after his son like his mother would. Every time the son cries out in pain, it's because you as the player failed to protect him.

Even with this melding of player and player-character, the writers at Santa Monica Studio still manage to develop the character in an unexpected direction as he continues to battle his grief and his past, without making the player feel as though any choice they could have made would have been out of character. The result feels like stepping inside a Norse mythology novel, and having the protagonist's experiences meld with your own.

Games are already pushing this immersion further, though. Experiences like *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* or *Forget-Me-Knot* take advantage of this ability to place players inside a player-character's experience by emulating their player-characters' Schizophrenia and Alzheimer's respectively, as it responds to every action players make. The result is a uniquely disturbing experience – it's one thing to hear someone describe these conditions, but to experience approximations of malevolent auditory hallucinations or the confusion of time and space shifting around you is quite another.

Both games still have stories – Senua is trying to rescue her dead lover from the underworld, and in *Forget-Me-Knot* the unnamed player-character is simply trying to remember who they are. Games such as these show the medium's distinctive ability to narratively foreground and educate players on social issues by putting players through these issues, something emblematised in the mainstream by the episodic game *Life is Strange* – a teenage experience where the player's interaction with other characters' bullying and mental health issues can either help these character push through their demons, or indirectly cause their deaths.

As powerful as these narrative experiences can be, games have found a way to take this immersive experience even further still. As suggested by the mention of *Life is Strange*, player agency becomes almost omnipotent when it is giving meaningful control over the narrative.

Up until this point, the games discussed have all been written to allow for players to make choices without “breaking” the story – with the exception of *Life is Strange*, where player choice can either permanently save or kill characters, thus changing both the story and who the player-character is.

This is called a branching narrative, because such narratives “branch out” depending on what players do, and this allows the entire narrative to shift around players much like real life. It also increases the writing teams' workload immensely, though: each narrative “branch” is essentially a new version of the world, player-character, and narrative where one set of the player's actions are taken into account, and thus must have new narrative arcs developed for them.

Despite this, these narratives are becoming more and more common in games for the unique experience they can offer.

This unique experience is the players' complete freedom to write their own roles. Degrees of liberty vary, but on the extreme end players are no longer limited to another character's role, and instead are free to write themselves into its story however they please.

Such narratives are most commonly found in Role-Playing Games, named because, though all games technically allow players to play a role in the game world, Role-Playing Games specialise in allowing players to choose their own “role” to play without worrying about breaking the story.

This can often be light-hearted fun – for example, the Surrey-made fantasy-RPG franchise *Fable* calls on players to stop evil destroying the world, but was one of the first big-budget games to allow

players to choose whether they do this as a fart-dancing hero, a chicken-kicking villain, or whether they do it at all.

On the flipside, RPGs can also be deathly serious. The now-seminal space-opera RPG *Mass Effect* franchise was one of the first RPGS to feature an extensive branching narrative in 2007. In it, players embark on a quest to build a starship crew and save the galaxy with a custom-made player-character.

The players' success relies entirely on the trust they build with the dialogue and actions they choose when interacting with their crew, all of whom are experiencing a personal crisis. If the player mishandles these crises, or refuses to offer help, then characters will die and the players will be unable to save the galaxy. After spending upwards of 200 hours with these characters, this can be devastating – similar to a late death in a long TV series.

The result is an experience different to anything any film or novel could offer. Common and intense themes like mental illness, grief, faith and identity are still present in a depth rivalling or extending past other media, but how and where these issues manifest entirely depends on who players choose to talk to, and how players choose to act and talk with them – much like how your real-life experiences rely on what choices you make.

To me, this emblematises the power of branching narrative to replicate human potential. There is a powerful art in how games can communicate not just the experiences of people, but how through branching narratives they can capture the complex, simultaneous potential of people to act in a multitude of different ways depending on how others act to them.

This is, to me, what makes games a medium capable of literary masterpieces: their ability to capture, portray and teach with human experience like no other medium.

Of course, I couldn't possibly cover every type of video game, or every narrative they include. But I hope this (somewhat lengthy) snapshot into the world of narrative gaming has shown you why you really are missing out on an amazing narrative experience if you've yet to explore games.

The stories games tell are just as valid; artistic; and powerful as, and yet so far from, the written and cinematic storytelling you know and love. And if this has inspired you (as I hope it has!) to look more into games or talk about things further, I'd love to have a discussion with you in the comments!