Writing as a Team Player

Over my gap year, I was lucky enough to work with the Guildford-based video game studio Flaming Fowl Studios on adapting the hit board game *Gloomhaven* into a video game (something I know all my friends are sick of hearing about). During this time, I worked closely with the Creative Director and CEO on the game's narrative and text, as well as with the studio's other departments—and learnt a lot about how to work as part of a team on a large, long-term and expensive creative project.

This blog will share five of my biggest takeaways form this experience, for others looking to work in the industry—or just for those curious. And if you're neither, I would suggest at least having a skim (after you read this article for an introduction as to why games writing should interest you), because these tips would also apply to working as a screenwriter, a playwright, or any role where you have creative—especially narrative—input on a team project. So, without further ado, here are my tips:

You Don't Work In A Vacuum

It sounds obvious, but this was easily the most important thing I learnt, so I've put it first. In inter-disciplinary team projects like a video game, everyone's work is going to rely on each other. The more work I did, the more I realised this—it was like a domino effect.

If my story needed a new kind of door, for instance, the artists would have to model and texture them. The animators would have to make them open and close. The sound designers would have to create the opening and closing sounds. The programmers would have to make these sounds, models and animations function like an actual door in practice. Then Quality Assurance would have to ensure these secret doors worked correctly in every possible situation.

All of these things take time and money away from other areas of the project—something important to large creative projects like *Gloomhaven*, which had funding limits to stay under, progress deadlines to meet, and around two hundred quests in need of creation. So of course, you can see why it was preferable for me to write with what the game already had, and allow everyone else to focus on making the game's main features.

This isn't just something that happens in games. With films, for example, the script decides, ultimately, what the movie requires.

It dictates the kinds of scenes and what equipment will be needed to film them, who the actors will be playing, what outfits the costume department will be designing, what stunts the stunt team will prepare, what props the prop-master needs to gather, what locations need to be recced and hired, how much Computer-Generated-Imagery will be required, what kind of music will be written and recorded for the film, and so much more.

And each of these departments will rely on each other—for example, the balance between physical props and CGI will depend on the capabilities of the prop-master, the CGI team, the locations themselves, and the actor's requirements.

Therefore, final scripts are often drafted or even re-worked during production in dialogue with these other departments and producers, based on what they feel able to do in the time and budgetary limits. Everyone has to work to each other's strengths and limits simultaneously in big creative projects like these. No one works in a vacuum.

Kill Your Darlings

This old piece of writing advice is something almost every writer has heard at some point—I can hear the groans from here. But it's just as important here as it is in any piece of creative work, if not arguably more.

For those uninitiated, being told to 'kill your darlings' isn't encouraging you to attack your loved ones. It asks you to be critical of your writing, and to be ready to cut your favourite parts of your work if they are causing it problems, despite feeling proud of them. But I feel that when you're working on a large creative project, this tendency to save your darlings takes on a different shape.

At least for me, being one of the only ones on the team that had never been contracted to work on a game before, I felt a pressure not only to save my favourite pieces of writing, but to keep them as "proof" of my writing to the rest of the studio, who would end up reading it.

I wanted to show that I had a right to be working with them despite my lack of experience, and as such I ended up awkwardly writing some sections around certain passages which I felt were particularly eloquent or witty. However, after some criticism from the Creative Director a few months into the job, I re-read Stephen King's *On Writing* and came across this passage:

> *'Certainly I couldn't keep it in on the grounds that it's good; it should be good, if I'm being paid to do it. What I'm not being paid to do is be self-indulgent.'*

> (2012, p.207)

A few days later, my guitar teacher then spoke to me about the importance of "serving the song" when improvising or writing guitar parts—an expression which I know made as many musicians groan as "kill your darlings" did writers. In case you're unfamiliar, "serving the song" means putting the needs of the song before your need to show off for your ego—quite a similar sentiment.

The way I understand it, it doesn't matter how impressive it is that you can shred scales at 220bpm, or how great the new metal riff you've written sounds—as cool as they are, those things are never going to comfortably fit in a slow jazz ballad.

Clearly, someone or something was sending me signs about my writing, so I tried to take them.

The more comfortable I got with putting the "song" before my "darlings", and the way they fed my ego, the more I saw my writing improve. I became more and more able to direct all of my writing toward fulfilling the purpose the rest of the studio needed it to, rather than spending time stressing and trying to meet that requirement with a barely-relevant line or paragraph I had attached my ego to.

This was important, not only for my own writing and enjoyment, but because it allowed me to work faster—allowing everyone else to do the same. But that didn't mean my work still wasn't criticised by other people.

Accept Your Criticism—Even If It Doesn't Come From Other Writers

One thing I had to get used to while pursuing my interest in writing at university was criticism of my writing. Constructive criticism is essential to our growth in all things, and this was no different at Flaming Fowl Studios.

The Creative Director and I would regularly criticise each other's work, just as I expected—we'd catch each other's typos, point out plot holes, find deviations from the lore, suggest better jokes, and

the like. The creative writing workshops and portfolio submissions on the course had prepared me for this more than I realised.

But one thing I wasn't expecting was the criticism from everyone else in the studio—even when most of them were not writers, but artists, programmers, producers, QA technicians. This is something I found a little harder to deal with at first: some part of me felt like it wasn't fair for them to be criticising my writing when they weren't the ones actively practising it.

I think the Creative Director noticed this, because early on he gave me some advice which has stuck with me ever since. I don't remember the exact wording, but it went something like this: work isn't like university. It's not about getting a grade from independent work.

At work, we focus on working as a team to get the best result in the shortest amount of time. Criticisms will come from people seeing your work from the perspective of *their* expertise and how it affects their work. Their suggestions are based on helping you work better fit into theirs, something they'll likely know better than you—it's not to make you look bad, but for the good of the project. And it helps you improve, too.

Learning *why* everyone's opinion was valuable, rather than just trying to blindly accept them, helped me a lot. Knowing that people weren't criticising *me* so much as how *my work served the project*, made it much easier to suck it up, learn from their suggestions, and move on—something I feel is invaluable in a team environment, where everyone's input is valuable, and you need to learn to consider how your creative decisions will impact everyone else.

Your Voice Is Valuable—Yes, Yours

Something I learnt alongside how to properly take criticism from everyone was how to properly provide it. Again, I spent my early days feeling like it wouldn't be right for me to criticise others when they're much more experienced than me, especially in their own field.

But it's important to remember that when you're working on a team like this, you've been hired into it for a reason—your skills and opinions are valued. Your unique perspective is going to notice things that others don't. For instance, as a writer sometimes you'll have to point out if decisions taken by artists or programmers are contradicting the storyline—I know I did once or twice.

Of course, I'm not telling you to tell a programmer how to code without a minute of experience coding, or to constantly suggest changes when you don't understand why the original choice was made, but there will be times when you feel like something needs to be changed and everyone else has missed it. And you're allowed to say something.

As I implied, there were definitely moments like that for me, where I suggested changes to things like the art, or even the higher-level narrative design of the game—more the realm of the Creative Director and the CEO than mine.

Even if these weren't my fields, these discussions often ended in either me learning more about why the other person had done what they had, or them agreeing that my change or something similar would work better. Whatever happened, it was a productive and beneficial moment for the project, and allowed us all to improve our work by better understanding the other. There's no rivalry—just the greater good of the project.

Having this kind of dialogue comfortably is also important to your dynamic as a team—you all need to have an atmosphere where you feel you can freely voice and criticise ideas without fear of offending or upsetting colleagues, otherwise Quality Assurance is going to have their hands full with

issues born of inter-disciplinary miscommunication, and the project as a whole is going to feel disjointed.

Everyone needs to feel that they can ask questions and make suggestions to ensure things run smoothly in order for collaborative creative work to be as fun as it should be—because creating shouldn't just be hard work!

Play Is Productive

Lastly, a somewhat under-appreciated point, but one I feel is especially important when working on such a long and often-times stressful project: remember to enjoy it.

Chances are, if you're working as part of the team on a video game, a film, a play, or something similar, then you've been dreaming of it for a long time. Celebrate that! You're living your long-term goal. Allow yourself to feel that achievement. Enjoy the view. Take in the scenery.

You're doing something many more people dream of than actually manage to do, and remembering that is likely going to make you feel happier and more motivated.

Of course, I'm not telling you to rest on your laurels and stop working. You were hired to do a job, after all, and you'll need to do it in order to get closer to your next goal. But it can be all too easy to laser-focus on and stress yourself out over reaching your new big dream, before you've really allowed yourself to recognise how far you've come in realising the current one.

On that note, don't forget how often work and play can intersect. You're now part of a team of industry professionals. Use that! Go to work socials, strike up conversations, and get to know your colleagues. The creative industries are famous for being self-contained—especially gaming.

Friends commonly recommend and hire friends for jobs, or let friends know about a job in their field they've heard of. New start-ups will frequently ask people they've worked with previously and trust to come on board before hiring externally. The people you meet now could well end up hiring you in the future—or you might even remember being impressed with their work, and hiring them before you consider public interviews. In these industries, knowing people pays—so don't miss your chance to cash in. And remember to have fun while you do!

Well, those were my main takeaways from my gap year. I hope you found them as helpful as I did, or at least mildly interesting. Maybe there's something about my list you'd change instead. Whatever you felt, I'd love to hear from you—let me know your thoughts in the comments below.

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After helping out with the festival on a gap year while contracting in video game writing last year, I'm now completing the final year of my Creative Writing Undergraduate degree. I'm also very excited to be one of your Assistant Directors again for SNWF 2022! You can find my writing portfolio here.