

# **Austin Writing for Games Conference, 2006**

**An Overview by Jackie Turnure**

**Good Writing is Good Writing  
No Matter What the Medium**



# Many Types of Games

- **Action adventure – Indigo Prophecy**
- **Adventure – Grim Fandango**
- **SIMS – Sim City**
- **Sport – NBA**
- **Fighting - Superheroes**
- **Car Racing – Rally car**
- **Flight Sims – WWII sims (hardcore to arcade)**
- **Role Playing Games – Neverwinter Nights**
- **MMORPG - WOW**
- **First Person Shooter – Unreal Tournament**
- **Third Person Shooter – Deus Ex**
- **Real time strategy –Command and Conquer**
- **Turn based strategy – Battleships**
- **Casual – Tetris**
- **Puzzles – Soduku**
- **Platform games – Donkey Kong**
- **DDR - dance**
- **Interactive Fiction – Façade**
- **Alternative Reality Games - LOST**
- **Virtual Worlds – Second Life Vampire Club**
- **Plus Hybrids and Genres within genres**

# Keynote Speech

- **Mark Terrano, Game Designer, Hidden Path Entertainment**
- **Don't use other mediums to analyse/design games**
- **Gamers talk about the gameplay not the story – let me tell you about the battle...**
- **Game stories are like home movies – they are meaningful to them. Living the story, not telling the story**
- **Writers need to play more games. The more you play the better your vocabulary**

# Keynote Speech

- **Games are social experiences – who buys the game hasn't changed but who plays them has. Siblings, partners etc.**
- **Player experience is more than the game itself. Fan sites, forums, stories etc.**
- **Games already exist as television. Athletic competition = sport, Intelligence competition = quizzes, Social competition = reality shows.**
- **UGC – we have always remixed (mix tapes, edit videos, modified a game level, fan fiction). It's the same as modifying our cars – we want to personalise. This is a scary concept for content creators.**
- **We must embrace user content, it's the personal experience that really counts. Eventually user generated content will just be content. Indie generated content might be a better term.**

# Keynote Speech

- **Pace: the rate at which players makes decisions. At one end of the spectrum are twitch games, the other emotional adventure games with shooters in the middle. A continuum, from interactive to passive, Tetris vs Movies.**
- **Gameplay pace problem – cut from Interactive Pace to Cinema Pace, frustrates the player. Just the same way ads interrupt television, take us out of the moment.**
- **More interactive games need dialogue and story blended into the action.**

# Keynote: The Future

- **Next generation:**
  - **Online (consoles)**
  - **Increased production costs (hi fidelity)**
  - **Micropayments**
  - **UGC/customised content**
  - **User time/social pressure – 15-30 minute chunks (lunchtime), have to fit with real life schedules**
- **Huge demand for casual “arcade” games. Fits time commitment and complexity, not high skilled.**

# Trailer for Deus Ex





# **NARRATIVE DESIGN: WRITING STORIES WITH GAMEPLAY IN MIND**

- **Alexis Nolent, Editorial Story Design Director (Far Cry:Instincts, King Kong) Ubisoft**
- **Ubisoft produces 15 – 20 games at the same time, each at a different stage in production**
- **Use feature film cross over crew. Splinter Cell 3 was directed by Andrew Davies, director of The Fugitive. Splinter Cell4 writers of feature film “The Assignment”.**
- **Writing games – big difference is the writer(s) is involved across the whole production, unlike film where the script is “locked off”**

# **NARRATIVE DESIGN: WRITING STORIES WITH GAMEPLAY IN MIND**

- **Games are not remembered for the writing, gameplay is. Players can forgive bad writing but not gameplay.**
- **People buy a game to experience something they don't get in any other medium.**
- **Gamers say they don't care about the story, but then they complain about it, especially the ending, dialogue etc.**
- **The game designer is more important than the writer. He or she is often a writer/needs to understand story.**
- **Important than the story is understood by all the team. Embed the writer in the team right from the start so the dept heads go to the writer, eg level designer.**

# **NARRATIVE DESIGN: WRITING STORIES WITH GAMEPLAY IN MIND**

- **Skills for writers are the same, but there are differences:**

**1. Player creates his/her own story through interactions**

**2. Players want as much freedom as possible which makes the consistency of the storytelling difficult**

# **NARRATIVE DESIGN: WRITING STORIES WITH GAMEPLAY IN MIND**

- **Game writers have to put up with many more people giving input, who know nothing about writing. More than in any other medium.**
- **Story can't be added later. Better to start with a strong storyline. Storyworld and gameplay comes first.**
- **Game writers need to be thick skinned, create many ideas and lose many of them in order to move on. A good game writer is a humble writer.**

# Trailer for RRR



# FINDING NEW MODELS FOR GAME STORIES

- **John Sutherland, Writer, (Alan Wake, Mass Effect)  
Microsoft Game Studios**
- **Drama is conflict**
- **The Very Hungry Caterpillar, not the very satisfied caterpillar. Argument that this was a story without conflict – wrong!**
- **Try selling the superman story with no kryptonite**
- **Problem is – we define conflict too narrowly. Conflict is not violence.**

# FINDING NEW MODELS FOR GAME STORIES

- **Reality shows set up conflict well – a bunch of mismatched characters who are either put in an unfriendly environment or in a claustrophobic one**
- **LOST – image of a man in a suit in a jungle, looking worse for wear. The hook – the mismatch piques our curiosity.**

# FINDING NEW MODELS FOR GAME STORIES

- **Emergent story comes out of the action. Story will emerge if there is good conflict.**
- **If in the middle of a football match you stopped one of the players and gave them a book to read they would throw it away. The game is where the action is.**
- **But if the book informed the game, eg announced a change in rules of the game (now they can carry a mace) the book is appropriate.**



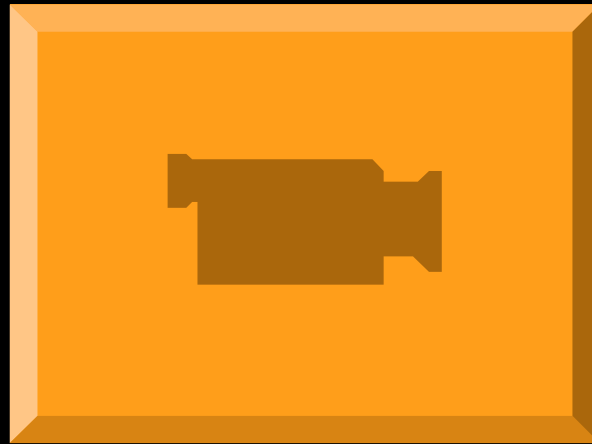
# FINDING NEW MODELS FOR GAME STORIES

- **Loss of control of the protagonist – the viewer/player is now the hero.**
- **MMO's the writer really has to let go as the players create the stories.**
- **Rules of games:**
  - **Do – if possible**
  - **Show – if you must**
  - **Tell – last resort**

# FINDING NEW MODELS FOR GAME STORIES

- **Protagonist flip is challenging for the storytellers but by allowing the player to be the hero, might mean games become the most immersive form of all time.**

# Trailer for Cricket



# STORY

# DOCUMENTATION

- **Rafael Chandler, Creative Director (Rainbow 6: Lockdown) Media Sunshine**
- **Gamers don't want story, they already have it**
- **Action without context is meaningless**
- **Not a question of whether we need story but what kind of story delivery is appropriate to the game.**

# STORY DOCUMENTATION

- **Pre Production:**
  - **Consider gameplay: genre, style, tech limitations. Writers need to know what the audio and other tech specs are eg limited audio streams**
  - **Marketing – is your writing going to fit in with the brand? How are they selling it?**
  - **Consider if it's a franchise or a sequel. Ratings, history of the games. Cohesive – match/extend the book, movie etc**

# STORY DOCUMENTATION

- **Production:**
  - **Develop storyline, characters, locations**
  - **Writing cinematics, cut scenes, in game text, dialogue, assets**
  - **Casting and directing voice actors**

# STORY DOCUMENTATION

- **Post production:**
  - **QA**
  - **Polish and refinement**
  - **Localisation**
  - **Legacy documentation – story closing kit (for subsequent writers)**

# STORY DOCUMENTATION

- **Technical Writing:**
  - **Problem with games is weak technical documentation, consistency for the whole team**
  - **Non fiction that explains or describes a process/system**
  - **Communicates data to specific audience (eg localisation)**
  - **Eg recipe book, manual, writers tv series bible**



# STORY DOCUMENTATION

- **Need to be:**
  - **Precise, brief and accurate**
  - **Not clever, witty or irrelevant, not “well written” or flowery**
  - **Impersonal – facts and data, devoid of opinions**
  - **Appropriate suitable vocabulary**
  - **Organised structure and legible, consistency of fonts etc**
  - **Might not be in story content order**
  - **Use journalist discipline, header, sub header, body etc**
  - **Style, 3<sup>rd</sup> person, tone, be consistent “the player” etc**
  - **Consider context it will be used – troubleshooting etc**

# **STORY DOCUMENTATION**

- **Passive story – use traditional script format**
  - **Cinematics**
  - **Cut scenes**
  - **Linear documents**

# STORY DOCUMENTATION

- **Active Story –**
  - **Done in spreadsheet (or script like Oz model)**
  - **Version control**
  - **Tabbed separation of assets**
    - **Character**
    - **Actor**
    - **Cue**
    - **Context**
    - **Trigger**
    - **Inflection**
    - **Location**
    - **Area**
    - **Effect**
    - **Filename**
    - **Line choice**

# Trailer for Desperate Housewives



# THE AGE OF DINOSAURS

- **Raph Koster, Creative Director**
- **Games do not have the longevity that films and books do**
- **Games do not adapt well to books and movies**
- **#1 Game in the world is the SIMS**
- **Top 20% of games make money**

# THE AGE OF DINOSAURS

- **10 years ago game development team was 2, now 130 people for AAA game**
- **\$12 million is conservative cost for AAA game**
- **Budgets have gone up by a factor of 22**
- **40-150 times more data**
- **Prices are dropping**
- **Therefore – not sustainable**

# THE AGE OF DINOSAURS

- **In all media, blockbuster “hits” are getting rarer and rarer.**
- **A huge TV show in the US now only reaches 15%, compare with I Love Lucy in the 60s reached 75%.**
- **Everything is fragmented. Only one gaming specialty store chain left in America.**
- **Cost is going up**
- **Price is dropping**
- **Consumers think online content should be free**

# THE AGE OF DINOSAURS

- **Need to –**
  - **Build for digital distribution**
  - **Smaller crews**
  - **Lower costs**
  - **Episodic delivery**
  - **Lose the publishers**
- **Aim at –**
  - **Different markets**
  - **Niche driven**
  - **Move away from core gamers**
  - **Design for online from get go (chat, customisation, profiles etc)**



# THE AGE OF DINOSAURS

- **Assume a world where –**
  - **No game retailers**
  - **No publishers**
  - **Fewer artist jobs**
  - **More procedural content jobs**
  - **Games become services not products**
  - **Celebrity is going to matter more to get eyeballs, loyal fans**
- **World of Warcraft is the last gasp of the dinosaurs**

# Trailer for Fantasy SIM



# Myths Busted

- **Games = shooters**
- **Games aren't stories**
- **Audience contribution is new**
- **Interactivity breaks emotional engagement**
- **Conflict = combat**
- **Personalised content is not story**
- **Story is king**

# **The Biggest Challenge for the Writer**

- **Working with interactivity:**
  - **First person narrative – the bus, story within the story**
  - **Game story vs the story**
  - **Context over content**
  - **Personalisation, identification and empathy**

# Basics Remain the Same

- **Engage**
- **Immerse**
- **Extend**
- **Evolve**
- **Reward**

# The Good News

- **Traditional skills do cross over:**
  - **Story**
  - **Emotional engagement**
  - **Genre**
  - **Character**
  - **Conflict**
  - **Structure**
  - **Dialogue**

# The Challenge

- **New skills needed:**
  - **Balancing narrative with agency**
  - **Player is the protagonist**
  - **Making navigation transparent**
  - **Controlling rhythm and pacing**
  - **Incorporating personalisation**
  - **Encouraging real world interaction**

# Benefits and Opportunities

- **Create extremely rich and diverse game story experiences**
- **Write for where your audience is**
- **Connect deeply with your audience**
- **Stretch yourself personally**
- **Improve on what's out there!**



# Final Thought

- **First you master the instrument, then you master the music. Then you forget about all the shit you learned and just wail.**

**Charlie Parker**