

Storytellers: A Hiring Guide for the Interactive Industry

by
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Introduction

In no other creative form are there as many obstacles to commercial or critical success as there are in interactive entertainment. The very medium itself forces the audience to adapt to, and adopt, new machinery, simply to experience the latest works. And the developers of these works find themselves chained to a methodological and technological horizon which relentlessly recedes. Why then, in an environment where shifting sands are the norm, would anyone ignore an aspect of the medium which has proven stable and reliable for hundreds of years?

To even the casual gamer it is no secret that games are routinely released which use dramatic writing and storytelling techniques that would not pass muster in high school. Yet unlike most problems bedeviling interactive developers, weak dramatic writing usually can't be traced to budgetary limitations or technical complexity. Storytelling is a known craft, and applying its techniques to interactive products does not require new algorithms or yet-to-be-invented hardware. So what, then, is the problem?

The obvious answer is that some of the people doing the work aren't qualified, but the underlying truth is that bad dramatic writing in interactive entertainment is compelled first and foremost by a technology-driven design process which undervalues and underestimates the storytelling craft. Whether that process can be changed will be seen, but the validity of the goal should be self-evident. Bungled storytelling techniques should not exist in interactive entertainment. There simply is no excuse.

For those predisposed to dismiss the subject altogether, note that storytelling techniques are not synonymous with linear or pre-determined narratives. The term "storytelling techniques" refers to things like character, plot, foreshadowing, mystery, suspense, tension, point of view, mood, theme, style, etc. Linear narratives, including cut-scenes, are the result of combining storytelling techniques with as much authorial control as possible. While storytelling techniques are often used in linear interactive works, and in cut-scenes, they're also used to provide a continual in-game context for the player's actions, to report back dramatic effects of the player's actions, to mask the transitions between gameplay and narrative, to provide motivation for the player, to provide a sense of accomplishment, to provide a sense of foreboding, and on and on.

Given the complexity of some of these uses, it's no surprise that one of the more common reasons for failed storytelling technique in games is that the storytelling isn't addressed

until late in production. Sure, maybe there's an "outline" somewhere, but the truly pressing issues involve the 3D engine that runs like mud, or the bug-vomiting code, or the epileptic animation, or marketing's insistence that the player-character have the biggest breasts in the industry. In such a climate, it's not surprising that storytelling takes a back seat.

It's also often the case that the person assigned to the storytelling is someone who wears at least one other hat in the development team. Since few companies have enough consistently produced product to allow them to keep a dedicated storyteller on staff, the job is often assumed by the person whose vision is driving the product, whether they're qualified or not. If that person decides they're unqualified, or too busy, the work may fall to the person on the team who wrote short stories in college or high school. Unfortunately, no matter who shoulders the responsibility, their other duties on the project often take precedence, again relegating the storytelling to second-class status.

The assumption at the core of both of these problems - leaving storytelling until late in development, and assigning unqualified or distracted people to the task - is that storytelling is easier precisely because it is a known and proven craft. It's understandable then that developers see storytelling as less critical than programming or modeling or game design. It's understandable, but it's also a mistake. Yes, storytelling is a known craft, but it still requires native skill and a considerable apprenticeship. For even the best storytellers, storytelling is, in any particular instance, just as difficult as writing code or designing a game.

Storytelling Problems are Storytelling Problems

A seductive aspect of this mistaken assumption that storytelling is somehow "easy" is the belief that the ability to use language well in written or oral form relates in any way to good storytelling. While it's certainly the case that you need to be able to use language to do the job, that in itself is no indicator of storytelling skill. To be fair, though, the assumption that storytelling is relatively easy *is* understandable. Working with words, with language, is the very stuff of our lives and civilization, and it is very hard to imagine that there are ways of using words and language which are fundamentally different from everything we know.

Yet imagine that instead of words and sentences, children spent each day in school learning how to work with copper pipe. Imagine these children, now grown into mechanical engineers and master plumbers, all busily designing and installing plumbing for skyscrapers, cathedrals, palaces and mini-malls. How well would they be expected to fare when an order comes in for a copper-pipe sculpture so evocative of human suffering as to move people to tears when they see it?

Obviously familiarity with pipe, or plates of steel, or marble or glass doesn't make someone a sculptor. Using paints, pens or inks doesn't make someone an artist. And using words doesn't make someone a storyteller. Storytelling problems are *storytelling* problems: they are expressly *not* problems of grammar, spelling, punctuation, usage, language or syntax.

They are also not problems of critical study. Learning how to write stories by reading stories (even thousands of stories) can't be done any more than you can learn how to play music by reading music. And if it seems that last sentence should have read that you can't learn how to "*write* music by reading music," instead of "*play* music by reading music," then you are at the heart of the matter.

Being a storyteller is to storytelling as being composer *and* musician *and* instrument (analogous to the distinctiveness of an author's "voice") are to music. Where critical analysis can teach how various techniques have been used by various authors, storytelling requires that the author learn *when* a given technique should be used, and how they themselves will use that technique as part of their voice. As with the performance of music, there is no substitute for practice.

The Goal in Hiring a Storyteller

Every work of interactive entertainment has the goal of providing the user with enjoyment. What storytellers know perhaps better than most is how fragile a player's ability to enjoy a work really is. The storyteller's term for the audience's state of mind when they are imaginatively involved in a work is "suspension of disbelief." This mental state allows the audience to become emotionally involved with the characters or events being portrayed, instead of merely observing a series of electronic impulses being gunned to a screen. Suspension of disbelief allows audiences to "see" events in an emotional context, and that's as true for real-time troops in a computer game as it is for actors on a movie screen

However, while concerns about creating emotional involvement are important, the critical benchmark - the minimum level of competency - is that suspension of disbelief be created and sustained at all. Storytellers do a number of things to ensure this happens, including: making the story world and events within it plausible; deriving the actions of characters from the reality of the characters, instead of from the plot; writing dialogue that rings true; and on and on.

At the same time the storyteller is orchestrating all of this, the storyteller is also watching for things that need to be removed. The reason for this is that suspension of disbelief is more important than any one aspect of a product, and anything that destroys it must be corrected, replaced, or cut. And that's not just true because we're talking about entertainment. On revising *Literature*, Somerset Maugham said, "If it occurs to you to cut, do so." The point being that if your sensibility notices something - which by definition is a disruption of suspension of disbelief - then whatever you noticed needs to go.

Now, that's *Literature*, and there the storytelling bar is set pretty high, but it would be a mistake to claim that works of interactive entertainment do not need to be as concerned about audience involvement. If anything, works aiming to entertain require *greater* concern precisely because they cannot avail themselves of the intellectual license given to those who toil for art. Entertainment is meant to be an escape, and the vehicle for that

escape, be it book, film, or computer game, must be transparent to the audience. If suspension of disbelief is destroyed for any reason, transparency is lost, and the audience that so desperately wants to be entertained is instead confronted with the machinery of the failed illusion.

Granted, all of this Literature and suspension of disbelief talk is a little oppressive, so let's take a look at a product in the interactive industry that gets almost all of this right: *Quake*. Okay, so *Quake* doesn't have much of a story. Okay, okay...so *Quake* doesn't have *any* story, or characters (monsters, yes - characters, no), or plot, or anything except for those little ticker-text panels between episodes. Still, I think you'll agree that *Quake* is tremendous at maintaining the player's imaginative involvement.

To see why, look at how transparent the *Quake* interface, control mechanism, and gameplay are. When you start the game a demo explodes in your face. When you pull down the menus the demo plays underneath. When you get killed you need to hit *one button* to restart the level, which takes a tenth of a second once you know how to do it. When you move around you move fluidly and seamlessly. When you encounter something you *always* know what to do: kill it or run like hell. In almost every respect, *Quake* keeps you in the imaginative world of the game, and that's as much a part of its success as anything else.

So how does all this action-game purity relate to the need for professional storytelling in interactive works? Well, if it's true that *Quake* is rare in part because its design and implementation are uncommonly transparent to the player, then think how much more difficult maintaining that transparency becomes when you add characters, a storyline, pre-scripted dramatic events, or even simple dialogue.

Protecting suspension of disbelief and ensuring transparency is part of the bedrock of the storytelling craft. If the interactive developer's aim is to create a work which uses suspension of disbelief in any way to deliver enjoyment to the player, no craftsman on earth knows more about that than a storyteller.

The Storyteller's Ultimate Goal: Emotion

Let's assume now that suspension of disbelief can be created and maintained. However helpful, this is only the equivalent of buying insurance. While the downside has been protected, and the player won't be mentally thrown from the game by faulty storytelling technique, nothing has been said about actually creating emotional involvement and making the player care.

One obstacle to emotional involvement these days is the fact that the typical audience in any hi-tech country has been exposed to so many stories over the course of their lives that they have developed an almost instinctive ability to detect weaknesses in dramatic works. Just the sheer volume of exposure means that the storyteller can make fewer mistakes because the audience - whether poorly read, intellectually backward or young - can sense more of them.

Which means, despite what you may think from watching television, that the minimum level of competency for storytellers is probably higher than it's ever been. If you think that's ridiculous, I freely admit it *sounds* ridiculous. But remember that the relevant issue is the process of creating enjoyment for the user through emotional involvement. As the audience gets smarter, writers have to work that much harder to protect the audience's involvement, and that much harder to eliminate mistakes.

As an example, consider clichés. Clichés are in part a function of an audience's familiarity; a certain repetitive exposure must take place before a cliché can be identified. Given the massive amount of storytelling going on, it stands to reason that avoiding clichés has become more difficult because of the audience's keen awareness and long experience, and that greater skill and technical ability is required in order for the storyteller to stay ahead. This is true even if the aim is pure entertainment.

On a more comprehensive level, it would be hard to argue against the idea that one of the most basic techniques in storytelling is preparation, which might be called the 'connective tissue' of a story. Sure it's fun to have a big explosion in the plot, but if it's not prepared for properly it has no effect on the audience. Like a massive, disembodied muscle devoid of ligament and tendon, it can, in fact, do nothing. Unfortunately, adequate preparation (which includes the quicksand of point of view) often requires subtlety and intricacy in order to stay ahead of the audience, which means the amateur storyteller is ill-prepared for the job.

As an example, several years ago I was discussing reaction to a script I'd written, with the producer in charge of the project. We came to a scene that he thought we could cut without doing damage, which revolved around two women-in-need visiting a third woman who had standing in their community. In the scene the two women learned the following: that the woman of standing wouldn't come to their aid, that the two women had no friends in the community, and that the two women were going to have to stick together if they had any hope of surviving.

Now that scene wasn't there because the scene itself was a thrill ride, but because it prepared the audience for a later scene where the two women stood up to the bad guys in the middle of town. I wanted it clear in the audience's mind that the women were on their own, so their actions would be seen by the audience as courageous and desperate, almost suicidal. When I'd finished explaining as much the producer saw what I was trying to do (and I don't mean I won him over - he simply saw the relevance), and the scene was retained.

There are two points here. First, although preparation is *always* the key to meaning and emotional involvement in a story, it is rarely apparent, nor should it be. Second, even skilled, dedicated, intelligent producers can be blind to the intricacies of the preparation which makes their products effective.

The Benefits of Hiring a Professional

All right, so professional storytellers cement the emotional relationship between product

and audience in ways that even knowledgeable team members will never notice, let alone understand. But what about the relationship between storyteller and developer? What are the advantages there?

At the very least the developer will now be armed with craft knowledge which was previously unavailable. Thus armed, the developer, through the storyteller, can prepare the product so that it creates the intended emotional involvement. The developer can also enlist the storyteller's aid in spotting and solving problems brought on by incomplete or faulty preparation, and in identifying areas where the rest of the game design may be disrupting suspension of disbelief.

Professional storytellers also know what questions to ask other members of the design team, and how to communicate the team's intentions to the target audience. Where the amateur struggles to find a way to begin a given task, the professional *chooses* the best way from the available options. Where the amateur falls in love with words and ideas, the professional knows that words and ideas are commonplace. Where the amateur blows deadlines the professional meets them, and keeps everyone posted along the way.

Perhaps most importantly, all of these skills are critical in light of the premise that the design process is not going to change any time soon. There simply is no time to waste on mistakes when producing interactive entertainment, especially if things have been left to the last minute. At a bare minimum a professional storyteller can usually adapt to whatever the constraints of the job are, and produce something which at least sustains suspension of disbelief so that the other parts of the game can be seamlessly enjoyed. Given time, they may actually be able to make someone laugh, scream or cry.

Finding a Storyteller

It's not too hard to zero in on a good writer, provided you know what you're looking for. For starters, you're not looking for just any kind of writer because the term "writer" covers a lot of ground. You're not looking for someone who does ad copy, say, or manuals, or technical writing, or writes for a newspaper, or journal, or magazine, or even someone who edits books on how to write stories. What you are looking for is someone who's skilled at dramatic writing, and there is no substitute.

Where to look? Probably the first place to look is in the credits of any game that you think knocked the storytelling silly. If there's someone listed with a "written by" or "script by" credit, then give them a call. If you can't find anyone going that route, try the Writer's Guild of America. They've worked to make their members available to the interactive industry, and I suspect a few of them can spin a good yarn.

Beyond storytelling ability, the real advantage in using people with previous interactive experience, or WGA writers, is that you know people from these talent pools are used to working on collaborative projects, which is not necessarily true of fiction writers or poets. This is important because almost all interactive works are collaborative, and it's critical that a storyteller be able to explain the technical reasons for the storytelling decisions they'll make. More on this in a moment.

What to look for in a specific writer is also straightforward at this stage: you're looking for someone who can emotionally involve you in their work, and the simple test for this is reading something they've written. Sure, it's tempting and easier to take a look at a finished product, but it's a mistake to do so because you're looking at what the whole team did. Whether the finished work is first rate, or it stinks, you're never really going to know who was responsible. (There's an old maxim that you can't make a good movie out of a bad script, but you can make a bad movie out of a good one, and in my experience that's true. But you would have to read the scripts to know what happened on any given project.)

I said a moment ago that it's important for a writer to have experience in a collaborative setting. Unfortunately, there are many successful writers out there who don't actually know how they're doing what they're doing; writing more from instinct than craft, they're just humming along naturally, using their 'guts' as editorial judge, jury, and executioner. That won't cut it in a team setting, where a knowledge of technique, and the ability to express it, is critical.

How do you make sure a storyteller can explain the reasons behind their decisions? The best indicator is feedback from people they've worked with, so ask a prospective storyteller for references. Anyone who's worked collaboratively with a storyteller that knows their craft knows how valuable those skills are, and you won't have to read between the lines if the person you're requesting information about has the tools.

And as long as you're asking questions, find out if the prospective storyteller delivered the goods on time. You can be a good storyteller, and be able to communicate what you're doing, but still fall down when it comes to deadlines. Since there are times when the deadline really is the overriding concern, you need to make sure that the storyteller you hire can change gears from "as good as possible within the time frame we discussed," to "as good as possible *right now!*"

Care and Maintenance of the Storyteller

After you pull the trigger and bring someone in - whether freelance or as an employee - the usual starting point for trouble is a breakdown in communication. The first thing you can do to prevent conflict is to make it clear to everyone, including marketing and sales, that the storyteller will be working under the direction of a single, designated person. One reason for this is obvious: it's impossible to write a story two ways, and any implicit or explicit instructions to do so can only result in disaster. Another reason is not so obvious: it redirects people with helpful suggestions away from the storyteller, and there are always plenty of would-be helpers where the story is concerned.

A related problem here is that someone may have already done work on the storytelling in whole or in part. When a professional storyteller comes aboard it can be a frightening and frustrating experience for that person as they watch their work being changed, violated or thrown out completely. What they won't understand is that any good storyteller does the same to their own work, and there's probably no other reason for an

amputation than that the story needs it. And even if they do understand, it's small comfort when they feel like they just lost an arm.

The best way to deal with this is to clearly give the storyteller the authority and responsibility for the storytelling on the project, and make clear to the rest of the team that that is the storyteller's job. If there is someone who took a stab at the storytelling initially, or laid the groundwork the storyteller will be building on, get them together immediately. The storyteller will have plenty of questions, and the person being replaced will get a chance to explain what they were trying to do, even if they didn't pull it off. Not only will this help the storyteller get up to speed, but it will become quickly apparent to the person handing the job off that the storyteller knows what they're doing.

As work gets under way, make sure you keep the storyteller informed of any changes that take place as production moves forward. Sure, if a scene is cut, that's something you need to pass along, but a change in the music is something the storyteller needs to know about, too. A good storyteller will subtly, even unconsciously, mate the mood of the language to the music, or to the color palette, or the style of the animation. As a rule the storyteller can't know too much about what the project is and where it's headed, or who it's being aimed at.

The corollary here is that the storyteller is going to have a ton of questions, and those questions need to be answered directly, and as completely as possible. The techniques the storyteller uses will depend as much on the capabilities and limitations of the game engine as they do on the characters or setting, so don't assume any question is unimportant.

The Payoff

A product created with the involvement of a storyteller will ship with two advantages over much of the competition. First, the product will maintain the player's imaginative involvement, even if storytelling isn't a large part of the game, which means the critics will not be deducting points for obvious gaffes. Second, to whatever extent storytelling *is* a part of the game, it will emotionally involve the player in a way that motivates, or at least provides a context for, gameplay -- which in turn has the potential of boosting both a game's critical ratings and word of mouth.

Beyond benefits to a particular product, there is the ancillary benefit of establishing a relationship with someone who can be of help in the future in a number of ways. Not only will you not have to go through the hiring and training process again, but the storyteller you've worked with will know how you, your team, and your company function, which will save time and money in the future.

Also, don't forget to look beyond the storyteller's writing skills to see what else they may be able to do. Last year I was asked, on short notice, to direct and edit the voice recordings of a script I was revising for a product being localized to the U.S. While it was fortunate that I had the requisite skills and experience, two real advantages to the company were that I'd written the revisions and knew them cold, and that I was able to

rewrite lines on the fly in the studio when problems arose.

And speaking of localizations, note that everything mentioned so far applies to localizing a product to another country. It's not enough to hire a good, or even a great, translator. Storytelling problems are storytelling problems in *all* cultures. If you're only translating the instructions for setting up a VCR you can still get the job done if the translation reads like a translation. But if you're translating a story that is to be emotionally involving and transparent, then any evidence of translation destroys suspension of disbelief and cripples the product. You need a storyteller on the ground in the country you're localizing to who can clean up the translation so it works in the broader cultural sense, ensures transparency and retains suspension of disbelief. [See also: [Localizing Narrative in Interactive Entertainment](#).]

Postscript

At the CGDC this year my experience in the seminars and lectures was disheartening, because it became evident to me that the biggest hurdle to improving the storytelling in games is getting developers to recognize just how much they don't know about storytelling technique. On one hand that's good, because it means developers aren't actively ignoring storytelling. On the other hand it's bad, in that developers don't seem to know how critical transparency and suspension of disbelief - cornerstones of every popular form of entertainment - are to their games. Just how exactly do you convince someone of the importance of something that isn't part of their reality? Especially if sales of their last game was measured in hundreds of thousands of copies?

Ultimately, the improvement of storytelling in games will be driven by an awareness of its importance to the medium, and the only force that can compel such awareness is commercial success. To that end the successful games released in recent months which emphasize storytelling techniques (think *Half-life*), and the cutting-edge games currently in production which will also do so, should make it clear that the die is cast. Whatever else may happen along the way, the medium of interactive entertainment will inevitably move toward more prevalent and effective storytelling techniques in all genres. And it is my belief that any game will only be that much more successful if the storytelling is as good as the rest of the product.