

# The Importance of Story #1

written by John Campbell

I asked a gamer friend of mine to answer a pretty simple question. "Tell me something about one of the characters in a video game you've played recently." He looked up from darning his socks (or whatever he was doing), and told me to clarify. "Not anything external, like appearance or the way they talk. I mean that character *as a person*. The kind of thing you know about someone after reading a good book." He seemed a little surprised by the question, so I told him it was for an article I was writing.

This guy isn't stupid, and knew what I was getting at. He thought for a little while, and eventually told me, "You know, games don't usually *do that*."

The general lack of story-telling in video games is pretty pervasive (though not without exception). It is also, in my opinion, a big waste. If there is any medium with which a story could be conveyed powerfully, it's video games for one simple reason: interaction. The player must take part in the reality the game creates, so they are already that much closer to things like suspension of disbelief, immersion, and identification with the characters.

There is a reason, of course, for the lack of stories. First and foremost in my mind is capitalism. Perhaps I should explain. Behind video games there is a pretty intense industry. Game designing needs man-power, money, and distribution. What that means is game designers need a decent company to back them, and what that means is game designers need to know how to appeal to business-minded individuals. Business-minded individuals know that a game is not going to do well unless it is concretely marketable, and what marketing needs is a few simple sentences like, "The first game to \_\_\_\_\_" or, "By the makers of \_\_\_\_\_" or, "If you like \_\_\_\_\_, you'll like this game!"

This usually results in either a game that's almost entirely derivative, or in a frenzied battle for technological supremacy, which requires inventive coders and original artists. Both these options can leave story out in the cold to die. You simply can't put story on a box.

This doesn't happen all the time. The gamer friend I was talking to knocked on my door a few hours later and told me, "Max Payne. That was developed. Just so you know." Max Payne is the most recent game I currently own, and it sees a decent amount of playing time. The guys on my floor gather around and watch me play it, but not because of its story.

There is an extremely elusive and magical thing called "fun" that game developers want you to experience. This, I think, is entirely legitimate. Video games are very much *games*, and as such, game mechanics can trump storyline when there's that "fun-ness" involved. Some games, like board games, just don't need a story. I don't know why, but the game "flow" that came out of the indie game jam last year still sits on my desktop, and I'll play it for a quick diversion just because it hits me right. It's different, and for what it's worth, it's fun for me. I think this is legitimate as well.

The problem lies in the fact that games can do so much more, and very few people are doing it. Games have been able to do much more since the days of Zork. The economy we're in (jeez, I didn't think this was going to be economical until I wrote it) prevents people from doing something for a living unless it can make people buy things constantly. Technology increases, so buy a new computer, and new video games. They get old so throw them away, keep buying. Old things don't make sense to a lot of people because we're told otherwise. Surprisingly, no one needs a 2 gig. machine to check e-mail.

It seems to have been forgotten that it's okay for a video game to not be "fun" in the "whee!" sense of the word—specifically the "whee" that comes from ground-breaking visuals, but even the general "whee" of being entertained. It has also been forgotten that story, real substantial story, is an integral part of "fun."

## Part 2: I get to the point

This is where, finally, I get to amateur adventure games. Sorry for the wait.

The two things that stop stories in the video game industry, business and game-mechanic innovation, are absent here. We have no one to sell these games to, no one we really have to please. Most importantly, I think, the game mechanics are almost entirely set for adventure games. We're working with puzzle-solving through inventory, dialogue, and basic interactions with the environment. This means point-and-click adventures have very little impact on gaming as far as nitty-gritty technological advancements and the development of new genres go. What we can do, however, is further the video game as a story-telling device.

I've been lurking about the amateur adventure community off and on for about (good gosh) five years now. So far, few games from the amateur community have affected me by their stories. That most definitely isn't an insult. A couple games are really just lots of fun. The Larry Vales series stands out in my memory the most vividly, because [Phil Reed](#) is really freaking hilarious. It also probably has one of the largest fan bases outside the AGS community (from what I can gather), though it was made with AGS. I bring this up because Phil has written a novel.

Comedy is chosen by a significant portion of adventure designers because, I think, it can hold a player's interest easily. No one really cared about concluding the story in Sam & Max, but it was pretty fun to do the next insane crap and hear lines like, "Aw, it's a cute little hypercephalic kitten." A really great written sense of humor is rare, and it's even rarer for that to transfer well into an adventure game. Comedies still require the basic elements of a story, which makes Larry Vales work well.

There are two things I see stopping this community from creating really wonderful story-centered games. The first is simply the goal of the designer.

A large number of people go into the development of an adventure game with this simple motivation: "I liked the old adventure games; I want to make something like that."

This was quite explicitly Yahtzee's motivation for [The Trials of Odysseus Kent](#). It is what it says it is: an attempt at returning to the old days. We should take it for what it is, but I hope from all the drivel I was talking about earlier you can understand that we as a community might have a chance to be about more than nostalgia. We can seriously do something that's not really new as much as missing from current gaming trends. We're in a pretty special position, I think, to advance the game-as-art, or at least as something more substantive. If we can get it going, we will have created the market research necessary for this type of thing to be mainstream.

It's also very hard, I think, to maintain the motivation, "I want to make a game" for the duration of a game's development. Let me tell you what took a significant portion of my life to realize. Since qbasic came with ms-dos, I have been making all sorts of games that I've never finished. Some of you may have done the same thing. At some point during each game's creation, I have lost interest. Perhaps you have experienced this as well. Hopefully, you can learn from my mistakes.

Let's make this general. Suppose you're designing an adventure—let's even suppose you've done a good job planning and are slowly developing the graphics along with implementing them in the engine. Next, let's suppose you play what's taken you the past few weeks or months (or more) to finish. You get the spaceman out of his crashed spaceship, the average teenager his homework back, or the pirate the map to the treasure. The game exits out because that's as far as you've designed. This part here is key: you ask yourself, perhaps not even very consciously, "I'm sorry, why do I care again?" And it's a great question.

Who really cares about the spaceman? I know I don't, not really. If you are out to make a game, you're going to lose interest unless you are just out-of-your-mind-obsessed with the idea of making one. An extremely good question to ask yourself is: would I care about this if it was just written down? Let me tell you, I would sit down and read Grim Fandango. That's probably not something you should hope for this instant—I guess ask yourself if you would listen to someone who was simply telling your game, step by step.

So story writing could further the genre we're working with and increase people's interest in it. It could also give significance to something you're working on. Instead of thinking, "I want to make a game," you could be thinking, "I want to tell a story I'm so attached to and/or affected by that I want other people to experience it."

Here's the second reason behind the general (hopefully I'm being clear that this is not without exception) shallowness of amateur adventures: The designers, you and I, don't really know how to write. We know what we like, and that we like some games that seem to be, vaguely put, "developed." We don't know how that works. Not really. I hope, in the next few articles, I can help.

---

## Comments:

We find out people's personalities, and what they're like, from how they act. We can only see what people do, we can't see into their minds and find out why.

But in an adventure game, the main character's actions are controlled by the player. This makes it difficult to give them real personality without limiting the players' choices.

You have to find ways to show their personality that are outside the player's influence, but without blocking the player from, well, playing!  
(Things like the way the character speaks in conversations.)

*Posted by Lucidium*

---

Thanks so much for the feedback, guys. It's nice to read what you guys think. Great article, Squinkycakes, I think we have a lot of similar ideas. I'm working on the next article in the series right now. It's more about writing than about game theory, but hopefully it'll help some people out--or at least be an interesting read.

*Posted by bionicbill*

---

I agree 100%. Comedy is all well and good, but a well thought-out story is even better.

*Posted by DaveGilbert*

---

ASAP :p

*Posted by Courthold*

---

I like it!!!

I've got an essay on my website that discusses the economical hindrances to making story-based games as one of the causes of the decline of adventure and increase of action in games. I think you might find it interesting, if not a bit lengthy.

<http://www.deirdrakiai.com/funstuff/cgevolution.html>

P.S. Courthold, when do you want me to start writing articles?

*Posted by Squinkycakes*

---

Yes yes yes! John, you're so right. This is the kind of stuff that I think about all the time. Story (along with humour, of course) is an area where adventure makers have potential to appeal to people who have never played an adventure before; maybe even to appeal to people who've never played a \*game\* before.

Erwin, you're right: story \*isn't\* the only way to keep your players interested. But I think John is saying that it's something that's been neglected by amateur developers so far. Humour (as in DOTT or Sam'n'Max), on the other hand, \*has\* already been recognized and exploited in a number of games (Larry Vales, Out of Order, Permanent Daylight, Rob Blanc etc).

*Posted by theothertim*

---

"I want to tell a story I'm so attached to and/or affected by that I want other people to experience it."

I don't think the designers of DOTT or Sam and Max had this in mind. I think their idea was more like amusing the audience with jokes and crazy situations.

A deep story isn't the only way to keep your audience interested, IMHO.

I agree with everything else (you're right about so many people not finishing their project after losing interest because they don't --really-- know why they are developing their games) and I'm looking forward for more articles :)

*Posted by Erwin\_Br*

---

A very good and thought provoking read. Thanks, John. :)

*Posted by krkode*