FOCUS

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FOCUS

FOCUS is published twice a year by the British Science Fiction Association. It is a magazine about writing, for writers, and aims to present high quality articles about the art and craft of writing, with a focus on science fiction.

Contributions, ideas and correspondence are always welcome at the contact address below, but please get in touch first if you intend to submit a lengthy article.

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K. T. Davies Says...

Is a rose by any other name still a rose?

Yes of course it is, silly. But even if you're a blooming marvellous novelist it doesn't mean you can just grab your quill and scribble a graphic novel or Oscar-winning screenplay. Well, you can try, but it'll probably stink and all your friends will mock your efforts with the cruelty of an 18th century pamphleteer. So read on, dear friends and hopefully, like me, you'll learn some proper good shiz about how to write for alternative media.*

As well as writing novels and short stories, I review and read my own body weight in books every year (that's a lot of books, btw). I'm also a big fan of comics, films, and computer games and have often thought it would be just peachy to write a film or a comic. Alas, when the 'gosh I'd love to write a comic/film' urge is upon me, it is with regret that I must acknowledge that I don't know how to do it. A state of affairs which I find most vexatious let me tell you.

So when I was approached about doing a wee editorial stint on this worthy organ, I took the opportunity to theme it around writing for alternative media. Now, before you start, yes, I know there's a lot of information on the interwebs about writing screenplays, comic scripts, and 'how tos' for putting the flesh on the bones of computer games. But that in itself can be a bit of a problem. Where do you start with a world of information —good and bad— at your fingertips? It can be overwhelming, misleading, and, as we all know, the devils and the angels are always partying in the detail. With that in mind, we've put together a bunch of kick-ass informative, nuts and bolts articles by some talented perps who not only talk the talk, but dance the light fantastic in their chosen fields.

Even if you don't want to tackle writing a comic, a screenplay or game content, it's got to be useful to understand how these other narrative forms work— how they're put together. The growth of the internet and the development of affordable hi-spec tech and crowdfunding has opened up new markets for independent game designers, comic book creators, and film makers which in turn means more opportunities exist for jobbing writers. What we've compiled here is by no means a comprehensive list, but I hope it will provide an informed starting point for anyone who wants to add more strings to their writerly bows.

K.T. Davies
@KTScribbles

** See what I did there?...Blooming? Geddit? 'Kay, I'll get my coat...*

About our Guest Editor...

K.T. Davies is a writer, reviewer and Olympic gold medallist slacker. She is also known as ***@KTScribbles*** on Twitter, her second home. Her meat sack self lives in the Midlands but she hails from the frozen north (the Stark side of the wall). Her first novel is the epic fantasy ***The Red Knight: http://www.amazon.co.uk/The-Red-Knight-K-T-Davies-ebook/dp/B008PN6I8M***. Her second is the baroque and roll, sword and sorcery adventure ***Breed: http://www.amazon.co.uk/Breed-K-T-Davies/dp/1909348651***. Both are really, really good and available to buy now. Subtle, huh?

Respect the Medium – Writing Comics

by Tony Lee

Let's start with two stories. Story One. I was at a *DC Comics* party in New York a few years ago. These are large, swanky affairs with a guest list that can awe and terrify in equal measures. And often at these affairs, you find comic writers hanging out with screenwriters, listening to their every word as, most likely they want to move from comic to film. But this also works the other way, where you also get screenwriters who want to be *comic* writers, and here's where the problems start. Because it was at this party that I was one of about seven comic writers, all listening to a very successful TV writer and producer, whose show was now on a three-month hiatus.

'I've got a month off,' he informed us as we hung on every word. *'I thought I'd have a break, maybe write a Wolverine or Batman comic.'*

At that point, pretty much every comic writer changed his or her opinion of this man. It wasn't that he mentioned *Wolverine*, a *Marvel* character at a *DC Comics* event. It wasn't that he expected to walk into *DC Comics* and immediately write a top-tier character. It was the fact that he had *such little respect* for the art of the comic writer, that he honestly thought that with no prior experience, he could come up with an idea, plot it, set it into pages, block it out, script it and rewrite for sending, all from scratch in a month.

I don't think he even realised that he lost us at that point. Suffice to say, the comic never happened.

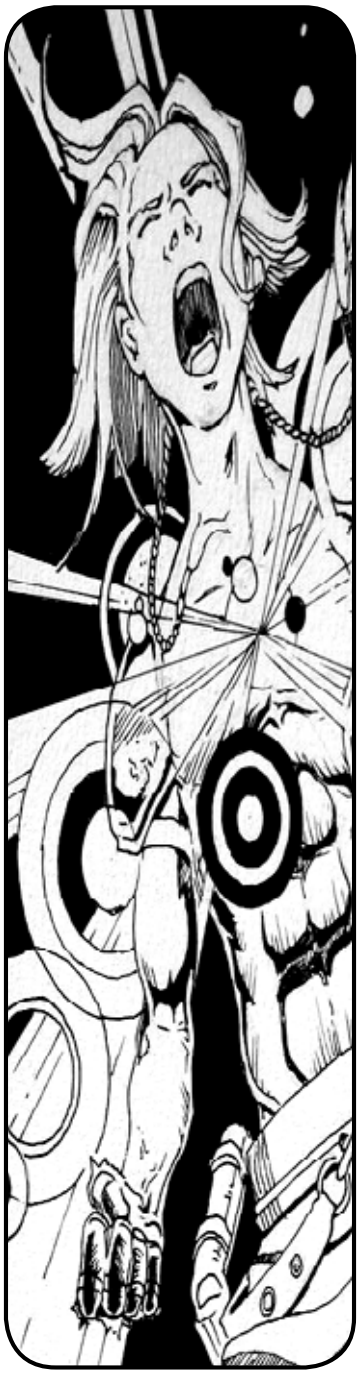
Now, the second story. I was brought onto a comic anthology a few years back, where I learned that an established novelist was going to be the 'big name' that drew readers to the book, but he'd never written a comic before. I was sent to meet him. I talked for a solid hour on the differences of comics and novels. He spent this time texting, checking his emails and pretty much doing anything but listen. In the end I asked what his problem was.

'Come on Tony, its not like comic writing's difficult,' he replied. *'It's a piece of **** compared to novels.'*

I left him to it. And, six months later when he came back to me with one of the worst scripts I'd ever read, I was paid a large amount to rewrite it. Funny enough, he never mentioned how easy comics were again.

You see, comic writing *isn't* easy. It's not the village idiot of literature; it's not 'writing funny books for kids', it's actually one of the hardest disciplines to write. And here's why.

First off, it's the only discipline that needs a *set ending point*. You write a screenplay? You write it as long or as short as you want. No film script is exactly 100 minutes. No TV show script is exactly one hour. The director and the editor are the people who make it that length, while you go wild. No novel is exactly a hundred thousand words – again, you write until the story is done. But with comics, the end is nailed down at the start. Twenty-two pages. A hundred and ten pages. The publisher has this set before you start, because the first rule for a comic publisher is *cost*. So already, you know you only have a hundred and ten pages, the equivalent of five twenty-two page issues, for your book. But that's still a lot, right?



No.

You see, you have these pages, and each page will have five, six, maybe even seven panels on it. But that's your *whole real estate*. And even then, it's not. Because that massive twist in the third act, around page seventy-one, where you learn that the antagonist is actually a parallel universe version of the protagonist with a sex change? Well that scene needs to be on *a left hand page*. Why? Well, we're back to the differences again. In a book, you read it line by line. You never scan ahead. A film is watched in a linear fashion; you keep with it as it moves along, never skipping forward, unless the film is really bad. But with a comic, you can't help yourself. You end at the bottom of the right hand page. You turn the page, your eyes scanning across to the top of the left hand side. It's a fraction of a second, but if your shock panel is on the right hand side? That means that subconsciously, as the reader starts the left hand page, they already know what's going to happen, and the shock is destroyed. Want a true shock? Left hand page.

And here's the rub. Because if you get to page seventy-one and need that shock, you have to move that page to a left hand page. And this requires you to do one of two things:

1) *Lose a page before the page.*
2) *Lose a page after the page.*

Both of these options cause you problems. Losing a page is losing a scene. It's compression, it's a nightmare. And, if you've also got a shock on page sixty, then you've only got ten pages to work with, as doing it earlier would affect that page too. Your real estate of a hundred and ten pages? It's *halved* for a shock scene.

So as you can see already, the average comic writer can't just sit in front of that white page and simply 'go', in the same way that a novelist or screenwriter can. They need to know in advance where the trouble areas are going to be. So how do you get around this? I can't speak for all writers, but I can speak for myself. Let's go through my process.

Firstly, I start with the *story*. Remember at school where you were forced to paragraph plan, time and time again? I hated that. But now I embrace it like a long lost sweetheart. I take the entire story, from start to finish and write it out in a synopsis. Take a few pages to put everything into it. It's like a treatment of a movie, but it'll also show you where your weak points are. Don't leave anything out.

(In fairness it's a good idea to do this, if only to have something you can use in the pitch document.)

So you have the full story written out? Pat yourself on the back. You've gotten further than most people have at this stage. Now, it's time for you to block out scenes. I print the pages out and, with a few lines start splitting the scenes.

Peter escapes the house / he faces off against his father as he enters / he gets to the airport where he flies to Rome, etc etc.

Here's the fun part. You now work out how many pages each scene needs. I do a workshop where I use a very old example here. James Bond is walking to his hotel room. He sees the door is open. Pulling his gun, he enters his suite, bedroom – living area – bathroom. Nobody is in the living area. He goes in the bedroom, nothing. He sees the bathroom door is closed. We're now in the bath, staring at the door as he kicks it in... And he's shocked at what he sees. END.

Now, we don't even show what he sees. It could be a body. It might be a towel on the floor. It doesn't matter. It's the scene that leads to this which does. Bond walking to his room, entering, searching, kicking the door. Nothing more. Now, a novelist could do that in half a page. A screenwriter in a minute of film. I offer you six panels a page. How many pages should you use?

If your answer was more than 'one', then you need to reconsider. It's a scene where Bond *says* nothing, *does* nothing, *finds* nothing. The reveal? It's on the next page, remember?

Each panel is a finger click. A snapshot photo. And you need to treasure these, not waste them on any old thing – because then, when you *do* waste a panel, it means something. How I'd do that scene is simple – *Establishing shot of Bond. View from behind Bond of the door broken. Now he's in the room, gun out. Now he's in the bedroom. Now we're in the bathroom as he kicks the door in, gun aimed at us. Small panel, his haunted eyes.* Six panels for the whole thing. And you could do it in less.

So now you've worked out the page count for every scene, count them up. If you're lucky, you're under the amount you need. Most times, you'll be a few pages over. So now you need to trim the page count. And, more importantly, how many left hand page shocks do you have? Are they currently on a left hand page when you do the count? You still need to move things around to ensure they are, and that the story ends on page hundred and ten.

Once you've done this, you should have a skeleton, and now it's time to put the meat on. I like to write on a lined page, a line for each page of comic, showing what happens each page. It could be *'Peter faces his Dad for the first time'* or *'car chase',* whatever happens on that page. Then, once I've done that, I move onto scripting the actual pages.

Again, this differs. Some let the artist draw the panels and the writer comes on board later. Others like to control how the pages look. I'm one of the latter. I use Final Draft, mainly as I've always used it for screenplays, but many writers use Scrivener, Word, anything. And my scripts are very simple.

Panel 1: Peter, now at the door to his house finds his father waiting on the lawn outside.

The artist can take that and do what they want with it. One rule I keep is: *if a character is speaking first, mention them first.* Otherwise the artist might draw them to the right of the panel, which causes issues if two people are talking. Remember that all panels aren't a unified size. Some will need to be larger than others.

Once you've scripted the page? Go back and work on the dialogue. First rule – never overfill a panel. It kills a comic dead. Large balloons are a nightmare. Try splitting into sentence balloons, so the letterer can move them around the art. Don't exposition what you can show in art. And try to keep no more than thirty-five words in a panel. More importantly, be realistic about the size of panel and amount of dialogue you use. That nine-panel grid WATCHMEN style comic you're doing is not going to work with two people having a conversation in panel five, simply because there isn't space. Get hold of Illustrator or Photoshop and actually letter a finished page – you'll learn very quickly what works and what doesn't!

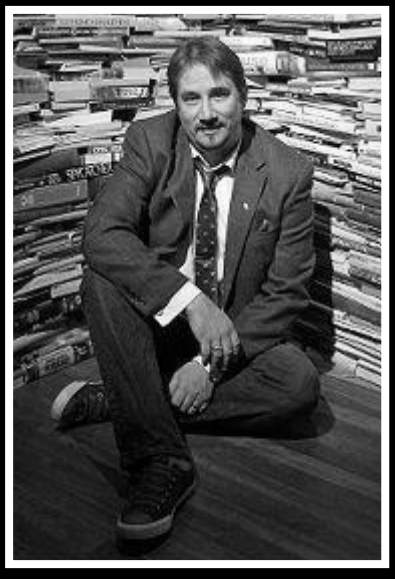
So by this point you've written your first comic. Well done! Look back at your trail, the path you walked to get here. It's a troubled one, with pitfalls and potholes. It's not the level, tarmac covered road you thought it would be, is it? No? Good. Respect the medium, and it will respect you. Now take your script and show it to an editor. We've got the fun part now, tearing apart and re-writing.

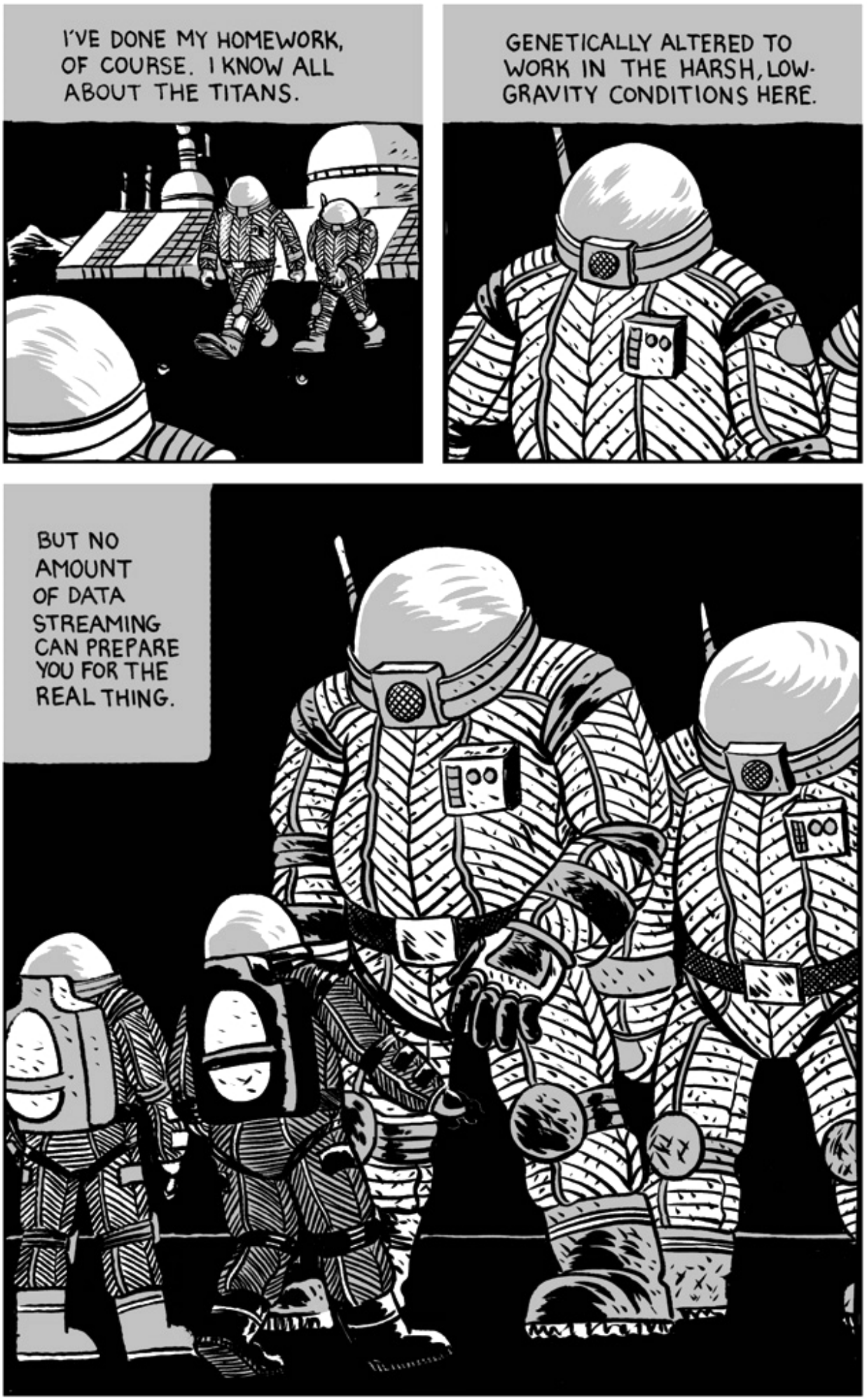
Wait, where are you going? Don't run off! You almost made it...

FIN.

Tony Lee *is a #1 New York Times Bestselling List and Eagle Award winning comic book writer and screenwriter, Tony has written numerous licenses and comics including* ***Doctor Who, Superboy, Spider Man, X-Men, Battlestar Galactica*** *and* ***MacGyver****.*

With a new career emerging in film and TV screenwriting in both the UK and the US, Tony's also the screenwriter of the movie ***The Mild Bunch****, starring Colin Baker, Vicki Michelle and Frazer Hines;* ***The Nest****, a US television show co-created with* ***Supernatural*** *and* ***Stargate Universe*** *actress Alaina Huffman;* ***Also Known As*** *for Boxfly Productions and* ***Cartel****, starring Craig Fairbrass.*





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The Pleasure of Viewing and the Tease of Playing: Writing for Film and Interactive Games

by Romana Turina

Many Hollywood actors and directors are making successful transitions to the small screen, a move that permits them to take advantage of the grand scope that TV can offer today; the chance to tell stories over hundreds of hours rather than two. There is however another form of entertainment, which could be even more interesting than both film and TV, one that offers writers the chance to explore characters and stories in unique, and interesting ways, with an even grander scope: video games. This medium should be of particular interest to us, as it is much friendlier to science-fiction and fantasy than screenwriting for films and TV is. For example, while *Star Trek* conventions are often the stuff of comedy punch-lines, in the world of video games "Frat Boys" will think nothing of spending an entire weekend running around in the science-fiction shooter Halo, or commanding an army of space aliens in *Starcraft II*, and then buying the merchandise to celebrate their fandom for this.

For a writer, video games are interesting because they can offer alternate or branching storylines and endings. Imagine if in *Star Wars* you could decide to turn down Han Solo's expensive trip to Alderaan and get a trip with someone cheaper; how could that story be played out? This is one of the many differences between cinema and games; a game requires a player to walk into a story, and – to a certain extent – to collaborate in narrating it. A film does not.

While there is a revered artistry in creating one canonical plot line, the chance as a writer to explore multiple variations of the same character's journey is one that flexes a whole new set of creative muscles. If you enjoy knowing your protagonist so well that you can speculate how they would react to any situation they come across, then there is no better way to explore this than by having the character actually face multiple situations.

This kind of storytelling is implemented by the use of a technique called branching. Branching is applied on different storytelling levels: the most obvious are 'branching dialogue', and 'branching story lines'. Branching dialogue occurs when players can choose what their character says during conversation, triggering different responses. This can be done simply as a way to make story and character more interactive, or as a gameplay element in itself. For example, in the case of the detective trying to question a suspect in the game *LA Noir*, the player uses the dialogue as the game itself: the task is to listen to the words of the suspect and then select from multiple-choice responses, which in turn trigger the next round of exchanges.

Going beyond this, games also employ the use of 'branching story lines'. This implies taking a story, forking its storyline into a plurality, and writing the different story's strands; where each of them can be entered when a change is triggered by a decision taken while playing. At times, games use dialogue to trigger the deployment of one storyline instead of another: when the character responds to the words of the interlocutor selecting a precise answer, the player enters one of the branching storylines and excludes the rest of them, within a whole system of forked, alternative paths. This technique might offer to the player endless possibilities of adventurous virtual enterprises, but these might be also emotionally and morally challenging. For example, in RPG (role-playing games) choices become very personal because players create a character from scratch and play the game through this one character in a role within the story. In the RPG *Fallout 3*, when characters are given the possibility to blow up a city with a nuclear bomb, or to disarm the bomb, the impact of such a conflicting decision is clear: not only do both quests offer different rewards, but each path will have differing effects on the character and on the player's experience of the story within that game world.

Everything I said can be better understood if we look at interactivity as if on a spectrum. On the one end, there are games like *Final Fantasy VII*, *God of War*, *Half-life*, whose design implements a linear progression of storytelling; the deviation employed by their level of interactivity allows for a minimal impact on the story. On the other end of the spectrum there are games designed to offer a completely open-ended story. These are games that are player-driven, like sandbox games (known also as free-roaming games or open-world games), which imply the absence of barriers in exploring and playing. For example, in the sandbox game *Dead Rising*, photojournalist Frank West investigates while facing possible death. Due to the level of interactivity offered to the player, and accordingly to the decisions the player makes, the possibility of survival will change, and with it the amount of story the player might experience, or miss entirely because it's not relevant to the branch of storyline the player chose to follow.

Open world games like this involve the most intricate writing of any style of game, requiring that a whole believable world is created. For example being able to follow people down the street and listen to whole conversations that have nothing to do with the main plot, but which enrich the world of the story. The big budget game *Grand Theft Auto 4*, for example, features an entire fake internet that players could visit on their in-game electronic devices, complete with satirical parodies of several famous websites, as well as a dating website where players could set up and eventually attend dates. Such depth and width would never be feasible in a 'cut to the chase' feature film, or even a 100-hour TV show.

Romana Turina *is a screenwriter and a film director based in the UK. She is working in, and on interactive media. She teaches storytelling in IM at the Theatre, Film and Television department at the University of York. Specialising in historical representation in games, she is now studying the character's value/function in the translation of history in interactive environment, specifically in digital games.*

There are multiple challenges the writer has to face when writing stories for games; the dialogue has to sound authentic and the characters need to be consistent to their persona when reacting to alternate situations, regardless what chain of branching options the player selected. As with every craft, however, the writing of story and gameplay in a combined form has evolved over time. In the beginning, games would use story to drive text-based adventures where writers would be very limited in their storytelling endeavors. Then, as graphics for games evolved, and hardware become more powerful, games started to tell more cinematic stories using non-interactive video sequences known as cutscenes, which were inserted between the gameplay to advance the storyline. The power of cutscenes is valuable as there can be multiple scenes representing branching paths, but the player can only watch the story while it is being depicted; there is no option of interaction. By using modern techniques like interactive dialogue and open world gameplay, today game writing has evolved to the point of permitting gameplay that resembles the experience of moving within a film; and the application of screenwriting techniques to the writing of part of the script. Consequently, before working on a game a writer needs to understand what the technology behind it allows;

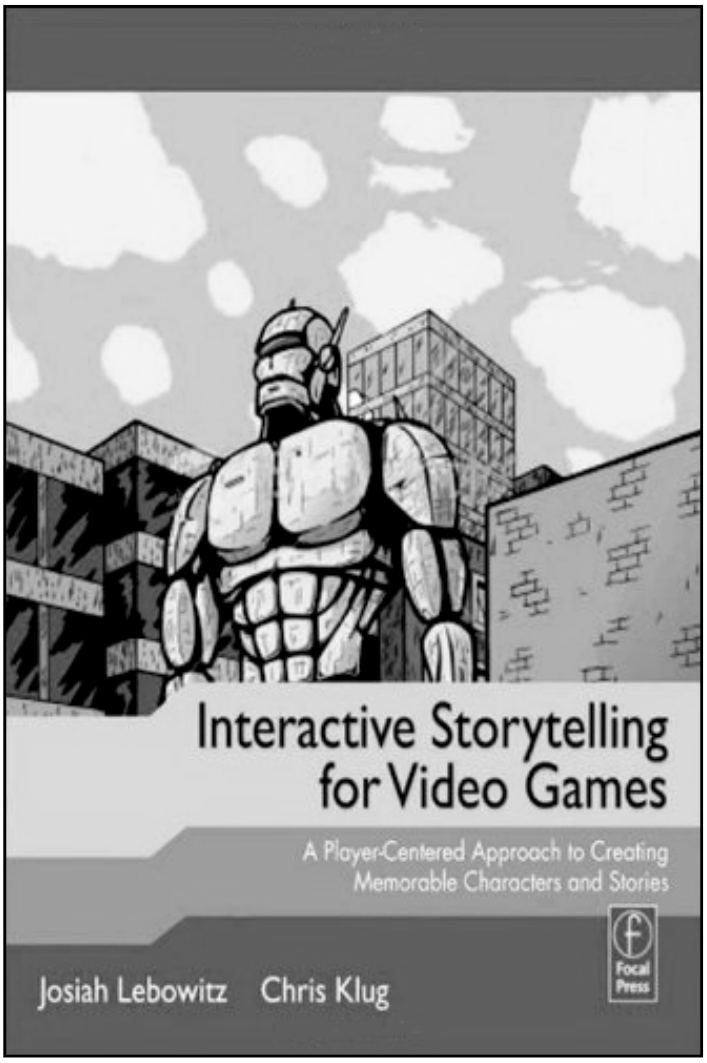
this will have a strong impact on the way the same story will be told, what will be allowed in the writing, and the amount of writing requested.

Finally, games are delivered in what is called a 'game-script' and not in a linear screenplay. A gamescript comes in two combined components: the flowchart that lays out the various logical paths the player can take, and addresses the decision-making side of the game; and the script that describes what happens, including scenes, mood, background music, and dialogue that will be triggered by specific actions.

In spite of the differences, when it comes to creating a character for an interactive game, we can see the process as an enhancement of the routine we follow in creating a character for a film. Not only do we have to build the character's arc, and understand which attributes the character holds that will help her/him in obtaining a goal, but we also need a chart of character motivations and relationships that will help to enhance the gameplay. Within this process, if we wish to deploy a satisfactory character's arc that enhances the dramatic value of the story, we need to keep in mind that players engage on an emotional level with characters. They invest in each moment in the game by spontaneous reactions, try to fulfill their desires, and tend to make the same kind of choices throughout the game unless pushed to change pattern by a very good reason. Therefore, to deploy a transformative character arc that is experienced by the players can be difficult, but it is not impossible.

In considering the possibilities to implement a character's arc that is grounded in a playable exploration of character, we must take into account that we can not know how the player will play this character, and consequently how the player-character will change. This conundrum can be solved by working on the one area in which we can find ways to have gameplay that gives a satisfactory level of control to the player over the protagonist's choices, but can also resonate with rich, alternate, meaningful character arcs; I am talking about 'theme'.

Let us take for example *Mad Men*, the acclaimed TV series. *Mad Men* is about the lives of people working in advertising. The protagonist, Donald Draper, is a creative director who hides his troubled childhood and legally dubious choices. He works his way through life facing the aftermath of the negative choices he makes, repeatedly. This kind of story-frame does not really offer much room for the player's agency. However, if we take the same story and propose it differently: will Donald Draper, a creative director who hides his troubled childhood and legally dubious choices, succumb to the aftermath of his negative choices, or will he find a way to redeem himself before time runs out? Now, we have room for the player's agency, and we have a game.



In a game the character's arc, while rooted in the theme, is open to the player's exploration: in our *Mad Men* game, it would be not about clear cut choices dictated by the plot, but about the space in-between, where the player can explore the consequences of each action, the theme of downfall and redemption. This does not mean that we have found a way for the players to change their own decisional patterns – if the player treats her family right in the beginning, there is no reason by the end of the game to change and become a person who treats her family badly - but we have put into place the possibility to explore alternatives, and ponder on the theme.

A young and developing medium, I would encourage exploring the possibilities writing for games might offer, and discovering where your talent could find employment and satisfaction within this flourishing market.
If you are passionate about writing for games, I would suggest reading *Interactive Storytelling for Video Games* by J. Lebowitz and C. Klug.

FIN.

NEWS FROM ORBIT

TERRY JACKMAN, CO-ORDINATOR OF THE BSFA'S ONLINE WRITERS' WORKSHOPS, REPORTS

INTERESTED IN OUR ORBIT WRITER'S WORKSHOPS?

Orbiter queries/info: consult the BSFA website at ***bsfa.co.uk*** or contact Terry Jackman. Please note this can be via ***terryjackman@mypostoffice.co.uk*** or ***terry@terryjackman.co.uk*** or check out the best reviews she comes across at Terrytalk, her irregular blog on ***www.terryjackman.co.uk***

GOOD READS!

I see that *The Martian*, by Andy Weir, had been voted the best SF novel of 2014 by Goodreads. [Some of you might have read my own blog review of it earlier in the year?]

This is a hard SF novel with a LOT of technical detail. Those of you more familiar with me will at once wonder what's going on; I am definitely not a science buff, and I don't naturally gravitate to harder SF. But this is a book that ignored the rules, and made them unimportant, so if you still haven't tried it, I'd at least take a look, and hopefully read. It's an experience.

While on the subject of reading, I noticed that Orbit have obviously paid Waterstones to put *The Girl with All the Gifts* by M R Carey, in their window displays. [Did you know that's how it works there? I live in hope that at least their handwritten notes about books on shelves might be genuine.] Despite that I'd still say take a chance on this one, though if I tell you what it's about then, like me, you might think 'Oh No', and miss out. Think of it as a blind date. Go on, you know you want to.

CONS – AND PROS

Though I got to Loncon this year — how could I miss that? — in the end between family stuff and a week at Milford to fit in/pay for I missed the BSFA AGM, a minicon in itself, and also for once, missed Eastercon too. To make up for that, however, I attended two cons I'd never tried before.

Bristolcon, in October, was one I've been trying to get to for a couple of years and it didn't disappoint at all. It was very friendly, well-run and had an excellent programme. And I don't say that just because yours truly sat on a panel and ran a writers' challenge!

Novacon, November in Nottingham, was another new experience I hope to repeat. Again the atmosphere was relaxed and friendly, the programming good. I moderated a panel on print on demand that was a great learning experience, with [for once?] all the panellists knowing a lot about their topic, and sat in on a discussion on writers' courses/groups. Among other delights the GOH, Kari Sperring, gave a great Room 101 session I wasn't expecting, and a friend, Jacey Bedford, launched her debut novel, *Empire of Dust*.

I'm already looking forward to 2015's Con offerings, and starting to plan which I can get to [assuming by then I'm not hiding in a corner because the reviews for *Ashamet* aren't what my publisher and my editor seem to think.]

So, with New Year Resolutions in mind, I'm going to urge anyone who hasn't been to a con to make it this year, at least once.

Meeting friends is a bonus on these occasions, but I know going alone can be daunting. I didn't know anyone when I first went, but the guy who said, 'if you never do it again…' was quite right. At my first Con, which was the Glasgow Worldcon — so I really did dive in at the deep end — I knew no one, so being an organisational soul [don't say it] I also volunteered. This is a great way to get involved, especially at bigger cons, eg Eastercon, where help is vital to make things run. The fact I don't do it much these days isn't a lack of willingness, more lack of time. This year I didn't even manage time on the BSFA table — a first for me — and that's another way you could get involved at a Con!

So how about making 2015 your Year of the Con. And say 'Hi!' if I'm there too?

SALES AND SUCCESSES FROM ORBIT

Mjke Wood	short story, 'The Last Days of Dogger City', in ***Analog***, and another short, 'The Man in the Pillbox Hat', in ***Inter-Galactic Medicine Show***.
Mark Iles	shorts collection, 'Falling From Grace, and Other Stories', from Solstice.
Max Edwards	short story, 'White Noise', in ***Holdfast*** online magazine.
Terry Martin	short stories, 'Anguish', 'The Scar,' 'Maid in Heaven', 'Bodies', and 'Contraband', all in ***Plonk Anthology***, from Red Wine Writers!
Sue Oke	flash horror, 'Too Sweet', in ***A Touch of Saccharine***, and flash SF, 'Distant Fires', in ***Life is a Roller Coaster***, two anthologies published by kindofahurricanepress.com.
Dom Dully	short, 'Washout' in an anthology from The Novel Fox Shorts, and another short, 'Matter over Mind' in ***Stupefying Stories.***
Geoff Nelder	two shorts, 'In Eiger Wild Wood' and 'Owning Mars', both in ***Nighteyes,*** a wolf-themed anthology.

WORD BY WORD

I'm going back a whole year for this one, but why not look back as well as forward?

If you check out the website for *A Worded Life (www.awordedlife.com)*, the home of a writing and editing service [that no, I haven't used and am not being paid to plug] then click onto its December 2013 entries, you'll find a really user-friendly account on how to write a synopsis – one of the simplest and easiest to figure I've come across. It never does any harm to make stuff simple, especially stuff some of us hate dealing with...

If I haven't said to it you already, then do have a very merry Christmas and a happy and successful New Year! A toast to you all.

Greater Fandom Through Technology

by Ed Fortune

There is an old joke about the internet which goes something like this "We have developed a technology that has allowed any person to access the sum of human knowledge almost instantly, and we use this great and powerful tool to look at pictures of cats". As amusing and as glib as this observation is, it rather misses the point. The reason the internet is filled with pictures of cats is because people like to share things that they like, and though that means many pictures of moggies, it also means ideas.

Back in the day, if you were a science-fiction fan, chance was that you would only find a handful of people local to you who were also into the same things. If those same people weren't as creatively inclined as you, chances are you'd be stuck in a sort of isolation. In the modern age it's almost effortless to find a tribe or support network and bounce ideas across each other. Over the last decade, this has grown into the backbone of the many media concerns. It has always been hard to break into the media, but thanks to the web anyone can make a start, be seen and get a following.

The sequential art community has been well catered for in this regard. Not only are there countless image sharing websites, but also countless webcomics. When compared to print media, publishing work online is pretty damned cheap. This has led to a large community of webcomic creators appearing. Some of the more popular online only types are able to command similar crowds that mainstream artists and writers do at conventions. This feeds into a cycle of others giving it a go and the cycle continues. In the UK, the indie comic book scene is thriving, both online and offline, and it's thanks in part to increased communications in the community.

A similar thing has happened to games development. The image of a lone coder, beavering away into the small hours to create a game is thought by some to be a thing of the past, thanks to the fact that the most popular games are now multi-million dollar affairs requiring teams of coders. However, time and again, it's been proven that simple games, written in a straightforward way appeal to many people and can be achieved by one person working alone. Again, due to the web, coders have been able to not only talk, but to jam; trading ideas and creating utterly weird and wacky games which may only appeal to a small number of people. Themes such as isolation, mental illness, and social disorders are explored in some of these games, elevating the whole thing to another level (but nonetheless staying on a budget).

These indie games are seen by the producers of hugely expensive games much the same way as directors of Hollywood block-busters see small-budget movies. That

is, they're mostly ignored but still examined for potential ideas and talent. This transition of game development into art has not gone smoothly, with a vocal minority using the same social media channels to gripe endlessly.

Of course, this has meant that big business has noticed and become involved. Early efforts to replicate grass-roots style media enterprises have typically failed. DC Comic's *Zuda* website was a take on webcomics that was seen as a failure by DC because it wasn't particularly profitable. An attempt to turn the entire process of indie game development into a reality-style TV quiz show ended in disaster before the first episode was even completed, with the various developers walking out. Indie sensibilities, it seems, are something best left alone and only acknowledged when they have fresh ideas to be exploited.

The future may still belong to the big boys, however. Draconian changes in VAT law, aimed at taking out large online corporations are designed in such a way that they apply to everyone. Though the likes of Amazon can afford to spend the money on cutting through this expensive paperwork, small press publishers and creators can't do so. Worse still, indie creators are not always time rich, meaning that more and more often, those seeking to earn a living will have to ally themselves with a larger corporate interest in order to turn a profit. This is a potential monopoly on fresh talent, and time will tell if Government is fast enough to realise that this could quickly become a very bad thing for both the independent artist and media as a whole.

FIN.

Ed Fortune *is a professional journalist who has written for magazines as diverse as* ***Time Out*** *and* ***The Fortean Times****. He writes a regular column on board games called 'Roll for Damage' for* ***Starburst*** *magazine and hosts a regular radio show about books called 'The BookWorm' for* ***FabRadio****. He has written a great many reviews on books, graphic novels, TV shows, movies, and in one unusual case, a duck. He also writes short stories and audio dramas. He lives in Greater Manchester and is powered by tea and chocolate hobnobs.*

Writing, like any skill, is improved with practice. These short exercises are designed to help spark ideas by seeking random inspiration from unlikely sources.

1. Pick five items that matter to you. Imagine them being discovered by someone who knows nothing about you. What would they learn about you? What sort of person would you seem to be?

2. Go to the nearest bookshelf full of novels. Pick the fifth book and write down the opening line. Now take the ninth book and write down the last sentence. Now write a story that connects the two.

3. Pick someone you see regularly but don't really know (someone who works in a local shop or who you see on the way to work). What might they have in their pockets? What stories may those contents hold?

alternatively: ***http://www.creative-writing-now.com/story-starters.html***

Can One Shot Make A Difference?

by Pat Kelleher

I haven't played video games since I had a ZX Spectrum back in the '70s, so when I received an email offering me a shot at working on a World War 2 first person shooter, I was a little surprised.

Disclaimer: Any misunderstandings about the nature of games development are entirely the author's own.

I'd written a series of First World War science fiction adventures called *No Man's World*, for Abaddon Books, owned by Rebellion. Based on those, their Publishing Manager had recommended me for *Sniper Elite 3*. I tried to make it clear that (a) I didn't play computer games and (b) my novels were set in an entirely different war. They told me not to worry and that the tasks didn't require a working knowledge of games development, which was a big plus from my point of view. As they were considering other writers, too, there was a short audition brief which I completed expecting a polite decline, only to find that they offered me the job.

Sniper Elite 3 took Rebellion's protagonist and Main Player Character (MPC), Karl Fairburne, to North Africa. So, after the obligatory NDA (Non-Disclosure Agreement) and some research into the North African Campaign, I went off to the Rebellion offices.

There, they eased me into the whole experience as we reviewed the game story for any plot holes and working on tweaks to improve it. I'm not entirely sure what I said, but I remember riffing on scenes, the way I would when plotting and, thankfully, they found some of it useful.

What the heck, it would be a new skill set, and it's always good to add another string to your bow. I'd seen a couple of talks by James Swallow about the role of writing in games, so I knew vaguely how writing for games differed from writing novels. You're doing all the set up, as with a novel, but those 'candy bar' scenes you look forward to writing, where all the cool stuff happens? They're left to the game player. However, *Sniper Elite* had done tie-in novels and novellas in the past so maybe I'd get my chance then.

They commissioned me as work-for-hire, on a day rate with the expectation of 20-30 days work. Unlike novels, where I'd submit an initial pitch and story synopsis, the game developers drove the story and they had locked down its major beats long before I came on board. Writing for the game was going to be a much more collaborative process. Without 'ownership' of the story, the job took on more of a technical challenge, having to accomplish tasks to very specific briefs, with little room for improvisation.

Then they packed me off with a whole bunch of reference material. There were level maps, renderings of game locations, and documents detailing each mission, along with a spreadsheet schedule of writer's tasks scaled to urgency as the game's release date had already been announced. Voice talent had been booked along with actors, studios, and motion capture equipment for the cutscenes. So, no pressure then.

Each of the tasks would go through a rigorous review and rewrite process with the developers, and everything has to mesh neatly with all the other game elements that were in development.

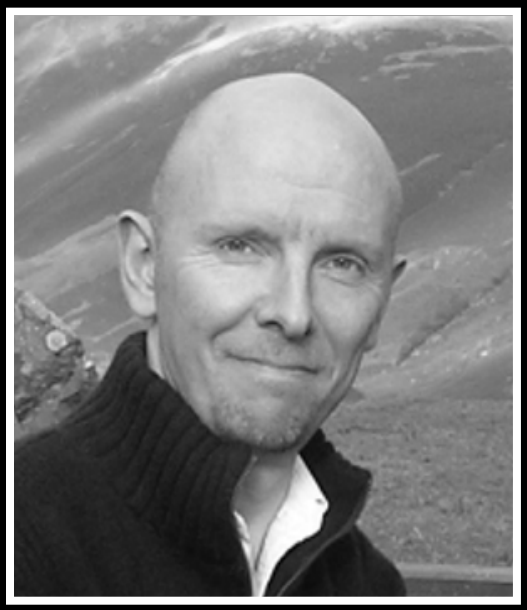
The first job to tackle was the AI Barks, the verbal responses of non-player enemy characters in reaction to the MPC's activities. The job? Basically, a thousand different ways of saying 'He's over there!'

Well, 870 lines of dialogue actually; short sentences or phrases broken down into very specific categories and sub-categories (and in some cases sub-sub categories) such as hide, investigate, attack, aggressive searching, suspicious bodies found, sounds heard, and a host of others covering every conceivable situation.

Each category required anything from five to thirty varied but similar responses that the AI engine could use at random and still have them make sense within the context of game play.

The developers' demands were exacting and they rejected some responses for being too general or occasionally too specific, in that they rightly belonged to an excruciatingly similar but different sub-category. This is, perhaps, where game-playing experience might have proved useful. Being aware of what actually went on in a gameplay environment might have made the task a little easier, but we live and learn.

Pat Kelleher *lives in Penury, Manchester. He has spent a lot of his career writing for a wide variety of TV licensed characters across a bewildering array of media. He has several non-fiction books to his credit and written educational strips and stories for the RSPB. His* ***No Man's World*** *pulp sci-fi novels are published by Abaddon Books, along with his Gods and Monsters e-novella,* ***Drag Hunt****.* ***Sniper Elite 3*** *is his first computer game work. Somehow, amidst all this, he has managed to avoid all those careers and part-time jobs that look so good on a dust jacket.*



I entered all the phrases in a large, and continually growing, spreadsheet (columns included language options for German and Italian as enemies in the game were to shout in their original language, with subtitles). It needed several drafts to achieve the required mix of responses, so that they could not be misconstrued. This wasn't as easy as I thought. It certainly taught me how lean and tight scripting for games has to be, though I must admit, at times it felt like grinding.

The next task was more straightforward; mission briefs for every level, each one an exercise in brevity. Written as a voiceover from Karl, they had to explain the nature of the task for that level, detail the objectives, recap relevant information and any pertinent consequences from the previous mission, while providing glimpses into Karl's character. All in a hundred words. Anyone who's tried to craft a one-paragraph pitch or blurb copy knows how exacting these small pieces can be. Again, accompanying spreadsheets of notes, detailing the major story beats and gaming objectives of each mission helped provide the necessary guidance.

The mission briefs led neatly into the intro and outro cutscene scripts; brief animated scenes leading into and out of the game play for each level. There were also a few mid-level cutscenes, where game-play dependant alternate scenarios were required. The cutscenes were written in a format that was half film script, half comic script, containing general camera/art directions along with the dialogue. However, some elements of the game were still in flux, and notes from the developers required rewrites to accommodate new information.

Early drafts contained a number of voiceovers from Karl that didn't appear in the final game. There was no time for angst-ridden internal monologues, no matter how finely crafted. Karl had a job to do, so in order to keep the cutscenes succinct the voiceovers were pared back, letting the mission briefs carry any pertinent information. Which was fine. My comics scripting had long since taught me that sometimes the visuals can carry the weight of the storytelling alone, rendering dialogue superfluous.

Rounding off each level, were the End of Mission Reports; brief fifty to a hundred word faux newspaper articles reporting on the wider significance of a mission success, or British Naval Intelligence communiqués concerning the intel gathered from the mission.

The next task took me back to the beginning of the game, scripting the narration for the faux newsreel introduction. This is the first thing the player sees when booting the game up, and was to set the historical context and the game's stakes. It was to be delivered with Karl's VO (Voice Over) and paired with an animated tableaux of vintage-style concept art, inspired by British Pathé news footage, so I had to include loose art directions such as 'Allied shipping being torpedoed in the Atlantic' or 'Luftwaffe planes over Libya'.

The final task was scripting the narrative collectibles, items that the MPC can find and examine. Story collectibles in the form of Axis accounts and a General's journal entries served to further the plot, offer clarification of narrative points, provide intel regarding the in-game mission objectives, or reference the MPC's actions as perceived by the enemy.

There were non-story collectibles, too. These added historical context and a degree of verisimilitude to the game in the form of letters from Allied and Axis soldiers and their families. They detailed the conditions that soldiers faced during the campaign, based on real first person events and trivia, along with collectible medal citations regarding the North African campaign, relevant to the locations and missions used within the game. Again, each of these was between fifty and a hundred words.

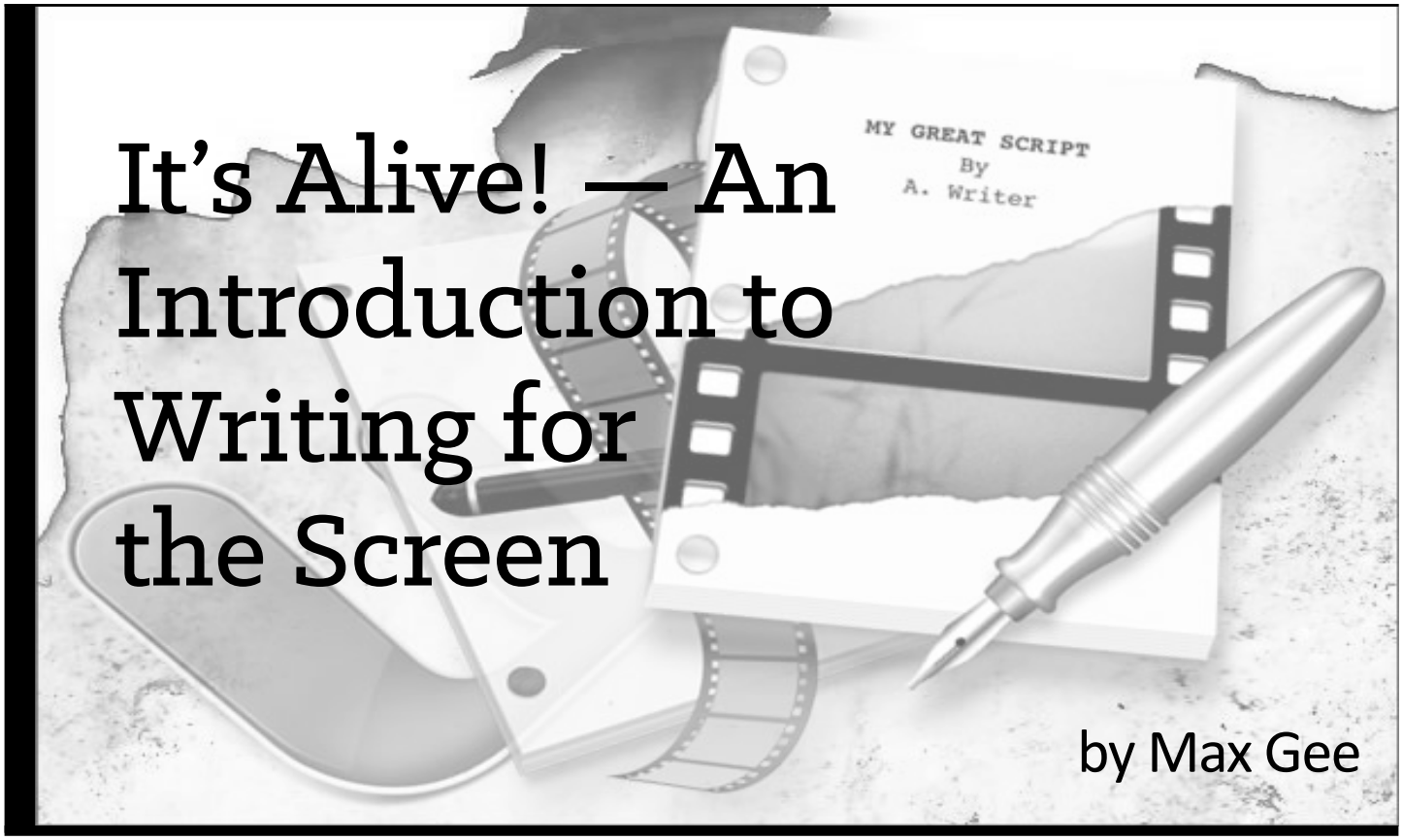
With that last task signed off, my writing contributions to the game itself were done. I never did get the tie-in novel. I did however get the opportunity to script a twelve page limited edition tie-in comic to accompany the game release. For me, that was the icing on the cake, and I got to work with *2000 AD* artist extraordinaire Patrick Goddard, too. At the time of writing, it's still available online: **http://www.gamesradar.com/sniper-elite-comic/**

Looking back, there were moments when I wondered what I'd taken on. It was certainly a steep learning curve, but the Rebellion team were nothing but supportive and their feedback, while occasionally tough, was always positive. I've found it rare that a company will take a risk and spend time mentoring you through a process, especially when it might be easier to hire someone who already knows their stuff because, you know, money and deadlines, etc. However, I'm glad they took me on. I've gained a lot from the experience and certainly feel like I've levelled up.

So, would I do it again?

Like a shot.

FIN.



It's Alive! — An Introduction to Writing for the Screen

by Max Gee

Screenplays are often described as being the blueprints for films. This is a really helpful analogy as it highlights the big difference between screenplays and, say, the novel; that screenplays are part of a deeply collaborative process. It's a process of compromise, consultation and accommodation. So if you don't like to share your creative babies, then writing for film is probably not for you.

If that doesn't put you off then here are a few tips to set you on the way to writing a screenplay.

Back to the blueprint analogy, which I like to take one step further and say that screenwriters are like architects. Screenwriters, like architects, are often the first people to tackle this creative build we call the film, or television series. They research the terrain for the film, they create the document which is their dream version of the film and populate this dream with an array of interesting, engaging and complex characters. Once the script/blueprint is completed it is passed on to the practically-minded builders—the film crew—to realise. Just as an architect cannot function fully without builders, and vice versa, a screenwriter cannot fully function without keeping the rest of the film crew in mind.

Okay so that's an idea of what a screenplay is conceptually, but what does the thing actually look like? And how do you start writing one?

Finding examples of screenplays to read is pretty easy these days. A quick visit to Drew's Script-O-Rama (***http://www.script-o-rama.com***) provides the avid script reader with a plethora of screenplays from movies and television. Or you can try the BBC Writersroom (***http://www.bbc.co.uk/writersroom/scripts/***). Without reading screenplays you can't really understand how the format works and how screen stories unfold. Imagine starting to write a novel without having ever read one; you wouldn't, right? Reading existing scripts is a must for any aspiring screenwriter.

From reading screenplays, one very important factor about the craft will become apparent: they are exceptionally rule bound. Their appearance is closely formatted and regulated. Part of the fun of being a screenwriter is finding ways to inject your own personality and style within these regulations, for woe betide anyone who does not learn these rules. The simple truth is that if a script is submitted to a competition, or the BBC Writersroom, or an agent, which does not follow the correct formatting, it will probably find itself in the bin; even if it is the greatest script ever written.

So how do you make sure you don't fall at this first hurdle? Well there are plenty of guides to screenplay formatting on the internet and all screenwriting software includes templates which make the process much easier. Most people who write screenplays use screenwriting

Max Gee *is a screenwriter and playwright who occasionally dabbles in prose. After completing a MFA in Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts in California, she was represented by the Bohrman Agency in Los Angeles. She has adapted* ***Sherlock Holmes*** *for site specific theatre in York, written a science fiction inspired web advert and was commissioned by York based* ***One&Other*** *magazine to write a speculative story about a future York.*

Max is currently studying for a PhD by Creative Practice in Screenwriting focusing on posthuman noir in Anglo-American films and Japanese animation.

Max sporadically blogs about writing, science fiction, film, anime and the posthuman at ***https://adventuresinbackstory.wordpress.com/*** *You can also find her on Twitter:* ***@MaxGee1284***

software—it is now much rarer to use an ordinary word processing program. I use *Final Draft*, an industry standard screenwriting program, because I find it simple and intuitive. The downside to *Final Draft* is the price. When I started writing scripts I used the equally helpful *Celtx* software, (***https://www.celtx.com/index.html***) which is still available online for the reasonable price of free.

The first regulation to consider when constructing screen stories is length. Unlike a novel there are strict length limitations on screenplays. The rough rule is that one page of a screenplay equals one minute of film time. This means that a feature film screenplay is around 90 to 120 pages long. Of course there are exceptions, and longer films require longer screenplays—the script for Christopher Nolan's *Inception* is 146 pages—but usually you have to be an established filmmaker before you can start bending that rule. With television the page count is even smaller; around 45-50 pages for an hour-long drama or 25-30 pages for a half-hour sitcom.

And there isn't really any dodging the page limits. I once met a producer who had read an action script I'd written, whose first comment was that he knew my script was long from the moment he picked it up. Luckily it was a pacey read, so the length did not put him off. But you need to understand there is no cheating these guys, they've read so many scripts they know if you've played fast and loose with the margins, or spacing.

Of course these length regulations are both appealing and daunting. The shortness means that a screenplay first draft can be finished more quickly than that of a novel. On the flipside more time is dedicated to rewriting to make sure those scant few pages are providing all the plot information and character development they need to.

The best description I have heard about a screenplay was from one of my professors— he compares a screenplay to a 120-page haiku; the level of precision in word choice is about the same. I wouldn't like to think about the number of hours I have spent trying to figure out the perfect verb for a situation. Does this character creep or sneak across the room; the subtle differences are everything in generating the right meaning or mood.

On the page a screenplay bears some similarities to a stage play script, but with some major differences. All screenplays start with FADE IN and end with FADE OUT. There is a joke at the screenwriting group I organise, that members who submit scripts without these basic elements will be defenestrated—I am happy to report no window-related casualties have occurred in the three years of the group's existence.

The scene is established by a slugline which looks something like this— INT. SPACESTATION – NIGHT —and provides relevant information on location, whether we are interior [INT.] or exterior [EXT.] and the time of day.

Then there's the action, which resembles prose, and describes the actions of characters and gives relevant details on the locations. Film is a visual medium so creating strong images which convey the world and the meaning of the story is vitally important and the action line is where this occurs. All action lines are in active present tense, adding to the sense of immediacy that a screenplay is aiming for. The urgency created by using active present tense should propel a reader to want to get to the end of the script in one sitting.

In the past, action lines would form longer paragraphs filled with information—the opening of Blade Runner is a good example of this and can be found at *Drew's Script-O-Rama*. More recently the trend has

shifted towards having shorter, sparser paragraphs. I feel three lines in a paragraph is enough, any more and the page starts to look dense. This is especially true in action-packed sequences where important moments can be lost in a paragraph of text. A good rule to begin with is that if you think a shot changes then start a new paragraph. Ellipses (...) and em dashes (—) can also be used to alter the pacing of action-heavy sequences.

Dense prose is the enemy of the screenwriter and a lot of emphasis is placed on keeping white space on the page. All scripts, whether they are deep psychological dramas or space operas, have to be page turners. The task of a screenwriter is to create a document which keeps a reader reading until the end, while still generating a fully realised world with compelling characters... all in 120 pages. Not sounding so easy now, is it?

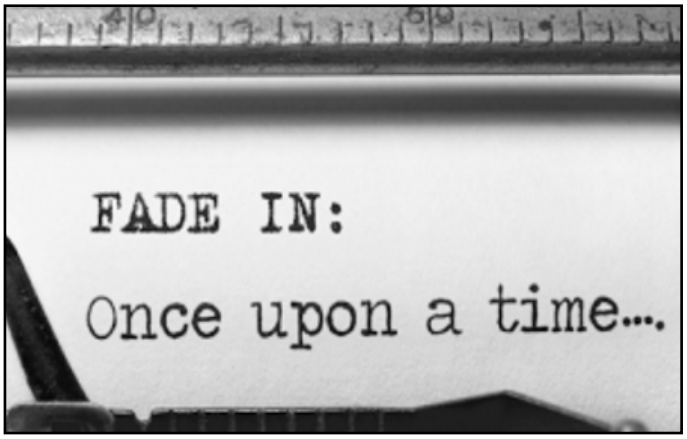
The final major component is the dialogue, which runs in small blocks in the middle of the page. Unlike a novel, where a first person perspective can place the reader in a character's mind, on screen the only insight into a character's voice is their actual voice—even in voice over narration. Dialogue must do more than give the audience a sense of the character's identity; it is directed between characters in a moment establishing their relationships, while propelling the plot of the story forward, and giving the audience all the information they might need to understand the world. Everything in a screenplay is working toward more than one objective, if it isn't, then its necessity must be questioned.

Film is a medium which plays on more than one sense so sluglines, action and dialogue are used to engage both visual and aural senses. Can a sound, or the lack of sound, convey more than five lines of dialogue? Would a specific look between characters be more effective?

It's always a good idea, I find, to remember how people actually communicate. Do characters use shorthand indicating they know each other well? Do they speak at cross purposes? Do their actions speak differently to their words? The juxtaposition of aural and visual information is one of the fantastic possibilities in screenwriting.

But try not to get too carried away just yet—remember you only have 120 pages to tell your story. To deal with the limited space in a screenplay a lot of the heavy lifting occurs before you start the script.

I used to treat planning and outlining like dirty words, but I've learned the hard way that spending time on structuring saves hours of headache later on. It is so much harder to scrap script pages you have spent time carefully crafting, even when you know they are leading you down a plot hole. A lot of screenwriting books spend a great deal of time on structure, whether they



are pushing the '3-Act Hollywood' model or not. As with most things creative you have to know the rules before you break them. And there is a reason why so many films fit certain structural patterns.

The last edition of FOCUS concentrated on world building, an element which is especially important to the speculative genres whose worlds can be so different from our own ordinary Earth. All the points about research and world building that apply to novels also apply to screenplays. The main difference is that what makes it into the final script is only the tip of the iceberg in your research. Speculative fiction scripts can fail to catch a reader's attention because they are filled with dense descriptions of new worlds. I've found one major concern of screenwriting is generating a sense of flow from beginning to end. As I mentioned, the screenwriter is constantly pushing the reader on towards the end of the script. Huge chunks of expository description in the action lines disrupt and stall that flow.

In many ways creating a world in a science fiction or fantasy screenplay is harder to get right than in a speculative novel. A science fiction screenwriter must think of visual and aural ways to provide the audience with all the information they need to understand the world and the story. The challenge is introducing world building details in an active way which feels natural. Nothing sticks out like a sore thumb more than characters explaining to each other details about their world which they both already know. Dialogue like this is only for the benefit of the audience and so breaks the verisimilitude of the script.

To combat this, one trick employed by science fiction screenwriters is to include, or often begin with, a news broadcast — *The Edge of Tomorrow* (2014) or *Starship Troopers* (1997). In the latter the way the news is relayed not only alerts the audience to the important events of the world, but shows how news is consumed differently in this future world and hints at the satirical tone of film. Once again, every moment in the script is made to count on multiple levels.

What I hope has become apparent through this article is that screenwriting is often about creativity developed under constraint. Whether in the formal regulations of the screenplay, collaborations with other members of the film crew or changes in budget, there is always some restriction on your imagination. But that is when, in my opinion, the best and most inventive ideas are formed.

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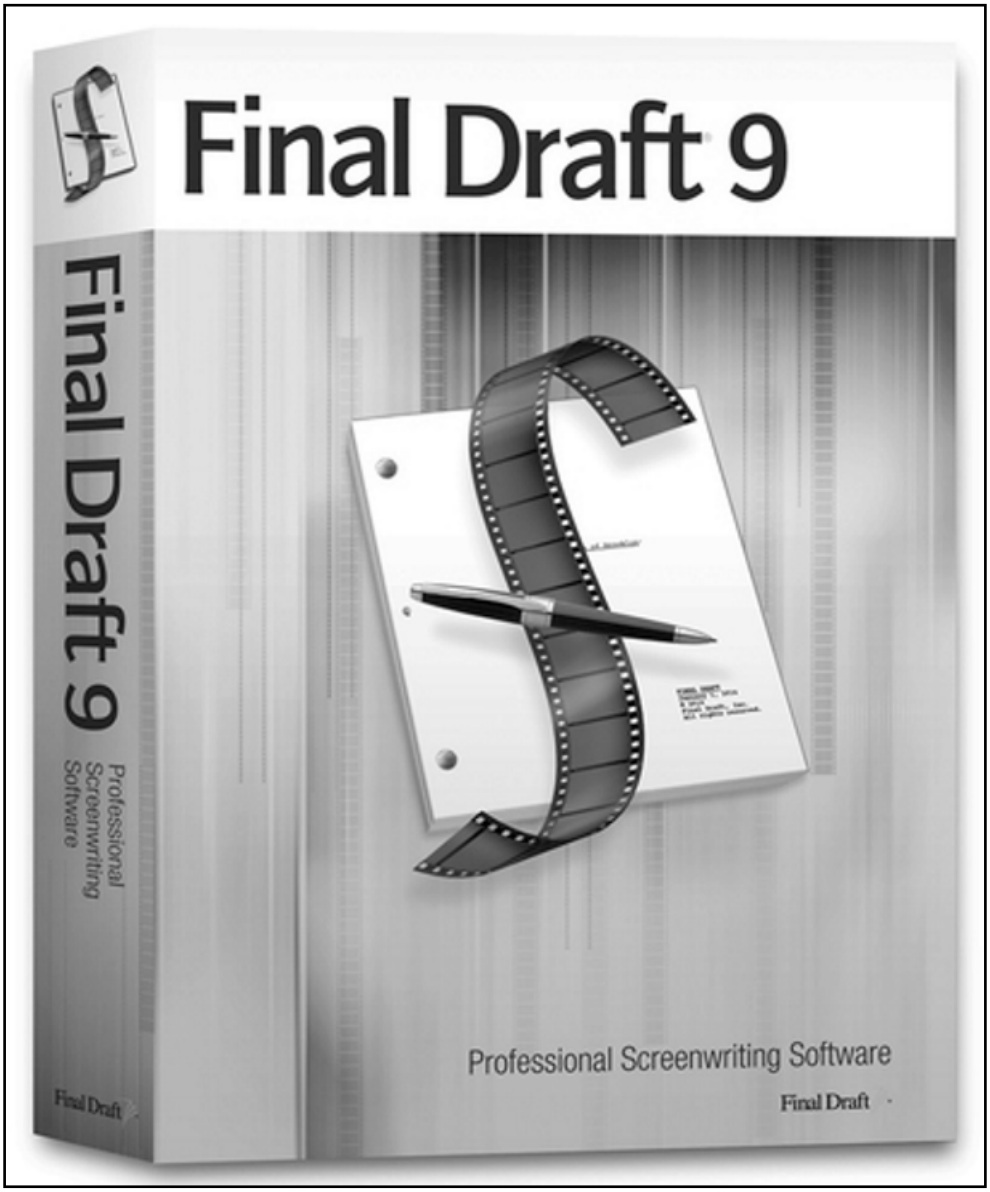

Press X to Skip Article

by Ben Fisher

My favourite metaphor for the challenge of writing for games is this: imagine you are trying to write a play – but one of the actors is an audience member, ad-libbing their performance, and they've never seen the play before. Sometimes they are eager to be part of the story and do everything they can to join in. Sometimes they are distracted by the inventiveness of the scene and find the set more interesting than the professional actors patiently waiting nearby. Sometimes they want to skip all the talking and get to the bit where the man punches the other man. And the play has to try and work equally as well for whatever audience member is on stage, and make them feel like the story was written with them in mind.

Additionally, in most cases the story is not the main focus of the play experience – instead, players are drawn to games because of a sense of challenge, competition, discovery, or of community.

For the majority of games, this is the context a writer works within - games are typically somewhere between improvisational theatre and an assault course. For the majority of games you see, writing is typically split into two parts accordingly— "cutscenes" where pre-animated sequences outside of player control are used to push forward a narrative, and "gameplay" where a reactive script supports and reinforces player choices and provides training and context, but typically does not push forward the narrative.

So in this context, how can a writer ensure a game has narrative meaning?

Over the course of my career I've worked on a tremendous range of game types – from film and TV show tie-in games through traditional video adventure games, all the way to things like a SpongeBob-themed surfing game, a "movie karaoke" game where the player is green-screened into favourite movie clips, and as it typical in the industry, a range of projects that never saw the light of day. I'm currently Design Director on SkySaga, a randomly generated multiplayer adventure game with a focus on player creativity and community. I've spent my career working on wildly different parts of each game, but in all cases have devoted time and effort to exploring the ways in which narrative techniques can be used to reinforce the player's experience, whether there is a script or not.

The best model I've found so far is this: the ability to put together a good script is obviously a prerequisite, but the main writer-like skill that contributes positively

to a game is the ability to provide a game with context, thematic resonance and narrative momentum. The highest value a writer can provide to a game team is actually *structural* – while game designers are focussing on moment-to-moment engagement and interesting mechanical situations for the player to encounter, it is incredibly difficult to also consider the overall pace and momentum of a given game sequence. Games are often built and worked on by multiple people in parallel, and you'll often find that ten or fifteen minute chunks of game are the responsibility of completely different people. The process of game design is fiercely iterative, so as these people work in parallel, attempts at elegant narrative clockwork will end up a pile of springs and cogs. However, there are a few strategies a writer can apply to work well in this context.

The runtime of a narrative-focussed action game typically falls somewhere north of the ten hour mark. This will break down into levels of 45 to 60 minutes, and each level will break down into multiple sequences of 10 or 15 minutes (similar to the sequence model of screenplay production). In terms of runtime, narrative games are box sets, not movies. However, this approach can scale up or down comfortably based on the type of game – you can impose (very) broad scale beats on the events of a 100-hour RPG (where the player is experiencing a multi-season series in one go), and you can use the same techniques to give each play cycle of a racing game a sense of pace (where the player is experiencing a single action scene).

A game, then, can be looked at as act structures within act structures – like any other form of storytelling. Writers are typically the most qualified person on a game team to make sure a game uses pacing to its advantage – where each play session has an act structure, and where each sequence inside a play session has an act structure too. Cutscenes can most effectively be positioned to act as milestones between sequences, since players are most receptive to non-interactive story events when they are presented as rewards for gameplay accomplishments. During gameplay, the script for each sequence can reinforce the tone of that beat in the larger narrative. Writers can help communicate the emotional goals of the reactive script in ways that allow level designers to reinforce and contribute to them. A particularly effective form of level design storytelling involves dressing the environment the player is in with details that form background stories. In this case, the player being distracted by the set dressing is actually a *good* thing, because it harmonises with the larger narrative goals, adding depth to the experience for players most interested in role play.

So, that's some abstract thought on what I've found to be the best model for writer involvement. I'll use three specific examples to illustrate how this all fits together. I've intentionally chosen straightforward examples for clarity, but these principles apply in whatever case. Experience would indicate that when you try and accomplish something fancier than this, you need to be in charge of the entire play experience, and the focus of the game has to be narrative.

First example – when developing the SpongeBob surfing game, we broke each two minute racing track into 30 second sequences, each giving a different broad theme to the track and level of peril (for example – open sea, twisting river rapids, cave tunnel full of rocky obstacles, wide open rapids leading to dramatic finish line). This process contributed an overall sense of action scene momentum. To reinforce this simple narrative, we wrote a set of reactive script "barks" that underlined the atmosphere of each sequence.

Second example - Once upon a time I worked on a violent action adventure called Dead to Rights: Retribution. After production of the main game had ended, we started production of an additional downloadable level featuring new characters, filling in details of an unseen sequence that occurred in parallel to the main adventure. Our production window was a month start-to-finish, which left us no thinking time at all. Thankfully, our level design

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team was four accomplished designers who had worked on the main game and were familiar with the tone we were trying to achieve. The main game story provided our narrative context and our characters. We used this start point to plan an overall timeline of the level – four equal sized sequences following a traditional three act structure, each separated by a cutscene that acted as a story reward. Each cutscene was used to shift the narrative tone from sequence to sequence. The gameplay in each sequence was planned to resonate with the emotional state of the characters – so following action movie tropes, non-lethal stealth infiltration gave way to an out of control explosive finale, and the turncoat antagonist shifted from professional detachment to revealing a selfish, emotionally driven ferocity. Here we tried something more complex than in the first example. The reactive gameplay script shifted in tone, too – so the same gameplay event would trigger a different emotional reaction from characters based on the point in the narrative. This is really pretty simple stuff, but it is very effective. The most useful thing in this approach, then, was not to write and deliver a script in isolation from the team– the ideal case is one where a writer can build a narrative context in a similar iterative, flexible way as the game designers are building the gameplay.

Third example – and the most complex – is the game I am currently working on, SkySaga. We want our game to have a sense of narrative momentum because this deepens a player's emotional connection with their experience, which clashes with the fact that the game is randomly generated and features open worlds, leaving control of pace and momentum to the player, and removing the level designer / writer relationship from the equation. The approach we have taken to overcome this challenge is one I've not seen before, but one I'm *very* excited about.

As mentioned earlier, writers most usefully provide context, thematic resonance and narrative momentum, by working directly with level designers to provide narrative structure to gameplay events. We have attempted to translate this relationship into game code.

The core gameplay loop of the game reflects the Hero's Journey – players start in a safe home of their construction, and leave that home to find resources and learn new skills. They will find themselves in a level where they can discover these resources by overcoming various challenges. On finding the exit they will return home to improve their home. The Adventure Director is a game system that takes the basic rules of sequence breakdown, and a simple understanding of act structure, and uses them to dictate the pace of a randomly generated level. An open forest will lead to a cliff. On climbing the cliff, the player will encounter a sprawling castle. The castle courtyard contains a dungeon entrance – and an

enclosed dungeon leads to a dramatic conclusion. These locations are populated with creatures that give a sense of increasing challenge and subsequent reward, and are laid out to gradually draw the player from open world into a controlled dramatic conclusion. As the game expands, the options for storytelling will be fed into the Adventure Director, driven by a combination of level design expertise and narrative structure.

This approach doesn't give the most complex or nuanced stories, but it plays to the greatest strengths of storytelling in games – it gives players a context to tell their own stories. Each adventure is a unique sequence of events, which players recycle into anecdotes and share with each other.

Ultimately, every game is a context for players to share stories with one another. The authored approach at one end of the scale imposes a hand-crafted story on the player, and ensures that everybody experiences the same story, using cutscenes and guided narrative events to tell one traditional story. At the other end of the scale, we can build an open world that gives players a forum for self-expression, and encourages them to generate their own stories. Regardless of the project, writers in the games industry help contribute an understanding of structure that causes the themes and emotions of a game to resonate more deeply, and help players to fall in love with the game.

FIN.

POEMS FROM THE STARS

BSFA Poetry Submissions edited by ***Charles Christian***

People of The Lie

Something happens
in the man created
reality. A strong
pull to the static,
pulverized atmosphere
of fable and doom,
chariot races
and planets exploding
in unknown
galaxies.

... Doug Draime (Oregon)

DOPPLER

Two ships
in the night,
we pass each other
somewhere along
the trailing arm
of a remote galaxy –
faint ripples
in a vast sea of ink.
A split-second encounter,
a blur of silica,
soft pulse of engines.
And against all
logic and reason
I feel myself
burdened with regret,
memories
already shifting
to red.

... Jeffrey Park (Munich)

Lost Dreams (inspired by Blakes 7)

I stand upon the abyss looking into the night
for an eternity I fought,
or so it seemed for I have lost my dreams.

Once I was a beacon burning bright,
but now I do not know why I face the night.
My memory is shattered and I have lost my dreams.

All I knew are dead or fled,
abandoned now I stand
alone against the night,
for I have lost my dreams.

Once I fought for the good of all,
now to prove I was right!
For I have lost my dreams.

Did I ever truly believe?
I no longer know my memory has fled,
and I have lost my dreams.

Now a final stand I make,
to prove that I was right!
But now I see my end,
as my dreams are finally dead!

... Henry Eggleton

inside the room

the thirteen stood inside the room
hats knitted together, beards intertwined
and the one they call Lego Yellow
tore open his chest and gave thanks, and break it,
and gave it unto them, saying – nothing.

he wavered, as one on the edge stole away,
threads unravelling
hands clasped across his baldness in shame

the remaining twelve stood motionless, profiles stern
beards carved in stone, checking their hats again and again
for a sign to set upon the one
to tear him apart, brick by brick
with a click-clickety-click, splatter-crash, tumble-down,
all fall down, all fall down-down, deeper and down

but the blasphemer lay on his bed and wept
saying: 'Where is Barbie, where's Melton Mowbray,
where's Mortimer's pies? Nay, which is more and most of all,
where is the London Planetarium?
They are entombed in the urns and sepulchres of mortality.
And yet let the name and dignity of Lego stand
so long as it pleaseth God.'

and thus was he forgiven, all the while acknowledging
the King James Bible and Sir Ranulph Crewe,
Donovan and the Quo, lest he be accused of Plagiarism
a Sin for which there may be no Remission.

... Catherine Edmunds

Dark Can Be Light

The balloon seller passed her the balloon,
the one she had especially pointed to,
the one ecru as an eggshell.
MR MIZZERABELLY'S BALLOONS said the sign
on the balloon seller's cart.
The balloon bobbed up and about as she walked home,
way, way ahead of her disinterested father.
The flowers in the gardens
leant back in their beds as she passed.
Sparrows sped from the shrubs and the eaves of houses,
racing madly ahead of her.
Cicadas fell from the trees.
The neatly trimmed lawn in the front
of her house gave an imperceptible tremor
as she skipped through the gate.
In the kitchen her mummy eyed the balloon
with an inexplicable disquiet.
Squeaky the cat slipped out through the cat-flap.
She marched up to her bedroom and tied the balloon
to the end of her bed.
The balloon bobbed sideways and upwards,
even though there was no draught from the door
and no window was open.
The ghost in the balloon just waited.
Sooner or later someone will always burst a balloon.

... John W Sexton

Scifaiku (& Nerduku)

muggled day
forgotten
spells

zombies
every morning
before Starbucks

zero bars
alone again
technically

... Nancy Taylor (Los Angeles)

plop! a frog
falls into a gravity well . . .
Zeno's Paradox

... Stewart C. Baker

thirteen trees bear names
of girls that fell for space men
summer nights ago

... Dominic Daley

twilight -
the moons we haven't mined
begin to appear

low Earth orbit
watching the sun rise
somewhere else

... Joshua Gage (Cleveland)

Old Baby Boomers
never die - they just upgrade
from vinyl to digital

... Alexis Byter

sign on the wormhole shuttle:
"Please keep all appendages
inside of your body."

assimilation -
the proper way to wear
your mother's old skin

... Julie Bloss Kelsey

Black Suit

The man in the black suit finally came
And conscripted us
But he was smart about it
Sending men ahead of him each month
To get us used to the idea
In suits that got darker
First there was a man in a white suit
Who brought us ice-cream
Then a man in a lime-colored suit with melons
Followed by a man in a red suit
Who brought us V-8 juice
Finally, like I said, came the man
In the black suit
By now we were ready for it and him
So we went along with him
And he gave us each our own black suit
Which we put on
And then we rounded up
Those who weren't and didn't

... Paul Smith, Illinois

Beware of the Dog

Sure, we've all heard it before,
how every full moon he gets out of control,
but any Saturday night in this burg
gets a little bit heavy.
Besides most of the bars
don't even let pets in,
no matter whether they're dogs or wolves -
not even seeing-eye pooches for blind folks -
and by Monday morning we're all so hung
that who even remembers?
So the thing is, sure, exercise some caution
when something growls at you,
maybe even stay in your car
until it lopes past,
but come the next work week
it's "How's it going, Charlie,"
when you pass his station at the plant
down the row from your own,
never mind what's the moon phase.

... James S. Dorr (Indiana)

suddenly, a unicorn

steps into the headlights
white coat set aglow
horn a perfect golden spiral
mane matted by brambles
his head turns to face

the car as you slam on brakes
vicious gush of the airbag
crunch, dust, blood trickles to lip
windshield rippled like
stones in a pond

smear of red across the glass
you stumble outside
the unicorn is gone
a few white hairs snagged on shards
you call home: "I hit a deer."

... Beth Cato (Arizona)

Time Travel Altar

In 2300 time travel was advanced and needed willing trainees to test the new trajectory models
So they harvested a ripe audience
History and humanities graduates who couldn't get a job worthy of their educational input
Seeking to escape call centres, bars, rowdy classrooms, and ubiquitous coffee chains
Fascinated with HG Wells, Gothic romances and Roman History amongst other time scales and locales
Seeking to experience first hand what they'd been reading in their classrooms in sometimes dry academic texts
Also bored disillusioned housewives seeking to tussle first hand with a Viking warrior or Highlander
Instead of getting secondhand accounts from Harlequin Mills and Boon (yes it was still going strong much to my prayers)
I was to volunteer first after watching the archived 1979 film "Time after Time" and hoping to chance across HG Wells smelling of honey wanting to add me to harem while amazing me with his brilliance and vision in a simpler world yet still embracing the future
History and humanities are seen as a waste of time but yet inspire imagination amongst some of their student body, a willingness to straddle two worlds in the pursuit of scientific research and personal curiosity
Time travel a possible also substitute for narcotic drugs for lost souls unhappy with their own orientation to time and place
And the homeless with no stake in society with nothing ostensibly to lose
Add to them the heartbroken, the dispossessed, the lost
Like pagans they would present themselves at the altar for the entry into a different time zone

... Myra Litton

Ultimate Feng Shui

She hired a Feng Shui specialist, and did all he said. She moved her bed and desk away from her door to face more favorable directions, hung mirrors and chimes to misdirect bad luck, added plants and installed small fountains of water to increase cash flow, and painted her rooms in different colors to attract chi.

Finally, all was in place - there was nothing left to do. She went to sleep in her new, perfectly aligned apartment.

When she awoke, she found herself outside on the pale square of ground where her building had been.

Everything had been so perfectly positioned that it had ascended to Heaven, where it belonged, leaving her behind - aligned with nothing.

... Lorraine Schein (New York)

FIN.

Painting An Idea: From First Concept to Final Draft

by Jamie Noble

"Don't work for free," I remember being told this when I first began my career in digital art. This advice came amid various other people telling me the only way to get experience was to offer my services for no fee. I was confused and probably didn't act on all of the opportunities that were laid out in front of me.

There is an argument for both opinions on the subject.

Work for free and you will build a rapport with potential future clients. You might begin to get your name out there when your work is used in your clients' promotions. You'll gain experience working to a brief and having people offer often quite brutal comments. This experience is invaluable: yes, you might feel like the expert and there might be a good reason why you painted the sky green and the anatomy out of proportion. However, with the majority of commercial art, it is there to be aesthetically pleasing, whether you paint a beautiful vista or a six-headed zombie dragon. If your client feels like a design choice is visually jarring, the chances are they won't be the only person to feel that way. It's lesson 101 of losing your ego and numbing your sensitivity. Listen to others and take on their feedback, regardless of their background, but be confident when you come to a design decision.

The downside of working for free is that some clients can expect you to continue to work without pay. Unfortunately, because there are a dozen other fledgling artists willing to provide the work who are one ladder rung behind you, you really don't have so much bargaining power. If you're not careful that unpaid internship may never end up becoming a paid job, and that's not sustainable. It's great to maintain relationships with charities, but don't get locked into working for commercial clients consistently for free and don't sell yourself short. With every unpaid job you take on, question what experience or skills you can gain from the work. If you're not gaining either, it may not be worth your time. Be clear with clients from the beginning – even if you begin the relationship working for free or at a discounted rate, make sure they know that next time you will be charging them at an agreed rate.

I've been working as a digital artist for nearly five years across books, magazines, board games and computer games. I've had freelance contracts and full time employment. In that time, I have encountered plenty of different personalities and situations, and if I can impart some of that experience upon newer artists to save confusion in a very subjective career, then all the better.

So (skipping self promotion, which would be an essay in itself), let's imagine you've finally found a paid freelance opportunity. It's quite low, but you're getting paid for what you love right?!

The client has something in their mind but needs you to draw it out of them and get it down on paper (or


GENTLEMAN'S
CLUB

screen...). This could take place in a cafe, which is great, you can scribble on the back of a napkin a composition that springs to mind, build a rapport and show your personable qualities. But, in a digital age, you're more likely to send emails. Not only does this do the job of sorting geographical issues, but also leaves you with a nice record of everything that was said. It not only helps when it comes to defining the project and having a client not saying, "I told you it was meant to be a GHOST sandwich!" on the last pass of a project, it also helps when juggling projects and having a refresher read whenever you get back to working on it. Nothing says unprofessional like asking the same question over and over again.

For many artists I talk to, this and negotiating and dealing with payments are the hardest parts of the job. Creative and passionate we might be, but that sometimes leaves admin and paperwork on the back burner. Learn quickly though. Do the admin and you'll, (a) get paid and (b) not have to rework a piece because it wasn't planned properly between you and your client.

During the back and forth of emails, your goal is to get concise bullet points from which you can plan your design. In some cases someone has a really specific idea in mind. In most cases, however, there is a bit of digging to be done to build your foundation. Although a client has a great idea, they may not be able to articulate this easily. In this situation I ask them to draft an email and break it down into bullet points. As soon as I've got that, I'll basically rewrite it in my own words riffing on ideas to see if anything stands out like a sore thumb. It also helps to show off your creative streak and keep clients happy that you're in control of the situation.

It's crucial to ask the client what pieces they particularly like in your portfolio and/or whether they can send you any images of the style they like. You'll find out a lot early on about the desired outcome of the project and references in both photography and art are always helpful to have alongside the entire duration of the project. As you build your client base, I'd be tempted to stick to one style, and refer more to your own portfolio when talking to a client rather than offering them anything between Frazetta and Marvel comic art. It will help you develop your own style in the long run. It's great to be versatile, but if I feel I'm not going to give my clients something I'm happy with I have to reluctantly turn it down. Remember the internet never forgets...it's very difficult to put something out there that you're not proud of and later attempt to scour it from the web.

Once I've hammered out the details I send off some terms and conditions and a project brief outlining what's expected and when. The terms and conditions describe ownership, but mainly give me a written opportunity to say I'd like to use work in future portfolios or other self promotion. It's one of the most important things to note, so make sure you get clarification on that before you begin work. Some clients are happy for you to show a piece in progress, but make sure you know where you stand as others (particularly video game companies) only allow you to showcase or publish work online after the product has gone live.

When you begin a project, send some loose sketches to your client. It works as a nice "look I'm already working on your project" email and for your own sanity in being on the right track early on. I often drop in a little disclaimer about the work being in a very early stage, but most clients are just happy to see the initial life signs of their vision. Start with some thumbnails to get you going – being so small, they're invaluable in seeing the full composition at a glance to make sure your shapes are pleasing, and also it stops you getting bogged down in detail, which can be heart-breaking when you look back after a few hours to realise the image just looks fundamentally wrong. Quite often I'll work with shapes and silhouettes. There's a term I picked up called the "happy accident" which occurs when sketching rough or using silhouettes. You begin to see really cool shapes or poses in your image, purely by chance. The sketches you send out could be a piece of line art, or maybe something rough with a few colours dropped on top to give your client an idea of the colour palette you are using.

On colour: try to limit yourself. Colour is very dependant upon the light present and, unless you have a disco in your image, you're unlikely to be firing the full colour spectrum onto your canvas. Often the difference between an amateur and a pro is an understanding of light. There's too much to cover even the basics on light here, but if you're serious about art, I'd suggest learning as much as you can from YouTube tutorials, books and other artists.

One of the luxuries of digital art is working in layers. This means I can take risks I wouldn't take with a paintbrush. It's a great way of making commercial art when deadlines are tight. Leaving my sketch on a slightly transparent layer on top I begin to block in lights and darks. Sometimes I don't introduce colour until I'm convinced I've found my

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composition. Other times I'll throw down a few colours and try to achieve a palette early on if I know it's likely to define the feel of the image. Having that control over colour is another benefit of digital art, and the rest of the project is a combination of using traditional techniques and nifty tricks in art programs. One of which is flipping the canvas, to avoid getting too comfortable with what you've made. If you spend nine hours looking at something, regardless of whether it's lopsided, you'll be so used to looking at it that it will look correct. Flipping the canvas is like hitting a reset button in your head.

Try to keep the painting loose for as long as you can. Get the important shapes in first before the detail – it was a lesson I learned the hard way and now I try to plan scenes before I get carried away. Once you feel happy and you've really got a grip on your colour palette and composition and you've started to add some detail, send off a copy to the client. That way they can spot any problems early before you put too much work in. At this stage, this is one of the two feedback sessions I budget for. It's worth mentioning to a client that there is a cap. Otherwise you'll end up with an eternity of back and forth. Communication is key, but as an artist you need to be painting rather than answering streams of emails. I try to list a few ideas of what could be changed. That way you're able to probe a little and not just overwhelm them with something they've never seen before.

Once you've received their feedback and you feel confident you understand what's expected, it's time to finalise all the details. At this stage I often tweak colours and add reflected light that I might have omitted. One

thing at this stage: don't forget atmosphere! It can really make a piece to add some thin mist, dust particles or anything to show there's some depth and it's not too flat.

The final stage for me – which I often have to force myself to do – is to flatten the image (which is to collapse all the layers I previously mentioned), and play with the balance of colour of the whole piece. I'm not a fan of the auto-features of art programs. I like to do this myself. It means you can play with the moodiness and colour palettes. I also tend to copy a layer and play with the levels of colour/brightness on each so I can then flick through different versions and see which works best.

Once I'm done, it's off to the client with the final piece. This is the last chance for amendments, but because you've kept in contact, it should be fairly easy. Any changes you've made in the final stages can be rectified by going back to your earlier saved files (it's worth keeping a few). Take all critiques with grace, and always maintain a rapport with your clients. Building a regular stream of work is very tough, and it's word of mouth and testimonials that will really get you noticed. Post your new creations with links to your clients' websites and hopefully they'll respond in kind. Now it's time for a coffee… while you familiarise yourself with your next brief!

FIN.

TALES FROM TURKEY CITY

Martin McGrath

The Turkey City Lexicon *is an attempt to create accurate, descriptive, critical terms for common problems found in science fiction as an aid to writing groups.* ***Tales from Turkey City*** *is an ongoing attempt by* ***Martin McGrath*** *to illustrate some of these errors in the form of flash fiction. You can find it online (Google is your friend) and previous entries in this series can be found at* ***www.mmcgrath.co.uk***

TURKEY CITY LEXICON: "ABBESS PHONE HOME"

Takes its name from a mainstream story about a medieval cloister which was sold as SF because of the serendipitous arrival of a UFO at the end. By extension, any mainstream story with a gratuitous SF or fantasy element tacked on so it could be sold.

Alice watched Kelvin's back. She saw the tension as he hunched over the sink, gripping its sides. She watched his breathing, short, sharp and angry.

"Tell me," she prodded him again, and watched him wince.

She picked up her coffee, marvelling at the steadiness of her hand, and sipped. It was cooling and bitter and that seemed so absurdly apt that she almost laughed. The thought occurred to her that she had never really liked coffee. She had started drinking it in university, not long before she'd met Kelvin, because it had seemed more sophisticated than the tea with two sugars that she'd grown up drinking. She put the cup down with something that felt like finality and stood up, her chair screeching back across the tiled floor. Kelvin turned at the sound. His face still flushed from earlier, angrier words.

"I think you owe me at least this." Cool and bitter. "Do you love her?"

Kelvin couldn't look up, and Alice knew. She had known. But that wasn't enough. She wanted him to say it. She wanted his confession.

"Do you love – "

"I... yes... I think I love her."

He turned away again and that was it. Nine years, just like that. She supposed there would be tears later and maybe moments of regret, but right now, she just wanted this to end.

"You should go."

He hesitated.

"I think you should go now."

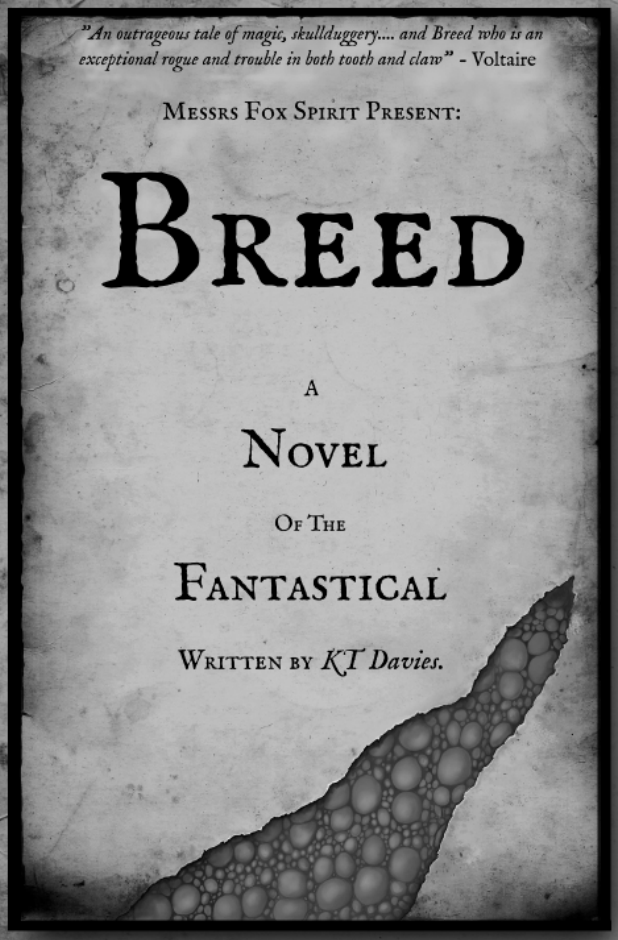
Kelvin moved past her. She listened to him go upstairs and heard him stumbling about, packing. Alice made a cup of tea.

"Alice – " He was standing in the doorway, an overstuffed bag at his feet.

She shook her head. He grabbed his coat and fumbled for his car keys. She watched him open the door and step outside.

And then the dragon ate him.

FIN.



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