

[SLIDES 1 THROUGH 5]

HENRY V!!!

10:00-10:30

All Stories Great and Small

First off some housekeeping we need to get out of the way:

As we progress, if I start to shorthand *anything*, if I'm unclear, please feel free to slow me down, or ask me at one of the breaks, or ask somebody else at one of the breaks: "Do you have a clue what he was talking about just then?" If what I'm covering is too elementary, let me know. I really don't have a feeling yet for what the shared knowledge in this room might be. As I figure it out, I will try to adjust. This is all still so new, nothing is cast in concrete, including concepts, mechanisms, or terminology.

We'll be here together from 10 to 6. I have been known to lose track of time. Please let me know if we're in danger of missing a break!

It is very important we get started again promptly after each break.

My guests are invited for specific times throughout the day. Since I'm never sure how long some sections of my talk may take, I may need to stop at an awkward spot when it is time for a guest, and pick it up later. My apologies in advance for this!

Finally, please fill out the evaluation sheets for the session!

[SLIDE 6]

Who is that odd character next to you?

Ok, I'm going to ask for a show of hands. Look around you, see who is sitting nearby who isn't raising their hand when you do.

Question: How many are Writers? Producers? Designers? Developers? Programmers? Artists? Publishers? Gamers?

Okay, check it out. You now have somebody close by you can learn from, or that you might be working with in the future. Interactive entertainment requires a collaborative effort.

Now, what are some of the games represented here today? If I dis anybody's product here today, I want to give them a chance to PK me, if they can.

Storytelling in Computer Games

Since tales of great hunts and hunters were told to awestruck listeners huddled around the protecting fire, consumers from cavefolk to moviegoers have been drawn to the power of storytelling. The story is the single thread that is woven through the entire fabric of what entertains us. The appreciation of a good story is not a gift granted to another species on this planet. It is reserved for Homo Sapiens alone.

Games are a very different animal from stories. We all know that. This is often the first observation out of the mouth of somebody who tells me we shouldn't attempt to tell more than cursory stories in games, or that we need to throw out all the old rules, and find some completely new paradigm like AI or letting the players do the work..

The problem is that people approach the wedding of story and gameplay from two distinct camps. Writers, few of them gamers, demand a measure of control, and give it up very unwillingly. Screenwriters, who seem most attracted to games, in particular. This is why so few have made a successful transition from one industry to the other.

Programmers, most of them gamers, lean toward an open-ended world that allows for total player control. That is why game companies made up of gamers don't really see the need for anything else. The writing is rarely budgeted for, and is usually given somebody in the company whose only qualification seems to be a facility for forming complete sentences.

Yet writing is an integral part of other media. The first truth is, and always has been: Entertainment. Entertainment is meant to be... FUN... Interactive Entertainment should be no different. And more: we should do everything we can to *guarantee* fun. And if writing is a recognized tool in helping to create entertainment in other media, why not in games as well?

This issue has come up again and again, particularly in online. We have the "sandbox" theory of game design. Build it, they will come and play. But playing with other human beings doesn't guarantee fun anymore than it did when we were kids on the playground.

My original intention for this talk was to include a guest who firmly believes that player-generated storytelling is all an online game really

needs. A year ago I could have found a dozen people here at this conference eager to expound on what many of us call emergent storytelling, that is storytelling generated by players.

While a guest or two will discuss it with me today, this year I couldn't find one person who was willing to suggest it was all a game might need.

We have become so media conscious of our own lives, is it any wonder we think we are capable of creating drama by simply *being*? I exist therefore I am dramatic!

It appears that it *can* happen. The social Petri dish of *Reality TV* (also known affectionately by network executives as "Writerless TV") demonstrates that. We as a species revel in the failures of our peers, as much as we celebrate their triumphs.

[SLIDE 7]

Yet *Survivor*, and *all* of its bastard children, are meticulously edited and paced to tell a story. Without the story-telling techniques *applied* to their presentation, they would be as dull as that slowly meandering line on the chart of our own lives between the spikes of pain and joy.

There is more to drama than real life. Drama only exists in real life when real life events mirror dramatic structure, and remind us of created drama we have witnessed. From *Webster's Dictionary*:

[SLIDE 8]

That fourth dictionary definition is colloquial. It has become common usage. "Wasn't that a dramatic basketball game?" really means "Wasn't that basketball game as exciting as the Disney movie about a basketball game we saw?" Even in real life drama only occurs when compared to created drama.

[SLIDE 9]

According to definition then we must start with drama, a structure in which to wrap real life. Drama begets Real Life Drama.

Drama -> Real Life Drama

But wait! Which really came first? Wasn't it life? Shouldn't the cause and effect look like the second one there?

Real Life -> Drama

No, because even in the very beginning of story-telling and drama, back around the campfire after the woolly mammoth fell, there was an added step in the equation:

Real Life + Interpreter = Drama

Drama is built on the reflection human beings bring to the incidents and conflict of real life that is then communicated to other human beings. And drama is built from the human context that we wrap the realities of life within.

Witness NBC's relentless attempt last summer to turn the true-life stories of Olympic athletes into Gap commercials to see the wheel spin once more in the wrong direction:

Life + Interpreter (Shakespeare) = Drama

Life + Interpreter (MTV Video Director) = Trivialization

It doesn't have to be that way of course. Every time *anything* is recycled, part of its original impact is lost, yet some true drama can remain. But when you add imagery without meaning to life the life is not dramatized, it is cheapened.

What most concerns those of us who work at popular dramatic storytelling these days is the drama of western civilization as defined by the Greeks, polished and honed by Moliere and Shakespeare... The leap from live performances on the spot to live TV, celluloid, kinescope, and videotape... And drama's first furtive thrusts into computer games... multimedia... interactivity...

What does the mass market audience demand from its entertainment?

[SLIDE 10]

- **Take me to a place I have never gone.**
- **Make me into someone I could never be.**
- **Let me do things I could never do.**

[SLIDE 11]

Elements of Dramatic Writing

These are by no means all the elements of dramatic writing! We don't have time for them all, but I've chosen some major ones, and will indicate how they are adaptable to game design.

Universal Themes

What is the story about? Good vs. Evil? Is that enough? You want an audience to willingly suspend their disbelief? Give them a theme they understand, and are interested in. Whether it's the universal heroic quest tracked from culture to culture by Joseph Campbell, or the Greek-tragedy of families torn apart. Give the story for your game, as any story, a reason for being told beyond the fact it would be fun. Don't give in to the mechanical repetition of cliché. Find new stories, or at least new meaning in old stories. Do RPG's really need another "There was a great conflict in the past between good and evil, now evil is coming back!" story that offers nothing more than a change of scenery, and different names for weapons and spells? In *Sly Cooper* we find a basic treasure hunt that is also a quest to retrieve family honor.

Drama

As we discussed before life is not drama. A senseless death in real life is not drama until we human beings react to it, place it in a context that touches us and others. What then is drama? William Archer says "the essence of drama" is crisis. He quotes another writer, "No obstacle, no drama." Obstacles exist to be overcome by strength, intelligence, force of will. How do we apply this to the creation of games? We create a game structure that is built on conflict, that provides obstacles (including traditional puzzles, but not limited to them), to the player.

Obstacles can arise during action, conversation with other characters, and are present everywhere in gameplay. Traps, bosses, locked doors, all are obstacles. But think of them as obstacles, not just puzzles or targets. These obstacles can be the natural next step beyond those that have dominated games up until now, replacing them with dramatic confrontations and suspense-filled predicaments that are the meat and potatoes of drama.

Conflict

Drama is not simply about conflict, but conflict certainly drives it. Conflict gives the player a need to continue. Too often games fall into the trap of emulating Golden Age mysteries. They do when they confine all the action to the unraveling of the crime instead of a mystery that unfolds and deepens as we read. In *Myst* the story is static, set in the past, and simply revealed bit by bit. In *Jak & Daxter* on the other hand we have the ongoing attempt by the Lurkers to release dark eco into the world, and the ongoing quest to help Dexter revert back to his more natural form..

The conflict of course doesn't have to include danger except in the broadest sense: the danger of the breakup of a relationship can be just as compelling as the breakup of an alliance between two planets.

Story

Story is the structure: it's almost like the clothesline upon which we hang out to dry the individual scenes and incidents. But that analogy fails to add a crucial element: forward momentum. The story is not the creator of forward momentum. It is the chart. The creator is...

Character

Story structure can spring from many sources: a situation, a relationship, an ideal, a need to educate, whatever. But it is borne on the backs of the characters that inhabit it. We can be touched by the death of an "old yaller dog" but we are most often and easily touched by the plight of our fellow human beings. Our stories must be populated by characters that compel us to watch them, or interact with them. Characters that we want to spend time with, maybe because we like them (Floyd, the Robot from *Planetfall* is a classic example), maybe because we are mesmerized by their evil as we are mesmerized by the swaying cobra (*Hanniba Lecter*).

Stereotypes. Square jawed heroes and hook-nosed villains. Gravity-defying big-breasted woman, wily thieves, scheming clerics.

Falling back on stereotypes is certainly easier than finding new characters either in life or in our imaginations. Certainly some of the appeal in RPGs is

allowing the players to assume roles more glamorous and enviable than we might play in life. But stereotypes diminish the overall gaming experience. They limit the sophistication of our stories. And as a result, limit our audience. Try to catch yourself doing it. Take the extra time and struggle to avoid stereotypes.

Emotion

Emotion lies at the core of all great literature. Drama. Of all classic films. And the best of TV. What touches us... what illuminates a truth about the human condition... is at the heart of what entertains us.

Game designers to date have shied away from emotion, or failed at delivering it when they've tried. It is absolutely essential that we attempt to get beyond what is hip and cool at the moment, and tackle some more lasting human values. Emotion is a good place to start.

In *Earth & Beyond* there is a Jenquai quest from an NPC you've previously gone on a quest for. This time you're informed that a Progen shipment of weapons needs to be intercepted. You go to the coordinates given and sure enough there is a ship there, but its captain claims it is not carrying weapons but children. Is he telling the truth? If he is then do you withdraw, or blow him out of the sky anyway? I chose not to, returned to the NPC who was furious with me, calling the children of our enemies "weapons." There are all sorts of emotional resonances evoked by the short one-off quest with echoes of our own planet's troubled politics.

Suspense

Tension. Uncertainty. Apprehension. What is going to happen next? In order for suspense to grow, we have to plant the seeds, and water on a regular basis. Suspense in games can be found in 1st Person Shooters: what's around that next comer? Sims: Is the toilet going to clog *again*? Strategy: what's my opponent up to now?

Here we have a puzzle that is synonymous with a suspense sequence in a film.

[HANDOUT: The Trunk Puzzle]

There's also the suspense of knowing there's a bomb in the room disguised as something else. The suspense in a developing relationship. The suspense of realizing you don't truly understand another's motives.

Pace

Rate of movement or progress. Speed. Shortening the length of dramatic scenes. Cutting out travel time you may have invoked earlier.

Adjusting "obstacle" difficulty. Whereas in an RPG the monsters get tougher the closer you come to the end, sometimes even there the ultimate monster is usually not as difficult if you've brought the right weapon, armor, package of spells, etc. Near the end of a game, consider rewards that come faster, puzzles not quite as difficult near the end.

Narrowing the world.

- a) Increasing linearity without appearing to do so, blocking off unused passages with an explosion.
- b) Reducing inventory as part of the third act reversal.
- c) Reducing number of tasks to be performed, number of characters to interact with, etc.
- d) Timers: Real Time (you're at your computer and the clock on the wall is ticking), Game Time (you're within the game world and a real clock there is ticking), Event-Based (you're within the game world and you have the illusion that a real clock is ticking, but it actually only advances as you do).

Consistent Style

Creation of a consistent world, consistent behavior of the characters. If all the NPC's are oppressed, show how each one copes with that oppression. Consistent language. Anachronistic language kills the suspension on disbelief. Consistent levels of difficulty. Difficulty can mount, but don't just toss a difficult puzzle suite into an arbitrary place in the game. Have a reason for where it is placed.

10:30 – 11:00

[SLIDE 12]

[SLIDE 13]

First Guest – Dan Arey

Our first guest today is from Naughty Dog. Most of the screenshots for the previous section of my talk have all been from their game *Jak & Daxter: The Precursor Legacy*. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome: Dan Arey!

Discussion Topics

1. Story in platform games? Why bother?
2. What makes it difficult to tell story in a platform game?
3. What makes it easy to tell story in a platform game?
4. What techniques can we use? (Cut Scenes, NPCs, etc.)
5. Discuss Surprise vs. Predictability in stories (Dexter doesn't get turned back for example)

[SLIDE 14]

6. What can you tell us about the sequel? What new storytelling challenges did you set for yourself?

[SHOW CLIPS]

We have a few minutes for questions from the audience....

11:00-11:15 BREAK

11:15 – 12:00

[SLIDE 15]

[GO OVER READING/VIEWING LIST]

[SLIDE 16]

Elements of Film Language

We have grown up with a consistent film language. We are bombarded by it in films and television. It is part of our modern collective unconscious. Game writers and designers ignore the rules of this film language at their own peril. Even if the market may not consciously recognize a bad translation of that language, they will subconsciously realize *something is wrong* when the rules are broken. For example...

Crossing the Axis

[SLIDE 17]

[ASK FOR A VOLUNTEER FROM THE AUDIENCE]

[DEMONSTRATE CROSSING THE AXIS]

We as audience or game players may not know the term "crossing the axis," but when it happens, we are aware that something has gone wrong. For that moment we are wrenched out of the experience the author/designer has attempted to create. We lose immersion. We lose the "willing suspension of disbelief."

Willing Suspension of Disbelief

Often erroneously shortened, leaving off that all important first word: "willing." This concept may seem to fall more properly under the heading of drama where we first find its use, but that is the drama specifically of the theatre. The drama I began with applies to all media. I've saved it for here where crossing the axis is a perfect example. It applies equally to film and most importantly to games. We try very hard to provoke our audience/player into willingly suspending her disbelief. It is important to know, or at least

sense when we're doing something that fights against that desire.

I'm going to mention here in passing another term that began in drama but is now used equally in film and games...

The Fourth Wall

This term derives from the physical layout of a stage in a theatre. The set of a play is built on three sides: upstage, stage left and stage right. Framing the stage from the audience's perspective is what we call the proscenium arch. If we were to physically place the fourth wall there, the audience couldn't see the play and would demand their money back. But the actors and director strive to stage the place as if that fourth wall existed. Except in rare moments of soliloquy where an actor speaks directly to the audience, the illusion of the fourth wall is preserved, and we shatter that illusion at the risk of destroying the player's immersion in our world.

[SLIDE 18]

Why? Because it is an aid to an audience willing to suspend its disbelief. So we translate that into film or a game more broadly as an attempt to preserve the "reality" of the world where we set our story. When we get to Game Language this will come up again.

Dialogue

[SLIDE 19]

The next element of Film Language I'd like to discuss is dialogue. Dialogue in games is much more similar to film than it is to plays or books. Or it should be. Games share with film the ability to pitch the action at a very fast pace. Leaner dialogue, delivered in spurts punctuating the action, is far more effective in not interrupting the action than long-winded passages.

What can we do with dialogue? The trick is to get beyond "how people talk," what we call colloquial speech. We need write characters in different voices with their own rhythms and reflections. Take colloquial speech and add an edge to it. Twist it. David Mametize it.

[SLIDE 20]

[EXPLAIN WHO MAMET IS]

Geography

A man walks out the front door of his house. He exits past camera. We cut to a reverse to see him get into his car. Those two shots may actually have been filmed thousands of miles apart. The front door may have been indoors. We create consistent geography within the camera that works for the story. It doesn't matter how it was really put together. It's an illusion. In an game, particularly a 3D game world, we create the illusion of a continuous, contiguous geography. We try wherever possible to disguise the fact that we need to load new graphics, or at least shorten the time it takes.

[SLIDE 21]

Earth & Beyond takes place in a huge universe. Literally! To help soften the blow to our "willing suspension of disbelief" warp gates are used to jump from system to system. This works because we've seen enough spaceships in movies do the same thing. Entering a starbase triggers an animation of our ship docking. The two star systems we cross between may actually be on different computers. But the illusion of continuous, contiguous geography is... somewhat... maintained.

Cutting

In adventure games, RPG's, strategy and sims, film cutting is generally confined to dramatic scenes; without interactivity. We call these strangely enough: cut scenes. They are used as the introduction, the final action, connective tissue between missions and levels, and so on. Both *Jak & Daxter* and *Sly Cooper* use them in this way. *Earth & Beyond*, as I mentioned, uses cut scenes to stitch together zones. Where actual story is being told a cut scene is a chance for a screenwriter or director or film editor to settle into comfortable shoes for a short while before venturing back barefoot again on to the hot coals of interactivity.

As I believe in keeping game dialogue to a minimum to move the action along, I also try to keep cut scenes to a minimum. We are an active medium. Cut scenes take the player's hand off the mouse, or prompt continual button-pressing in players trying to skip them. I made this

mistake at the end of *Wild Wild West: The Steel Assassin*, an action adventure hybrid where I got so enamored with the drama of my final act and it was swell, I crammed it in at the expense of the gameplay.

Cut scenes can be very helpful in moving the plot forward, illuminating character, providing a cool reward. Just remember: To a gamer, time spent with an inactive mouse, is time wasted.

POV

3D rendered worlds allow us to stuff many camera angles as we want into a game. Sometimes the game cuts on its own, sometimes it allows the player to choose angles. Massively Multiplayer games use cuts. Most platform games these days allow us to move the camera. There is a wonderful freedom in this, and it is very helpful in allowing us to get the best angle on the action, helpful for getting the best view of an obstacle we need to overcome for example. But if its use is indiscriminate, or inconsistent (one moment the player has control, but in a similar moment the game grabs that control away) the effect can be dizzying. Right now I'm of two minds. It makes most sense in action games, but there's always the danger of missing something crucial. We cannot design a plot point into a scene or area where the player may unwittingly miss it.

Shifting between POV's (as opposed to simply camera angles) is very tricky. How many third-person games have you seen where NPCs will suddenly speak directly to the camera. It works better when we're in first person, but having both first and third person conversations in the same experience, increases POV disorientation.

An exception to this involves a deliberate breaking of the fourth wall. This can be seen in many console games where a character, even the player-controlled character will suddenly look at the player and comment on the action. This fits with the looser consistency allowed by the style and audience for these games.

Another exception where breaking out of the predominant POV can work is again in cut scenes. It is used for variety, as in intercutting, or to create suspense, and is perfectly valid. Alfred Hitchcock was a master of POV. Remember the scene in *The Birds* when Tippi Hedron is sitting outside the school...?

[DESCRIBE]

[SLIDE 22]

12:00 – 12:30

[SLIDE 23] [SLIDE 24] [SLIDE 25]

[PLAY CD 1]

Second Guest – Chris Klug

[SLIDE 26]

Our second guest today is from Westwood Studios, formerly of Las Vegas, Nevada. Most of the screenshots for the Film Language section of my talk have all been from their game *Earth & Beyond*. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome: Chris Klug!

Discussion Topics

1. Story in massively multiplayer? Why bother?
2. How does *Earth & Beyond* deliver story (backstory and ongoing – V-Rix plot – push vs. pull)?
3. Elements in the world we use to tell story ? (Cut Scenes, NPCs, Quests etc.)
4. What is episodic storytelling, and what are its advantages?
5. A dynamic game world. How does *Earth & Beyond* react to player actions (small scale like faction changes and larger scale)
6. Working with the rest of the team (designers, artists, programmers, producers etc.) to get them to help you get the story into the game.
7. What can you tell us about the future?

[PLAY CD 2]

We have a few minutes for questions from the audience....

12:30 – 2:00 LUNCH

2:00-3:30

[SLIDE 27]

Elements of Game Language

This is our longest stretch without a break. As we start to digest and come down off our sugar highs it'll be easy to drift (for me too). But try to stay with me! This section has probably the most material per square inch packed into it.

[SLIDE 28]

Game Mechanics

[SLIDE 29]

The entertainment value of an interactive product is directly related to the gameplay, the underlying reason for the player to interact with the world, and the simplicity with which we make it possible to do so. While not a direct concern for writers, our first game mechanic does influence how we are able to tell our stories. This is the....

Interface

Three words: Simple, transparent, intuitive.

Real Time Strategy games in particular can fall victim to complex interfaces and micromanagement that can distance us from the game world.. If an interface offers too many choices, you'll find yourself playing it instead of the game.

In most console games where the emphasis is on action and reflexes simplicity is a necessity. Menu choices are limited because the player must learn which button evokes which action. The key here is to tie similar types of actions to the same button. And that same button remains consistent not only throughout a game, but across most of the games on any given system. The X button on a PS2 functions almost identically in both *Jak & Daxter* and in *Sly Cooper* for example.

Massively Multiplayer games on the other hand often have a vaster array of

gameplay elements: combat, crafting, chat with other players and NPCs, guild functions and so on. *Asheron's Call* and *Dark Age of Camelot* each have fairly simple interfaces as far as combat is concerned for example. In general *DAOC's* interface remains simple throughout, while *Earth & Beyond*, a game with admittedly a lot more on its mind story-wise than *DAOC*, can be a bit "click-heavy." Its chat interface for example is not as elegant as *DAOC*.

The simpler the interface the cleverer we have to be to keep the storytelling aspects of the game interesting. We should try to avoid giving players the single option of simply clicking the action button to move to the next paragraph of text. We can break it up with other actions in the game world.

Let's say the gameplay requires a player to retrieve the page of a book from a safe. We can begin our storytelling in the mission setup, continue it a guard's overheard phone call, continue it with a few words printed on the card taped to the bottom of a drawer where the combination is printed, continue it on a secondary document within the safe, and on the page of the book itself. If we intersperse these 5 steps with moments of action, we have layered the story throughout the level, and not simply stuffed it into the mission statement at the beginning and wrapup text at the end.

Just as in screenwriting where we find the phrase "exposition in action," we can do the same in a game.

So keep the mechanics simple, You'll avoid the need for an elaborate interface, and probably a game manual as well. Intelligent cursors and easily-found objects that can be manipulated do not necessarily lead to a too-easy game. Making the player go on a pixel hunt to discover your interactivity is only a sign of sloppy design, not another level of gameplay. It's frustrating. Not fun. But don't let the simplicity trap you into boring repetitive story delivery.

Design Issues

Anything that helps the player willingly suspend disbelief, and move beyond the fourth wall into the world of the game is a good thing. What tricks can we use to help the player do that?

a) Design a coherent world that observes strict laws. This is another aspect of the consistency I mentioned earlier. Build the world of your game

anyway you like, but understand if every choice you make you are creating rules that govern that world. If the game pretends to be on earth in the first years of the 21st century, don't introduce 3D TV. We don't have it yet. If you want to stick it in a lab, or a visiting flying saucer fine, just not in every home.

Keep the obstacles organic to the story, and solutions real-world and intuitive. Keep them *in context*. Even the smallest incidental quest can actually tie in to a larger story. I use the *Rumpole of the Bailey* model. As well as treating us to some of the best writing ever in a TV series, John Mortimer gave us an elegant handling of traditional A and B stories. All the B stories supported the A stories, at least thematically. A big case Rumpole was working on would be mirrored in a domestic squabble between him and his wife Hilda, the woman Rumpole calls She Who Must Be Obeyed. That's a reference by the way to the often-filmed novel by H. Rider Haggard called *She*.

There has to be a reason why there's suddenly a loaded gun on the desk that wasn't there before, and the reason can't be that you couldn't let the player have it before the confrontation with the robber because she might have shot the robber with it, but now you need her to be able to shoot somebody else.

If you use an inventory *be very careful*: allow for alternative solutions to puzzles, or find another reason why a logical object can't be used. Don't just refuse to let the player use the shoe on the nail simply because you want him to use the hammer you made it so hard for him to get.

b) Teach the Player the rules. Give him a hint system, but disguise it if you can. *DAOC* uses easily identifiable NPCs to lead players to quests. On the other hand *Everquest's* hints are often so hidden they're as hard to find as the quest requirements they are supposed to explain.

[SLIDE 30]

c) Decide the relationship between the player and the character she manipulates in the game. Are you the character? Or is the character you? Big difference. In most solo games you "play" the character. You drive that character through the game, but he has his own personality, distinct from yours. One of the joys AND CURSES of massively-multiplayer games is that what the player-character may look like, whatever the history of the universe he is a part of may be, the character is a direct extension of

the person playing it. Creators may have all dreamed of true roleplaying on a massive scale once upon a time. We have been rudely (sometimes literally) awakened. The way games currently running now are built around levels and loot does not encourage roleplaying.

The answer to those questions also answers: To voice or not to voice the player's choices in a conversation? Voice the inner thoughts? "I probably shouldn't open that door right now..." You can choose to give plentiful detail to the player character, or keep things sketchy. Plentiful detail will help the story and character arc. Few details allow the player to fill in some of the blanks, to be more comfortable in the character's shoes.

1st Person presents some unique problems for the dramatist, especially working in interactive. Normal character development isn't really possible. We must work with things like *self-awareness*. What might the player discover himself through the course of his adventures? Another is *training*. Here the player learns skills that will help her move through the game. Another is *detection*. What the player can learn about the world and the story in which he finds himself. We can play with *choices* to illuminate character. By presenting the player-character with moral, ethical, pragmatic, philosophical choices, and altering the dynamic game world to respond to those choices, we begin to reveal not only the character of the character, but the character of the player herself.

d) Maintain the illusion of a real world. If you have a map in the game, consider making it a map in the game world. Limit the use of text onscreen, or make it organic. This may mean limiting the size of objects. If an object is too small, a text box ala Windows might seem appropriate, but we don't see text boxes floating around this room when our eyes fix on an object. A literal world is a more easily entered world than one that forces the player to accept "game conventions."

Some game conventions may be necessary. The idea of inventory for example. Unless the game is a comedy, avoid placing cement trucks or live fish in your inventory. Start out with the idea of limiting the inventory to what you could comfortably carry either in the traditional backpack, or your hands, or what you could wear. RPGs and action games seem to be much better at matching the real world than adventure games.

e) Avoid dead ends and wandering. There's nothing more destructive to pace,

suspense, story movement and character than leaving the player to wander aimlessly across the landscape of the game. This means giving the player goals to reach, and missions to accomplish, all structured within the larger story. Find a mechanism to *remind the* player what she should be doing, but again keep it as an organic piece of the game world.

[SLIDE 31]

Interactivity

We need to provide enough *interesting* and fun things to do.

Simply clicking to move to the next video clip to see whether you die or survive gets old very quickly. Unimaginative level design that requires players to fight past every obstacle in exactly the same way gets old.

Don't commit the cardinal sin of stuffing the game with things to do simply for the sake of "adding gameplay." All it will do is point out the thinness of the underlying game structure, the precise thing you may be trying to disguise. Gamers and critics alike will be merciless. And they should be. Interactivity shouldn't be superfluous to the story or characters. It shouldn't tear down the fourth wall, it should help preserve it. Build that coherent world and stick to its rules. Like John Mortimer in *Rumpole of the Bailey* relate everything you add to the world, its story or its characters.

Both *Jak & Daxter* and *Sly Cooper* are terrific in how they disguise the limits of their game mechanics. They are operating in a genre that has been around for a long time. The fishing sub-game in *Jak & Daxter* is the same basic game mechanic as *Space Invaders*, but it is integrated into the world

Obstacles/Puzzles

Puzzles and other obstacles, like sub-games should relate mechanically and thematically to the story and the universe of the game. They are opportunities to interact with NPCs, illuminate character (of both NPCs and players!).

Skills

Skills need to have some real value in the world. I've read that skills were added late to *Everquest*. It shows. Throughout the 3 years since it went live, EQ has been upgrading its skill system. Looked at another way, skills can have even more relevance than something productive to do. They can be tied to character, both the player's and NPCs. In *The Gryphon Tapestry*, NPCs taught skills.

Quests

Quests are another under-utilized type of activity. All RPGs have them. Most console treasure hunt games have them. Big quests, little quests. But rarely are the quests more than simple Fed-Ex. Go get me a minotaur horn, bring it back, and I'll reward you. Collect 80 Precursor Orbs and I'll give you a Power Cell. Now, there's nothing intrinsically wrong with Fed-Ex quests. But what a missed opportunity for storytellers if they aren't used to tell story and reveal character.

I want to create NPCs that are characters with their own needs (Not just personalities!), (Characters are more than accents and attitudes!), and stories that are meaningful. So simultaneous with developing quests I try to determine what players can do to impact the lives of the NPCs and how the quests help develop my story.

I'm indebted to Chris Foster, designer at Turbine, for the ongoing discussions that forced me to focus my thoughts on quests.

Quests can come in all sorts of interesting shapes and forms. Some examples from life:

[SLIDE 32]

Run with the bulls in Pamplona. Play bingo for cash. Return home from the Trojan Wars. Win the hand of a fair maiden. Help Jews escape Hitler. Prove that chivalry isn't dead (*Don Quixote's* quest). Agree to appear on Jerry Springer's TV show. Stay awake through all eight hours of this tutorial.

1. Each has a reward for overcoming one or more challenges. None are simply Fed-Ex.

2. Knowledge can be more important than items in a quest. It frees you to explore story, ethics, universal themes, etc. Tracking that knowledge is key.

3. Replayability must be addressed in multiplayer, although replayability can be seen in some quests more obviously than in others. Two issues: Allowing one player to do it over and over again; or only playing it once, but not ruining the experience for the thousands (hopefully) who will follow him.

The simplest solution (beyond ignoring the problem) is of course a matrix. *DAOC's* kill tasks for example.

You set up your matrix like this:

Go kill the x (50 possibilities for replay value), and recover my lost y (50 more possibilities for replay value). Come back. You can z (marry one of my 50 daughters, choose my best stallion, pick out a nice diamond, etc., 50 > in all). Now... X isn't home/is already dead/is nicer than the quest giver/has a quest of its own/46 more. Y has been broken/lost again/put to use in a machine even more valuable/47 more. Z loves another/is ugly as sin/has never been ridden successfully (We -may- have switched to the stallion here)/was replaced years ago with paste. On and on and on.

More sophisticated is modularity, or what you might call object-oriented questing and storytelling. More on this soon.

[SLIDE 33]

To populate our game or world with quests, use ALL kinds:

1. First level quests: out-and-out FedEx for everyone. Life is full of them, no problem. But don't forget character and story (or at least consistent context). Infinitely replayable. The matrix I just provided is geared to this lowest level of quests.

2. Second level quests: Variable. Quests that are not infinitely replayable, but with enough variability they might as well be. Again for everyone, maybe limited by player-character XP. Much more story/character driven.

3. Third level quests: Restricted. Replayable only by a certain segment of the player base: only archers need apply, baking skill required, etc. In terms of character/story can be a step back to first or second level. Again, in reach of many of us in the real world.

4. Fourth level quests: Limited World Affects. Replayable until some world change (large or small) is achieved. Could be only for a single player, or a small group of players. Could be a "flip-flop" quest. One questor completes the quest setting State A to State B. Another questor completes the quest and State B is reset to State A.

5. Fifth level quests: Event Quests. Quests that alter the world, not just for a single player, or small group, but everyone. Not usually replayable unless the state achieved can be added to. In *Disney's Virtual Kingdom* I created quests where players received a brick with their character name on it as a reward. That brick could be used to rebuild a castle, or build a bridge to a new island (section of the game.)

6. Six level quests: Neverending Quests. The journey is more important. The Holy Grail is never found, but the experience is fulfilling nonetheless. Most massively-multiplayer games have never-ending quests because to complete the quest would essentially end the game. Yet games like *Earth & Beyond* and *Asheron's Call*, because they provide ongoing story, can ride on neverending quests the way soap opera's ride on neverending stories, theoretically for decades.

[SLIDE 34]

Puzzles, learning skills, quests... Killing stuff, forming clans or guilds, politics, achieving wealth or fame... any of these can form the foundation that we can build story upon.

Rewards

Rewards are extremely important as well. They add to the "fun" factor of the experience. These rewards can be eye candy, a cool dramatic scene, a plot or character twist that launches us into the next act... Action games are full of such rewards, if again limited to the visceral: cool explosions and deaths.

They give the player the satisfaction of victory that compels him to play more. Just as we sprinkle reminders to players throughout the game about what they need to accomplish, we sprinkle rewards to pat them on their backs and push them back into the game with new energy. Accomplishments are marked in *Jak & Daxter* with a shuffled selection of animated celebrations

Dying

The threat of death is often used to create tension in drama. However in many games the death of the player/character exists mainly as a penalty, or a break in the action.

If a player character unknowingly opens a booby-trapped closet door, and it explodes in his face, killing him, we have substituted shock for suspense: a classic dramatic structure blunder. If we know the door is booby-trapped, but we have to get in there anyway, we now have an added, continuing element to the scene: suspense.

If you're going to kill a player, warn them it could happen. Be wary of cool deaths for their own sake. We all have written witty death scenes. But they can snap the player right out of the drama, for the sake of a brief moment of "Whoa!" or a joke. Frag NPC's with impunity, but treat the death of the player-character with some delicacy please. In an ongoing game killing off the player character is very dangerous. You're playing with the investment the player has in your world.

In *Earth & Beyond* player characters don't really die. Their ships become disabled, requiring a jumpstart by other player classes able to perform the function, or if none are near, a "tow" to the last starbase were the player registered (called binding in *DAOC* and *Everquest*).

There are no easy answers. If you've followed the saga of the *Middle Earth* MMO at all, you know that this was a major source of conflict between the original design team and the company over "permadeath."

Another problem with how death is often used in a game, is the "learning by dying" syndrome. You see this in approaches to puzzles. Cut the blue wire or the red wire? Cut the right one, you live. Cut the wrong one, you die. You restore, and now know which one is the correct wire to cut. What has happened to the fourth wall? What has happened to the willing suspension of

disbelief? Where is the tension and suspense?

For many platform games this is standard practice. When Jak or Sly runs out of health, he dies. The player may or may not learn something to add him because of that death, but it requires resetting the player to the beginning of the level, or a saved game point within the level.

This is a standard game mechanic to up the difficulty of the game. But it requires players to slog through the same level over and over again.

[Show of hands]

How many find that this adds to the challenge of the game?

How many find that this adds to the fun of the game?

How many find this frustrating?

I find it frustrating. I was raised on adventure games. This is the way it used to be in adventures. But very soon they were signaling a dangerous choice point, and allowing you to save right there. It is my own personal prejudice that action games have not done all they could to find their own new paradigm.

Non-linearity

Non-linearity, or at least the illusion of it, is essential in multiplayer, and helpful in solo games as well. It gives the player the feeling that she is moving through a dynamic world that reacts and changes as she interacts with it. The player should feel she can go in any number of logical directions and have an equally fulfilling gaming experience. There is no true Golden Path. Golden Paths are the trails we lead our dogs along by the leash. Players do not like to be leashed.

Whatever the genre, once you set up the basic premise in the introduction, you can open the game world wide. If you must have paths at all, what you want is any number of *equal* paths. The challenge is creating what I call modular scenes so that *no matter what the order of their presentation*, tension and suspense will increase. Interesting word: modular. There is a structure suggested in it. And we will explore that structure shortly.

There will always be eddies and backwaters in any game structure, but these should be readily apparent. If the Player wants to digress, let them. In the bloated middle section of a semi-linear game, this won't matter. I wouldn't allow it later in the structure of any game though. It can interfere with pace.

[SLIDE 35]

NPCs

Ok, what can NPC characters do to you?

[SLIDE 36]

They will try to kill you.

They will talk to you.

They will trade and and buy and sell with you.

They will adventure with you, and attack or perform other simple operations.

They will marry you and raise a family with you.

In an MMO it's basically the first three. In a solo RPG the fourth attempts to duplicate the multiplayer experience. *Asheron's Call's* designers passionately wanted the focus to be on PC to PC interaction. That is why, I'm told, their NPCs are such stick figures, personality-wise.

Number 5? Hmmm...

Respecting NPCs

Last winter I solicited suggestions from game designers about the many ways NPCs can be used in games. They are a bountiful, and often overlooked, resource for those of us looking to create interesting and emotionally satisfying game stories. I keep my original list simple

and obvious:

1. Merchant
2. Expositor
3. Quest Giver
4. Quest Participant
5. Trainer

What are some others you can think of?

[HANDOUT: NPC RELATIONSHIP CHART]

For *The Gryphon Tapestry* we created a matrix which tracked the relationships players had with NPCs. It was important that players knew where they stood with NPCs, because NPCs taught most of the skills in the game. Get on the bad side of one you needed to learn a skill from, and you might have to search far afield to find another teacher, or work at getting back in that NPC's good graces. Of course, being friends with one NPC might mean another wouldn't think very highly of you. It was a social tightrope players seemed to like trying to walk.

[SLIDE 37]

Conversations

Interface

One approach to conversations with NPCs is built upon the fact that people play games for some of the same reasons they watch passive escapist entertainment: to go places they've never been; do things they wouldn't think of doing in real life; to be people they might only dream of being: heroes, goddesses, villains... Remember?

Just as we can put them into an exciting situation beyond their everyday experience, we can put them into a conversation where they can hold their own with Sherlock Holmes, Albert Einstein or Dennis Miller. There is entertainment value in the Player seeing a well-written line of dialogue, and selecting it to see how the character they're speaking to will react.

Therefore it can be acceptable to stretch the fourth wall to allow actual

lines of dialogue to appear onscreen. The Player clicks on them, then hears the player/character say them, and watches the NPC's response. This works best IF the player is the player-character. If the player-character is the player as in most MMOs, the only case for menu-driven dialogue is a game like Disney's *Toontown* where players, due to their age, are protected by being able to only choose from menus unless certain strict conditions are met. Anyone playing the current iteration of *Toontown*? How is chat handled?

The case for dialogue is the case for character development. How the player thinks of herself. Who the player wants to be. How the player wants others to see her.

Conversation can be handled in different ways in a game depending upon context. How does conversation flow? Not just in one way. We need to create the illusion of natural conversation, but we can be flexible.

For example, it might be most convenient to ask a shopkeeper about the wares he has for sale. You can throw in a couple of comments about the weather, but if the scene's primary purpose is the buying and selling of goods, a simple topic menu, whether portrayed onscreen as dialogue, or just a list, could work fine.

If it's a chance encounter with a character who might impart any one of a group of useful items of information, and you know you can cover the others someplace else, you can Race give the gamer a single path through what will probably be a short and sweet conversation.

But the conversations we have in our life are not always the simple question and answer approach to gathering information. There are a lot more subtle paths the conversation can take.

If you're involved in the opening stages of a relationship with another character, and there are a number of conversation choices you might pursue, the structure becomes more weblike.

Other tools are universal variables and conditions which we will cover in more detail in the next section.

These also directly flow into the attitude the NPC will have toward the player. If you are tracking relationships, an NPC who knows you've lied to them, should be much more difficult to convince the next time around.

Entrance and Exit Points

In real life conversations don't necessarily begin at the beginning, progress through to the end, then stop. We come in on the middle of them, pick them, up later, decide we want to talk about something other than what the person we're talking to does, etc. To replicate these possibilities in game conversation we identify natural entrance and exit points, paying close attention to the passage of time, as the player-character experiences it in the game. Again, compromises must be considered particularly concerning the art necessary to cover more than a few possibilities, but we strive to address at least three variations:

- If the Player concludes the conversation, then immediately reopens it without doing anything else.
- If the Player remains in the area, but does other things, or briefly leaves the area and returns.
- If the Player is gone for some time before returning.

The Player-Character can handle these. Or the NPC. It doesn't matter.

Playback

What did that guy say to me back at the hamburger stand? Repeat the whole scene verbatim? I'd rather use a "game world" solution like a tape recorder or notebook.. This is much preferable to simple returning and repeating a conversation, as if it hasn't occurred. It helps maintain the necessary Real World Illusion. In one of the early games I worked on, *Once Upon a Forest*, important clues are noted in a journal one of the characters keeps. In another, *Dark Side of the Moon*, this is handled by the V-Clips in the VDA.

Naturalism

This doesn't mean the NPCs take their clothes off, but it certainly exposes the shallowness of the character-interaction model, if designers ignore opportunities to create the illusion that there is some sort of naturalistic exchange going on with NPCs. In *Half-Life* for example, numerous characters not only look exactly like, but also talk alike and mouth identical phrases. I played the game to the end, hoping for some major revelation about cloning. I was disappointed.

Return Visits

Many games succumb to what some designers consider a necessary evil: the repetition of repeat visits. Avoid a single generic line an NPC can say in response to a return visit. In most we get simple repetition. In some there is a little variety built into a few characters, but only of canned speeches. A few basic variations wouldn't add all that much disc space, or art production.

Another trick is to choose a generic series of remarks hopefully related to the character or situation, but that don't require specific game-affecting responses. Then choose a generic series of responses to the *type* of remarks chosen. You can then mix and match these in any number of ways, creating the illusion of continuing small talk. We successfully applied this through up to 125 different combinations in *The Riddle of Master Lu*. Just be sure to shuffle the stacks of remarks and responses. Don't randomize them. Shuffling guarantees that you'll hear *all* of the possible combinations before there will be no duplicates. A shuffle will guarantee that while you'll begin to hear repetitions, they won't be in the same order.

3:30 – 4:00

[START "EVERYDAY PEOPLE"]

[SLIDE 38] [SLIDE 39] [SLIDE 40] [SLIDE 41]

[STOP MEDIA PLAYER]

[PLAY CD]

Third Guest – Nate Fox

[SLIDE 42]

Our third guest today is from Sucker Punch. Most of the screenshots for the Game Language section of my talk have all been from their game *Sly Cooper & the Thievius Raccoonus*. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome: Nate Fox!

Discussion Topics

1. Story in platform games? Why bother?
2. What makes it difficult to tell story in a platform game?
3. What makes it easy to tell story in a platform game?
4. What techniques can we use? (Cut Scenes, NPCs, etc.)
5. How do characterization & narrative focus affect in-game action sequences?
6. Writing a cartoon game that appeals to both younger and older audiences.
7. Working with professional writers.
6. What can you tell us about the future? What new storytelling challenges have you set for yourself?

[PLAY CD 2]

We have a few minutes for questions from the audience....

4:00 - 4:15 BREAK

4:15 – 5:00

[SLIDE 43]

Online Multiplayer

For the most part everything we've talked about today has been applicable in one form or another to either solo or multiplayer games that want to tell story. We are now going to turn our attention to some of the challenges peculiar to telling story in what we call massively-multiplayer online or MMOs. These do not necessarily need to be MMORPGs (massively-multiplayer online role-playing games), although most fall into that somewhat misnamed category. And the place we need to start is...

[SLIDE 44]

The Sandbox Theory

If you build it, they will play; just keep them from REALLY killing each other. We can look at the figures for *Ultima Online*, *DAOC* and *Everquest*, and rejoice in the number of people out there playing. We can look at the numbers of *Asheron's Call*, and begin to wonder if yet again we are already beginning to cannibalize a market that is far from mass. *World War II Online*? *Anarchy Online*? *Motor City Online*? Remember *Majestic*, that wrong-headed internet push technology experiment from 2 or 3 years ago? Hmmmm... Out of all of these only *Majestic*, *Asheron's Call* and *Earth & Beyond* have attempted to do an ongoing story, and we must admit that none of these has been a runaway success. I haven't played *Asheron's Call 2* but what do they mean when they say the world "dynamically evolves around you..."? Is there story?

[SLIDE 45]

Dusting Off My Crystal Ball

The year *Majestic* was all the buzz at GDC I predicted it wouldn't work, although my reasons were only half correct. I hated the push aspect of it: telephone calls, faxes, etc. Yes, you could turn them off, but that was all that made it unique. It didn't occur to me that they might have no idea about

how to produce enough content to feed their audience.

Last year when everyone was talking about emergent storytelling as all that was needed, and forecasting astronomical sales numbers for *Sims Online*, I predicted that 1) relying solely on emergent storytelling, and 2) the way success was measured (not sure if it still is) by peer popularity would severely hamper the product's success. I've heard that "lack of content" is another factor. "Content" is a word you hear a lot in online. It's used mostly by people who are either frightened or ignorant about story, seeing it as simply another type of content like a new type of monster to kill. Someone working on *Sims Online* has stated that a more important reason for its troubles is that the customer base, built from the solo products and not online, was not prepared for a monthly fee, and rebelled. We'll see.

All of this banging of my own drum is a prelude to my prediction for this year's online naked emperor. I won't be mentioning it again. It's called simply *There*. From *There's* website a quote: "*There* is the first online getaway that gives you the freedom to play and talk naturally while having fun and making friends." Oh? I do that now in MMOs, but okay. The key to *There's* projected financial success, not exactly clear on their website, is product placement... as if participants will be pleased to be able to hangout wearing virtual Nike's and sipping virtual cokes. There are some "games" (that's in quotes), but it is basically a chatroom with billboards. There is no there *There*. Like *Sims Online*, building the sandbox may not be enough, particularly if you forget the sand.

Can you tell I'm annoyed? A lot of money gets spent rigorously avoiding the obvious: story engages humans. We have a civilization that is based on story. The theological messages of every religion are conveyed through... stories. We have a culture based on drama. Simply because we have a new machine in our homes, simply because story has rarely been done with any skill on that machine, particularly in online, is no reason to assume it can't be done any more than it was correct to assume, as many did at the time, that story would not work very well in solo games, or that the printing press's sole utility would be to produce Gutenberg bibles.

Ok, putting the crystal ball away... and the soapbox, although I may keep that handy...

[SLIDE 46]

Let's briefly look at what current MMOs use to replace story. Here's where that other word crops up again: content.

More zones, more mobs, more items, particle effects on weapons, new quests even! Do the quests relate to the backstory? Sometimes. Ongoing story? Except in those games I've sited, there is none. Although we'll be hearing from *Shadowbane* shortly. The backstory associated with DAOC's recent expansion pack, *Shrouded Isles*, actually contradicts some of the backstory already in the game. Did the developers fix that? No. The new epic quest for a Valewalker, a new player-character that is sentient tree, is the same one for druids, bards and wardens. For all the new "content" the expansion pack added, the supposed "story" in the world is treated with contempt.

A problem all the large MMOs share is the high-level game. There is no endgame (hopefully), so what can they do to retain the players who have done it all? *DAOC* for many months proclaimed the answer was RvR combat, capture the flag on a large virtual scale. Think of Tribes, only you can't play capture the flag until you've spent x number of hours leveling your character.

They've now lowered the opportunity for acceptable RvR to level 15 with the addition of a 4th battleground where players of equal levels can be evenly matched. The battlegrounds actually work better because players still have to level, so they can be balanced with PvE. For the top level, 50, all they can do is add more zones, more mobs, different skins, different item drops, etc. Is it any wonder *DAOC* gets most of its player base from other MMOs.

How many more such games can a finite market like this support? Subscriber numbers are carefully guarded or tweaked. What does it mean to have xxx subscribers? The answer varies. But there are several studies now available that track subscribers and retention rates, and they indicate quite clearly that the current crop of MMOs are like a snake eating its own tail. Not very appetizing and the food source is quite limited.

[SLIDE 47]

The Human Factor

The biggest challenge facing the designers of MMORPGs is that before we only had one human being to worry about. Now we have thousands.

A challenge? Yes. But we CAN have it both ways. Tell OUR story. And let them play THEIR game. You might guess from what I've said that I'm ant-emergent storytelling. I'm not. I'm anti-the suggestion that it's the Holy Grail of online multiplayer. You're going to have player-generated content whether you like it or not. How you react to it is the key. We'll be getting into this in a short while with our last guest, Damion Schubert. Before when I earlier mentioned in passing some of what follows, it was theory. Much of it is now being successfully put into practice. Let's begin by examining interactive story structures.

[SLIDE 48]

Interactive Story Structures

[SLIDE 49]

Traditional (Linear)

The traditional story structure is time-tested. It is successful in a variety of media, familiar, and guarantees the author control over the progress of the story. Traditional stories enjoy the added benefit that lots of people can write them.

[SLIDE 50]

Branching (Linear-Thinking)

Branching story is also time-tested. It has been somewhat successful, but not recently. As interactive movies have deservedly fallen out of favor, branching has fallen with them. It's also familiar. Many people still think it is the only way to tell interactive stories. Author control is again guaranteed. It is after all just a collection of linear stories with different start points, all headed in the same direction from beginning to end.

[SLIDE 51]

Web (Simple Non-Linear)

The web structure is fairly new to most people. By connecting up scenes in more than one direction, it begins to break the linear pattern. It has been somewhat successful in boxed games. It's familiar, basically because people mistake it for branching. There is less author control, and it is more difficult to write than either of its two predecessors.

[SLIDE 52]

Modular (Non-Linear)

Modular story structure is new. Some people don't even recognize it *as* story structure at all. Like film direction that concentrates on what is in front of the camera, rather than the camera itself, it can go unnoticed when it works, and be a disaster when it doesn't. It is unfamiliar. There are no more little arrows connecting the elements of the story. There is *apparently* no author control, and it can be extremely difficult to write, especially for someone who has already successfully constructed linear stories.

During a discussion in an internet newsgroup a couple years ago somebody said that a free-form, modular approach to storytelling *might* generate coherent story, but asked how could it ever approach great art or literature? In answer I presented *Don Quixote de la Mancha*. Written in 1605, it is considered not only the first true novel in western culture, but a work of some literary and artistic achievement. Janet Murray mentions the book in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, but in my opinion misses its structural implications, and concentrates instead on the earlier, less sophisticated, bardic forms, such as those utilized by Homer in *The Odyssey* and *The Illiad*.

What is the best-remembered moment of the novel? Tilting at windmills. The phrase entered our language and has remained for four centuries. *When* does it occur in the novel? And what can that mean? The picaresque novel can be thought of as modular storytelling, with only one route mapped through the modules.

Charles Dickens polishing episodic structure to gleaming art. His long novels, written as serials, have a much more defined linear structure, yet there are modules in any of them that could be experienced in different order. We can argue that the Victorian novel is a far more sophisticated form than the picaresque. But remember that Cervantes was there at the birth of the novel. Is it any wonder that his structure speaks most easily

to us here at the birth of interactive storytelling?

But let's consider Dickens for a moment. Take Scrooge's ghostly visitors? Each episode is distinct. A complete story with its own conclusion and moral. Dickens wrote episodically a long time before TV. With a bit of shifting around, couldn't those visitations transport us to the same satisfying conclusion in another order? Or as a game in ANY order???

Let's take a more complex Dickens novel, my favorite actually: *Bleak House*. Dicken's intent was the unmasking and ridiculing of a venerable institution of English property law called... chancery.

Bleak House was based on a court case in Chancery Court involving the estate of a man who died intestate in 1798. This case was still not resolved by 1915 and had by then cost over £250,000. The Chancery Court's reputation was so bad, there was even a boxing hold called "Getting in Chancery", which involved your opponent locking your head under his arm and pounding it repeatedly with his other fist.

To illustrate the horrors of chancery, Dickens introduces us to a bucket-full of characters, all affected by its insane intricacies. Each story is carefully threaded through the novel. It would appear impossible on the face of it to start rearranging things. But this novel too was written as a serial. And Dickens did NOT have every twist and turn plotted in advance. And it is possible to pluck an entire thread from one place in the book and plo p in down whole in another. Here the story *threads* are the modules, just like in a game story today. But inside of existing as discreet chunks, they are woven through the entire structure. Yet with the tracking of a remarkably few variables they can be juggled in just the same way.

Anyway, moving into the 20th century, the progression of serialized fiction takes something of an artistic step backwards in the movie and radio serials from Pearl White to *The Adventures of Captain Marvel*. And strangely enough the Captain's adventures fit the modular storytelling mold as well as anything else to date. We can thrill to the Captain fighting the infinitely re-spawning forces of evil in institutionalized modular, episodes that except for the first and last, really can play in just about any order. Pass a few variables and Shazam!

Hot on the Captain's heels come soap operas that dare to turn Republic

serial climaxes into climaxes of a very different sort. Soap operas mark another stage in my development. I was the head writer of a couple in my former, linear life.

But out of all these structures, which one works best for games?

[SLIDE 53]

Which one works best for games?

[SLIDE 54]

They all do. And they can often work best in combination.

[SLIDE 55]

You can use all of them for story, branching and web for conversation construction, modular for game action and combat, and traditional -for cut scenes that advance the plot or provide player rewards.

Story Game Structure

[SLIDE 56]

A comparison of popular Drama and StoryGame Structure would find both using a strong hook to catch the audience or player as soon as possible. We make an effort to keep the drama compelling. In games it is especially important to maintain the fourth wall, the invisible, but incredibly important wall that separates audiences from the action on-stage.

Both need engaging characters. In story games these are the NPCs players interact with. We rarely put words into the mouths of other players. Although it does happen. Look at the rich vocabulary of taunts in strategy games for example.

We need escalating suspense to keep the audience interested, building on their expectations, then topping them to increase tension. (I'll single out one little technique for achieving this) in a wholly non-linear fashion is just a moment.

Just as strong drama needs surprise twists, storygames must deal with player knowledge. A problem that is compounded when there are many players in a persistent world in various stages of any number of stories. Here is a reason at last for not only multiple endings in a story, but multiple beginnings as well. Also, I tend to embrace the concept of players sharing their experiences in persistent worlds, rather than running from the idea. It may not mirror the real world, but it gives them something to talk about. As one party shares how it progressed through a quest, another can react with the different choices *they* made.

A satisfying conclusion is essential in a good lay... I'm sorry! ...in a good PLAY, movie or book! The most vivid and immediate memory some take from the experience is its concluding moments. In an ongoing world, there can be no ultimate conclusion, but we must provide many satisfying resolutions along the way. Remember? Rewards? And stories are the perfect medium to provide them.

And finally there is the universal theme. Is it a story of ambition, love, betrayal, courage ? What is the "story " of the story that touches us as individuals, members of a specific culture, and human beings at large.

[SLIDE 57]

Symbiotic Escalation: "A Bad Day at the Office". Think of this example as only one way of escalating tension or suspense in a modular story structure. It is by no means the *only* one!

Suppose in the course of any work day six bad things can happen. These are not earthshaking, such as getting fired. Nor are they so minor as to pass beneath our emotional radar. All are of a similar intensity somewhere in the middle ground between minor irritation and total calamity. A misunderstanding with a co-worker, a meeting that went nowhere... whatever.

Ok, one of these happens to you. You go home, and your significant other asks how your day was. Balanced against that one bad thing is an entire day of good, or at least neutral incidents. So you reply, "Pretty good!"

Suppose three bad things happen. Depending on your outlook on life, you might reply, "So so." "Not bad." "Not so good." Etc.

Suppose all six happen. You would say you had "A bad day at the office."

Now, these 6 things could happen in any order. And none is of a higher intensity than any other. Yet, simply by juxtaposing them in a single "world," then adding them up, something interesting occurs. The resulting emotion is stronger than any one of the individual pieces. Symbiosis. And we can manipulate that symbiosis in a modular story.

[SLIDE 58]

Game Structure Considerations

These are more tools to help us achieve compelling drama, even in a modular story structure. You can find their roots in the earlier section on drama. All are designed to maintain illusion, to maintain the fourth wall.

Maintaining consistency of style.

I bring this up more than once because it is so important! Avoid anything that is anachronistic to the world you create. By all means create as bizarre a world as you like. It can be as far from the real world as you can imagine. But once you create it, and its laws, stick to them. Live within them. Do not *comment* on them by stepping outside the illusion of reality you've created, and winking at the player.

Providing rewards (without obvious leveling)

We don't have leveling in real life. We don't walk around with a bar code on our foreheads that reads "Level 17 Chaotic Accountant." We do measure success however in a variety of ways: money, esteem, name-recognition even. And many more. We all know the numbers need to be there to *track* the progress of the player, and there needs to be a mechanism to tell the player how she is doing, and to reward her for her progress. But if we want to maintain the illusion that the player character inhabits a real world, hide the numbers.

Hiding the numbers (die rolls, etc.)

Not just for leveling, but everything! Any die roll result or check for balance the game makes can be expressed in a standardized way that players will recognize. Even provide a chart in the documentation, if you wish, just don't have those numbers flashing past in the middle of a fight. You don't see them when Jackie Chan goes after twenty bad guys with a ladder. Sure, a martial arts movie isn't interactive, but it would also destroy the fourth wall, and therefore harm your willing suspension of disbelief.

Tracking variables (Order of modules, states set, flags tripped: relationships, status, knowledge)

Another tool to escalate suspense and to track the player character's progress in the world is to attach a database to the character. In this way the game engine can know which modules the PC has visited, and in what order, and can adjust the experiences in the remaining modules before the PC reaches them. Then we don't have to rely solely on symbiosis alone. We can create the illusion of a dynamic world that is altered by the actions of the player within it, a world where events pile on top of one another with purpose. Since the PC may alter the world in any number of non-story ways as well, it provides a consistency of experience. We don't stop world-affecting gameplay for an insular story. The story affects the world, too. Maybe not in the same exact way. But it *will feel* the same, and that is what we are striving for.

[SLIDE 59]

Hints 1

So, hint number one: use NPCs, *a standardized* description of action (so the player can quickly spot trends, success or failure), specific dialogue (again *standardized*, but not necessarily entirely repetitive), and anything else you can think of.

[SLIDE 60]

Replace explicit numbers with real world-style accomplishments for players to truly feel as if their characters live in the world of the game.

[SLIDE 61]

Hints 2

Hint number two. Most of us already maintain databases to track things in our games: items owned, skills learned, abilities acquired. We can use the same database to track stories completed; scenes of stories

completed; knowledge acquired; general reputation; NPC relationships. And by tracking all these story, or at least character-based, conditions, we as designers can ensure that the experience, even in a dynamic, open-ended world is consistent, believable, and as logical a progression as in any linear story.

[SLIDE 62]

Attach that database to every PC in the game. Again we do it already. Just use it to track story and character elements as well as physical objects or numbers.

[SLIDE 63]

Hints 3

It is our duty as writers and designers of story-based genre games to do everything we can to guarantee the player a rewarding, fun, experience. Therefore we cannot totally abdicate authorship. We only need to hide it when we use it.

We *want* players to be storytellers, but we cannot leave them to flounder. We must help them be *good* storytellers. We cannot create worlds and expect the players themselves to do all the work. The worlds must be focused and covertly manipulated to help non-storytellers feel as if they are truly not only enacting, but creating their stories.

We can create story scenes as independent modules.

We can use web and branching structures to tailor conversations with NPCs based on the PC's experience.

We can use traditional linear scene progression for rewards, and major advancements in the plot.

By knowing what the player has done, we can allow the world to react to the PC's ever-changing knowledge of the world.

[SLIDE 64]

If you want your players to immerse themselves in your game world, and the stories and characters you populate it with, use every trick you can think of that you've seen in the best movies, TV, drama and literature as storyrelated substitutes for the usual simplistic tracking of statistics. Use any techniques you have to *hide* the mechanics of the storytelling, and the gameplay. You want as little as possible to get it the way of entertainment. And meaning.

5:00 – 5:30

[SLIDE 65]

[SLIDE 66]

[PLAY DAMION'S CD]

Fourth Guest – Damion Schubert

[SLIDE 67]

Our last guest today is from Wolfpack Studios. Most of the screenshots for the Online Multiplayer section of my talk have all been from their upcoming game *Shadowbane*. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome: Damion Schubert!

Discussion Topics

1. Story in massively multiplayer? Why bother?
2. What unique problems does the persistence of a world present?
3. What form does the developer-created story in *Shadowbane* take? Is it backstory? Ongoing?
4. Do players need to discover the story on their own (pull), or is it handed to them on a platter?
5. What elements in the world are used to tell story? (Cut Scenes, NPCs, Quests etc.)
6. Player voice vs. developer voice?
7. Player created content. Does the game world react to it? How?
8. What can you tell us about the future? When will we be seeing *Shadowbane*?

We have a few minutes for questions from the audience....

5:30 – 6:00

[SLIDE 68]

The Pact

There must be a pact between game writer/designer and player just as there is in any other medium. The author does everything in his power to ensure a good time for the reader. The reader agrees not to sneak a peek at the last page.

Part of the responsibility of the game designer is to make sure each of the possible paths through the game are equally fulfilling.

Part of the responsibility of the gamer is to go along for the ride. One more time, we call this...

... willing suspension of disbelief.. not suspension of disbelief, but *willing* suspension of disbelief..

It is part of the responsibility of the reader not to put the book down right when Sophie is making her choice. The moviegoer should squirm in the seat rather than wandering out of the theatre for a popcorn fix right when Luke is attacking the Death Star.

Our job is to keep the experience fun. The gamer's job is play the game.

Why make games?

Is it a need to create? A need to express ourselves? A need to entertain? A need to illuminate the human condition? A need to make great wads of cash? Keep this question in mind, as you write. Think of avoiding stereotypes and embracing universal themes. Anybody can write clichés. How does this happen? From not understanding the craft of writing or the medium you are writing for.

You can begin to suspect how a watch works by hearing the ticking sound it makes. But you learn how it works by taking it apart, and putting it back together. That's what we've tried to do here today.

My mentor at California Institute of the Arts was a screenwriter and director named Sandy McKendrick. In one course he taught we watched a handful of films over and over again: *North by Northwest*, *On the Waterfront*, Sandy's own *The Ladykillers*... The purpose was to see beyond the entertainment value each film possessed, to see the seams, to see how all the elements came together to create a unified entertainment experience. If you can get to the point where your favorite game no longer entertains you, you will have taken a crucial step toward understanding how it worked its magic. It can be a sad moment and an exhilarating one all at the same time.

Today I've tried to give you not so much techniques **GUARANTEED TO MAKE YOU RICH AND FAMOUS**. We have "experts" trickling in from the world of Hollywood eager to do that.

I've tried to concentrate on a foundation derived from other media, from our own collective unconscious, and then suggest ideas, new approaches to think about, as you sit down to write for games.

Why make games? It's a form of entertainment that we enjoy. And we should want to share that joy. Hopefully many in this room today have or will soon have the opportunity to do just that.

And that leads to our next question...

What kind of games do we want to make?

I think we have a responsibility to recognize what it is we do, and how it affects other human beings. And all the technology in the world cannot take that responsibility away from us.

Should meaningful stories remain the province of other media? Other entertainment? Should we let the fact that games and stories are *different* stand in our way?

Oil and Vinegar

Salad dressing: the mix of interactive entertainment. It can be quite tasty. Entertaining. Fun.

Should games have meaning?

Not all of them. But some should. We need balance. , not saturation. We have been given a gift... the ability to create... but with that gift comes responsibility. A few more questions. Some simple to answer, some not so simple...

"Is the product fun?" "Does it move me?" "Does it make the world a better place for its having existed?" "Would we like a game we create to endure? To touch the hearts and minds of generations unborn?"

Each one of us must provide the answers to those questions for ourselves.

Not all of us would like a game we create to endure. Or to touch the hearts and minds of generations unborn. But some of us must. Imagery without meaning is empty and artless. We owe it to ourselves, and the future to strive for more. A failure to address these issues is a failure to communicate with the player/audience. It is a failure to communicate with ourselves.

[SLIDE 69]

[SLIDE 70]