

## **Building a Virtual World Writing Team**

### INTRODUCTION

Writing massively-multiplayer games is not simply a massive challenge; it is a conglomeration of massive challenges.

First, there is the sheer amount of material that must be in place when the game launches. Second, there is all the additional writing that will be needed as new content is added. Third, there are all kinds of writing required: quests and stories; NPC dialogue; informational text; help systems; on and on. Fourth, each kind of writing requires a different style, talent and craft knowledge.

Anyone who has written professionally knows that just because a writer can write trenchant dialogue does not mean he can tell a story to save his soul. And a brilliant novelist may be unable to tame her literary style to the needs of clarity and brevity journalistic prose demands.

Given time a single writer might supply all the material for a year of television sit-coms or a single issue of a daily newspaper or even a massively-multiplayer game, provided we ignore irritants like budgets and deadlines. But that isn't feasible, so we look to teams of writers to do these jobs.

When I was the head writer of a daytime soap opera I turned out more material each week than most writers are required to complete in two or three months. I wrote the long-term story documents (projecting story from three months to a year into the future), all daily breakdowns (outlines for each episode), and two or three scripts (the actual action and dialogue for each episode). My output averaged five hundred pages per month, not including the sometimes extensive editing I had to do to scripts written by my writing team. That's six thousand pages per year, the equivalent of twenty novels or sixty screenplays. What I wrote in week one was produced in week two and on the air in week three. And that pace needed to be maintained day in and day out fifty two weeks a year.

I mention this for two reasons. Massively multiplayer games aren't the first medium to require massive amounts of writing. It can be done, but it can't be done alone. Like an MMO, a soap opera is a merciless, forever-hungry monster voraciously devouring everything in its path. The monster that is daytime television demands two hundred and sixty programs per year. Even at the comparatively sedate pace of night time television where production companies are only required to turn out twenty-two shows per season the monster is almost impossible to keep ahead of without a writing team.

At the height of the Hollywood studio system, which stretched from the mid nineteen-thirties to the early fifties, movies were routinely written by teams. One writer or more would construct a storyline, another would flesh it out with dialogue, another would embellish action sequences, another would supply the expertise needed for a particular genre, and still another would "punch up" the script with jokes. This practice continues

today. The number of writers who worked on the feature film version of *The Flintstones* has entered popular Hollywood mythology, and seems to increase with each new telling. Were there really more than twenty? I suspect only the bookkeeping department knows for sure.

## TEAM CONFIGURATIONS

There are two major configurations of writing teams in virtual worlds just as there are in television. The first type was initially confined to hour-long drama, but has now been almost completely abandoned. Usually there is a writer-producer and/or a story editor on staff, and the first drafts of scripts are written by freelancers - what we call contractors in the game industry. Here the burden is on the in-house writer or writers to shape the freelance material into a style consistent with their show. And while the producer or editor may come up with the original story ideas, freelancers often bring in their own, broadening the selection of ideas to choose from.

The second type of writing team – the full-time staff - has always been the province of TV sit-coms and variety shows, and is now used by most hour-long dramas as well. In comedy in particular the writers all sit in a room for hours on end shouting out ideas while the one with the best penmanship copies the outlines of the story on a wallboard. Here the chief writing burden is sorting through the ideas and fashioning them into a coherent - and hopefully entertaining! - structure. (This also explains why many successful TV comedy writers have difficulty transitioning to movies. Their dialogue may still be funny, but often their structure is weak.)

Either configuration is possible for virtual worlds. Most single player game developers hire writers on contract to save costs, while most massively multiplayer games want writers on site as part of the development team. In fact these writers often have other roles such as art or programming, which saves even more money, but usually diminishes the quality of the work.

Still, given the tools for telecommuting at our disposal, it is perfectly feasible for most writing team members to be off-site contractors. I've had two jobs as lead writer where I was off-site: one worked fine, one did not. For such an arrangement to succeed it needs copious amounts of trust, open lines of communication, and a willingness to spend a lot of time on airplanes.

## THE LEAD WRITER

The most important member of the writing team is the lead writer. In television this is usually a writer-producer. In games many titles are used, but I'll keep it simple here and call her the lead writer. This position requires several more skills in addition to simply good writing, and should be the first position filled on the team. This seems obvious, yet often writing staffs are hired simultaneously or in no particular order. Having a qualified lead writer in place before the rest of the team is assembled means that designers and producers don't have to be expert writers themselves any more than they need to be

expert artists or programmers to make those hires. An experienced lead writer knows what is needed, probably has her own contacts to draw from, and will be far more likely to hit the ground running with a team she has helped put together because of the added familiarity.

Stories may differ in length, tone, theme, and many other things. Characters must speak in their own voices. Disparate elements should all appear to exist naturally in the same world. For these reasons the lead writer must be a master forger, able to take the work of several often very different writers and mold it into a single consistent style. When done well it should be impossible for players to discern different authorial voices.

The lead writer must be the voice for the entire writing team, representing them in meetings with producers, designers and other department heads. Communication is critical to the development team, and good communication occurs when lines of communication are clear. If a writing team member takes a question directly to a designer tasked with implementing the quest system, they may end up with a brilliant solution that enables a greater differentiation between NPCs, but that also kicks out a supporting leg from the faction system. And if this new solution is not communicated to the people whose own areas are affected, the damage may not be discovered until a disastrously late date.

Note that I am not suggesting the lead writer should be communicating directly with a designer or programmer or artist either, but with their lead. This addition of middlemen in the process may seem unnecessarily convoluted or time-wasting, but it keeps everyone on the same page, and does not preclude times when the leads themselves will put two team members together.

All of which means a lead writer must be a diplomat both to those above, and to those in his charge. Ways of selling a new story idea, or asking for an engine design change, must be found that are positive and non-threatening. The lead writer must also convince every member of the team that their ideas have worth, but yet make it clear that it is the lead writer's job to sort through them like tomatoes, only choosing the plumpest and juiciest. In a team setting knowing when to drop a pitch to the designers for a new feature, or close a blue sky discussion with the team and move on, can be as important as knowing how to write.

(Here are a couple tips for everyone who needs to pitch an idea: listen to the *pronouns* your audience uses when they respond to your pitch. Listen for the moment when *you* segues to *we* as they discuss your idea with you. The moment that happens you know they are on your side. By the same token try to get a sense for how much you should push an idea, if you aren't hearing that pronoun switch. The first moment you think you've hit an idea hard enough move on. Continuing to press the issue will only distract your listeners, forcing their attention on their perception of you (stubborn? arrogant?), and will make the next idea all that much harder to sell.)

The lead writer must also be part producer, aware of budget constraints, milestones, staff priorities, art asset and engine limitations, and able to veto even good ideas that are simply not possible given the constraints of production. To this end a lead writer must gauge value constantly every day, and balance ideas with their effect on production. Hundreds of ideas generated by a truly creative environment that out of context sounded good or even great will be lost during the production cycle. Rejecting them will sometimes feel like the "death of a thousand cuts." But it must be done.

The luxury of the "We'll release it when it's ready" philosophy is granted to only a few mega-successful designers, and even then I'm of the opinion it should not be indulged. It comes across to me as amateurishness instead of professionalism. If Shakespeare managed to write on budget and on time; if Hitchcock managed to direct on budget and on time; who are we to conclude that quality cannot be achieved by adhering to a schedule?

The lead writer must be able to lead both by example and direction. She must be able to write what she preaches. She need not be the best writer on the team, but she must hold her own, teach her staff writers to be the best possible writers they can be, and be willing to learn from them as well. I always try to hire writers who will challenge me by their talent and enthusiasm. It saddens me every time I see an insecure lead writer or designer deliberately hire staff members he feels will not threaten his position.

## THE STAFF

So where does the lead writer go to find his team? It is a mistake to narrow the search to the genre of the virtual world and think that's all you'll need. Being the creator of a *Dungeons & Dragons* module is absolutely no guarantee that a writer can be a potent member of a team in a massively multiplayer game set in the *Dungeons & Dragons* universe. Being the author of *Star Trek* spin-off novels is no guarantee that a writer can keep up with the never-ending demand for new material a *Star Trek* virtual world would generate. Being a writer of single-player games where linear story structures remain a viable (if limited) option is no guarantee that a writer can adapt to the open-ended narrative of a virtual world. (Is it any wonder that single-player quests are so often cavalierly stuffed into multiplayer environments?)

Familiarity with the story world or the genre is important, but more selection criteria are needed. A staff writer needs to have experience writing to deadlines. A staff writer must understand the nature of value, and be willing to sacrifice even good ideas if they prove too unwieldy to produce, or might overbalance some other aspect of the world. A staff writer must be able to apply as much professionalism to descriptive text as to epic adventures.

All writers on the team must have to some greater or lesser degree the talent of forgery. Staff writers need to be able to recognize, copy and maintain a consistent style, so that regardless of who wrote what, *all* of the writing appears to come from a single source. It is not a staff writer's job to bring a unique and idiosyncratic style to the table. Rather they

have to do their best to write in a style that mimics the vision of the material, and each other.

This is not to say that one writer must be adept at all the different jobs required in a virtual world. Only that what they write must mimic as closely as possible the overall style of the writing, whether it be scene descriptions, NPC behavior, or dialogue.

The final consideration in the construction of the writing team is its size. This is somewhat dependent on the abilities of the team members, and how jobs will be divided. Will everyone write quests or will one person write all the descriptive text for items and mobs? Each team will be different and the lead writer must be flexible enough to adapt the structure of the staff to the strengths and weaknesses of its members. (Since writing quests and stories is one of the "fun" jobs – and writing item descriptions isn't! - I usually allow everyone the opportunity to participate, assigning additional quests or more sophisticated stories to those who are more accomplished.)

In my experience a team of four or five staff members under the direction of a strong lead are more than capable of meeting the demands of writing content during pre-production. Often one of the staff members becomes a second-in-command, assisting where possible with various lead writer duties, and making sure the pipeline of material keeps flowing. Each staff writer may have a particular area of responsibility, but all contribute wherever needed. To supplement the team freelance contractors may also be hired to script planned-for events or stories far in advance of their production, in essence creating lead time even when live production is underway.

It is customary for the development team to be replaced with a live team once the virtual world launches, yet my experience has been that there is much to be gained by maintaining the continuity of a writing team familiar with the demands of a particular world after it goes live. This is the standard in television, and it makes just as much sense here.

## ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Once the team is in place the pipeline for material must be constructed. Who delivers what to whom? When? What is the green light procedure? In what format should ideas and stories be written? Who is in charge of seeing that the writing gets into the game world? Must the text be translated into code? Is there a scripting language the writers need to learn?

How much new material can a team be expected to turn out in a set amount of time? Far more than most developers believe. Far more than many writers want them to believe! Go back and look at the amount of material a soap opera requires, then look at the amount of material in any of the large commercial massively multiplayer games released so far. Listen to the cries of designers and developers who say they can't keep up with the new-content monster, let alone stay ahead of the beast.

There was an interesting presentation at GDC a couple years ago on *Majestic*, Electronic Arts' ill-fated and ill-conceived internet-based push-technology storytelling experiment. An EA executive in charge of the project listed some of the lessons learned after the experiment had failed. I was dumbfounded by the list. Most items on it were things the development team should have known going in, particularly since several members supposedly came to the project from television. One of the most blatant mistakes was the huge underestimation of the lead time needed to satiate the hungry monster's appetite. They ran out of new material in a few weeks!

Lead time is a television industry term meaning the time allotted to put as many shows as possible in the can (ready to be viewed) before the first episode airs. Nighttime shows need this lead time because it can take two to three weeks to produce an episode, yet there must be a new episode every week. (It takes one day to produce a daytime soap opera episode which is the only reason soap writers have any chance at all of keeping up with their monsters.)

In game development the pre-production period is the lead time. Yet over and over we see months of pre-production spent on design, art and programming before the first writer shows up. If game writing is ever to have any chance of overcoming the myth that "New content takes too long to create. That's why there's so little of it!" or "The writing doesn't have to be as good as other media. It's just a game!" or "Players want player-generated content, not developer-generated content!" we'd better at least give writing a development cycle and budget so it can compete with the quality and quantity of the art and programming.

It's one of those vicious circles. Writing in games isn't very good because developers don't think it can be, therefore they won't do what is necessary to make it good. Which brings up two other very important reasons to have the writing team in place from the very beginning. First, it gives them time to get to learn the game engine and to adjust their writing styles and expectations. Second, it also gives them an opportunity to suggest features of the game engine that can be designed specifically to facilitate storytelling.

## CONCLUSION

The keys to building a successful writing team for a virtual world can be summed up as follows:

- 1) Hire a talented lead writer who possesses the skills to be leader, diplomat, salesman, producer and master forger.
- 2) Hire staff writers used to deadlines and balancing quality and value issues
- 3) Build the team at the very beginning of pre-production to create lead time, and so the team can learn the game engine and aid in its construction.
- 4) Create open yet formal lines of communication to minimize misunderstandings and time-consuming glitches in the development process.
- 5) Empower team members to present their ideas, yet keep the hierarchy clear so all understand how decisions will be made.

There is no reason players must endure empty worlds and unfulfilled promises of story in massively-multiplayer games. With the right team in place virtual worlds can enjoy the same level of story quality as the *best* episodic television shows, with the added benefits of far more story, and the excitement of living the stories instead of simply watching them!