

Nate Fox--- Sly Cooper and the Thievius Raccoonus--- GDC notes from 2003

Question 1- Story in Platformers, why bother?

- Story provides context for all actions. It answers the fundamental question of why the main character is doing what they're doing.
- It gives your game an identity (although *theme* is more important than story here).
- Story helps guide your team towards one vision of what you're building.
- It provides cohesion to what would otherwise be a random assortment of jumping puzzles. It makes things make sense.

Question 2- What makes it difficult to tell a story in a platformer?

- Instructional Dialogs. The quantity of instructional dialogs necessary for platformers turns players off to having to listen to anything... including story.
- Scheduling. Invariably parts of the game will get cut do to the schedule, crafting a story that is "edit friendly" can be tough.
- Game play evolution. Things change as the game is made and the story has to be flexible enough to handle it.
- Technology and Economy. What sort of tools you have at your disposal to tell a story will have a big impact on what sort of story you can tell. Also the cost (money/production time) of authoring story sequences will also dictate how much story you can put in the game.
- Character Inputs. Platform character's main source of interaction with the world is their ability to jump and attack... what sort of story makes these actions relevant?

Question 3- What is easy to do in platformers?

- Freedom! The genre is inherently not locked in reality.
- Exaggerated characters. Because the unreal nature of the game player we can fill the worlds with totally exaggerated characters that provide a quick read for the player.

Question 4- What techniques were used in Sly Cooper to tell story?

- Cutscenes. These are great because you can move around a lot in their content, but are problematic in that they are non-interactive and inflexible if anything needs to be changed.
- Binocucom. The powered binoculars Sly carries around also allow him to have conversations with his teammates. This tool is useful for instructionals and for focusing the player's attention, but suffers from being boring and non-interactive.
- T.V. We call it a "TV" when Sly gets a non-binocucom message from his teammates. These sequences suffer from being unable to focus the player's attention but are great in that they don't create any pause in the gameplay... which means they can be much longer than non-interactive story sequences.
- P.A. Every now and then we'd have a level's Boss speak into a public address system to talk to his minions. These provided an interactive low cost

solution that helped build the Boss's personality, link him to his guards and to the evil scheme being implemented in his lair.

- Level Design. Getting the story to be represented as in-game challenges is the best way to have people become interested in the story. There is a tremendous amount of synergy that occurs when level design and story are working together. Things to think about when crafting your levels are...
 - a. Conceptual vs. Mechanical Gameplay
 - b. Level Decoration
 - c. Establishing Shots

Question 5- How does characterization and narrative effect in-game action?

- Bentley, Sly's partner, was created as a coward so that he can constantly tell the player how dangerous everything is. Bentley is also a hypochondriac so that we can tell the player about the visceral qualities of the level that Sly is moving through (such as smell and temperature).
- Inspector Carmelita Fox is a police woman so that there is someone in the game that calls Sly a thief; otherwise he's just some nice guy taking down criminal organizations.
- The Bosses evil schemes define the gamespace, as you interact with the levels you're interacting with the creation of that Boss. In other words, you're getting to know the Boss through interacting with something that they created.

Question 6- How should a person write for a cartoon?

- The big problem with platformers is their "cute" overtones. We achieved a lot more success writing the dialog so that it appealed to adults. Kids were, for the most part, only interested in hearing the funny quality of a character's voice and not as interested in what was being said. Whereas the adults could only tolerate the funny voices if the characters were talking about things which interested them.
- The Muppet Show is a great example of cute characters being very serious about ridiculous things (and what adult doesn't like the Muppet Show?).

Question 7- What is the best way to work with a writer on this sort of project?

- The game designers need to have a proven formula for level construction before any work on the story can be done.
- Work hard so that all story and dialog is there to advance gameplay... not just for the sake of plot.

Question 8- What can you tell us about the future? What new storytelling challenges did you set for yourself?

- I'd really like to let people live out their fantasies through videogames.
- I'd really like to broaden the themes seen in games.
- I'd like to create stories with sense of moral ambiguity.