

The Art of Game Design: a continuing series

What is it?

After his stint as Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger went to Israel to run a zoo. A reporter found out about this unusual career move, and went to see what was what. Arriving at the zoo he was startled to discover a cage containing a lion and lamb lying peacefully side by side. "Dr. Kissinger!" he exclaimed. "This is fantastic! Since biblical times men have tried to get the lion and lamb to lie down together. How can you have succeeded after so many over the centuries have failed?" To which Kissinger is said to have replied, "Every day a new lamb:

The Gamestory is a new creature born of the union between the lion and the lamb. The lion is interactivity. The lamb is story. Amongst all species the Gamestory is uniquely frail, and se- only exist in captivity. Inside the computer. If one accepts the premise that story has a place in computer games, and more people seem to be doing that these days, we need to explore how to feed the lion without sacrificing the lamb, or the Gamestory will never even be born.

What is its natural habitat?

These days there is a trend toward simpler adventure games. The thinking behind this is that it makes the games more accessible to the mass market, that amorphous holy grail that promises, not life everlasting, but new gamers unending.

The Gamestory can not survive in an environment where interactivity has been clear-cut to a few withered stumps. It should thrive on player input. Making games shorter and simpler is certainly one of the easiest solutions I've ever heard for broadening a market base. Let's give them less! But all the evidence I've seen regarding what the con-



Start with a strong premise

Ripley stares at Tomb Chamber

sumer demands from entertainment suggests there is something more fundamental, more primal, but more difficult to achieve, that is needed.

The Gamestory has a noble pedigree. Since tales of great hunts and hunters were told to awestruck listeners huddle; 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.

The technology and manpower necessary to produce wonderful-looking computer games is available to whoever has the bucks to buy



Create characters the player will want to spend time with

Ripley looks hurt after Dr. Twelvetroes puts him down

it, just as it is for the film producer. And just as most movies have a certain base level of polish to them, so can computer games.

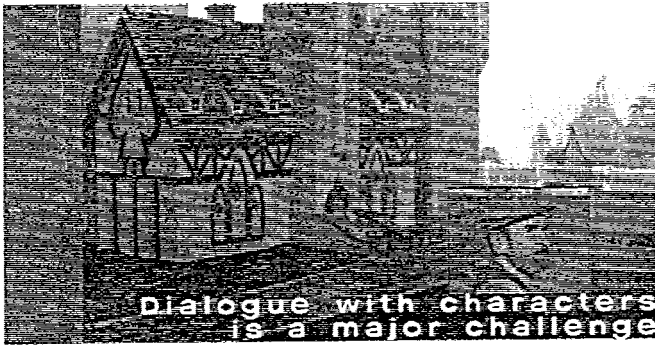
What then distinguishes a good game from all the rest? One way to do so is with story. Even the young Gamestories we are seeing these days will flourish, if properly reared.

Care and feeding of the gamestory

For a healthy Gamestory, start with a nutritious premise. That premise needs to take into account the medium for which it is intended. The Gamestory bred for an adventure game should be able to support all the puzzle-solving it requires, and should also be non-linear enough to provide options when the player gets stuck. It should be of at least equal weight to the other elements of the game: graphics, puzzles, sound, etc. It must be strong enough to drive through far more twists and hairpin turns than the average film, for example. The script for Ripley's Believe It Or Not! The Riddle of Master Lu is 844 pages. The Gamestory requires a lot of room to roam about in.

Finally, even a genre-specific premise needs to provide something more than all the stories in the genre that have come before. We must make the investment in the material. Find something in even the most cliché-ridden genre that speaks to us as human beings.

The character of Newt, and her relationship to Ripley (that other Ripley) in Aliens is the soul of the film. When Newt goes to sleep at the end, it is a profoundly satisfying moment. You can almost feel the audience begin to exhale, at least. A cheezier film would have had the alien lurch one more time into frame, or we'd cut to yet another alien egg opening, or... Jim Cameron rightly decides to give both his character



Wolf leers at Ripley

ters and his audience a long-deserved rest.

The old plot of the young heroine in the haunted house is not worth making into a game, if a new reason to tell the story can't be found. And it isn't enough to say, "Well, we added interactivity." The new element should touch us emotionally, intellectually, hopefully in both ways. If the writer can't invest something of him or herself in the material, the Gamestory dies of neglect, or worse: abuse.

The designer must play within a genre's rules. The surest way to camp or boredom lies in taking a very hip, cool, above-it-all attitude to the story moves each genre requires. Attempts to turn a genre on its ear by someone who hasn't a clue why the genre has worked as well as it has across generations and centuries can only bring disaster. An attempt to do precisely the same thing by someone who knows and respects the genre can result in art

Let's pretend our baby Gamestory now has a premise with the right elements. Next we need to think about the characters who will move through the story. I like writing games set in real-world universes. This creates all sorts of interesting challenges.

The major characters should be people the gamer will want to spend some time with. The universe of the game should be as populated as the universe it mimics. **Master Lu** had forty-two speaking parts, and I still felt the world was too empty. Part of the reason for unpopulated games is that while it is easy to model realistic-looking environments, it is much harder to approximate the behavior of human beings.

That doesn't mean we shouldn't make the attempt! Without recognizable human characters for the player to interact with, drama is replaced by sensation, and emotion becomes nothing more than an adrenaline rush. Observed human behavior artfully translated is as important in a game as in any other storytelling medium. Basic rules apply.

The characters cannot be clichés. Anymore than the story can. I don't believe the tastes of gamers are as degraded as some games require them to be. Gamers are for the most part savvy people, bright and well-rounded. These people might be experiencing some pretty good movies and books when they're not playing games. How many times will they be willing to forgive lapses they'd laugh at in other media?

Dialogue with the characters is a major challenge. There is no algorithmic dialogue system here today, or on the horizon, that can guarantee the level of drama necessary for the Gamestory. For now I'm forced to use a complex web of branching and game-wide, interdependent variables, to create the illusion of a dynamic world where the player appears to dictate the course of events, yet the designer maintains the control necessary to employ the benefits of a more traditional dramatic structure.

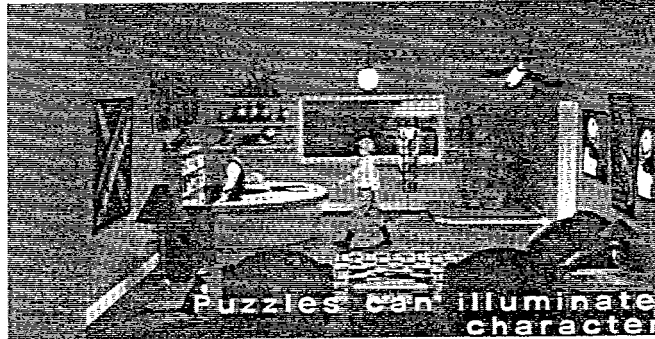
All the threads of the conversations, as all the threads of the Gamestory itself, should strive to offer an equally entertaining experience. The player should not be shortchanged for not following a single "golden path" through the game. By the same token the player should be willing to accept a lesser experience, if he is reluctant to go with the flow of the action.

Part of the responsibility of the game designer is to make the main threads of the story attractive to the gamer. Part of the responsibility of the gamer is to go along for the ride. This is not heretical, or some new rule thought up to ensure the lion doesn't devour the lamb every day. Part of the responsibility of the reader is not to put the book down right when Sophie is making her choice. The moviegoer should sit in that seat and squirm rather than heading for the restroom right when John Travolta is teaching Danny De Vito to act.

Finally, a word about puzzles. Puzzles are currently the *raison d'être* of adventure games. This is not as limiting as it might seem on the surface. I like to reward the player for a puzzle well-solved with something cool to look at or listen to, and I can sneak in a little exposition as well. How do we match the dramatic pacing of a film, if the player gets bogged down in a puzzle, or would rather stare at the pretty pictures? Puzzles can actually help pacing, and they're a wonderful device to reveal character.

As mentioned above, during the course of playing, the gamer enters into a relationship with the designer. As s/he becomes more comfortable with the parameters the designer has chosen to work within, s/he comes to feel the underlying rhythm, the heartbeat of the game. The designer can exploit that by placing puzzles near the climax that are actually easier than in the body of the game, the gamer will feel the pace of the game picking up. And if a puzzle relies on how a character (either the protagonist or an NPC) views the world, we can use the puzzle to deepen our understanding of the character.

The Gamestory is still a yearling, wobbling about on ungainly legs. It will require a lot of nurturing before it will realize its full potential. But one day it will be as powerful a source of entertainment and human enrichment as the best novel, play or film.



Ripley talks to Matteo



The explosion

Lee Sheldon is the senior writer/designer at Sanctuary Woods. He has recently completed his first adventure game, The Riddle of Master Lu, and in a past life worked in TV. We'd like to thank him for his willingness to offer us the above contribution in the midst of an extremely hectic schedule.

