



, February 13, 2011 [<http://howtonotsuckatgamedesign.com/?p=1983>] by Anjin Anhut.

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Oddly enough there is an ongoing discussion about the ideas that storytelling in game creation might not be as important as game design. There are gamers and professionals arguing things like this:

"Good gameplay can save badly written stories, but good stories can not save badly designed gameplay."

"This game is bad. Players just think they like it, because they get fooled by flashy cutscenes."

"Many players say they finished the game because they liked the story, but they wouldn't have finished the game, if the gameplay wasn't that good."

"Storytelling in video games is unnecessary, because stories in video games are crap anyway."

"If I want a story I read a book."

This has to stop. We need to change the discussion about story in games and those people need to get their act together. And here is why:

1.

It artificially limits the greatness, accessibility, attractiveness and cultural relevance of the medium we love.

Gaming is a colorful and diverse culture, with many unique qualities, coming in many forms and shapes and offering emotional engagement for everybody. With the advent of casual games, the wii and Facebook games, the industry became very inclusive and accessible for a very wide audience. No matter, if you like a challenge, just want to explore new worlds, want to pet exotic baby animals or see a man's head burst open, there is a game for you. But then there are the people who want to be excluding, to somewhat claim our culture for themselves and have our culture in general cater more to their own preferences.

I'm from germany and am kinda careful with calling people out to be fascistic. So I call those people tribalists now. They treat gaming culture like an ism, like a tribe, campaigning to expand the acceptance and cultural importance of their own values. They don't want their culture, their tribe, to be measured against other media, like movies and books. So they treat the common quality of all media, the storytelling value, as a minor aspect and put gameplay on a pedestal, the one thing the other media don't have.

There is also a certain idealistic, bad-ass, young, heterosexual, mostly caucasian male idea of the core gamer, those tribalists want to uphold. Since parents and grandparents don't fit this image, the wii games are "all shit because they are to easy and not complex enough" and Facebook games "aren't actually real games at all".

Gaming doesn't belong to a certain group of people. It belongs as much to the pro gamer, the hardcore gamer and the game creator as much as to the casual gamer, the 6 year old gamer, the 90 year old gamer and the story enthusiast looking for a new way to experience great narrative.

2.

It's disrespectful and dismissive towards a very big chunk of the money paying player community and towards a giant portion of the hard working people that create the games for us.

No, really. A line needs to be drawn here. Whoever starts campaigning to put one aspect of game creation over another, therefore devaluating the hard work of creative people and dismissing the preferences of other gamers, is nothing more

than a tribalistic dick. A dick, who tries to sell his personal preferences as the alpha and omega of game design, but who actually is just severely limited by his imagination.

Everyone is entitled to his own opinion when creating and consuming games. So if you don't care about storytelling, hate extensive cutscenes or consider the story parts of video game are mostly laughable at best, well, that is fine. And yeah, voice your opinion. Do it loudly. And if you want developers to neglect storytelling in favor of better game design, well, that's a reasonable demand. So voice this also. Go on. But remember: Everyone is entitled to his own opinion when creating and consuming games. This of course means also, everyone who plays games to experience a story and everyone who creates games to tell a story is entitled to do so as valid a gamer and developer as anybody else.

You DO NOT argue for your own favorite things, by saying that people favoring different things "don't get what video games are about". Tribalists need to stop confusing their taste with expertise and start treating other gamers and creators with the respect they deserve. They need to learn what courtesy is or GTFO!

3.

I hurts the creative industry we love.

Many developers want to sell story based games and many players want to spend their money on them. And that is a good thing. Many new players come from enjoying different media, like movies and bring certain narrative expectations with them and also are inexperienced with games. And when games can fulfill their expectations by offering great stories or even surpass them through the addition of accessible gameplay, well, that is also a good thing.

That is money for the industry, a growing audience and a growing cultural acceptance. Why would anybody want to limit that? Why would anybody campaign against the recognition of storybased games and for complex and challenging gameplay to be "what games are about".

Nobody needs to fear that challenging and complex gameplay will die out. Nobody needs to fight for that. All the tribalist trying to defend their territory against the expanding casual game a storybased gaming audience are not helping. They do not only shut the door for concepts and people they don't want to be associated with, they also shut the door for acceptance and money.

4.

It's absolutely dishonest towards oneself.

Except from players, who's gaming world only consists of Solitaire, Minesweeper and Tetris, everybody(!) wants story in their games. Players might hate long cutscenes, never played through a story worth remembering, dread awful dialog or feel like many games could have been better, if the developers would have focused less on story. But they would not want story to go away in their games. Nobody wants naked gameplay.

No shooter is more fun when just shooting at cardboard targets instead of enemies. No fighting game is more fun when kicking collision boxes instead of opponents. No Madden game is more fun when commanding unrecognizable no-name stick figures instead of official licensed real life NFL players. To turn target practice into firefights, you need story. You may not need much. Sometimes good character design does the trick, without any word of exposition needed.

So what if the tribalists win their overgeneralizing argument? Do they get the storyless games they want? What about stories that the individual player on the less-story-more-action side actually likes? I mean really likes, all their favorite characters are in there, the dialogs are fun to listen to and the emotional payoff at the end makes for a memorable finish. Does he wish for those games to be less than they are?

This needs to stop.

Bash bad storytelling. Bash bad gameplay. Bash weak voice acting. Bash interruptive cutscenes. Bash whatever is done in an uninspired throwaway lackluster kind of way. Bash it hard. But stop bashing the idea of games as a storytelling medium. They are a storytelling medium and it is important for them to be exactly that. Extracting storytelling does not help to set games apart from other media, it weakens games and makes them trail behind all the other media for a lack of emotional engagement.

Gameplay vs. story – this argument is not helping, no matter who would win. It's just bullshit. It's excluding, dismissive, disrespectful.

And it needs to stop. Right now.

A well, the age of the internet....





Zanreo

on **May 8, 2013 at 7:59 pm** said:

You bring up many good points, however, I can't fully agree. Mostly because in most of the games I like and play (some of my favorite genres are platformers and rhythm games), "story" isn't that important – there is usually some kind of "story" thrown in, but it's not particularly deep or interesting and what is fun about the game is the gameplay. No one plays Mario for the story, it's all about the platforming! Don't get me wrong, I do enjoy a nice game story now and then (one of my favorite series, Ace Attorney, is a visual novel and as such very story-based), but sometimes I just WANT to relax with some fun gameplay without necessarily thinking about story. I think story-heavy games absolutely has a place in the industry, but they shouldn't come at the expense of focusing more on story and turning the standard for games into "interactive movies". Also, I do agree that "Good gameplay can save badly written stories, but good stories can not save badly designed gameplay" – if a game doesn't have good/fun gameplay, I'm unlikely to enjoy it no matter how good the story is. But interesting article anyway, it was nice to have a look at the other side's perspective.



Zanreo

on **May 8, 2013 at 8:01 pm** said:

*expense



Evilagram

on **November 5, 2012 at 3:26 pm** said:

As someone who loves video games stories. I can't agree. A game should not be sold on the worth of its story alone. I frankly can completely tolerate the long cutscenes of metal gear solid, hell, I enjoy them to an extent, but if the game behind them weren't solid, I'd have dropped it a long time ago. What I can't tolerate is Skyward Sword's CONSTANT removing of control from the player. Unskippable mini-cutscenes, those kill me. But that's unrelated to the larger issue of story in games.

I am not opposed to games developing better stories, however I believe that we have not figured out or standardized even the basic principles of game design well enough to be devoting as much development time to storytelling as we do. Many modern games are tremendously story driven, and I feel this is a mistake as it frequently comes at the cost of gameplay.

The problem is compounded, because all the cutscenes and story aspects of a game can be legally obtained by watching a youtube lets play of the series. If you're loving a game's story and don't want to bog yourself down with tedious and dull gameplay, you can get everything you want for free without any of the effort. You even get a rewind and skip function.

I don't play games for the story, because if I wanted the story, I could get it for free without any moral compunctions.

I enjoy and discuss stories from a lot of games, but if a game doesn't have compelling enough gameplay, then I'll damn well pick up the story from a secondary source. That can go for art direction too. I'll buy the art book, don't pass off a crappy game along with it.

Suck it, Mass Effect, Journey, and Heavy Rain! Your shit is WORTHLESS!



Tim

on **April 27, 2011 at 7:03 am** said:

I am in the US, and this trend is ever present here as well, probably more so than in Germany because people expect so much action in games.

Personally, I don't think people give game stories enough credit. The vast majority of games I play for the story primarily; even when the writing is mediocre, the gameplay and story sections can really help make it greater than the sum of it's parts by increasing immersion, almost to the point where I feel like I'm there.

Games like Heavy Rain in particular benefit from this fusion. Even though it was not particularly known to have a lot of exploration, I would spend a lot of time walking around the screens, observing the areas, looking for objects that I might have not seen, reading the characters thoughts, and just moving at a slower pace than a movie in general. The mere fact that I could control movement at all really made me immersed in the game, whereas in a movie, I always feel tempted to pause so that I can observe the environments and atmospheres. In a game, I can explore areas at my leisure and really get into the atmosphere. Not to mention the fact that the story was branching, where major

characters could potentially die. It really made it feel more personal. So I feel very strongly that overall package made this game excellent, maybe even top-tier, whereas as a movie, it wouldn't necessarily have fared as well. Although, I actually thought the writing was good, the voice acting wasn't really a problem — the main thing holding it back was the plot twist which felt a bit forced, and that's where I think movie critics would have criticized it.

Sometimes the writing can be bad (Xenosaga games), or hell some parts of the Metal Gear Solid games, but sometimes the plot, characters and atmosphere are so interesting to me, that I still find them worth playing for that aspect alone, especially when it comes to convoluted plots. The ones that fail at storytelling to me are games with boring stories when they are sold on that basis. I'd rather have a story have all kinds of issues in a convoluted plot than one that just sounds generic and predictable. Unfortunately, a lot of critics will actually reward games in the story category for telling generic or unmemorable stories solely on the basis that they didn't screw up, when there is nothing distinctive or interesting of that aspect of the game. Or even worse, when I can't remember the story even after I finish the game.

One advantage that games have over movies is that they can potentially MUCH longer story lines, with lots of small "every day" developments, which can make the characters seem more identifiable. I mean, if you fight thousands of battles with characters in a story, actually see the mountain they are exploring from any camera angle you want, it really makes you feel like a part of the adventure. It's sometimes interesting to see more mundane aspects of their story, like what their most used weapon was, or their best spell. Now, you might tell me that I'm more interested in exploration, but what I am saying is that gameplay, story, exploration, atmosphere, sound and graphics all contribute towards making the game memorable, with story and character development complemented well by the other categories.

I play some games for the gameplay, such as Koei's strategy games, and others for story, like Visual Novels, and I love both. I think if games that had well written stories sold better, (Such as the Digital Devil Saga games and Planescape Torment) we would see a lot more of them.

That said the good story bad gameplay and bad gameplay good story goes both ways. I wouldn't generally play a SHMUP, fighting game, mario, or most strategy games for a story. For RPGS, there are some that I play primarily for gameplay, others for story. There are also games that I felt were hurt by their forced stories, (Final Fantasy 10 for example) and others where that was not the case. It really depends.

I think that companies should promote lower budget story games like visual novels as a medium of their own, since they obviously won't float everyone's boat, but since they don't take a lot of budget and can benefit from the interactivity and the immersion, I think that they are a worthwhile market.

That said, I've never really been huge on Tetris, but I love board games and stuff like that.



ToonaiNaLalague

on **March 11, 2011 at 10:04 am** said:

You make a great point really! but I do have to point out that story-driven gamers are not equal to casual gamers. I have to admit that I hate casual gamers primarily because I think they cause the phenomenon of overly simplistic gameplay AND bad or no stories in games. I WANT my games to have bad ass storytelling like Bioshock, MGS, Assassin's Creed, etc. And I also want my games to have learning curves that require a certain level of skill to master. Casual gamers don't understand that and are actually the ones who're warranting for gameplay that they can "simply enjoy" w/ barely any, if any at all, plot or substance. The Wii may have some good story driven games enhanced by the motion-oriented gameplay, but its a fact that the Wii is, out of the three major consoles, the one most being flooded by bad mediocre games capitalizing on the fact that most Wii buyers are only in it for the shallow entertainment of swinging a controller mindlessly for most of the game thinking it emulates some real-life activity. It makes money for the industry, but you have to admit it doesn't directly help gaming as an artform, something that I'm sure both of us wish gaming would be.

That said, I think that in many ways, a developer who has the good sense to write a great story for a game will be more willing to substantiate and coordinate the gameplay experience as much as possible. That's the kind of development I want in gaming. Honestly, I've barely ever heard of these tribalists or fascists (I'm not from Germany) who think gaming should be devoid of storytelling. If ever they really do exist, fuck them. Gaming is a revolution in storytelling precisely because it allows a person to PLAY the story. Gone is the age of cold, clinical, and repetitive score-based arcade games, it's all about the atmosphere that motivates games nowadays. It's what makes games substantial and purposeful. Gaming is definitely going to overtake other forms of media as the predominant medium for artistic depiction precisely because it's a medium that offers control. It turns a person from a mere audience or viewer to a PLAYER.

While it's true that bad gameplay can break a good story, I believe just as strongly that a bad story can break a good game. It's what kept me from playing Vanquish, for example. I know its got kick-ass third-person shooter gameplay, but I can't seem to bring myself to get it for my PS3 because I've heard all over that its sci-fi story is so vanilla.

Overall, thanks for opening up this topic, it really made me think. Keep up the good work!



Trialia

on **March 9, 2011 at 4:57 pm** said:

Damn well said. I love the Final Fantasy series, for example, because their stories and gameplay are BOTH usually wonderfully complementary to each other – but I still haven't finished instalment 13 of the series because, good though the story is, the gameplay is so linear it's boring me to play it. BOTH need to be decent to make a game really worth valuing to everyone. No matter what people on either side might say.

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