



CRC Press  
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# Professional Techniques for Video Game Writing

SECOND EDITION



Wendy Despain

# Professional Techniques for Video Game Writing



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# Professional Techniques for Video Game Writing

Second Edition

Edited by  
Wendy Despain



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# Preface

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WELCOME TO THE SECOND EDITION of *Professional Techniques for Video Game Writing*. The first edition, written more than 10 years ago, was a fledgling book in a fledgling craft, aimed at drawing out the best techniques from the few professional writers in the game industry. Video games were just beginning to be appreciated as a storytelling medium, and there were few standard practices.

We've come a long way since then. Now, new blockbuster games are evaluated on their story content. Most game companies recognize the value of having a trained writer available for consultation early on, and dialog writing is rarely left to the last minute as an afterthought.

Now we have no excuses. Back then, being a professional game writer was something a lot of people aspired to, but the craft was still being invented. Now we have more established processes and better understood timelines, and we've found and shared many techniques across game studios and the industry at large. We haven't exactly reached full maturity, but we're well into our awkward teenage years where we really ought to know better by now.

So while the first edition of this book gathered whatever processes were working, the second edition looks at many of the same topics but brings together industry best practices, some tried-and-true methods for success, and some outlines for where we're getting better at figuring out how to do this job.

Many of the original contributors have revisited their chapters, updating them with the decade-worth of knowledge and exploration they have gained. In many cases, the original advice still rings true, and there they've clarified or added examples. In other cases, things have changed—either because as writers we have found better ways of doing things or because the industry has changed around us and we've adapted processes to the needs of the game. Those updates are in here, too. Some new chapters have

been added, often because we originally bundled several topics together into a single chapter, but over time they have grown to deserve being addressed in their own chapter.

The list of contributors for this book is pretty impressive. Each one has double-digit years of experience working with the biggest companies in the game industry. At the same time, there's a good variety—plenty of experience on small indie gigs, experimental projects, and in academia. Their bios are included in this book, and they're pretty good reading as well—more than one sly joke, I promise.

But none of them claims we have nothing more to learn. There are still many mysteries, challenges we have yet to tackle, and problems we don't quite know how to solve yet, but we're starting to narrow down the field of what those challenges are.

Other books—whether they focus on the general craft of writing or specifically writing for games—cover more theoretical or general advice, and there are some really good ones out there. This book aims at providing very practical techniques used in game writing from the trenches where it's happening every day. Less theory here, more practice.

In that vein, we have provided writing exercises at the end of each chapter, relating to the material covered in that chapter. Some are light-hearted, and others are introspective efforts at helping you understand how you can do better and be better. All of them require some effort to do well.

Game writing is still not just watching movies and playing games all day. It's a lot of hard work, delving deep into the personal wells of creativity while sticking to a deadline and collaborating with sometimes very large teams. This book aims to arm you for that struggle with practical approaches to common problems, outlining the pathway ahead so you can go faster and farther and do better than we have done so far.

**Wendy Despain**

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# Editor

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**Wendy Despain** has more than two decades of experience spearheading digital media projects. She has worked with teams around the world as a writer, narrative designer, producer, and consultant on interactive experiences ranging from video games to augmented reality. She's worked with EA, Disney, Ubisoft, Tribune Entertainment, Cartoon Network, PBS, Marvel, two Gene Roddenberry universes and Wargaming. Currently, she's a Production Director at ArenaNet, makers of the *Guild Wars* franchise. Her latest short fiction was published in the table-top RPG anthology *Pugmire: Tales of Good Dogs* (Drivethru Fiction, 2019).

**Her other books include the following:**

- *Writing For Videogame Genres: From FPS to RPG* (A K Peters, CRC Press, 2009)
- *Talking to Artists, Talking to Programmers: How to Get Programmers and Artists Communicating* (A K Peters, CRC Press, 2009)
- *100 Principles of Game Design* (New Riders, 2012)



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# Contributors

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**Tom Abernathy** is the Studio Narrative Director at ArenaNet. His major game credits include *Guild Wars 2*, *The Division*, *League of Legends*, *Halo: Reach*, *The Saboteur*, and *Destroy All Humans! 1 & 2*. A 20-year veteran of Jumo (Director of Narrative), Riot Games (Lead Narrative Writer), Microsoft Studios, and the late, great Pandemic Studios, among others, in 2009 he was named as one of The Gamasutra 20: Top Game Writers. A graduate of the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts (MBA) and Oberlin College (BA), Tom has an extensive background as an actor, director, and writer in theater and film; he was the primary writer on 2017's multi-award-winning *The Man in the High Castle: Resistance Radio*, and his most recent film credit, *Bad Country*, was released by Sony Pictures in 2014. You can follow his ill-advised Twitter rantings @tomabernathy.

**Ross Berger** is a screenwriter, narrative designer, and transmedia strategist. He is the author of *Dramatic Storytelling & Narrative Design: A Writer's Guide to Video Games & Transmedia* (Taylor & Francis, 2019), a best-practice "how-to" for fledgling game writers as well as an in-depth exploration of the future of entertainment and storytelling. Since 2007, Ross has bridged the gap between Hollywood and Silicon Valley by designing, writing, and producing story experiences across traditional and new media platforms. Credits include the Webby-Award winning *LonelyGirl15*, the *Obama Girl* franchise, and the Matt Damon/Ben Affleck-produced show *The Runner*. In the video game industry, Ross served as senior narrative designer for such companies as Microsoft Studios and Electronic Arts on titles that include *Quantum Break* and *Sunset Overdrive*. His first console title was *CSI: Deadly Intent*, where he learned video game storytelling from the former masters of narrative, Telltale Games.



Ross has also worked extensively in Virtual Reality as a writer for the Oculus Rift launch title *Farlands* and the award-winning *Eclipse: Edge of Light* for the Google Daydream and Oculus Go.

A graduate of Brandeis (BA, Philosophy) and Columbia (MFA, Playwriting) universities, Ross is a member of the Writers Guild of America and the Television Academy.

**Anthony Burch** is a writer of videogames (*Borderlands 2*, *League of Legends*), comics (*Joker: Year of the Villain*, *Big Trouble in Little China: Old Man Jack*, *Rocko's Modern Afterlife*), and webseries (*Hey Ash Whatcha Playin'*, *RocketJump The Show*). His work has been called “on par with the best of the industry” (*GameInformer*), “worth taking a look at” (*ComicBook.com*), and “I’m writing you out of my will” (David Burch).

**Richard Dansky** is the Central Clancy Writer for Ubisoft. He has 20 years’ experience writing for games, including such titles as *The Division*, *Splinter Cell: Blacklist*, *Rainbow Six: Black Arrow*, and *Driver: San Francisco*. He is also the author of seven novels, including *Ghost Recon Wildlands: Dark Waters*. He lives in North Carolina with a variable number of books and bottles of scotch.

**John Feil** is a veteran game developer who has worked at companies such as LucasArts, Microsoft, Snowblind Studios, Amaze Entertainment, Wizards of the Coast, and most recently, Paizo. He’s worked on properties like *Star Wars*, *DC Comics*, *Marvel Comics*, *Disney Princesses*, and *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Magic: The Gathering*. John spends the bulk of his time removing dog fur from his clothing, playing bass guitar, and helping game companies make better games.

**William Harms** has been a professional writer since the mid-1990s, and he has written for some of the largest and most prestigious entertainment companies in the world, including Sony Entertainment, 2K, Ubisoft, Techland, Marvel Comics, DC Comics, Sega, and Top Cow. His comic book work includes the acclaimed vampire series *Impaler* (finalist for the International Horror Guild Award) and writing comics featuring *Captain America*, *The Avengers*, and *Wolverine*, among others.

William currently works at Hangar 13 (a 2K studio) as narrative director. He led all the writing for *Mafia III*, which was released to wide acclaim

for its story and writing in October of 2016. *Mafia III* was profiled in the *New York Times*, *NPR*, and other major media outlets and was nominated for two BAFTAs, including for narrative. His other game credits include *inFamous*, *inFamous 2*, and *Dead Island: Riptide*.

**Heidi McDonald** is a game writer, designer, creative director, musician, author, lecturer, and workshop facilitator who has worked on 18 game titles (both entertainment and serious, original IPs and licenses) during her 8 years in the games industry. A frequent GDC speaker who has covered topics including romance and emotional engagement in games, Heidi has won a few awards, worn some outlandish hats, eaten a lot of cheese, and generally had a wonderful time. Her book *Digital Love: Romance and Sexuality in Games* was published in 2017 by A K Peters, CRC Press. Heidi has dedicated her career to the idea that games can make positive change and better human beings. More information is available at [www.deathbow.com](http://www.deathbow.com).

**Haris Orkin** has written for television, stage, film, and video games. He has written for *Dungeons and Dragons*, *Kingdom Hearts*, and *Command and Conquer: Tiberium Wars*. *Red Alert 3* for EALA came out in late 2008, and Haris received a Writer's Guild Award nomination for the best video game script. Ubisoft and Techland released *Call of Juarez: Bound in Blood* in June 2009 to strong sales and excellent reviews. *Dead Island* was released in 2011 and was one of the top selling titles of the year. In 2013, *Company of Heroes 2* for Relic Entertainment and *Call of Juarez: Gunslinger* for Ubisoft and Techland were both released. In 2015, Orkin wrote for *Dying Light*, which was one of the top selling games of the year. *Tom Clancy's The Division* (Ubisoft) and *Mafia 3* (2K) came out in 2016. *Mafia 3* was nominated for a BAFTA award for the best writing in a video game. In 2017, *Ruiner* (Reikon Games) and *Get Even* (Bandai Namco) were both released to wide acclaim.

**Rhianna Pratchett** has worked on titles such as *Tomb Raider*, *Heavenly Sword*, Codemasters' twisted fantasy games *Overlord*, *Overlord II* and *Overlord: Dark Legend*, 2k's *BioShock Infinite*, and EA's *Mirror's Edge*. She has also contributed to several books on games writing and authored the *Tomb Raider: The Beginning* comics with Dark Horse and the six-part *Mirror's Edge* miniseries with DC Comics, along with several of her own short stories and screenplays (*Vigilia* and *Warrior Daughter*).

**Tracy A. Seamster** began her games career as an independent contractor before working on a number of AAA MMOs (*EverQuest II*, *FreeRealms*, *The Agency*, *The Elder Scrolls Online*) as a writer and game designer. She's currently independent again, living with her cat Melody on a horse farm in the middle of nowhere surrounded by fields, forests, and insects. She hates insects.

**Maurice Suckling** has helped develop over 40 published video games since the late 1990s, including *Driver*, *BioShock 2*, *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel*, *Civilization VI*, *Killing Floor 2*, and *Fortnite*. He is currently Professor of Practice at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Upstate New York, where he leads the writing concentration for the Games, Simulation, Arts, and Sciences program ([www.mauricesuckling.com](http://www.mauricesuckling.com)).

**Samantha Wallschlaeger** is a writer and narrative designer currently working at Monolith Productions. Her credits include *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, and *Guild Wars 2*. She's passionate about the blending of narrative and design, healthy creative collaboration, and inclusivity in story and characters.

**Andrew S. Walsh** is an award-winning writer/director with credits across film, television, theater, radio, animation, and video games. A man of many job titles, he has appeared as writer, director, speech designer, narrative designer, narrative producer, story consultant, script editor, motion capture director, camera director, voice director, story producer, story liner, story editor, and once mysteriously as "t-by" something which he can only attribute to being a tea-drinking Englishman. Currently working as a senior writer with Guerrilla, to date he has worked on more than eighty video games including *Fable Legends*, *Nosgoth*, *Prince of Persia*, *Harry Potter*, *Risen*, *Shadow of the Beast*, *The Division 2*, *Medieval II: Total War*, *LEGO City: Undercover*, *Need for Speed: Most Wanted*, and *Watch Dogs: Legion*. His television credits include *Raven*, *Emmerdale*, *Byker Grove*, and *Family Affairs*, whereas his film work includes the English version of *Professor Layton* and *The Eternal Diva*. He can be found lurking online through [www.andrewwalsh.com](http://www.andrewwalsh.com).

**Marek Walton** got his break as a writer on *Driver: Parallel Lines* in 2004. Since then, he's worked on story, script, and dialogue on a wide variety

of games including *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel*, *Fable Legends*, *Killing Floor 2*, and *Wonderbook: Book of Spells*. Marek also voice directs, having worked on titles such as *BioShock 2*, *Sonic* and *SEGA All-Stars Racing*, and the *Wii Fit* series. He holds a Master's degree in Creative Writing from Edinburgh University and is currently a senior narrative designer at Crystal Dynamics.



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# Getting Writing Jobs in Video Games

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Wendy Despain

*NCSoft, Quantum Content, International Hobo*

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THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY is full of paradoxes. It's a job focused on goofing off. The tools used for making games range from absolutely free to outrageously expensive. Getting people to play your game can cost millions of dollars in advertising, or you can get lucky and have a word-of-mouth phenomenon. There are no rules, only exceptions.

The paradox at the core of getting hired as a writer in the game industry is that it's an entertainment industry job, and so is as hard to break into as music and television – but in order to be considered for an entry-level writing position, it's best to already have significant experience. So, how do you overcome the paradox? Mostly with a combination of knowledge and gumption.

So first, the knowledge. This chapter first focuses on what kinds of jobs are available for writers in the game industry and what kinds of prerequisites and skills are generally expected. It finishes up by covering job hunt advice that applies to all of them.

There are three different types of jobs a writer-sort-of-person may get hired for in games. Let's start with the one that at first seems most obvious, but actually has the widest variety of possible permutations.

### 1.1 GAME WRITER

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It's oversimplifying to say that the game writer is the person who writes the script for the game. For one thing, writers think of the script as dialog and direction, whereas programmers think of script as lightweight programming. And to be clear, a game writer is usually not doing much of that kind of scripting, though they may do some. They do write the dialog script. And this is what most game developers think of. The writer is the person on the team who makes the dialog fun or dramatic or gritty or intense. They put words in the mouths of the characters the rest of the team is designing, modeling, and programming. They provide context for quests and names for monsters. They find 20 different ways of saying "You win!" so it doesn't get too repetitive to tell players when they are doing well.

Game writing is simultaneously very collaborative and very lonely. Often, writers are surrounded by programmers, artists, and designers with whom they co-create this piece of entertainment software. But the writer often puts headphones on or otherwise isolates themselves, so they can focus on getting the words written down. Many of their teammates don't understand what they do and don't intuitively know when to consult with the writer.

Although there may be a lead writer on a team of writers, the job is generally very focused on getting the right words into the right place in the engine. It's often more tactical rather than strategic.

Strong game writers generate short, pithy dialog that conveys story, emotion, and character. They do a lot of work to build out their characters and setting and plot, and many of those words never make it into the game. However, that work is a crucial foundation for them and the rest of the team. They answer questions like:

- Who is this character, and why do I want to follow them into danger?
- How do we tell the players what to do without sounding like we are ordering them around?
- What plot point can we use to motivate the player to move to that point on the map where the next gameplay element is?

Game writer can be an entry-level job, or a place where someone with experience in other industries can make the change into working for video games. At larger game companies, the writers work on teams with a fair amount of guidance and supervision. Many game writers still work as contractors and freelancers, parachuting in to write the dialog they are assigned and then moving on to the next gig.

Expectations of candidates:

- 2–3 years of experience—schoolwork and internships can count here if there is enough high-quality writing
- Portfolio with writing samples and games

## 1.2 NARRATIVE DESIGNER

---

A narrative designer generally focuses on solving the challenges involved in combining story elements with gameplay and interaction. Sometimes, this job isn't called out with a unique title. There are some designers with a natural affinity for storytelling, and this comes out in their work whether they are specifically tasked with narrative design or not. However, when a project is planned to have a heavy narrative focus from the beginning, many times there will be at least one person designated as a narrative designer. Their responsibilities generally fall into two areas.

### 1.2.1 Story Presentation Decisions

Narrative designers often architect the approach for presenting story. For instance, deciding when cinematics are used, solving how branching dialog choices are presented on screen, and how story logs or journals are incorporated. Individual tasks for narrative designers can vary widely depending on the project and the specific needs of the game. They may seem somewhat similar to writers' tasks, as narrative designers often participate in big-picture storybreaking sessions, write narrative summaries, maintain story outlines and scoping documents. However, some tasks are more similar to traditional game design, as narrative designers may sketch plans for user interface elements, create rubrics for presenting narrative elements consistently, and problem-solve edge cases where story and gameplay are clashing. They dig in on minutia like how many characters can be used in chat bubbles and which kinds of lines will have voice-over, rather than text-only presentation.



### 1.2.2 Designing Gameplay for Ludonarrative Harmony

The concept of ludonarrative harmony may be most easily defined by explaining its opposite—ludonarrative dissonance. This technical term is used by game designers to describe the problem of gameplay action or mechanics contradicting or conflicting with the narrative elements presented at the same time.

On a basic level, ludonarrative dissonance can be seen when a game gives players currency that looks like food (collecting apples, for instance) and a problem to solve that involves feeding something (small humans, perhaps), but even though you have a stack of 10 apples, you are told you have nothing to feed this hungry child. Ludonarrative dissonance can also be a problem beyond icon shape choices, at a more macro level. For instance, if the theme of the narrative in the game revolved around hope, optimism, and growth, but the only actions available to players were killing and destruction, the gameplay would often contradict the narrative elements. Hopeful, optimistic stories will fall somewhat flat, or feel tacked-on. Effective narrative options in this gameplay setting are pretty much limited to rescue missions and victorious wars against dastardly, one-dimensional villains. However, if the primary actions available in the game were crafting and exploration mechanics, these would more easily reinforce hopeful, optimistic narrative elements.

When narrative and gameplay work together to reinforce each other, instead of competing or contradicting each other, they have an exponential effect. The player experience can transcend other narrative forms as the audience doesn't just identify with a superhero saving the day—they themselves take the actions to save the day and stand up to shout at the screen as they triumph. Books and movies don't deliver this kind of experience.

Narrative designers focus on the combination of design skills with narrative skills. They answer questions like:

- How will dialog be displayed on-screen?
- Where are our mechanics conflicting with our story?
- How can the design of the game resonate with the story to deliver a more powerful experience?

Narrative design is a complex balancing act not usually entrusted to entry-level applicants. There may be opportunities to contribute portions of the narrative design while employed as a writer or designer on a large project, or if you're in a small studio or working on an indie game, there may be nobody else available to take on these tasks. Narrative design responsibilities are sometimes distributed across multiple designers, with none of them taking on the title. It can be a role that writers grow into, if they have an affinity for game design. Expectations of candidates:

- 4+ years of experience in game design, writing, or both
- Portfolio of completed game projects and large-scale narratives like plays or movies, and some writing samples

### 1.3 STORY EDITOR/LOREMASTER/LEAD WRITER/NARRATIVE DIRECTOR

---

This job goes by many names. On large-scale game projects, a team of writers usually works together, similar to a television series writing staff. This writing team's leader has a slightly different job from the other writers. Sometimes just called a lead writer, sometimes given titles like story editor or narrative director, this person is responsible for keeping an eye on the big picture story—sometimes spanning multiple games or tie-ins.

They often don't write dialog themselves, but they guide the work of other writers and help keep the staff working in the same direction. They spot problems when a character's tone has changed from one writer to another, and they make sure big story arcs are being followed and paid off. They often do a lot of big-picture planning for outlines and histories, which they then record in documentation and present to the rest of the team, usually soliciting feedback from the writing team as they go. This position is roughly equivalent to the showrunner job in television. Sometimes, these responsibilities are combined with managerial duties. They answer questions like:

- What is the high-level narrative arc?
- Where will the stop/start points be for episodes, chapters, etc.?
- How will the staff writers share tasks?

Lead writer is an advanced role requiring a lot of experience leading teams and solving narrative problems. This sometimes means experience writing on multiple game titles, but this kind of narrative experience can sometimes transfer from having worked in theater or television leading groups of writers. Expectations of candidates:

- 6+ years working in teams of writers
- Portfolio of published/produced plays, movies, or games

## 1.4 MORE WRITING-RELATED JOBS

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There are a few other writing-related jobs some game companies hire. Editors are sometimes hired to help with copy editing all text that goes into the game. This is a final pass to minimize typos, conflicting boss names and confusing skill explanations. Not all game companies have someone in this role. When hiring for it, they look for someone with obsessive attention to detail, strong technical skills, grammar geekery, and the ability to persevere through a mountain of work without complaint.

A slightly more common job is a VO specialist or voice-over coordinator. This person shepherds dialog through the pipeline after writers are finished with it, booking voice-over talent, making sure all scripts are ready for recording, managing VO sessions and getting that VO back to game developers for hooking up in the game. They also make sure the handoff to localization goes smoothly. Less writing experience is needed for this job, but it can be a real benefit to have that talent for storytelling and ability to spot problems with scripts as they move through the process. Experience working in radio, television, or some other job involving voice talent is more highly valued.

## 1.5 GENERAL ADVICE FOR BREAKING IN

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There are a few things that are common for all writing-related jobs in the game industry. Keep in mind that it's a business like many others, and professionalism is appreciated. This means being able to handle stress gracefully, communicate effectively, and have creative outcomes when approaches and opinions conflict. No matter what your job is, it's important to hit your deadlines, work within your constraints, and be reliable. If you're easy to work with, more people will want to work with you. Keeping the job you get or getting the next one will be much easier.

### 1.5.1 Titles in the Game Industry

No two game companies are exactly alike, and titles are not standardized across the game industry, so these descriptions are intended to convey a general sense of what many people expect people in these jobs to do. There can also be pretty wide variance in the day-to-day responsibilities of two people with the same title working at different game studios, so ask a lot of questions at the specific studio where you're applying.

### 1.5.2 Make Games—Indie Style

The way to solve the chicken/egg problem of needing experience doing the job before you get the job is to take the initiative and make your own games. There are several kinds of software available—many of them for free—that will help you make a game with little to no programming. Unity is a very popular game engine that is used in professional studios as well as by indie games. There are tutorials available, or you can just jump in and start pushing buttons to see how things work. GameMaker, Inkle, Ren'Py, and Twine are simpler and more focused on smaller-scale games.

If you can conceive, plan, write, and build a short game to put in your portfolio, you have gained valuable experience. Many people start that process and never finish. Just by getting to the end, you will be able to demonstrate that you can stick with a project all the way through and deliver on something you planned from the beginning. Don't underestimate how valuable it is to demonstrate that to a potential employer. A small game (or more than one) on your portfolio will also demonstrate that you understand the fundamentals of interactive storytelling and aren't afraid to learn new software.

If you want to be a game writer, don't wait for someone else to hire you to be one. You don't need anyone's permission. Instead of working on that novel every night after your day job, work on your game. Keep a handle on the scope. Finish it and put it on your portfolio. Then make another one.

### 1.5.3 Write Other Forms of Narrative

Don't just write games. Also write plays. Write comic books. Write movies. Try stand-up comedy. Write a script for a TV show. Find another narrative outlet to practice in. This will provide easy-to-digest writing samples for your portfolio, but it will also give you practice solving narrative problems

finding the right word, getting through writer's block, and finding an audience for your work.

Some games have had interesting, compelling stories, but the medium hasn't been around long enough to develop enough of its own storytelling language. There are some standards out there, but they aren't the entire box of crayons we could be drawing with. Video games have a lot of room for innovation and finding new ways to tell more effective stories than we have ever told before.

Do deep-dive analysis projects on why your favorite movies and games are successful. Play games, watch movies—the classics, the ones people talk about from 10 years ago and longer. See how other cultures use the same media and compare storytelling techniques. Come up with theories about what works in game narrative, and try them out on small projects to prove they work. All of this will make you a better game writer and help you get a job doing things you love.

#### 1.5.4 Network

Build a network of friends and acquaintances who are also interested in breaking into the game industry. This can easily be done at a school with a game development program. Often, when one of your classmates gets a job, they can recommend people they went to school with when there are openings at their new company.

School isn't the only place to meet game developers. There are game developer conferences like GDC in the spring, with talks about best practices in all game developer disciplines. The International Game Developer's Association is a professional association with mentorship programs, meet-ups, online resources, and developer's conference information. Take advantage of their programs for people trying to break in. There are also internship opportunities and entry-level QA tester roles that don't require specialized training. These jobs can help you see what it's like to work at a game company and learn more about the development process.

Remember that networking isn't just about meeting people and business cards. It's about making new friends, helping people connect who otherwise wouldn't have met, and generally demonstrating you can be a pleasant person to be around. Be professional and respectful. Even if you hated a game someone made, remember that they may have learned things in the process they could share with you.

### 1.5.5 Portfolio

Build an online portfolio you can refer potential employers to. Fill it with writing samples, games you've made, and blog posts about your game-related experiences. Demonstrate your creativity, personal writing style, and display what your strengths are.

Your portfolio is what gets you the job. Make sure it reflects what you're interested in. If you really want to work in sci-fi, try to have at least one sample in that genre in your portfolio, but don't worry too much about customizing your portfolio for every job you apply to. Have a variety of work available, and suggest different pieces to different employers to point them in the direction of their kind of material.

If you include projects you worked on with other people, it can be very helpful to include some commentary about how that collaboration went and what parts of the final product were your contribution.

## 1.6 CONCLUSION

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Video games can be a rich space for telling stories, and there are fun opportunities for collaborating with other creative people on making something innovative. It's a dream job for a lot of people, although too many people think more about the dream part than the job part. It's a job like any other. Someone is paying you to get specific work done on their timeline. And it is work. There's a lot of boring, tedious work to do to make 80 hours of gameplay, and you're usually doing it with other passionate people who may be hard to convince that your idea is better than theirs.

At video game jobs, you may get to play games at work, but they're broken games. They're full of bugs, the balance is off, the dialog is clunky or missing, and there are only a few things to do. Over time, the games get better, but just when they get to be really fun, you ship that game out to the public and start the process over again.

## 1.7 EXERCISES

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1. Research game engines and pick a new one to learn.
2. Create a portfolio website with samples of your work.
3. Write a choose-your-own-adventure style short story in a program like Twine or Inkle and add it to your portfolio website.



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# Game Script Formatting

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Wendy Despain

*NCSoft, Quantum Content, International Hobo*

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IF YOU'RE COMING TO THIS CHAPTER to learn about the game industry standard practice for formatting a game script, I have bad news for you. There isn't one. In eight years as a freelance game writer, no two game companies ever asked me for the same document format. There's no call for one-inch margins and twelve-point Times Roman in .docx files. I've worked in three different Excel spreadsheet layouts and two kinds of modified screenplay format. Some of my big-picture interactive narrative assignments are turned in with a modified memo style along with an intricate, hand-drawn, Photoshop-edited flowchart. Many studios use their own homebrew text entry system into their game engine, and one game job required me to write my dialog directly into code. They all do what works best for their individual team. Conformity is not common in this industry.

And yet, storytelling has a history of appreciating structure—just ask the fans of haiku and iambic pentameter. Writers are accustomed to being given a structure and format set in stone and the freedom to fill in that structure with characters and content in any style they like. Game writing



doesn't work that way. In fact, sometimes it's exactly the opposite. You get an assignment where you're told they don't care what file format it's delivered in, but your narrative must include a princess, a plumber, and a bunch of mushrooms.

## 2.1 THERE IS NO ONE TRUE INTERACTIVE SCRIPT FORMAT

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There just is no one true interactive script format. There are a few very good reasons for this and a few less good reasons. Let's start with the less good reasons. They're partly cultural, partly habitual, and partly arbitrary. For one thing, the video game industry has a long history of independence. Many of the early computer games were created by lone enthusiasts.

Although huge teams are brought together by big corporations to make games today, the organizations still have a maverick, rebellious culture. Everyone thinks they can do this better than the other guys, so they start from scratch and reinvent as many wheels as they can. Each studio has a different workflow and a different set of development tools and a different philosophy about narrative. They all have their own way of dealing with dialog and narrative planning.

Secondly, the added position of "writer" on these big development teams is relatively new. Up until about 2002, game designers and programmers did what we today call narrative design and dialog writing. Many of them didn't have the background in traditional forms of writing but were very inventive, so they created a system that worked for them on the particular game they were building at the time. As writers were hired onto teams and as contractors, they mostly worked in isolation from each other—again, coming up with their own formats.

Historical and cultural reasons aside, there are two very good reasons for not having one consistent script format across all games. For one thing, new ways of playing games, new ways of building games, and new genres of games are still being invented all the time. If we get too structured with back-end procedures too soon, we may tie our hands for future innovation. Games are not novels, they're not screenplays, and they need to develop their own format. Leading the pack right now are connected-box formats like Twine, where branching storylines and choice-based consequences can be visually represented, but something better may come along at any moment.

Possibly the most important reason for not having one consistent format is that games themselves don't have one consistent format. Consider writing quest dialog for a role-playing game versus commentary for a sports

game. They have different requirements, different delivery methods, and different purposes. It's difficult for them to effectively share a common format. Within the game-development process, text needs to be presented in different formats for different developers. For instance, programmers need to put icon names and slider labels text into game interfaces, animators need to lip-sync the dialog, and the voice-over actors need to put feeling and tone into an audio file. All these people need different things when they're looking at your words, and changing the format to fit the use can go a long way to bringing out the best performance and presentation for the game.

## 2.2 HOW FORMAT WORKS IN STUDIOS

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It's a cliché because it's true. You've got to use the right tool for the job. It's possible to pound a nail in with a screwdriver, but it's much better to use a hammer, or even better a pneumatic nailer. The same goes for script formatting. Game developers today use different formats for doing different jobs. If you're writing a cutscene or cinematic or scripted event, anything that ends up being presented to the player in a noninteractive, movie-like fashion is best communicated using a movie-like script format. This is either the "traditional screenplay" or "modified screenplay" format. An example of a game script (from the console game *Call of Juarez: Gunslinger*) in a traditional screenplay format is included in Appendix A.

More interactive portions of the game are usually presented in a spreadsheet format. Often, writers aren't familiar with Excel, but when the end product needs to be imported into a database and triggered by code or randomized, that's the best format to put it in.

And when it comes to planning nonlinear narrative, a picture is still worth a thousand words. Sometimes the first draft of this picture is sketched on the back of a napkin, but this isn't very effective at communicating it to a development team. The format for presenting nonlinear narrative structure is still up in the air. I've seen whiteboards with color-coded markers, bulletin boards with note cards and photos, sticky notes on a blank wall, and modified PowerPoint and Visio org charts. Twine and its variants can make these visual representations more interactive, and Scrivener and Final Draft have some useful elements, but there's just no one tool that does everything.

Individual studios often create proprietary development tools to help streamline their production process. To get some idea of how these work, take a look at the modding features some PC games provide, or learn to