



From Jem to CastleVille

A "Truly Outrageous" Game Narrative Postmortem

Christy Marx

Principal Game & Narrative Designer

Zynga



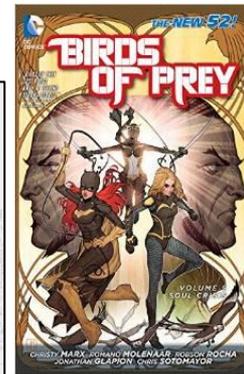
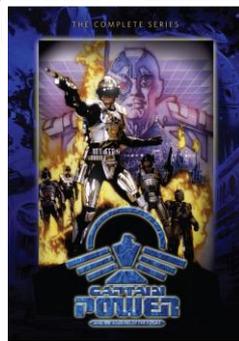
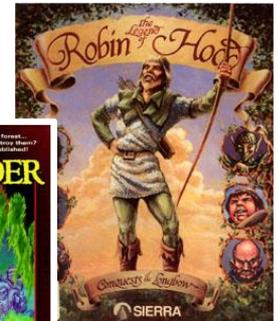
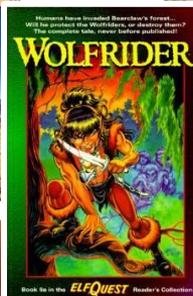
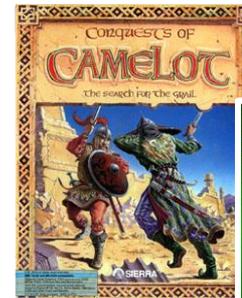
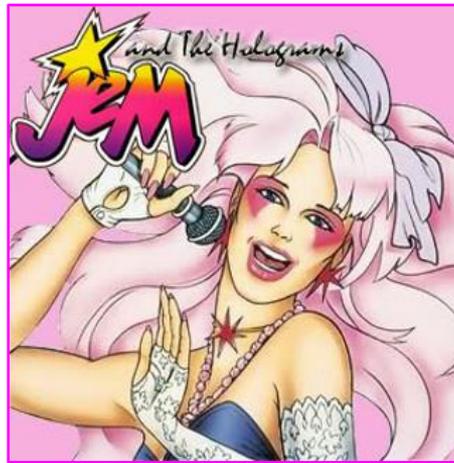
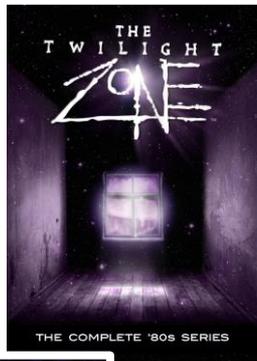
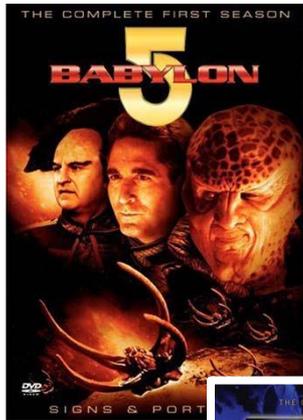
GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE®

MOSCONE CENTER · SAN FRANCISCO, CA

MARCH 2-6, 2015 · EXPO: MARCH 4-6, 2015

My Background

TV, Feature, Animation, Games, Comics





How is Jem relevant to a mobile game?



- Animation, comics & games are all forms of visual storytelling.
- They are collaborative art forms in similar art styles.
- They use the same story genres: fantasy, sf, action-adventure.
- They require tight, concise, focused writing.





CastleVille Legends Premise



A Dark Wizard cast a Spell of Gloom over the land that traps Heroes in crystal.

Hundreds of years later, you (the player) drive back the Gloom, set the Heroes free, and build a new Kingdom.

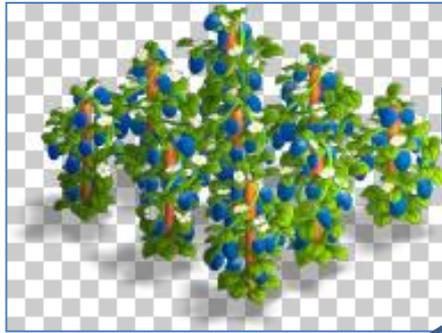
ELDER GAME BOARD





BASIC INVEST & EXPRESS GAME LOOP

Resources



Workshops



Craft Goods



Use Gold to buy more Resources & Workshops



Sell Goods to Merchant





EXTENDED INVEST & EXPRESS GAME LOOP





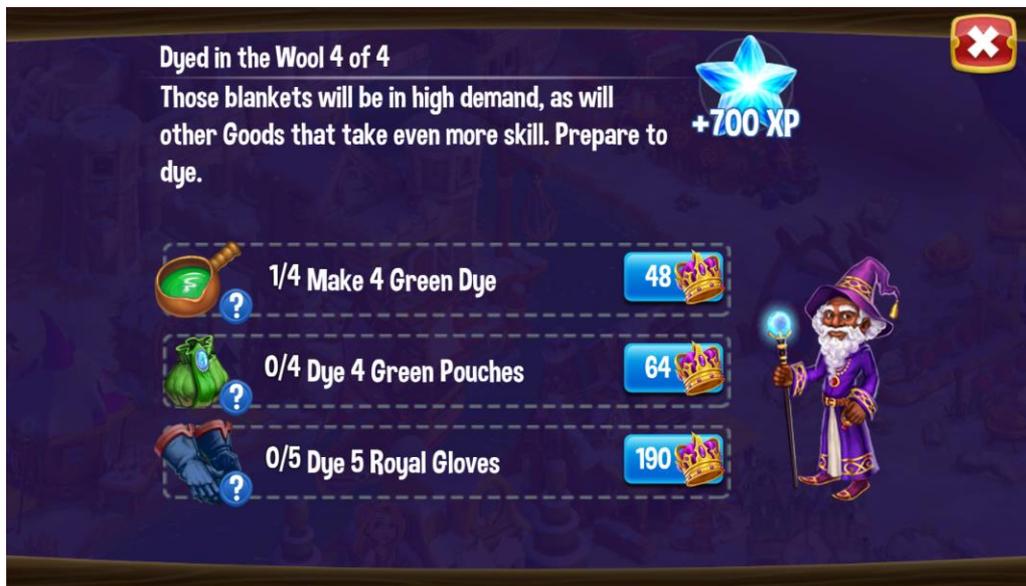
MAPPING THE NARRATIVE

- Several significant narrative factors gated by map
- Map size determined nearly everything else
- Number of zones/realms determined:
 - The number of Heroes
 - The number of Places of Legend
 - The number of resources and workshops
 - Resources includes crops, animals, mines, lumberyard, ice pond, stone quarry, etc.



NARRATIVE FOR MOBILE

- The most significant difference between mobile and PC or even tablet, is the limitation of the physical space.
- Think of game writing as the haiku of storytelling.
- Tweet = 140 characters
- Quest text = 125 characters plus Localization space





NARRATIVE STRUCTURES



EPISODIC or MODULAR

- Avoided single linear storyline with a definite end goal.
- A specific goal leads to constantly moving the goalposts for the player because in an evergreen game, you never want the player to feel they've "finished" the game.

HOPSCOTCH ARCS

- Hero's arcs stand alone and can overlap without conflicting.
- Easy to add new modules of story to the same Hero.
- Some quests can hint at a larger meta-story.

BREADCRUMBING

- Sprinkle a trail of story "breadcrumbs" into the modular quest chains.
- Accumulative storytelling in which the breadcrumbs eventually add up to a larger story.



REPEAT, REPEAT, REPEAT



- Don't be afraid to be repetitive. Don't assume players will remember a person, place or event that seems obvious to you.
- The player's experience with the text is not the same as reading it on a spreadsheet. Days or weeks can pass between reading pieces of text.



Hero's gameplay purpose:

- Unlock zones & crafting
- Explore Places of Legend
- Strategy element in selection of Heroes
- Get valuable rare drops.



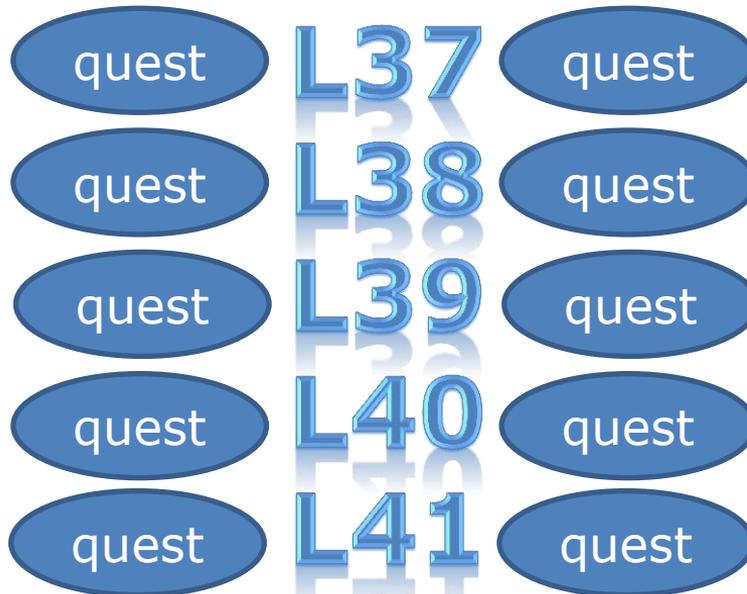
Hero's narrative purpose:

- Create story immersion
- Quests that drive the extended core loop



MODULAR QUEST CHAINS

- Created two simultaneous, independent quest chains per zone: one for the Hero and one for Magnus.
- One quest chain for the Hero's individual story and one that hinted at the meta-story.

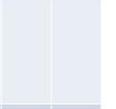
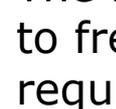
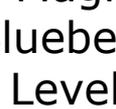
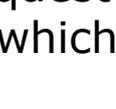




CHALLENGES:

- Failed to take into account how the game was tuned and how long it would take players to level up, especially later in the game.
- Not enough quests for the player to transition more smoothly from one level to the next.
- Had a single quest with tasks that spanned more than one level causing players to stick at one quest while they tried to level up twice.
- Had quests where all 3 tasks used the same workshop, which isn't optimal.

Progression

Level	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	
Features (incl. Heroes)																					
Legendary Places																					
Mills																					
Workshops																					
New Workshop Recipes	0	0	2	0	1	1	3	3	3	2	2	2	1	2	2	3	3	2	1	1	
Other																					

- Magnus introduced at start; Rafael at L3; Yvette at L9; next Hero, BLUEBELLE, not until L21 – a massive gap.
- Both the Magnus and Yvette quest chains for her zone ended around Level 18.
- The final Magnus quest was to free Bluebelle, which required Level 21.
- There were no quests at all to get the player from Level 18 to Level 21.



EVENT CONSEQUENCES

- Events (cadence features) are vital to retention and revenue.
- Wide-funnel means setting events at low levels (around L11-14) for participation by largest number of players.
- Which left us with only three Hero NPCs to use for every event, which quickly became restrictive for coming up with stories, quests and tasks.





QUICK SOLUTION:

New, modular, long quest chain using previous learnings to bridge the gap.

Going for Baroque

Yvette will surely swoon if I bring her a precious gift - a gleaming scale fallen from a dragon in the ancient days.

+1 Crown

- 3/1 Have 1 Silver Wire ✓
- 3/1 Have 1 Iridescent Scale ✓
- 0/1 Make 1 Dragonscale Necklace. 150

A Tart Rejoinder

A taste of tart lemon might let Rafael know that it takes more than honey and baubles to impress a woman.

+2500 XP

- 1/1 Plant 1 Lemon Tree ✓
- 6/4 Harvest 4 Lemons ✓
- 0/2 Bake 2 Lemon Tarts 90



HARDER SOLUTION:

We took GIOVANNI, originally designed for L47, and retrofitted him to L16, along with his zone, quests, resources, workshops, workshop recipes, and Places of Legend. This instantly boosted variety of stories, quests, and tasks.





KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Strive for open-ended narrative structure with evergreen games.
- Think episodic or modular storytelling.
- Think of game writing as the haiku of storytelling, especially for mobile.
- Front-load game with enough NPCs and assets to provide variety and interest in your wide-funnel events.
- Create enough quests to keep players from getting stuck or feeling aimless.
- Breadcrumb bits of story to create an accumulative storyline.
- Repeat, repeat, repeat.

