



# THE DESIGN IN NARRATIVE DESIGN



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# HELLO

I'm Jurie Horneman, I've been making  
games since 1991.

I've worn a lot of hats: today I'm  
wearing my game designer hat.



# WHAT ABOUT YOUR HATS?



Who here thinks of themselves  
primarily as a writer?

A narrative designer?

A game designer?

Who here thinks storytelling in games  
would be better if writers were  
consulted more often and especially  
earlier?

That there is a very pernicious  
problem. It's systemic, it's complicated.



# WHAT I'LL BE TALKING ABOUT

I'm not going to solve that problem here today. But hopefully I can cast a new light on it by showing a design approach that I've found to be extremely useful in game design. I'll start with some quick definitions, then an example, then I will talk about the design approach, and then what that means for storytelling in games.



# 1. TWO DEFINITIONS

**First I want to ask you to suspend your disbelief and to accept two simple non-academic definitions of terms I will be using, just for the sake of argument.**



# STORY

PRE-AUTHORED, ABOUT  
SOMETHING HAPPENING TO  
SOMEONE

People get confused by what is meant  
by 'story' in games.

Including me! I mean a pre-authored  
story, not an 'emergent' story or 'the  
story about my roleplaying session'.



FICTIONAL

RELATED TO THINGS I AM  
ASKING YOU TO PRETEND ARE  
TRUE



**This is about willing suspension of  
disbelief.**

**This is a very important concept for this  
talk.**



## 2. AN EXAMPLE

Let's say you have a game where the player has hit-points. You need to show the player how much hitpoints she has.  
A very common design problem.



<b>98</b> AMMO	<b>86%</b> HEALTH	<table border="1"><tr><td>2</td><td>3</td><td>4</td></tr><tr><td>5</td><td>6</td><td>7</td></tr></table> ARMS	2	3	4	5	6	7		<b>187%</b> ARMOR	<table border="1"><tr><td></td><td>BULL</td><td>400</td><td>/</td><td>400</td></tr><tr><td></td><td>SHEL</td><td>98</td><td>/</td><td>100</td></tr><tr><td></td><td>ROKT</td><td>100</td><td>/</td><td>100</td></tr><tr><td></td><td>CELL</td><td>600</td><td>/</td><td>600</td></tr></table>		BULL	400	/	400		SHEL	98	/	100		ROKT	100	/	100		CELL	600	/	600
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Doom (id Software, 1993)

Boom. There you go. Job done. Well done everyone.

OK, but now let's say you decide that you want to really immerse the player in the world, and so you say you don't want "game-y" numbers on screen, because they break suspension of disbelief.





Half-Life (Valve Corporation, 1998)

So you find an explanation in your game's setting. You say, well, the player puts on a high-tech exo-suit that has an actual HUD. Eureka! A beautiful solution. Minimal HUD, and it makes total sense in the world of the game. Now let's say you love the idea of not having a numbers on screen. But! Your game has a fantasy setting and an exo-suit doesn't work. So what do you do?



# ICO™





If you're the designers of ICO, you take out hitpoints altogether. You think about why you need hitpoints, and why you want the player to know about them. You make all the situations so they're very clearly deadly or not. Slow the player down instead of decreasing an abstract number. You get pretty much the same effect but without breaking suspension of disbelief. This is a lot of work and affects the whole game! But it's a wonderful solution.



3. WHAT DID  
WE JUST SEE?

**So what did we just see here?**



# MECHANICAL & FICTIONAL

We were looking at two sides of the game: the rules (the mechanical side), and then the fictional side of the game. This is a really useful way of looking at game design. I've been using this approach a lot, and I know other game designers have too, even if they maybe don't use these exact words.

**You look at your game from these two sides, and you try to make things come together into one pleasing experience. Because if you don't balance these two sides, you can get dissonance, which you usually don't want. You risk breaking suspension of disbelief.**



MECHANICAL  
= ABSTRACT

The mechanical side of a game is abstract: the fiction is what gives a game meaning. Of course the mechanical side has a big effect on the experience, but if I just say "when this counter hits zero the game ends," that can mean anything.





FICTIONAL  
= MEANINGFUL

**The fictional side is what we're asking players to believe when we talk about suspension of disbelief.**

**Every design element can be seen from the mechanical and from the fictional side. These are two sides of the same thing. They are not separate. They are aspects, dimensions, perspectives.**



# EXPLAINING THE MECHANICAL SIDE

**To balance the fictional and the mechanical often involves explaining a mechanical element, justifying it within the game's setting.**



(DIEGESIS)

The fancy word for this is diegesis. As I use it, it comes from sound design in film.



# WORLD-BUILDING

**What you do when you explain the mechanical is world-building: inventing how the world works, which characters or creatures exist in the game, why a character acts a certain way.  
Let's look at a few more examples:**





Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time (Ubisoft, 2003)

**Example: explained character death in  
Prince of Persia: Sands of Time.**





Portal (Valve Corporation, 1998)

**Example: explained level design in  
Portal.**



Manhunt (Rockstar Games, 2003)

**Example: explained level design in  
Manhunt.**





# GOING BACK AND FORTH

In the design process you often go back and forth between the mechanical and the fictional. You find some explanations for mechanical elements, and once you've done that, that may trigger new ideas for the mechanical side.

It's not uncommon to go back and forth a couple of times.

Here is an example:





Deus Ex: Invisible War (Ion Storm, 2003)

**An example of mechanical ideas  
coming from the fictional side: DX2  
black market biomods.**



NOT EXPLAINING THE  
MECHANICAL SIDE  
(CONVENTIONS)

Sometimes it's fine to leave an element as is and assume it won't harm the player's experience, because it's a convention of video games.



The Getaway (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2002)

**Example: This is The Getaway. The game is telling you where to go. Can you tell?**





Grand Theft Auto: Vice City (Rockstar Games, 2002)

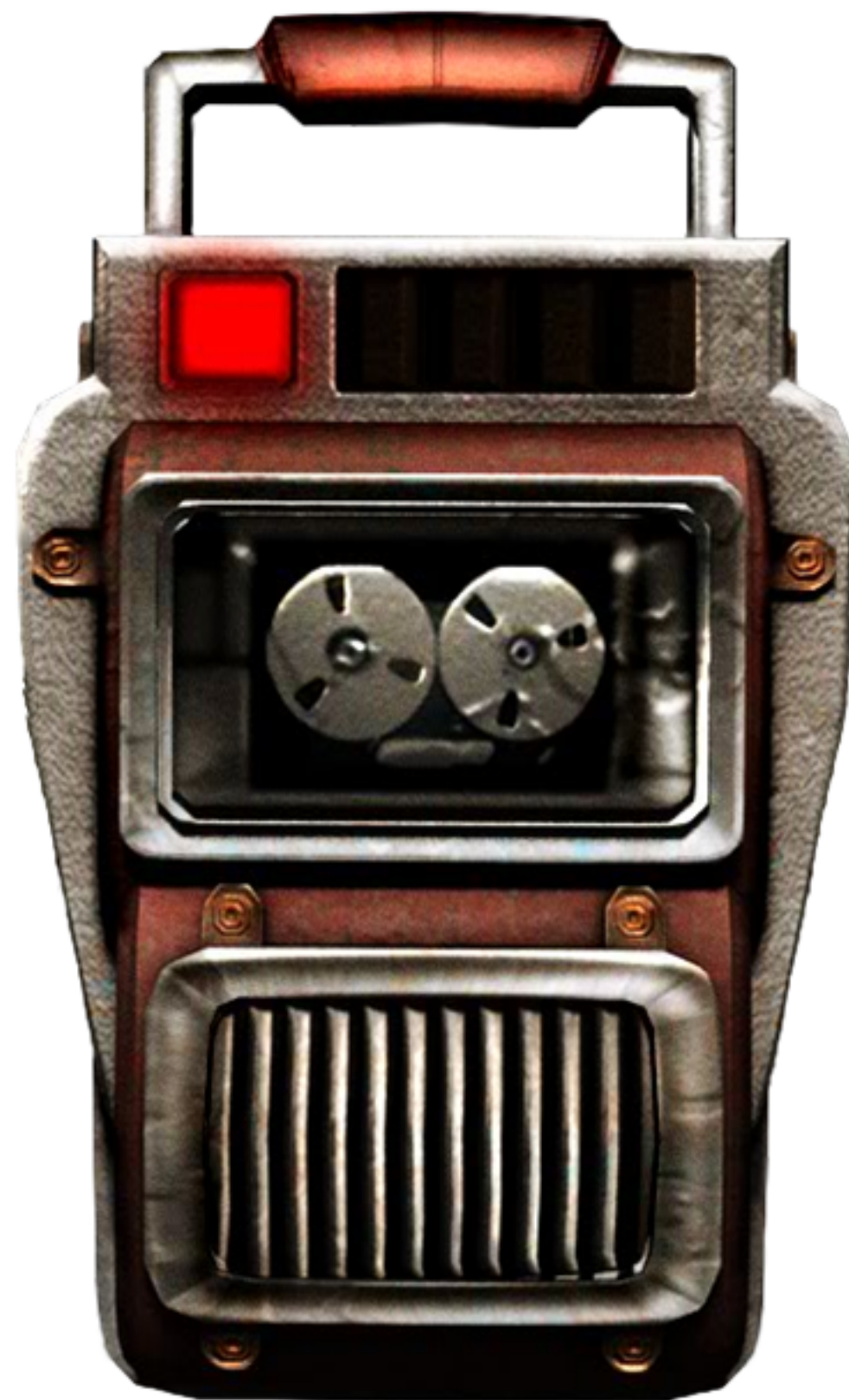
**This is GTA: Vice City doing the same thing. It's not subtle but it works!**





# CONVENTIONS EVOLVE OVER TIME

**Game conventions evolve over time.  
Common justifications become too  
commonplace.**



BioShock (2K Boston / 2K Australia, 2007)

Conveniently placed audio diaries as a way to optionally tell backstory.  
Loudspeakers and walkie-talkies as a way to have a companion character without having to show them.

...

Players are smart, they can spot overused explanations.



4. WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR  
GAME TEAMS?

**Working on the fictional side of design  
requires skills you probably know well  
as a writer.**

**It requires world-building, inventing  
characters, places, situations.  
Reconciling rules and fiction, which is  
not unlike reconciling plot and  
character.**

**Adapting a game's fiction to the  
constraints of a medium.**

These are skills that every writer, every storyteller knows.

But they have nothing to do with "story" - remember my definition. They are a subset of the skills you require to tell a story.



IF VIRTUALLY ALL GAMES HAVE  
A FICTIONAL SIDE...





...THEN ALL GAME TEAMS  
NEED STORYTELLING SKILLS

**These skills are essential to game development.**

**Most companies will benefit from looking at game design in this way.**



DO ALL GAME TEAMS NEED  
WRITERS?

**No**

**Do all game teams need writers? No.  
Each company is different.  
The writers-in-game-teams question  
goes beyond what I've been talking  
about here. Ask me afterwards for my  
opinion on the economic / producer  
psychology!**



SHOULD MORE GAME TEAMS  
HAVE WRITERS?

Yes



SHOULD MORE GAME TEAMS  
HAVE NARRATIVE DESIGNERS?

**Yes**



SHOULD MORE GAME  
DESIGNERS LEARN ABOUT  
STORYTELLING?

**Yes**



SHOULD MORE WRITERS LEARN  
ABOUT GAME DESIGN?

Yes





SEPARATE SKILLS FROM JOB  
TITLES

**Separate skills from ideas about  
"writing"**



⟨MIC DROP⟩

THE JURIE'S OUT



# THANK YOU FOR LISTENING

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