GAME NARRATIVE
SUMMIT

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF GOOD VIDEO-GAME STORYTELLING

Rob Auten & Tom Bissell

Game Developers Conference® Online 2011
October 10-13, 2011 | Austin, TX
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GDC
11
Online

Thursday, October 13, 2011

Who Are You Guys?

ROB: I started working in games about ten years ago when I and a friend of mine who was film director started collaborating on writing and directing game cinematics, mostly for Ubisoft. A few years later, I took a long-term consulting gig at Fox where I was asked to keep an eye on the dozen or so licensed games they had in production, which is sort of the most thankless job in both Hollywood and the games industry. But, I spent a lot of time with some amazing game teams and filmmakers and learned a lot about how both worked. Some of the highlights for me were Aliens, Avatar, Alvin and the Chipmunks and Jumper.
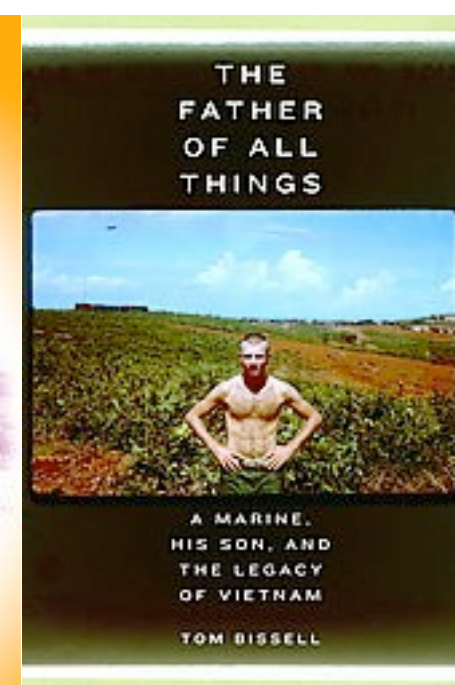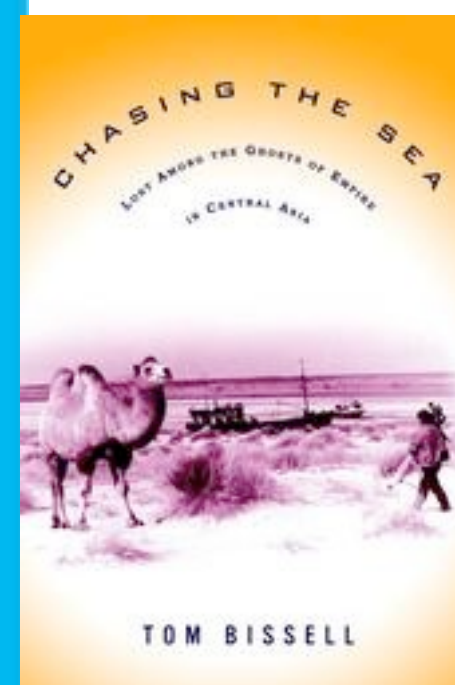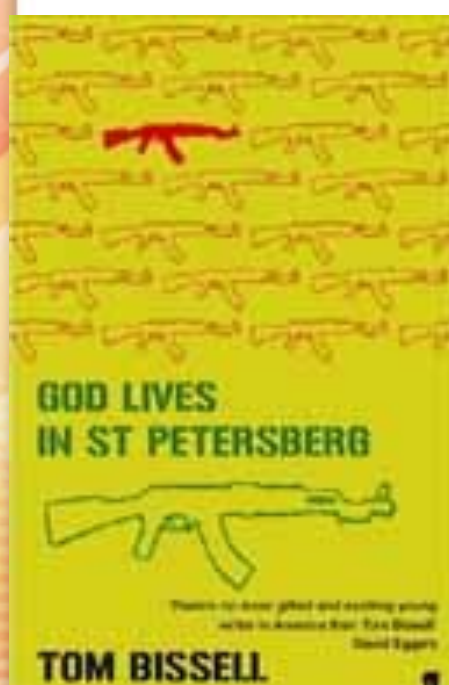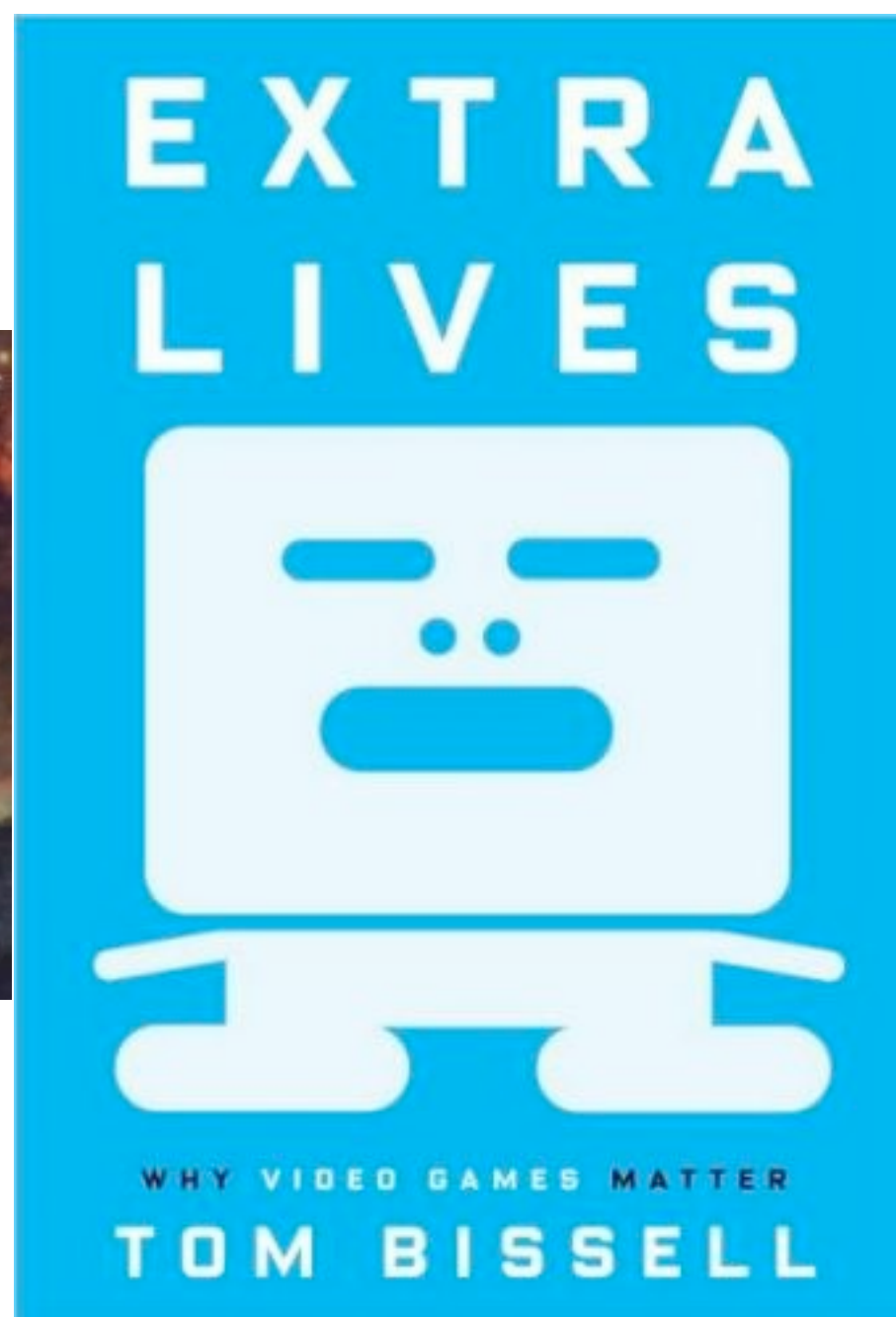
Who Are You Guys?
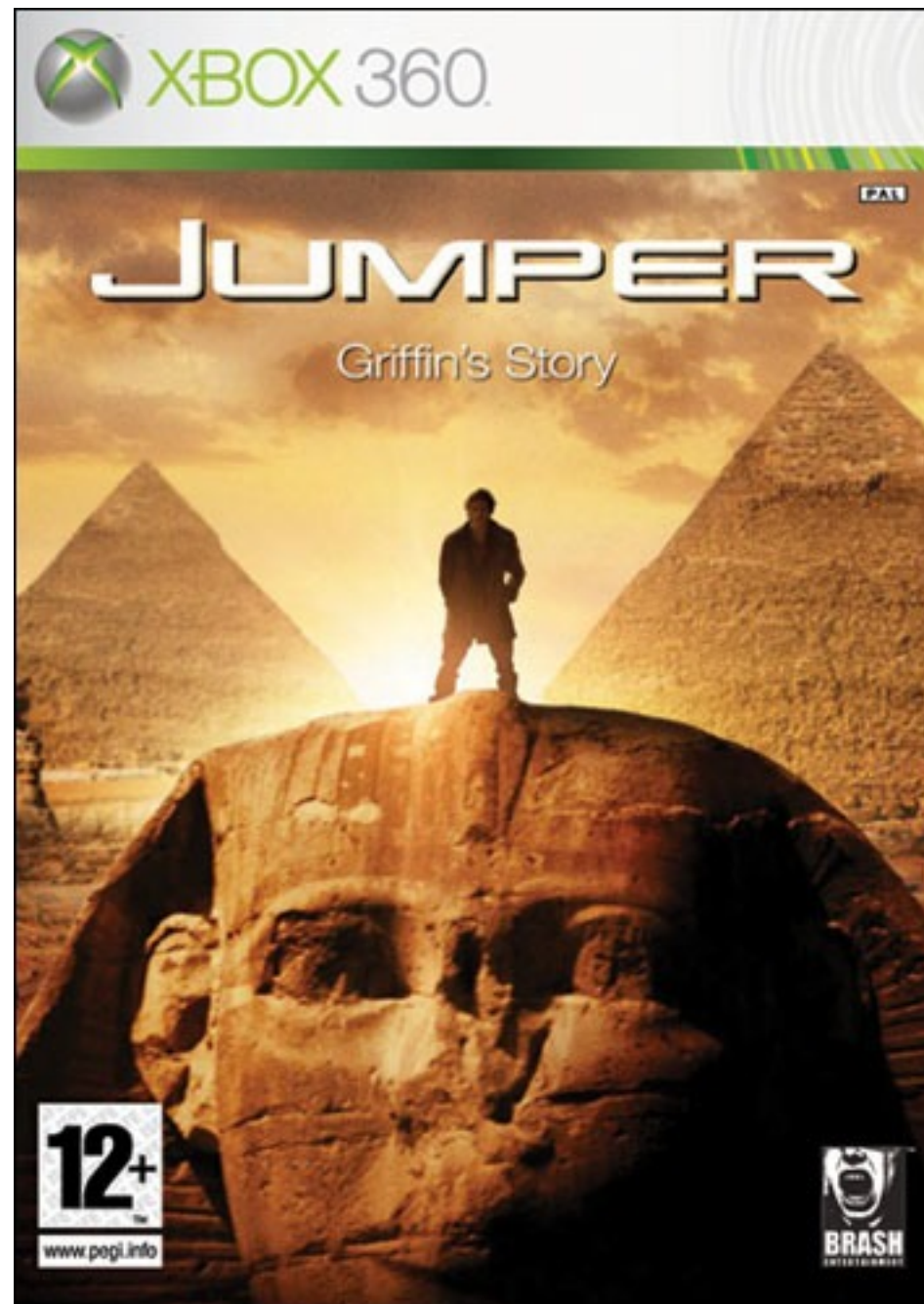
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Tom jumps in to say Jumper: Griffin's Story. We don't want anyone to get confused about which Jumper property we're talking about.

ROB: Anyway, now I work as a full-time writer and focus on trying not to repeat the mistakes I saw when I was sitting on the other side of the desk.

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Who Are You Guys?

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TOM: I came to games as a literary writer and journalist who played games all his life, but especially when he had writer's block. A really, really severe case of writer's block led eventually to my wanting to write about video games. The book I wrote, Extra Lives, came out last year, and did not sell as well as anticipated, and please find me after this talk so I can blame you personally. Rob and I met at GDC three years ago, when we discovered we had both read a couple books and liked Far Cry 2.

ROB: I was working on a title set during the Vietnam War, which was, when we met, the subject of Tom's most recently published book. I brought him into the project so I wouldn't have to do as much research, but, well, we're still waiting to see what happens with the game.

What Are You Working On?

And we've worked on or are working on more than half a dozen titles together since. We only occasionally want to hurt each other. These projects an XBLA game, a couple iPad games, a free-to-play PC game, and two major AAA franchise titles. Only one of these games has come out, and that's about all we can say.
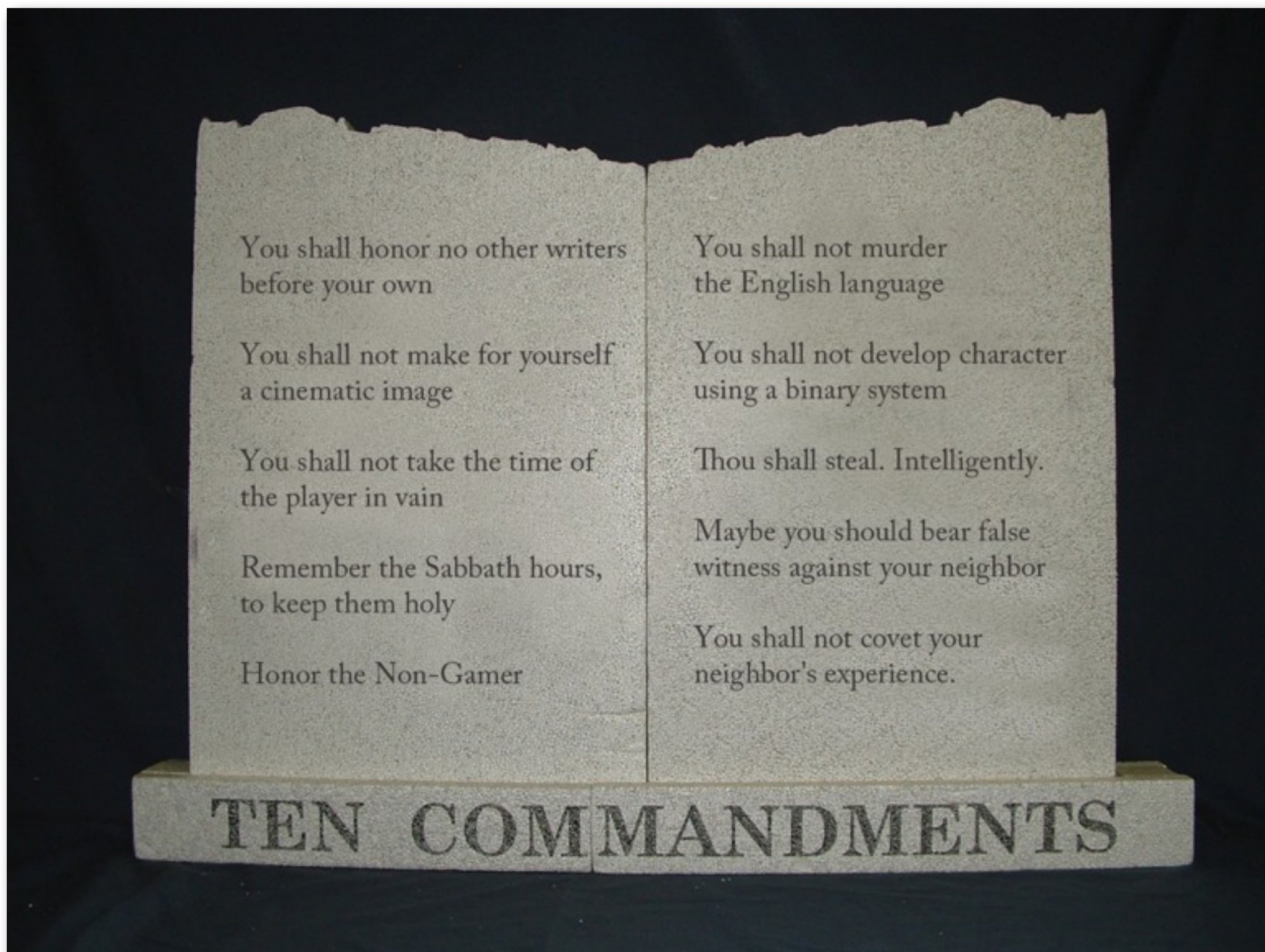
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So Why Should I Listen to You?

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At this point, you may be asking yourself this very question. So, please forgive us that we can't show any case studies. For now, you'll have to trust us that we do think games are incredibly compelling and important and our only nascent popular art form. We love games and get the most excited about the things they can do that other forms of media cannot. So these "commandments" are in part a list of things that we try to avoid doing ourselves. CUE

Ten Commandments stone tablets:

You shall honor no other writers before your own

You shall not make for yourself a cinematic image

You shall not take the time of the player in vain

Remember the Sabbath hours, to keep them holy

Honor the Non-Gamer

You shall not murder the English language

You shall not develop character using a binary system

Thou shall steal. Intelligently.

Maybe you should bear false witness against your neighbor

You shall not covet your neighbor's experience.

TEN COMMANDMENTS

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At the end of the day, all of this talk of story in games is more than a little abstract and possibly even impossible to utilize in the way we all want it to be utilized. Stunning fact: A lot of the things I believed most strongly about game storytelling have proven almost impossible to practice on the projects with which I've had involvement. CUE.

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You shall honor no other writers before your own. So, we all know that there are systems to the games are made. Agile development, all that stuff. And it's pretty obvious to point out that these methodologies weren't taken from the entertainment industry.
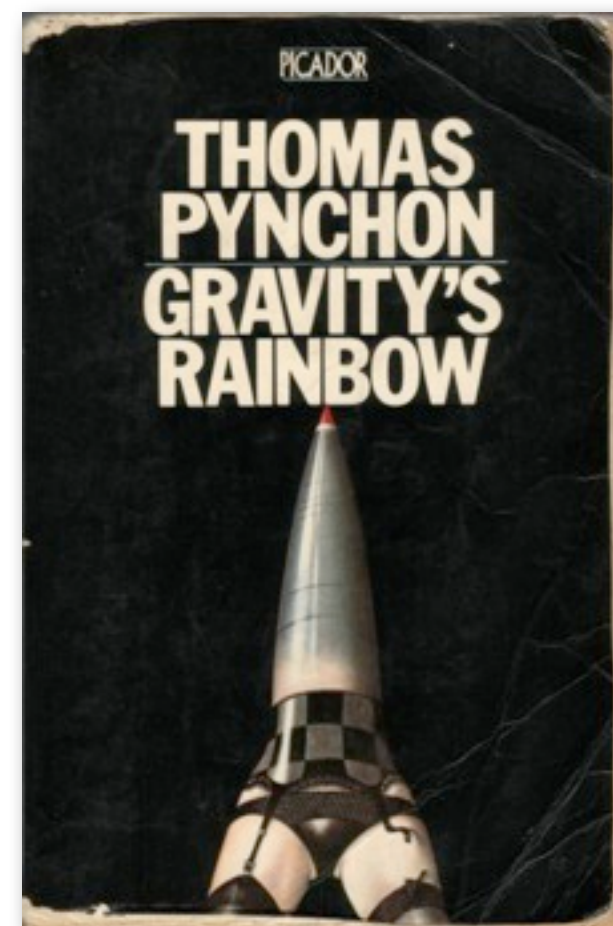
Software Technical Writer

Core Responsibilities:

· Write, edit and maintain all technical documentation, including instructional materials, training documents, specifications, processes, standards, forms, work flows, quick reference cards, in print and online

· Work closely with developers to determine content for technical documentation

· Gather information and requirements

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They came out of the enterprise software business—creators of such beloved products as the spreadsheet and Windows 3.11.

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GDC Online **Fun Fact!**

Thomas Pynchon began his career as a technical writer for Boeing.

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Writers were the people who wrote the manuals and on-screen text prompts telling you to go read the manual. And so, here we are thirty years later, and no one really knows what to do with us.

SEATING CHART

EVERYONE ELSE

US

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Writers don't typically get to sit at the adult's table in development process. Or they get to sit there, but only briefly. Every writer who's worked on a game can probably remember the first time they sensed they were working with people who would eliminate them from the process in a heartbeat if they thought they could get away with it.

Most teams still have an in-house writer as opposed to processes that audition new people between or during projects. Many of these people are fantastically talented, but we really believe it's important for us to stay freelance, even if that means we don't work on a game project for a little while. We just go off and work on our own stuff. It's kind of a relief and I think we both feel that the things we do outside of our game-writing activities enrich our game work.

SATURDAY, MAY 7, 2011

A blunt critique of game criticism

Note: *This essay has gone through a couple drafts based off extensive feedback (which you can read below in the comments). I'm aiming for a version of this essay that is less likely to violently misinterpreted by a majority of readers. Apologies for altering the context of any of the comments below...an unfortunate peril of live editing. Again, let me know where I'm wrong. Let me know which portions makes sense.*

To Escape Criticism: Do Nothing Say Nothing Be Nothing

I read Ben Abraham's weekly summary of game criticism over at Critical Distance. Unlike a decade ago, there is now an absolute deluge of essays being written about games. I see reactions, counter reactions, and copious commentary. What is difficult to find is good writing that dreams of improving the art and craft of games.

There are three areas of improving writing on games:

- **We need better methods of filtering game criticism.** The types of writing about games have exploded. With communities of writers attempting to support highly divergent goals and audiences, simply understanding if an essay is useful is a huge challenge.
- **We need writers who are more deeply educated in the art, craft and science of games.** The majority of "game criticism" tends to be informed by a narrow population of gamers, journalists and academics specializing in the humanities. We are often missing experienced perspective from the sciences and the developers of games. The vast body of game criticism is written by people that I would consider partial game illiterates. They are dance judges who have watched Dancing with the Stars, but who have never danced.
- **We need a defined class of game writing that focuses on improving games.** The existing community will continue writing about the experience of gaming. But what if there were a small group that wished to do more than talk about playing? Imagine holding your writing to the standard that asks you to *ratchet forward the creative conversation*. For this tiny crew, judge your writing on its ability to directly improve the art, culture and science of games in an incontrovertible fashion.

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 I love game developers. Many of my friends are game developers. But I do confess that one thing really gets my back up about game developers, and that is this notion that a writer is a "humanities person" and thus a trembling chick in the stormy, knowledge-drenched world of the game development process.

Replace the texture of the dollar with a single person's experience and the micro and macro economics with game design and development (play testing, psychology, economics again, etc.)

The comment about the engineer and the humanities professor is appropriate. However with games, we seem to have accidentally asked the humanities professor to write about the purpose and meaning of bridges independent of any knowledge of physics, transit or architecture. Instead, he walks across the bridge once, considers his research done and then spends the next three years writing a book about how his feet ache. ;-)

To be clear
- I'm not putting game criticism in a box.
- I'm not claiming your soapbox for my own.
- I'm not restricting meaningful discussion to only developers.

Instead, I'm asking you to be better at your job. Be more informed. Understand games at a deeper level. Base your writing off a broader range of hands on experiences than just sitting down with a game and playing it. Yes, playing games is still valid, but there is a heck of a lot more out there.

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One of the most egregious offenders in this respect is the game designer Daniel Cook and his Lost Garden blog. CUE. I quote: "With games, we seem to have accidentally asked the humanities professor to write about the purpose and meaning of bridges independent of any knowledge of physics, transit or architecture."

He goes on: "Instead, he walks across the bridge once, considers his research done and then spends the next three years writing a book about how his feet ache." I mean that's just an amazingly pandering generality and about writers in games and writers in general.

"Video games can never be art"

This attitude, and its whispered prevalence, might explain why people who care about storytelling across a wide range of mediums still feel so comfortable dismissing videogame storytelling out of hand. Many engineers can make a functional bridge. Everyone would probably recognize that functionality is not what writers bring to the game-development process. This isn't and shouldn't be a recognition rooted in antagonism.

"Writers are far from the most important part of the video game process."

We're writers. Our job is to see the world through other people's eyes. We'll happily concede that writers are far from the most important part of the development process. I couldn't make a game by myself. Maybe a linear dungeon text adventure.

My Game

You are in a field. It is dewy. The warm, dumb sun hangs acrimoniously in the sky.

] WEST

Exits are NORTH and SOUTH.

] NORTH

The field continues. The wheat is edged with a vermillion hue. There is a barn ahead.

] NORTH

You arrive at the barn. Its paint peels as if spat upon by generations of better-born men, men who once dreamed great dreams before sheltering themselves in the dunes.

]GO IN BARN

Exits are NORTH and SOUTH.
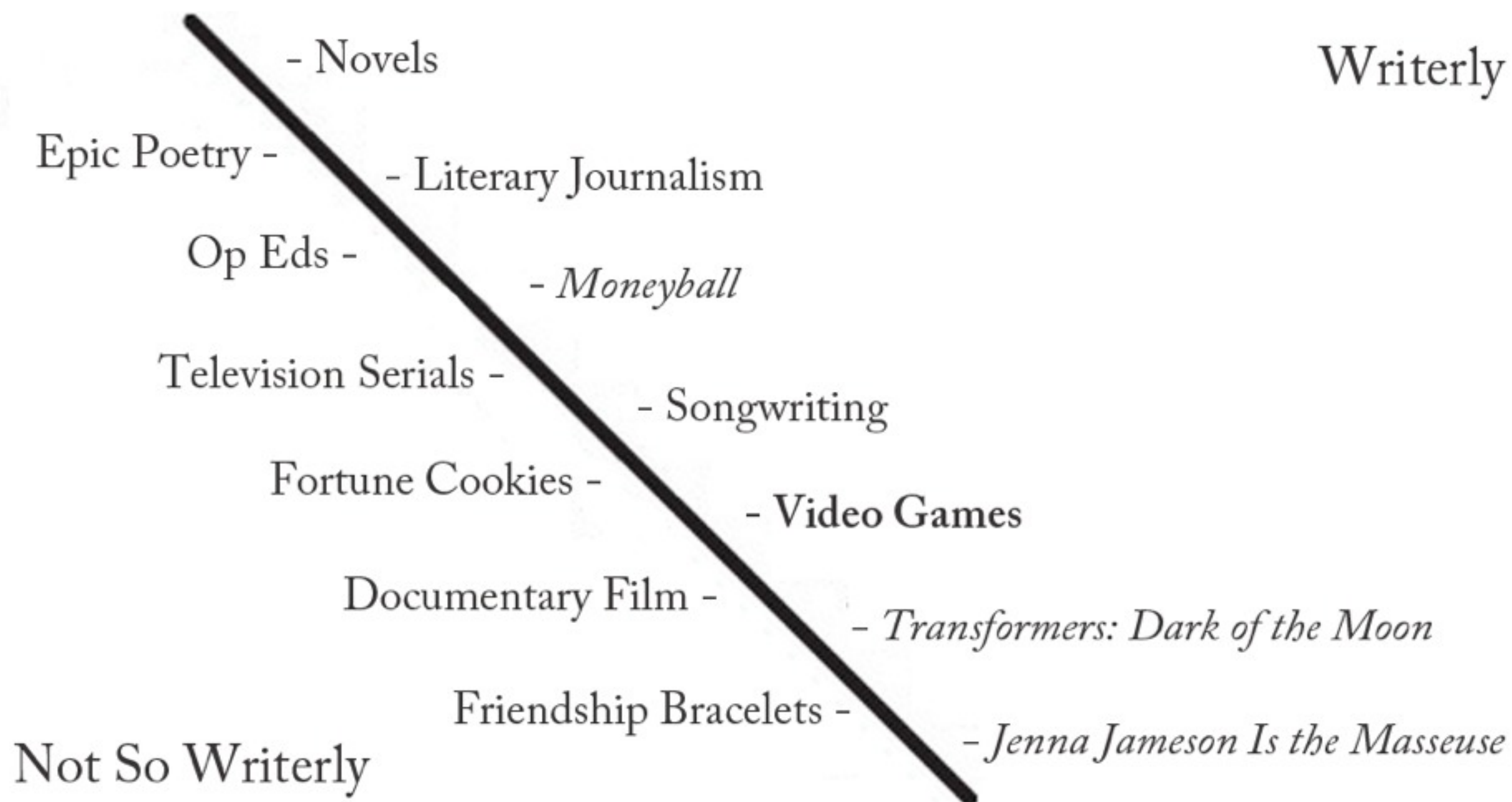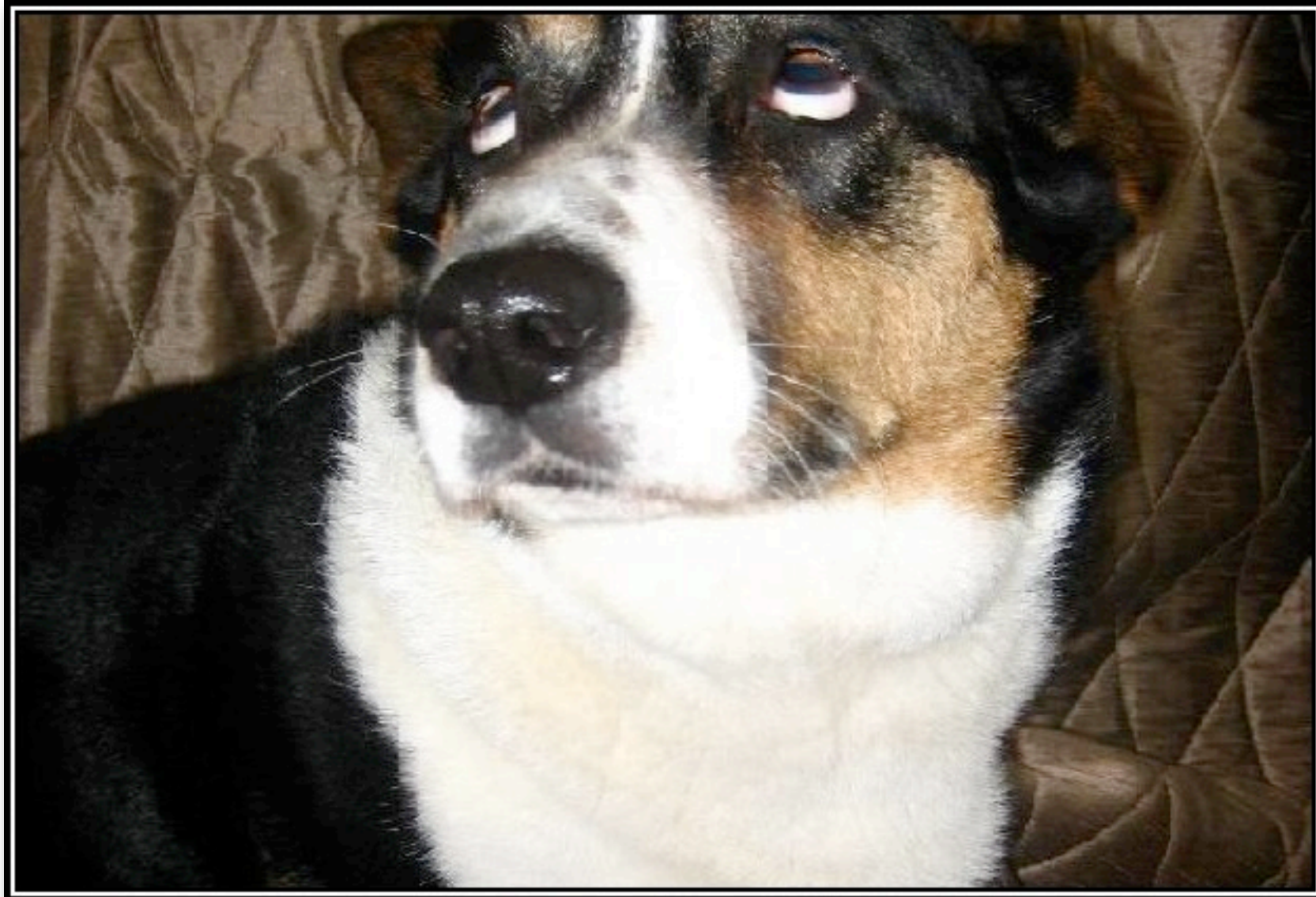
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It is absolutely our responsibility specifically as game writers to know, roughly and maybe crudely, how games are made. If we're not willing to try to do that, we shouldn't be trying to write video games.

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- Novels

Writerly

Epic Poetry -

- Literary Journalism

Op Eds -

- *Moneyball*

Television Serials -

- Songwriting

Fortune Cookies -

- **Video Games**

Documentary Film -

- *Transformers: Dark of the Moon*

Friendship Bracelets -

Not So Writerly

- *Jenna Jameson Is the Masseuse*

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At the end of the day, games are not really a writer's medium.

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Writers are also not the least important part of the development process. This is a maniacal egghead's medium, and what is a writer is not another kind of maniacal egghead? So let's have an end to the eye-rolling, note-passing, and smirky shrugs, when the writer asks for something story-based that "the engine doesn't support" or that breaks "the fundamental cycle of compulsion." I don't know what that means, by the way. It is the nature of writers to want impossible things. It's also a nature that should be generally encouraged and occasionally tactically smothered. We'll understand.
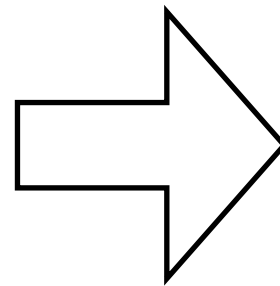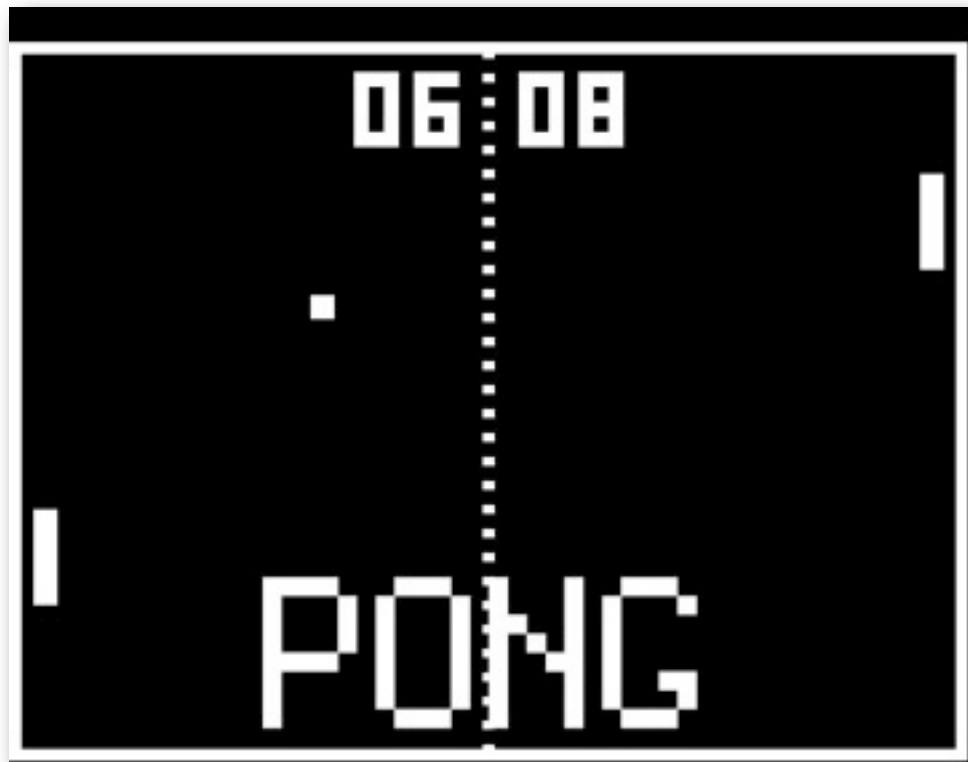
COMMANDMENT THE SECOND

You shall not make for yourself
a cinematic image

Thursday, October 13, 2011
Lots of games already obey this
commandment.

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Very few social and casual games have sprawling narrative or cinematic elements, and they arguably been more successful at accessing a wider audience than their more filmic counterparts. And some of them are wonderfully written.
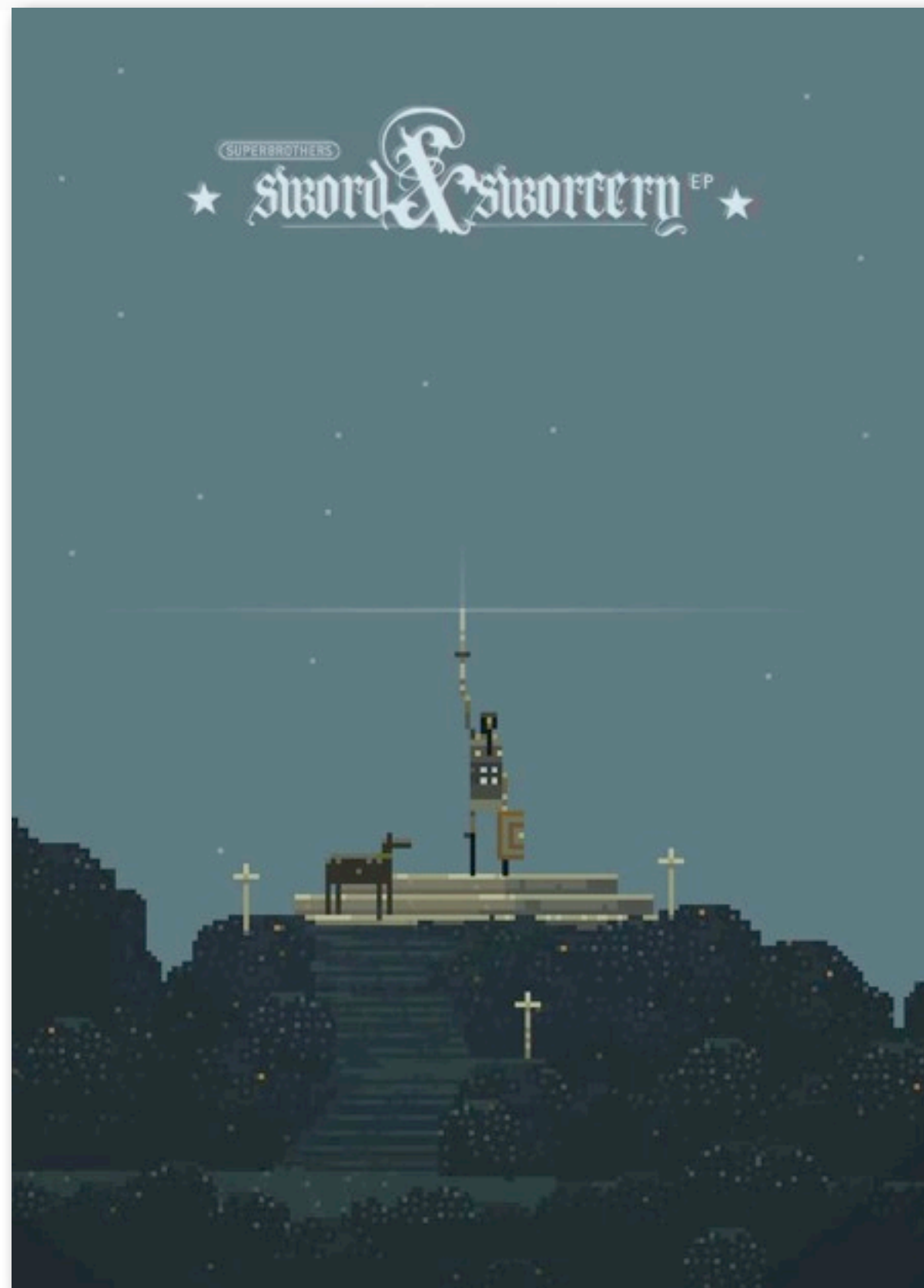
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 A few months ago I wrote an article about iPad gaming and was surprised, and kind of appalled, that the two most literarily compelling video games I played all year were Surviving High School and Sword and Sworcery EP. Why? Surviving High School's characters consistently played against type (the big ape jock turns out to be a good kid, at the end of the day; and the snooty, good-looking minx turns out to be a nice, faithful girl).
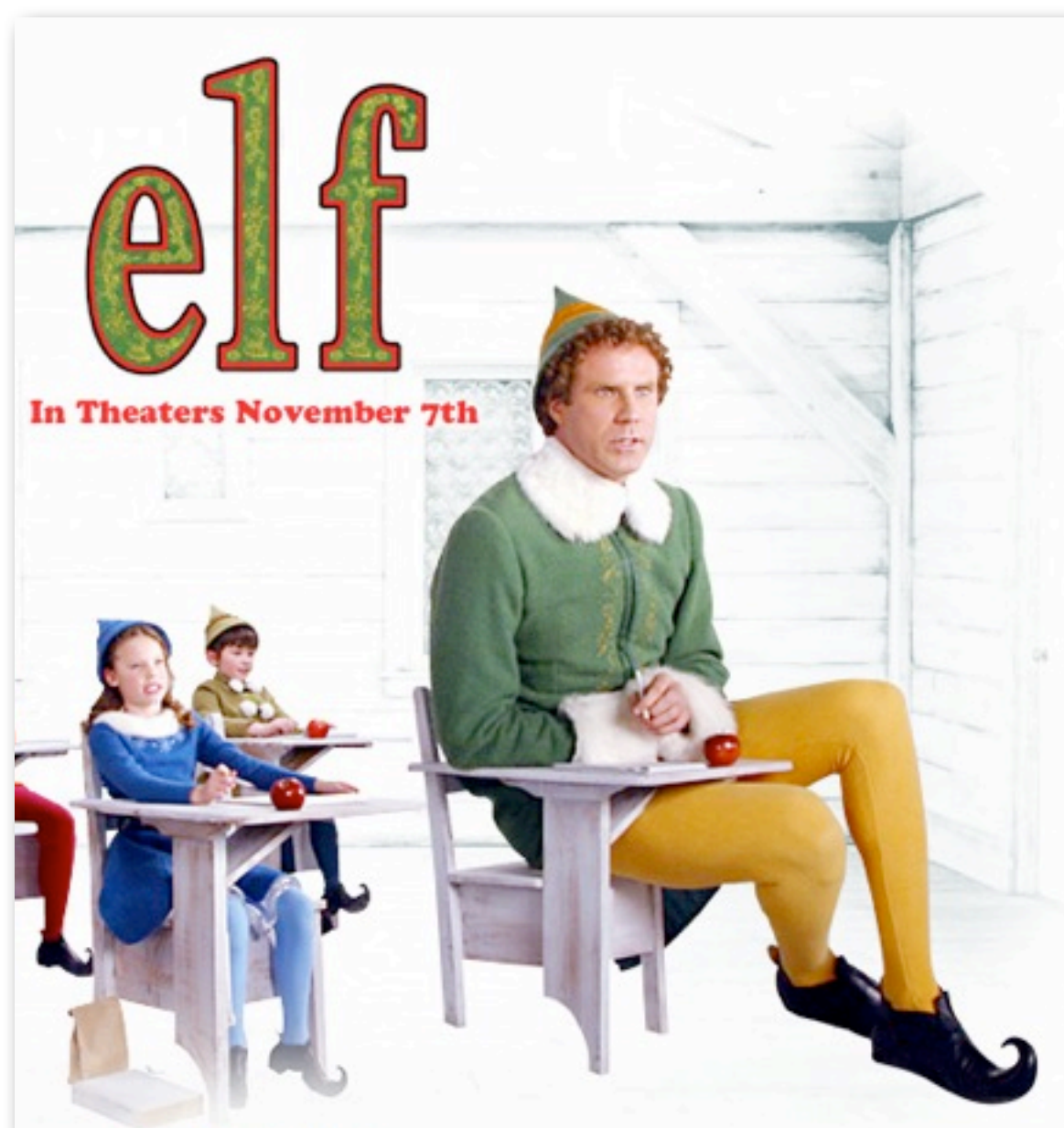
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Sword and Sworcery grounded itself in an incredibly familiar gaming world, but upended that with a completely fresh and modern take on its characters, so that it felt like Wes Anderson's Legend of Zelda.

STILL ALLOWED

Thursday, October 13, 2011

 At this late date, it should be illegal for anyone who makes a game about Elves to impersonate Tolkien.

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Cinematics are as evil as they are necessary. The more you need them, often, the worse off you are. I've worked on a few titles where literally every playable aspect of the game is finished before the storywork even starts. I know I'm not alone here. The problem is that cinematics, even the ones that feature compelling characters like some of the Rockstar games and epic action pieces like this scene from metal gear solid, usually aren't very good. And I say this with the utmost respect for cinematic teams. These poor guys get a phone call at the last possible minute asking them to make Pixar quality films that have to be as short as possible and that have to fix all the incongruities that came up in developing the actual game. It's an impossible task to do amazing work under these circumstances. And, painted in this corner, we make mistakes, like thinking that a filmic structure or storytelling devices will somehow make the cinematics have more resonance on the viewer.

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Three-act structure is an unnecessary, unhelpfully restrictive, and falsely scientific way to think about storytelling. Plenty of films do without three-act structure. Novels don't have a three-act structure. Neither do short stories. The Greeks, who invented theatrical drama, wrote plays with one act.
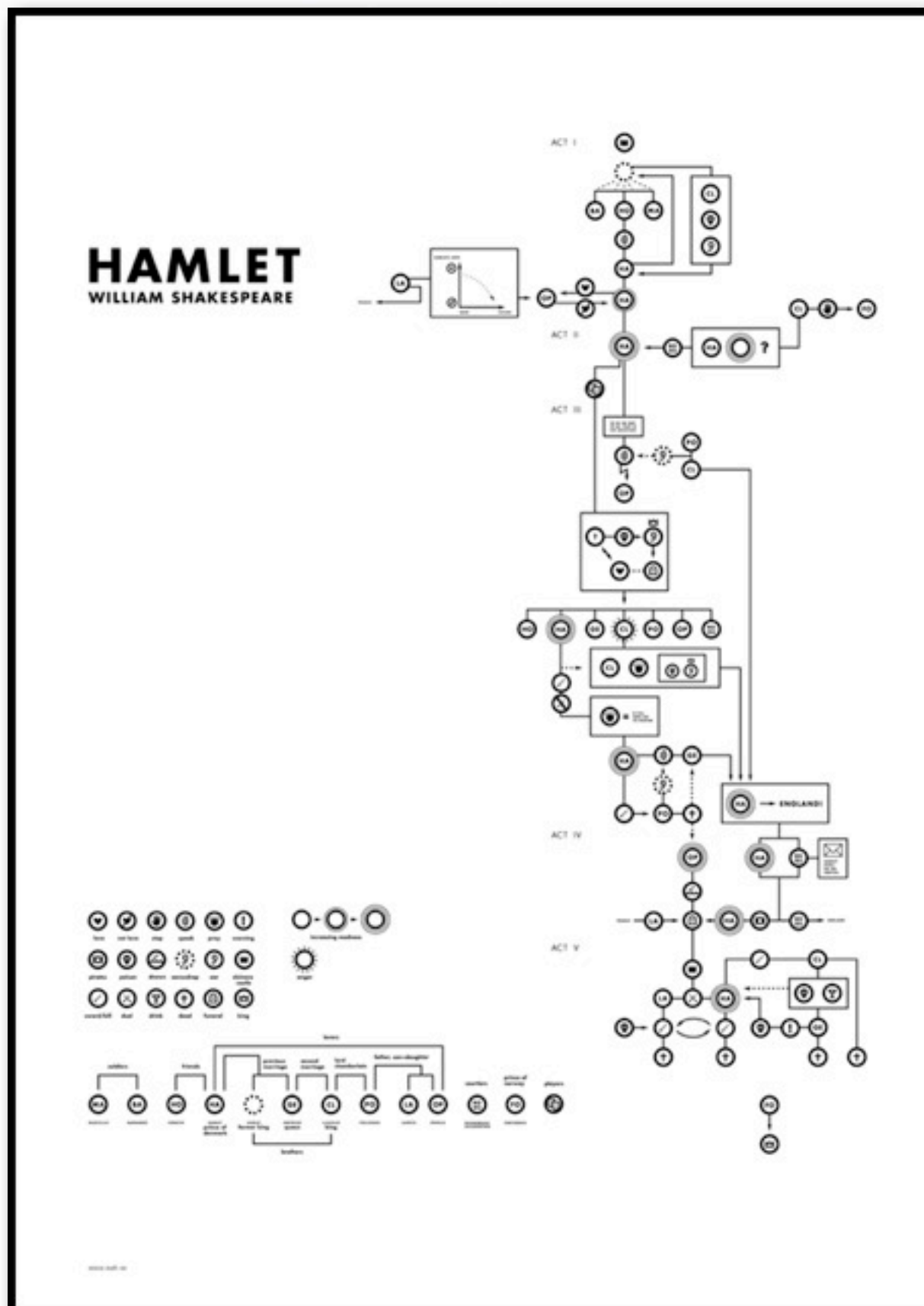
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Nothing Shakespeare wrote could be said to adhere to three-act structure. Nothing in ancient literature, religious or secular, has three acts. Absolutely no one thought in terms of three-act structure until fairly recently.

Television writers love thinking in terms of three-act structure because television writers write scripts that have, yes, three commercial breaks. This has nothing to do with storytelling. It has to do with commercial necessity. A medium's limitations determine the methodology of its storytelling and not the other way around.

SPACE INVADERS: THE PREQUEL

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If story is what happens and plot is how it happens, game writers have to realize that the three act structure is, in fact, a scaffolding built to support plot, not story. What's funny, to me anyway, is that it's pretty obvious that most video games are almost entirely second acts. Space Invaders doesn't open on a coded transmission or enemy ships destroying the Capitol building. The notion of a beat sheet that says something like: first, the character will wake up, then she will grab a glass of water, then she will turn on the shower for a game is to ignore everything that makes games special.
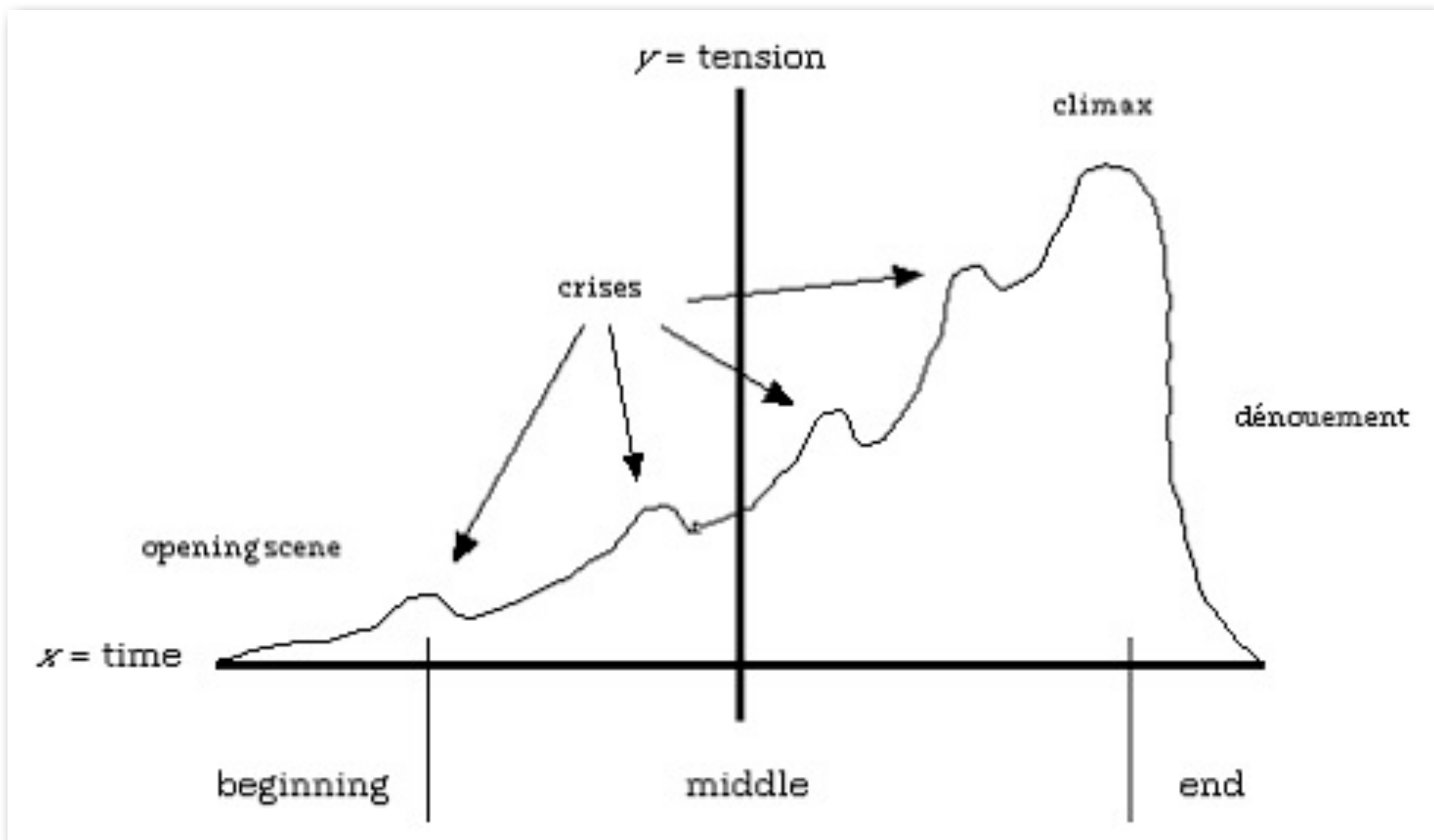
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I said before novels don't typically have a three-act structure, and there's a reason for that: the reader is more able to control the pace at which he or she reads. CUE. "Beats" make a lot of sense in a straight-through storytelling experience designed to hold the audience in place, as a film or television show does. "Beats" make much, much less sense in a storytelling experience in which the author has comparatively little control over how much story the audience is going to expose itself to in any given sitting. What other kind of storytelling experience does this remind us of? Yes, exactly: video games.

Breaking up a story into acts only works when the audience has no control over the pace of the story. Once the author loses control of pace, you lose control of storytelling "beats," which are the lifeblood of three-act structure. Finally, and most devastatingly, there's exactly zero structural necessity that demands one divide a video-game story into three acts. Beyond disk space, no finite markers govern its storytelling at all. Novels can be 200 pages or 1200 pages. Video games can be five-hour-long experiences or fifty-hour-long experiences. The ways in which video-game storytelling structure can be conceived is as various and unpredictable as novelistic storytelling structure. This is a strength, and three-act structure dilutes that strength.

COMMANDMENT THE THIRD

You shall not take the time of the player in vain

Thursday, October 13, 2011

We just want to point out our favorite violator on this one.

KOJIM   CTIONS

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 The game I spent the most time on in the last couple years was Demon's Souls, CUE which is one of the least written and least storytelly games, that still manages to tell a story, ever made. We can be sure that someone or many someones wrote endless documents and character sheets and came up with the game's lore. Of that, the players get only the stuff that matters. A less wise developer would have insisted on making lore-dumps a core part of the experience. It's what I'm going to call an invisibly written game--wonderfully so. Demon's Souls means so much to me because its storytelling was determined by my exploration. It was as long as I made it. I got as much story as I wanted. The more it hid its story, the more I chased its story. Not every game can be structured or written or designed like Demon's Souls, god knows. But in terms of game-writing, I can't think of a modern game from which there are more valuable storytelling lessons to draw.

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When I'm playing a game and walking along the main narrative path and I see a little foot or deer trail run off in a dangly perpendicular, I know there's probably a power-up, like a health refill or collectable, up there. I've played enough games to see this all-too-obvious set-up for what it is and make the conscious choice, depending on where my character is at health- or ammo- or whatever-wise, to go out of my way to get that thing or not. Narrative can be a power-up. It can be left to the player to decide whether he or she needs or wants it.

I AM NOT TALKING ABOUT MAKING CUT SCENES SKIPPABLE

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The better part of good storytelling is knowing what you can not say. Game stories have historically bent over backwards to remind players both of gameplay stuff and narrative stuff.

My favorite example of this is Ashley in Resident Evil 4.

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 Let's say that one of those exchanges has redundant information. It's a charmingly dumb moment, but you still see versions of it in games all the time. The Call of Duty games do something I find absolutely mysterious. A dude will say, hey, "Follow me," and then he walks away, with "FOLLOW" floating above him. I understand where this comes from: the fear that your average audience member might be very dumb, or very stoned. Iteration is something you hear again and again in game development, and it's obviously important. But we let ideas about iteration infect our thinking narrative and storytelling, and maybe we shouldn't.

COMMANDMENT THE FOURTH

Remember the Sabbath hours, to keep them holy

It turns out that not every commandment dreamed up by a wandering desert tribe 4000 years ago can be neatly transformed into an applicable rule of videogame writing. Who knew? So here we're going to talk about fun.

The question of whether videogames should be "fun" is, to coin a phrase, hotly disputed. It's a horse I like beating a lot, and I find that my beating of this horse tends to provoke in game writers a lot of silent affirming nods and in game designers a lot of barely contained rage. Here's why I think this is: A person coming up with a story or narrative isn't thinking about fun. Fun and narrative are unstable partners.

Games, historically speaking, are competitive, goal-driven human activities, and that's where video game storytelling begins: this very odd and wonderful merger of goal and story. Game stories begin as goal-oriented endeavors that vaguely involve story. They have now become storytelling-oriented experiences structured around the achievement of goals. I think sometimes we want our game narratives to be "fun" in the way gameplay is "fun," and I'm not sure that's always wise or necessary. Play offers kinetic engagement, but stories engage us along a different and less frantic wavelength. Not every game story has to involve a world in danger.

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 I'd like to tell you, briefly, about my experience with Jonathan Blow from his upcoming game The Witness. Jon reached out to me last year, because he wanted to get into the game a story that was engaging and interesting and entertaining and fit around the gameplay in a snug and appropriate way. We ran through three very different versions of a kind of light-sci-fi, near-future story that involved some relatively dramatic revelations. Jon would like them at first, then gradually turn against them, then request I try again. This went on for a while, until he realized that the "entertainment story" I was trying to help him tell was not the story he wanted to tell. So I turned out to be too Hollywood for Jonathan Blow.

But I respect him so much. He started out wanting to make a game with resonance and feeling, but which also meant and expressed something personal to him. Anything less than that, however ingenious our light sci-fi framing device happened to be (and it was pretty great, I gotta say), was a betrayal of his vision. That is an attitude in very short order in this industry. It's certainly not an attitude I have about videogame writing, because it's not an attitude any freelance videogame writer can afford to have. Jonathan Blow doesn't want to make fun games. He wants to make meaningful games. Getting fired by him, weirdly enough, was one of the most inspiring experiences I've had as a game writer.

COMMANDMENT THE FIFTH

Honor the Non-Gamer

Thursday, October 13, 2011

We all know who makes video games: gamers. If you're sitting here this afternoon and don't play games, hats off, you're probably a very senior video game executive. But here we are at GDC where thousands of people cram into these rooms to hear their peers talk about what works and why in games.

GAMES:
FOR US
BY US

Thursday, October 13, 2011

However, I'd like to point out that some of the most transformative games in my gaming lifetime have come from outside what, to me, feels like the establishment that we so proudly display today.

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They're invisible and somehow unmentionable at major industry events. This is the company that made open world gaming commercially viable and they continue to innovate with things like next-level performance capture. And Zynga. Zynga makes games that plenty of established game designers laughed at, until they started working there. When you work on games, you're pushed — by the culture of your studio, by your experiences whatever it is — to think you know what kind of gamer you are. I know plenty of amazing and smart people who won't play games made by certain studios, or who won't play certain genres of games, or who won't play certain kinds of games on certain platforms.

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And while i think this is maybe a little bit silly, I'm not immune to it. I have complicated feelings about, say, Heavy Rain. This is a game will a really hole-strewn narrative, but I respected how it was able to create anxiety through non-confrontational scenarios. In this scene, my character, a father who has recently gone through a divorce and lost a son, is trying to get his one not-dead kid a snack. I can still easily access the anxiety I felt as I rifled around this kitchen looking for a bag of chips so my surviving son could go to bed without hating me. It's a stupid construct, as I supposedly live here and should know where the snacks are at, but it worked on an emotional level. Maybe we need more game experiences that don't feel like what we think game experiences are supposed to feel like. Just putting it out there, maybe more intimate and human moments, transmuted into gameplay will help us elevate these amazing things that we make to a larger audience.
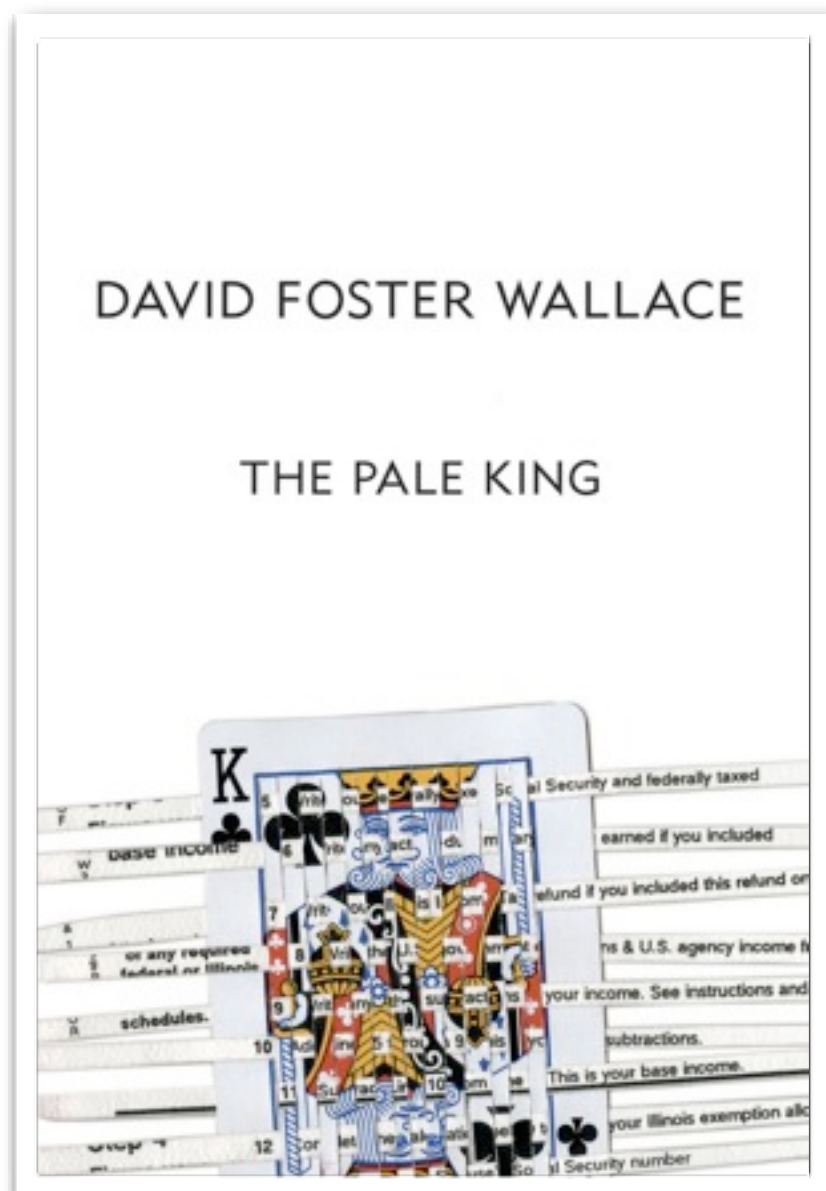
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How many people in here have played Catherine? Right now it's the most interesting game I've played all year, if only because it explores some emotional territory that games almost never explore, though its virgin-whore view of female sexuality is retarded and a lot of the name's narrative elements are the opposite of interactive.

Here's something from the late David Foster Wallace's novel The Pale King, in which a teacher is talking to some accounting students: "You are now nearly at childhood's end; you are ready for the truth's weight, to bear it. The truth is that the heroism of your childhood entertainments was not true valor. It was theater. The grand gesture, the moment of choice, the mortal danger, the external foe, the climactic battle whose outcome resolves all--all designed to appear heroic, to excite and gratify an audience. An audience. Gentlemen, welcome to the world of reality. There is no audience. No one to applaud, to admire. No one to see you. Do you understand? Here is the truth--actual heroism receives no ovation, entertains no one." Do any of us doubt that a video game could, very powerfully, explore this? So far none has dared. Catherine convinces me you could make a killer game about accounting.

COMMANDMENT THE SIXTH

You shall not murder
the English language

Thursday, October 13, 2011

Writers need to have a very specific set of skills. They should understand story and character, but they also need to be able to express these things in an appropriate way. When they don't, it's a problem.
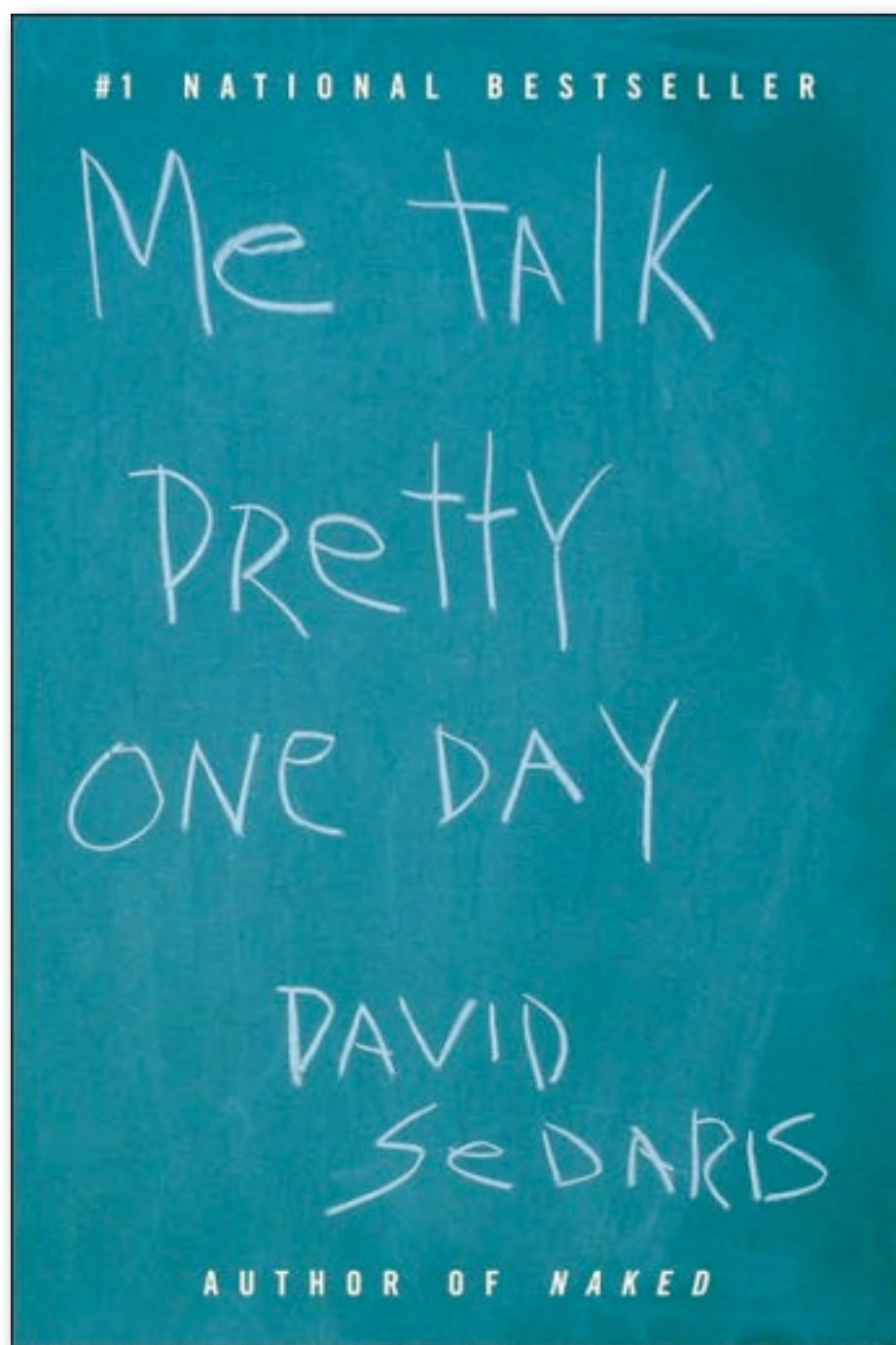
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Anyone catch the error here? "Isn't going so smooth." It should be: "Isn't going so smoothly." Why is this a problem? Because Fear 3--a really terrific shooter, I'd like to say--wants us to believe that Fetel is the smart, nefarious, meticulous brother, and yet, apparently, he doesn't know the difference between an adjective and an adverb. That's not a mistake Fetel would make, and it ruins the scene because it undermines everything the game wants us to believe about Fetel the character. Know this: I'd love to be a grammar Nazi, but I frankly don't know enough about grammar to be a very effective one. CUE. I used to think I was a grammar Nazi--until I received back from a copy editor my first professionally copy-edited manuscript. Writers aren't and don't need to be copy editors.

I can hear a lot of you thinking, Is this shit really important? I'm going to say it is. Think of the endless and very expensive hours of testing developers subject their games to. Why is paying a copy editor 30 dollars an hour to have a look at some loading screen text not a normative value in this industry? It should be. When you're dealing with language, it's worth something to do it right. It means something to get it right. Someone could get very, very rich if they set themselves up as the game industry's go-to copy-editing clearing house, and it's a little shocking to me that such an outfit, as far as I know, doesn't yet exist.

COMMANDMENT THE SEVENTH

You shall not develop character
using a binary system

Thursday, October 13, 2011

Thursday, October 13, 2011

Here's a question: Could Nabokov's Humbert Humbert, the "hero," quote-unquote, of Lolita, ever be a video-game protagonist? I'm going to go out on a limb and say that I cannot imagine the video game, as games are currently conceived, that would be able to do full emotional justice to a character of such twisted self-justifying morality and all-around ickiness. I mean, what would Lolita: The Video Game, do? CUE. Press X for stepdaughter molestation? We say this to acknowledge that there are certain kinds of characterlogical conceptualizations that the problem of interactivity makes formidably hard to imagine.
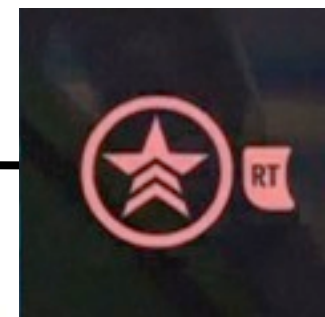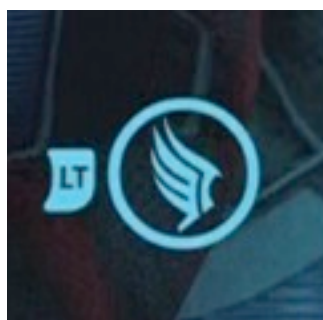
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I loved Mass Effect 2, which has a binary morality system. If you make the "good" decisions, you're a paragon. If you make the "bad" decisions you're a renegade. You can win the game either way and these options are presented on a color-coded dialogue tree, so you know exactly which path you're following. But, as I naively thought when I first played the game — and I knew better, as I had finished the first game — what happens if I just decide on a case-by-case basis? Even though the UI tells me this is the "good" decision, I, Commander Shepard, decide that I disagree with what the game is telling me is right and wrong?

What happens, apparently, is you cease to be a compelling enough character to get anyone in the game to care about you on anything more than a cursory level. The game became filled with women — I played as the dude, which Tom reminds me was a mistake — of the good and bad girl variety who wanted nothing to do with me, despite my incredible heroics, because I didn't sufficiently distinguish myself as an Eagle Scout or Patrick Swayze in Roadhouse enough to be worth their time. I ended up in this colorless, sexless moral purgatory.

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This need to distinguish myself is exactly the lesson I learned from watching the first season of The Pickup Artist, and doesn't really seem to be the kind of lesson in social dynamics we should be propagating.

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We as writers need to move away from this emblematically video-game idea that morality is the means by which we arrive at one of two of three endings. The only game I can think of that did something genuinely interesting with binary morality was Metro 2033, which hid from the gamer that thing we've all learned to salivate in response to: clear input with regard to the "moral choices" we make throughout the game. It was a brave decision, and maybe it didn't entirely work--I played through Metro twice without even knowing there were multiple endings--but what was so refreshing about Metro was to witness a game actually try to honor the idea of morality as something unknowably alive inside us rather than something to be scolded or head-patted.

Curious crew member. Where you eded up after your death, Shepard?

Heaven. Met Alenko.   Valhalla.

Enkindlers.   You know... around...

Hell. One big party.   I was only mostly dead.

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The framework of a game has no place overtly judging a player. That's what the other characters are for. I'm going to have to get a lot more anti-social before a UI can really deeply make me regret a decision. If we're going to get people excited about what games can do, we need something better than a cross between a choose your own adventure book and a slot machine. As complicated as it may be to implement, we need to aspire to create stories in which the effects of the player are seen in the world, not in the framing device.

COMMANDMENT THE EIGHTH

Thou shall steal. Intelligently.

Thursday, October 13, 2011

This commandment's a quick one. When we're thinking about allusions to other media in our games, we need to cast a wider net than movies. Anyone think it was odd that the homicide chief in LA Noire had an Irish accent? Why in 1947 would an Irish national even be a police officer in Los Angeles? Then you remember: Because the homicide chief in LA Confidential had an Irish accident.

 I mentioned this to a game designer friend, and he said, "Yeah, but how many gamers have even seen that movie?" Which is the soft bigotry of low expectations if I've ever heard it. You remember in Splinter Cell, when the password Sam Fisher uses is "It was a bright cold day in April"? That's the opening line of Orwell's 1984. Remember when in Far Cry 2 the Jackal quotes "a book he head, a long time ago," and doesn't mention that it's Nietzsche? CUE. Both offer wonderful examples of smart theft. Stuff that deepens character and the gameworld's milieu with something as ridiculously low-cost as literary allusion. It intrigues the audience members who get it and does no harm to those who don't.
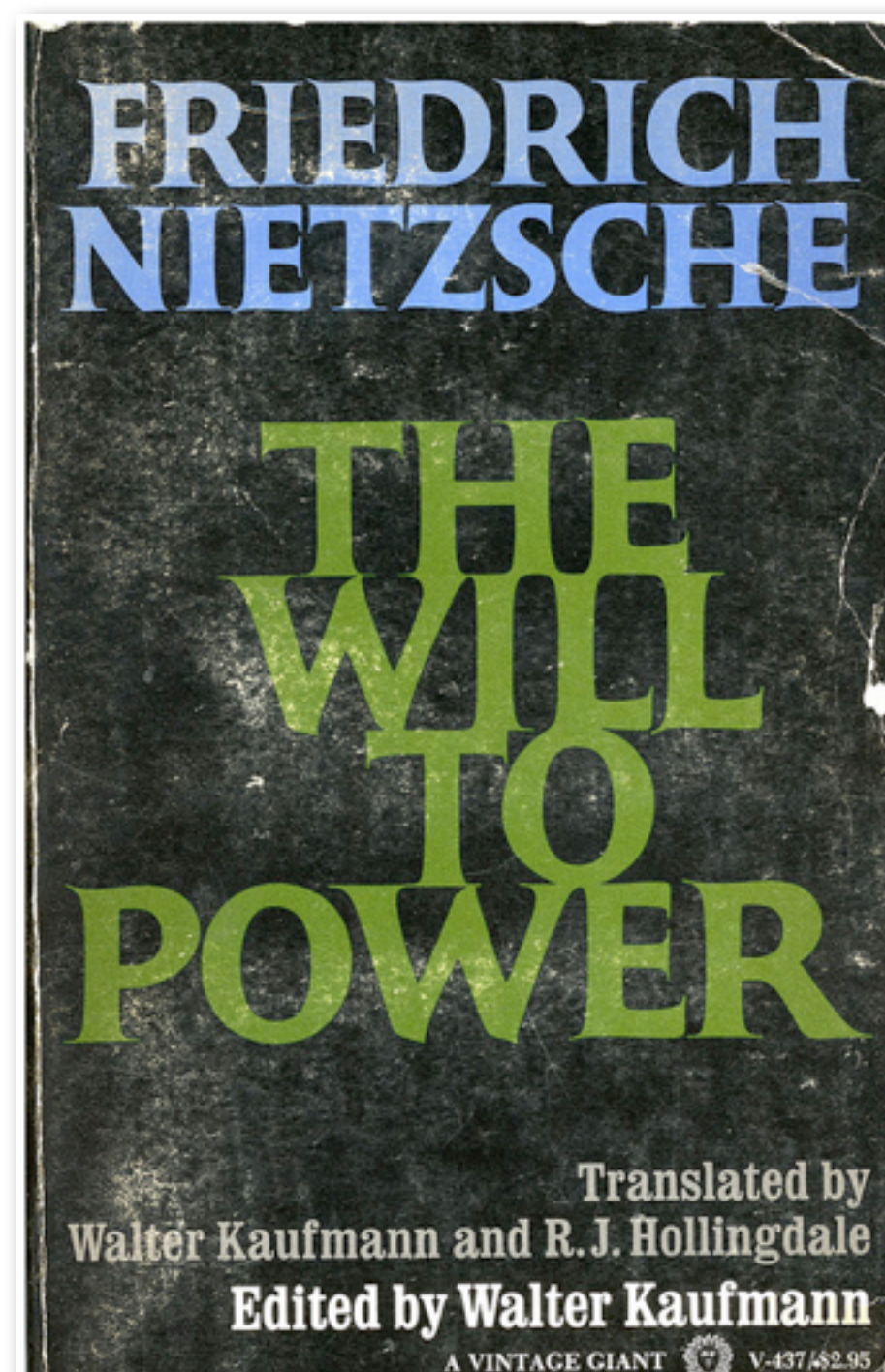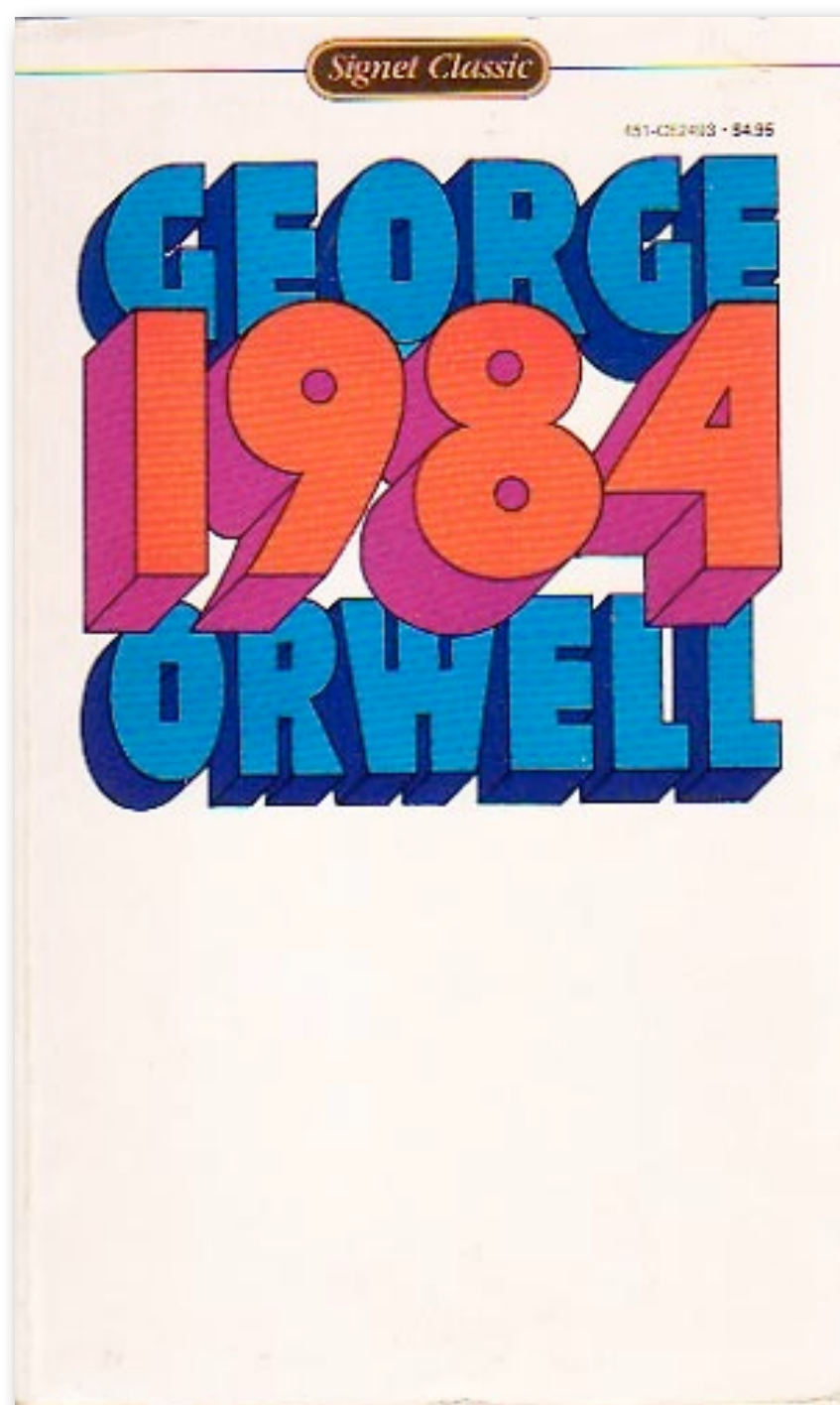
If you're interviewing a writer for your next project, probably the smartest thing you can do, once you've ascertained said writer actually cares about games is to talk about books, current events, or art, rather than film or games. You need to get a sense of what your writer cares about, where he or she is going to steal from. And if it's comic books, sci-fi films, and fan fiction, you might want to look elsewhere. Not because these things are bad, but really because on this point they're tapped out.

Thursday, October 13, 2011

At the risk of alienating a large portion of this audience: The well of geek culture is perilously close to empty.
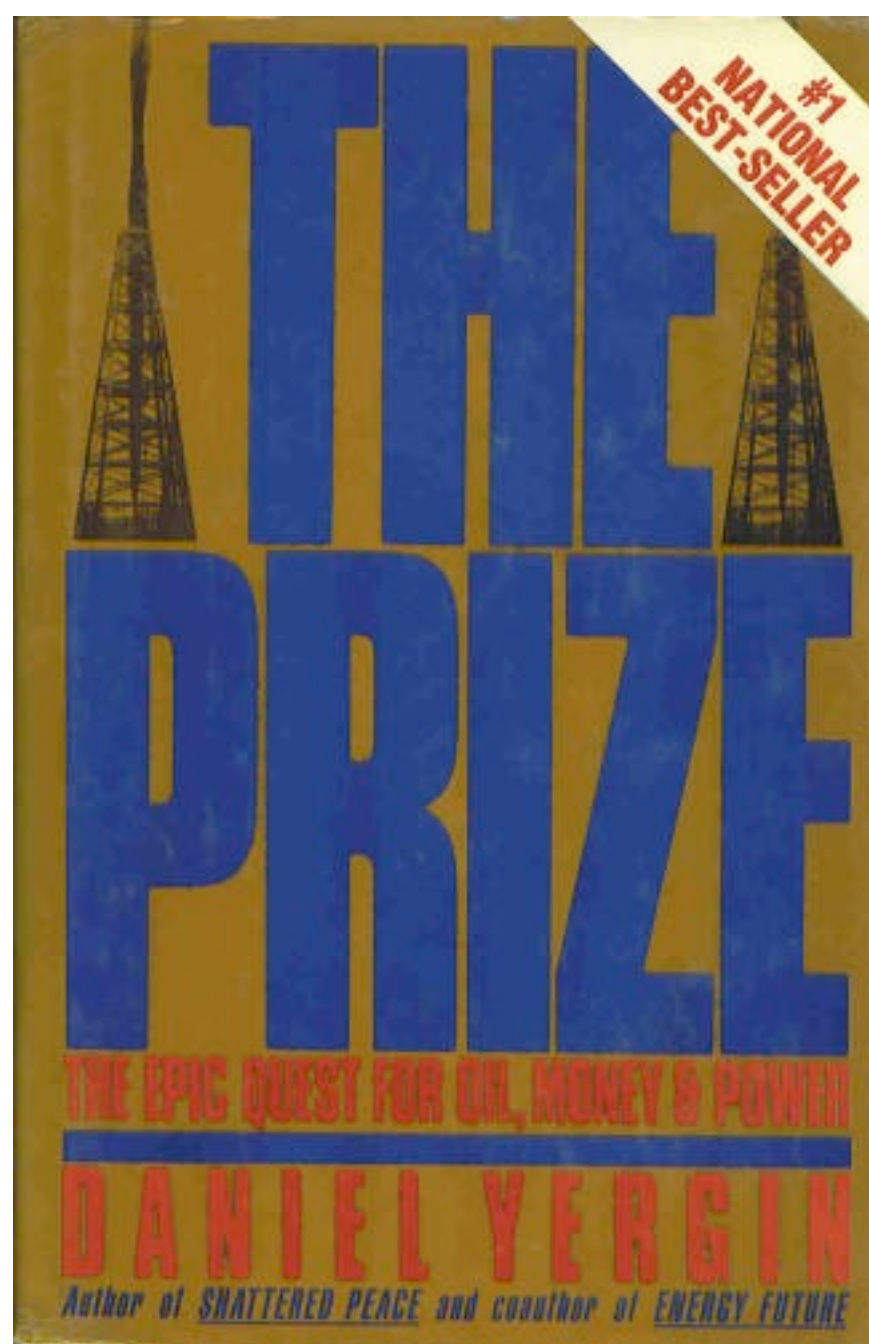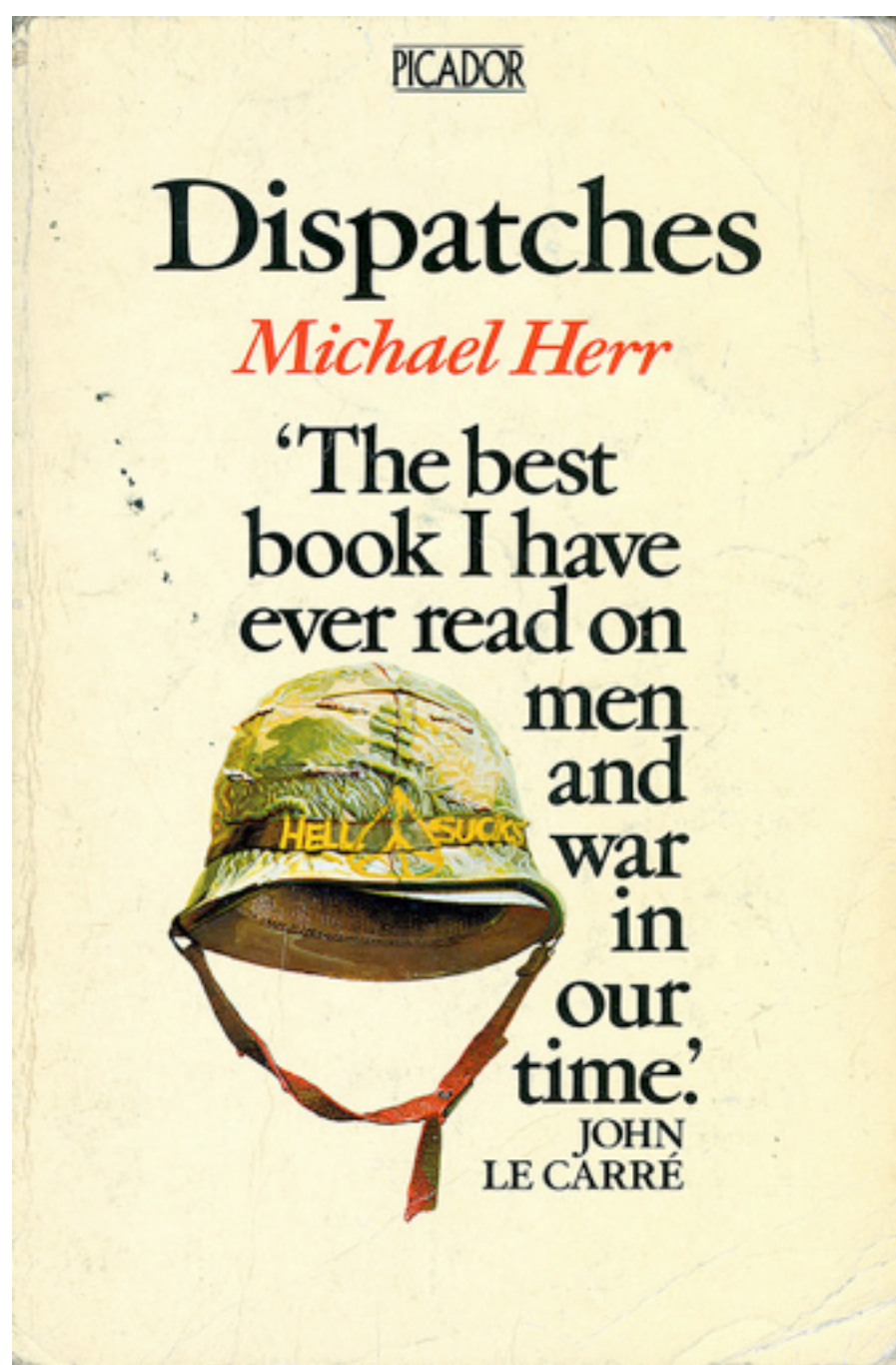
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Even worse, it's dangerously close to being

mainstream.

GAME NARRATIVE SUMMIT

Thursday, October 13, 2011

The war was fought, and the geeks one. We won! So let's venture out into some new lands, shall we? If you're going to make a game about war, read Michael Herr's Dispatches. If you're going to make a book about a galactic struggle for resources, don't read Dune. Read The Prize, Daniel Yergin's Pulitzer Prize-winning account of the emergence of the modern Arab oil-producing states.

COMMANDMENT THE NINTH

Maybe you should bear false witness against your neighbor

Thursday, October 13, 2011

This one comes from the experiences we've had working on our projects, and is more of a shared aspiration than a commandment. It's a reminder about the one incredibly dramatic thing we haven't yet figured out how to do.
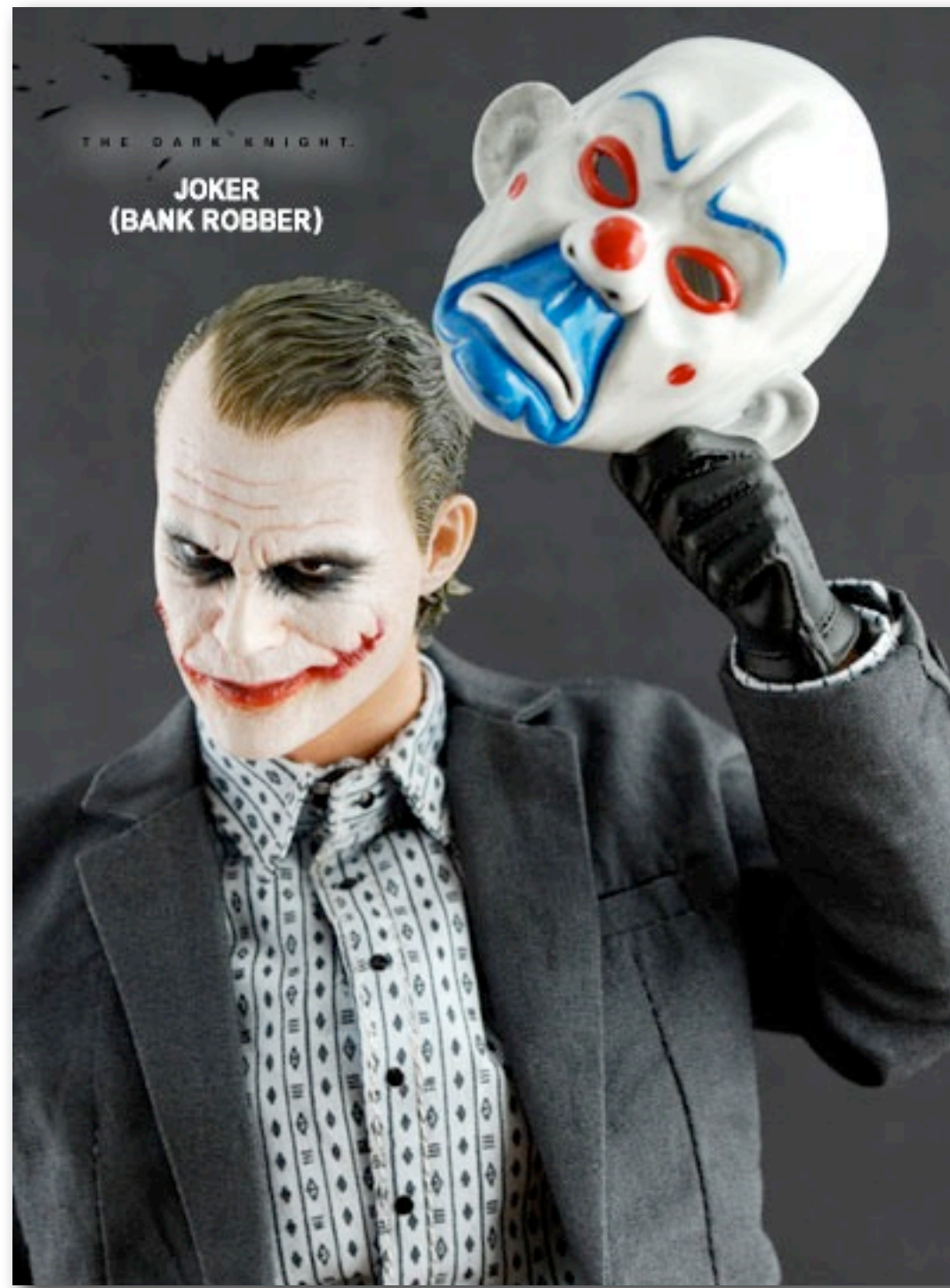
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We understand that no one has done this because maybe it can't be done, but games like Kane and Lynch 2 and Demon's Souls suggest there are narratively integratable ways beyond standard multiplayer deathmatches in which characters can be embedded in a narrative world in which the line between cooperation and antagonism is a sinister blur.

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We're talking about betrayal. I know you just said you're not supposed to rip off fanboy movies, but imagine the opening bank robbery scene in The Dark Knight as a narrative multiplayer game. One robber fucking over the rest of his squad. This would tap a level of frustration, breed a level of suspicion, and just generally bring a slew of real-world emotions to the medium that are currently almost always missing.

GDC 11 Online

Thursday, October 13, 2011

We understand that story collapses the more you need to keep track of player decision, and the more players you add, the worst it gets. Which is a good argument for trying to find a middle ground between formally storyless Warcraftian sprawl and the rigid scriptedness of Call of Duty, which as you can see from this amazingly bulletness sequence, doesn't offer much by way of narrative or gameplay dynamism. We want to give greater authorship to the player. That needs to become the point.

COMMANDMENT THE TENTH

You shall not covet your neighbor's experience.

Thursday, October 13, 2011

So here's the thing: A game writer working at his or her best to do the thing this medium does best, means he or she must relinquish traditional ideas about authorship. Games, if they are to be allowed to do what they alone can do, cease to be a storytelling medium and become an experiential medium in which storytelling opportunities occur.
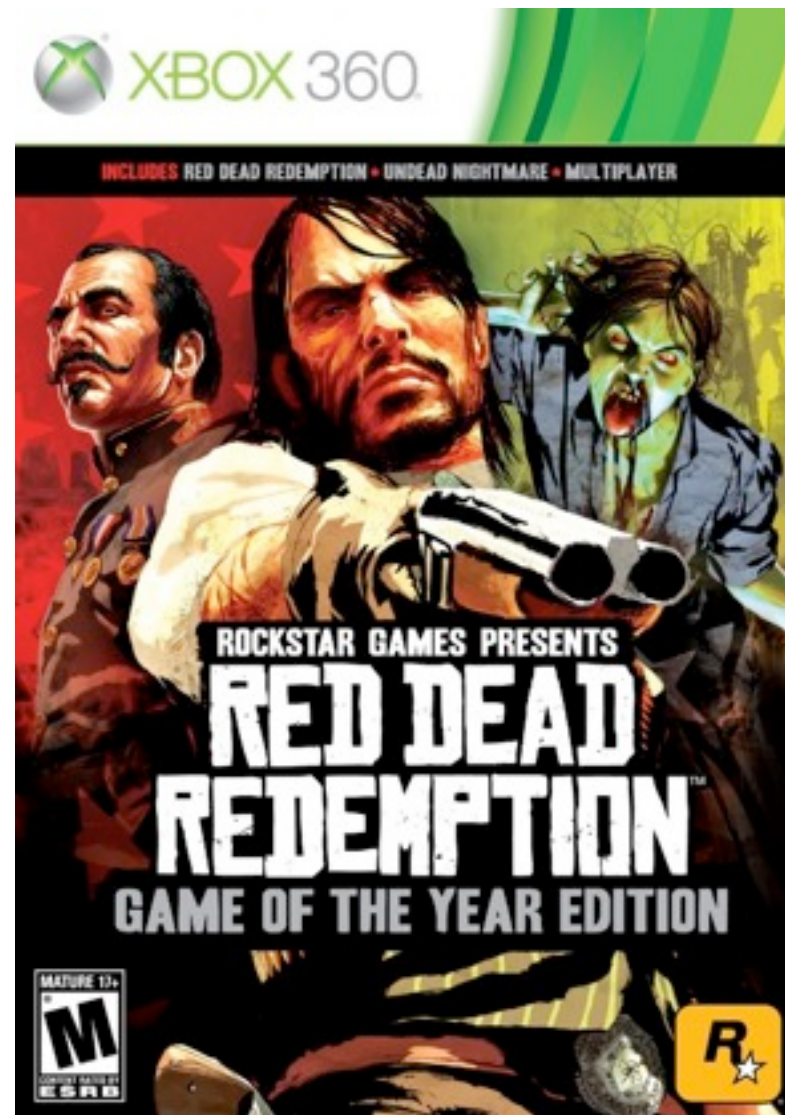
Thursday, October 13, 2011

There are many great "authored" games with rigid narratives. CUE. I can only hope to write a game as good as some of the "authored" games I love. But we have to ask ourselves, as gamers and writers: Is this kind of storytelling what this medium does better than any other? The answer to that is obviously no. The best game narratives are capable of making the player think that he or she is actually having a unique and majestic game experience. Rarely, I find that some designers have even enabled me to think that I've done something that has somehow "broken" the game. This is sort of the ultimate in a designer wearing the mask of the player.

Can I PLEASE close the door?

ICANHASCHEEZBURGER.COM

Thursday, October 13, 2011

This lesson can be applied to story as well. In interactive fiction, the sensation of closed doors is basically the single most important thing you can communicate to the player. We call this Closed Door Principle.

Interactive storytelling gets all its juice from the sense that you're inside the story, and that you can also affect the story. Without that sense, you're stuck with the play-a-while-and-watch-a-movie-style of game design, which has resulted in some terrific games. But we need to think of ways to create stories you can't wrap your arms completely around. You can do this by writing little lines of dialogue that are only going to fire if a player looks at or does something subtle, or limiting certain game areas by providing five story opportunities and the chance to experience three of them. The point is, constantly keeping the player alert to the fact that the story has things you're not seeing, can't see, just missed your chance to see.

 As writers we need to make sure that, during play, whenever one small narrative thing is being revealed by player action, another is being hidden. This is the single most powerful thing about videogame storytelling. It's where the author and player join hands.

QUESTIONS

Be nice.