

Level Design Workshop

Section Six: Environmental Narrative



GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE™ CHINA
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ENVIRONMENTAL STORYTELLING

Environmental Storytelling

- Exists in the conceptual space between Gameplay and Scripted story
- The story that the player deduces from the gameworld itself

Environmental Storytelling

- Gameplay stories- “what the player does”
- Scripted stories - “what the player watches”
- **Environmental stories - “where the player is”**

Environmental Meaning

- The game's environment constantly surrounds the player.
- It communicates meaning, whether the designer intends it to or not.
- An environment that has not been carefully considered only communicates its most basic properties

- * But the environment CAN communicate much more
- * The cost to do so is generally much lower than Scripted story, and in many cases compared to the Gameplay story.

Environmental storytelling is:

- Visual
- Static
- Passive
- Optional
- Instantaneous
- Scalable

Latent Story

- Decoration that tells a story
- The player is free to pay attention to if they want, but is not forced to engage.
- What are the practical advantages of Environmental storytelling?

Advantages of Environmental Storytelling

- Inexpensive
- Time-Agnostic
- Memorable

Inexpensive

- Don't require unique mechanics or heavy bugtesting
- Don't require writing or voice acting or character animation.
- Require art assets to be created and placed in specific ways
 - Setup cost, memory cost, but require fewer personnel with shorter pipeline

Time-Agnostic

- Scripted stories take **time**, usually in the form of voiceover and animations playing out.
 - Not necessarily a bad thing for a first-time player
- But Scripted story is **more static than Environmental Story**
 - Will always take the same amount of time to resolve
 - Player has no control of duration (can only watch or not)

.Half-Life 2 lock-in scripted story sequences fail for players who are not naturally invested in the story



Time-Agnostic

- Environmental stories have no set time span.
- Allow the player to expend as much attention on them as the player desires.
- Environmental storytelling doesn't pose the risk of pushing the player away by forcing them to sit through content they're not invested in. It drives player engagement.

Memorable

- Environmental storytelling happens as much in the player's head as it does in the game.
- Player is deeply invested when they engage with the content.
- While all players are shown the same cutscenes, the piece of Environmental storytelling that the player discovers themselves is theirs to own and remember.

THE MONTAGE EFFECT

The Montage Effect

- In film, the Montage Effect was pioneered by filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein and Lev Kuleshov.
- The principle is that, with any series of images, a viewer will always assign meaning to a given image based on the image that precedes it.



The Montage Effect

- Environmental storytelling clusters concepts together
- The player observes and imposes a framework of relationships upon them.
- The designer works in reverse, arranging elements that the player can reconstruct into the intended story.
- Can express a simple, single moment...

Example: Grim scene From System Shock 2



Example: Gone Home

- But Environmental storytelling moments can also cover more time and say more about a character.
- Environmental storytelling can express how a character lives, and therefore what kind of person they are.
- Environmental storytelling can build up a character's identity over time.

Gone Home





- Lived-in, domestic spaces invite the player to explore and discover more about the characters that live there

STAGING & FRAMING

Staging & Framing

- Consider how the player first encounters an Environmental storytelling scene, and how it is lit and presented.
- Unlike a Scripted moment, some Environmental storytelling may be off of the critical path
 - Reward for players that explore and want to find more meaning in the game

Front and center



Hidden example



Staging & Framing

- Because Environmental storytelling is simpler to create, it's much more feasible to allow some players to completely skip some of this type of content.
- The players who find it will feel that much more rewarded, and word of mouth results.

USING LANGUAGE

To Graffiti or Not to Graffiti?

- One element often found in environmental storytelling is some form of writing.
 - Graffiti, notes, signs or clippings from print.
- This use of language can be a boon, or a crutch.
- Over-reliance on written text can explain to the player exactly what the scene means, instead of letting the player figure it out.

Telling instead of showing ☹️



To Graffiti or Not to Graffiti?

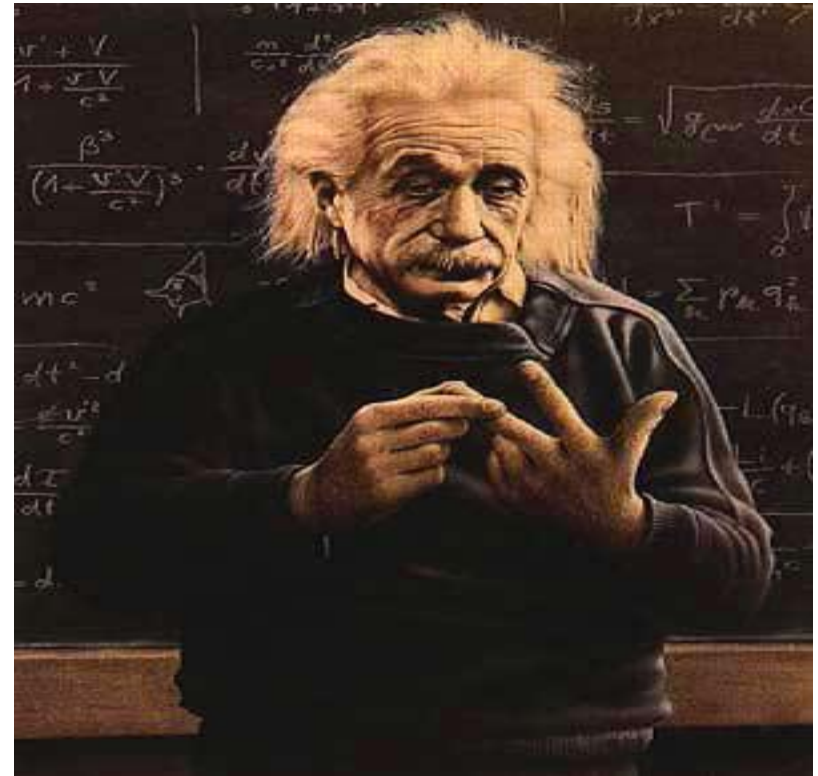
- But sometimes text can be applied in such a way that it holds the scene together, giving just enough context for the other elements to have meaning.

Showing and telling 😊



Einstein's Razor

- Environmental storytelling is primarily visual.
- Language can help the effect cohere.
- *“Everything should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler.”*



In Conclusion

- Environmental storytelling is all about maximizing your ability to communicate with players.
 - Populating the environment with meaningful imagery maximizes the impact of the space the player navigates.
 - Environmental storytelling can often be the most efficient method of conveying authored story as well.

When faced with a section of the environment that isn't “saying” anything, or a story element that you need to communicate to the player, consider how you might be able to fill the environment with meaningful images that allow the player to reconstruct the story in their mind.

Make the player a storyteller, instead of just a bystander.