



Video Game Storytelling: What Every Developer Needs to Know about Narrative Techniques

Evan Skolnick

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UNLOCK YOUR GAME'S NARRATIVE POTENTIAL!

With increasingly sophisticated video games being consumed by an enthusiastic and expanding audience, the pressure is on game developers like never before to deliver exciting stories and engaging characters. With *Video Game Storytelling*, game writer and producer Evan Skolnick provides a comprehensive yet easy-to-follow guide to storytelling basics and how they can be applied at every stage of the development process—by all members of the team. This clear, concise reference pairs relevant examples from top games and other media with a breakdown of the key roles in game development, showing how a team's shared understanding and application of core storytelling principles can deepen the player experience.

Understanding story and why it matters is no longer just for writers or narrative designers. From team leadership to game design and beyond, Skolnick reveals how each member of the development team can do his or her part to help produce gripping, truly memorable narratives that will enhance gameplay and bring today's savvy gamers back time and time again.

Video Game Storytelling: What Every Developer Needs to Know about Narrative Techniques Details

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Isla McKetta says

This is a really well written book with a unique approach to storytelling. It covers a lot of things that fiction writers will know by rote but then looks at them from the angle of gaming (which has some very specific needs). Great examples highlight each aspect of storytelling and then Skolnick dives into what the world of writing for games should look like (and what it really looks like). The book had me wanting to be a video game writer for a minute. Now that's a feat :)

David Sheppard says

I have given Evan Skolnick's "Video Game Storytelling" four stars, because while he definitely has something to say about video game development, he has some serious conceptual deficiencies concerning the structure of storytelling in novels, movies and plays. It's actually a pretty darn good book, even cool in parts. It has its flaws, but when you compare it to others out there, it definitely holds its own.

Before I go any further, I should let you know where I'm coming from. I have been playing games for decades, both board games and computer games. I'm not one to spend all my time gaming, but I have spent months trying to get to the end of a computer game. "Riven," the second of the "Myst" series, comes to mind. Also "BioShock." I am not a game developer. I am an author. I write fiction, screenplays and non-fiction, but mostly novels and books on how to write novels. I have written on storytelling as a subject independent of genre.

So I'm an author and a gamer, while Evan Skolnick is a gamer and has been a game developer for decades. He gives seminars at the annual Game Developers Conference in San Francisco. Game creators struggle with how to integrate narrative storytelling into the action of a game so that it provides a richer and more complete experience for the player. Skolnick wrote this book to help developers more fully understand the art of narrative storytelling in video games. I read his book not to critique it but to learn something about storytelling in games. And it taught me quite a lot. I was not disappointed. The book's subtitle is "What every Developer Needs to Know About Narrative Techniques." This is the heart of the matter: how to integrate games and storytelling.

The book is divided into two parts, the first titled "Basic Training" is more about storytelling elements themselves: conflict, structure, character and arcs, etc. These are the elements of storytelling as applied to game creation. The second part is titled "In the Trenches." Here Skolnick gets down to describing the mechanics of actual game development, including the composition and function of the team, all the while paying particular attention to how the story comes together as the game progresses, and how each element of the team makes that happen. This is great stuff.

But here come my quibbles. The good news is that Skolnick fully understands that the engine that drives any story is conflict. Without conflict, you have no story. Hollywood screenwriters understand this better than do novelists, but game creators revel in open unabashed conflict, sometimes to its detriment. The problem

comes in Chapter 2 when Skolnick discusses “The Three-Act Structure,” (page 15) which was first identified by Aristotle. Skolnick interprets the first plot point as the beginning of confrontation, i.e., the beginning of the conflict. Here’s how he describes the first act:

“The audiences of other story-based media — novels, movies, comic books, and plays — come into the experience with a certain degree of patience. They’re willing to spend some time up front getting familiar with the world and characters before the main conflict is introduced and the story really gets going.” [page 21]

This just quite simply is not true. Skolnick goes on:

“While traditional story audiences regularly tolerate 25 percent or more of the total story time being devoted to initial setup...” [page 21]

How he could be so wrong about this and it could escape the attention of his editors is beyond me. In traditional story structure, the conflict is locked as soon as possible, very close to the beginning. The first plot point is when the central conflict takes off in a new direction, perhaps a dramatic escalation or an expansion of the scope of the conflict. So the central conflict is actually locked at the beginning of Act I and is dramatically escalated at the beginning of Act II. No one would wait until 1/4 of the way through the story to start the confrontation. Here’s the opening on E.B. White’s “Charlotte’s Webb,” a children’s book:

"Where's Papa going with that ax?" said Fern to her mother as they were setting the table for breakfast.
"Out to the hoghouse," replied Mrs. Arable. "Some pigs were born last night."

Fern is out the door in a flash to stop her papa, and the story is off at a dead run. Furthermore, in the opening three pages of Dan Brown’s “The Da Vinci Code,” an albino murders the curator of the Louvre Museum in Paris locking the conflict that unfolds at a break-neck pace that is only resolved at the end. I realize that not all novels are structured this way, but neither are all video games. And as for movies, here’s what Irwin R. Blacker says in his book, “The Elements of Screenwriting”:

“Conflict is the essence of narrative film. In the opening minutes of a film, two or more forces come into opposition. In film terms, the conflict is ‘locked’ as quickly as possible. So urgent is the need to lock the conflict that many films do so in the tease before the title and credits.” [page 7]

Skolnick has not done his homework on narrative storytelling.

Whatever Skolnick’s misconceptions about plot point 1, he fully understands plot point 2, which occurs 3/4 of the way through the story. Here’s what he says about it:

“Plot Point 2 separates Acts II and III, and is sometimes a bit fuzzier. Generally it’s the moment in which the Hero, battered by the effort of already overcoming so many challenging obstacles, finally sees the path to victory. She hasn’t achieved it yet, and the outcome could still go either way, but the Hero has had some kind of epiphany and at last knows what she needs to do — if she can only pull it off!” [page 16]

This is a profound statement about plot point 2, and this paragraph alone makes the book worth reading. To his credit, Skolnick also understands the biggest problem with the three-act structure: mid-story sag. Here is his comment on the subject and his solution:

“Act II is usually about twice the length of either of the other acts — it’s big! So big, in fact, that it

sometimes gets hard to handle when it comes to structure, planning, and pacing. A writer can start wandering in Act II and lose momentum quite easily. Because of this, many writing gurus split Act II into halves, separated by a Midpoint — the halfway point not only of the act, but also of the overall story — at which time things will often spin in a new direction.” [page 14]

This is extraordinarily insightful, and you can see this midpoint as a “reversal of action” in many movies. For example, in “Jaws” the shark hunts the people for the first half of the movie, and the people hunt the shark in the second half. In Cameron’s “Titanic,” the ship floats in the first half, hits the iceberg in the midpoint and sinks during the second half. Many novelists and movie makers don’t have this insight, but Skolnick nails it.

My other problem with Skolnick’s discussion in Chapter 2 is that he seems to believe that the protagonist (generally the player of the game) is always there to resolve a conflict that was locked long before the player arrived. Granted, many stories are of this nature. “Star Wars” is one. “Riven” is another. Even “BioShock” fits that format. But what Skolnick is suggesting is that it’s always the same setup. This may be true of current video game development, but it doesn’t have to be that way in the future. The conflict doesn’t have to have a backstory. The relationship between the protagonist and the antagonist can be simpatico at first but rapidly deteriorate into a prolonged conflict. All authors know this. I’m not sure why the gaming community would have such a narrow view of the central conflict.

Skolnick focuses on what storytellers from other disciplines (novel writing, screenwriting, playwriting) can tell game developers, but it’s also obvious that game developers have a lot to offer authors. What I’m thinking of has to do with environments and how they can help tell the story, particularly the backstory. It isn’t something that authors don’t already know, but the degree to which game developers concentrate on letting the environment tell part of the story really is an eyeopener. After all, game developers can’t get away with sketching a few images of a setting. They have to present it in all its glory as continuous visual images from many different angles. They expect the player to spend time roaming the landscape viewing the scenery and perhaps solving a puzzle or two. The environment must be interactive. An author can get away with only describing the salient features of a character’s appearance, but a game developer has to show the complete character, plus the way the characters move. This is pure choreography.

I could write a book about this book. It’s that interesting. As I’ve already stated, it isn’t perfect, but it goes a long ways down the road to explaining narrative technique in video game storytelling. A lot of people could benefit from reading it, and they aren’t all game developers.

Shashank Uppalike says

This book gives a very clear picture of how important Storytelling is in games and cites examples from across different media to show effectively the strategies and pitfalls concerned with narratives and its design. I would recommend it not just anyone involved in narratives driven game development process but also general readers who would want an insight to storytelling across movies and digital games.

Definitely worth rereads!

Mya says

Honestly, I think this book is a "must read" for everyone in game development. It is quite short, concise with plenty of well known examples, and it frankly warns you of the possible pitfalls one could encounter while in the game-making process. I really think stories are neglected and placed as an afterthought in many games - not in the best ones, however. It takes less to spend 4h reading this book than wasting months making a lame game because you don't really know what you're doing. It is a nice book for gamers, to get more knowledgeable of the making process, but also as a way to learn what makes a game good and what damages the enjoyment of it.

Jason says

A great book explaining the foundations of storytelling in games and how successful storytelling permeates across all development disciplines. My only complaint is that I think it skews too far toward rudimentary fundamentals of story, especially in the first half where it discusses basic aspects of stories in general (before diving into applications within each discipline).

Joshua says

This book is a great resource for anyone aspiring to dive into any part of video game development. The examples and instructions given are very helpful for not only video game storytelling, but for books and short stories as well.

Suzyqb87 says

I keep talking to people about this book! Evan Skolnick's "Video Game Storytelling" is the quintessential, example-rich guide for creating narrative for video games. Skolnick offers both a practical and philosophical guide that is useful for video game writers, beta testers, novelists, and gamers curious about the process. Skolnick divides the lessons into "Basic Training," which was a helpful introduction to classic video game storytelling tropes, believability, and how much background to give, and "In the Trenches," which was a hearty helping of anecdotal and prescriptive overview of roles on a game design team, character/mission/level development, using environments to augment the sense of a larger world, audio considerations, and quality assurance. Throughout the book, Skolnick consistently and vividly shares relevant and recent examples of popular games' successes and failures. Even when I hadn't played all of those myself, he also provided YouTube links so I could see clips from video games and get the reference. Excellent!

I am astounded at how Skolnick accomplished so much in a normal sized book. I feel as though I've shadowed someone in the game design industry for a month, and I know there's still more to learn.

Skolnick delved into a level of detail I had never considered. He introduced me to new concepts, such as "ludonarrative harmony / dissonance," which refers to the connection between narrative story and gameplay, and "barks," which are the programmed sounds and words that non-player characters (NPCs) say often in response to the main player's actions. His practical leadership and role-related advice for those working in teams of audio, design, narrative, business leads, and testers highly relates to my own occupation as an instructional designer balancing the workflow between multimedia, web designers, subject matter expert, students and professors to create online courses. His 25+ years of experience with video game and

entertainment giants Marvel, Activision and Lucasfilm provides a level of insight I suspect isn't commonly available to the public.

My top takeaways as a writer translating this book's lessons for video games into novels:

I especially will be conscious of how to create environmental details in world-building in my novels to make it seem as though the world will be larger. Skolnick's example of graffiti and varying barks resonated with me. I'll try to find similar opportunities in environmental details.

I will now focus on ways for the reader to identify with the main character - critical in video games!

Providing background - just enough to whet the appetite but not enough to bore the reader - also works for books. I'll be using his tips for the start of my stories.

Planting details so that later big events will seem less deus ex machina already come up tonight in my writers' group; phenomenal tips in this section are great for a story in any medium!

It takes something special for me to pick up a book of nonfiction and then rave about it. For this book, the juxtaposition of story telling, video games, and the perspective of an industry insider were that special blend. I've grown up with video games and watched my brothers play video games. Today, I still play one particular game (The Sims!) and now watch my husband, play video games. Taking a gamble on this book paid off in full, and then some.

After reading the book, I feel a deeper appreciation for the intelligent, thoughtful planning that went into the seamless games we've played and seen. I can now envision the collaboration between graphic designers, coders, project lead, and narrative writer, and I'm armed with an arsenal of new terms that will help me to navigate video games nuances in the future.

This book has already helped me to enjoy video games and the constructs behind them, connect with fellow gamers and writers, and reflect on my own approach to story telling. Thank you, Evan Skolnick, for sharing the art of great storytelling in your field.

I received this book free from Blogging for Books for this review. I was not required to write a positive review. The opinions I have expressed are my own. I am disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission's 16 CFR, Part 255: "Guides Concerning the Use of Endorsements and Testimonials in Advertising.

Maximilian says

Note that this book is mostly about creating a story working as a team. While this perspective was interesting and nice to see, it detracted from what it could have been. It's just too "practical." I may be a bit of an introvert, but anyone can see the draw of designing your own story without having to deal with the chaos of a AAA game design team. This is why I prefer playing and making indie games.

For what it was though, it did a good job of it.

Marlene says

Originally published at Reading Reality

I'll be honest. I picked this book up from Blogging for Books because it would give me an excuse to talk about my favorite video games in a book review. How cool is that?

Also because I was going through my third or fourth play-through of Dragon Age: Inquisition at the time, and I was very interested in seeing some analysis that would help me crystallize my thoughts on why the damn thing was so good.

I'm playing DA:I again right now, so it seemed like the perfect time to get this book out of the TBR pile. And it was.

Video Game Storytelling is a book that breaks down the essential elements of telling a good story, any good story for any medium, and then shows how to apply and support those principles in the creation of one very specific storytelling medium – a video game.

After having read it, I suspect that the parts of the book that deal with the ins and outs of video game production show the way it should work in the ideal world, but very seldom does. I say very seldom does not because I have experience in the industry, but because I have a lot of experience as a player – and it's pretty obvious from the outside looking in that storytelling usually takes a backseat to gee-whiz-bang special effects, often to the detriment of both. (For an example I give you the commentary on Final Fantasy XIII's story versus the nearly universal praise of the storytelling in Final Fantasy X)

My interest in video games, especially console games, is in the story. When people ask why I play, or what is it that fascinates me about games, my answer is usually that "I love video games, when they're good, because it is like being inside a story." I'm not reading the story, I'm playing the story.

So the first half of Video Game Storytelling is the part that really grabbed me, because it is all about stories – what makes them work and what makes them fall flat on their virtual faces. I think that anyone who is interested in creating stories would find the author's summary of the elements of good storytelling very helpful reading.

A lot of the emphasis is on "show, don't tell." The player, reader or viewer (this also applies to movies and TV, after all) is more engaged when the characters and the story show you what you need to know, instead of two talking heads or voice-over exposition. The examples given are cogent ones, and it articulates what feels right and what doesn't.

Both Final Fantasy XII and Dragon Age: Origins tell essentially the same story. The country is falling apart because the king is dead and the heir is lost, nonexistent or there is a question about who will rule. The difference is that FFXII used a ton of voice-over exposition to explain the political situation, while DA:O just had you see how screwed up things were by having your character experience it first-hand. It also helps that the lost heir in Dragon Age is a way more likable and sympathetic character than the one in FFXII. I often wanted to slap Ashe (in FFXII) in the face, where I usually wanted to give Alistair (in DA:O) a hug.

The author of Video Game Storytelling also makes a whole lot of salient points about reader/viewer/player expectations of character and story, and the ways that failing those expectations can "bounce" people off of a

story in any medium.

One of the points that the author makes that definitely applies to any type of storytelling is that of making sure that all the characters, including the villains, have their own realistic (albeit wrong) motivations for what they do, and that every character's motivation has to make sense from their point of view.

How many of us have either bounced off a piece of fiction, or critiqued it less than favorably, because the villains all seem like cookie-cutter evil? Being a member of the "Evil League of Evil" is not enough of a reason, by itself, for bad people to do bad things. They also can't just be crazy, there still has to be some internal logic behind what they do.

Forces of nature, like a hurricane or a tornado, or the Blight (disease) in Dragon Age: Origins, don't have their own motives, but the way that people react to them still does.

J.R.R. Tolkien, in *Tolkien on Fairy-stories* (published in 1939! and available in *The Tolkien Reader*) talks a great deal about the "willing suspension of disbelief" that a writer must necessarily create in his readers, and by extension viewers or players, in order to get them to invest in the secondary (imaginary) world that is created within the work.

That concept is explored in *Video Game Storytelling* quite a bit. The creator has to make the world of the game as internally consistent as possible to keep the player immersed in the story. It is also necessary for a game that the gameplay match the story being told. In other words, don't give a pacifist character a gun and expect them to be the player-character in a first-person shooter without a lot of angst on somebody's part.

The willing suspension of disbelief also applies to the things that characters say and do, and this applies in other types of fiction as well. How many books have you read where the author says that the main character is really smart, but in fact, they act like an idiot in at least one area of their lives without any believable explanation?

Things that don't make sense, in any medium, bounce us out of the story.

One part of the analysis of storytelling that I really enjoyed was the explanation of the uses of coincidence and especially the *deus ex machina* ending. I always hate *deus* (*dei?*) *ex machina* whenever I spot them, so it was great to see someone teaching writing explain how and why they are bad to people who will go on to write hopefully better stories without them.

In short, while the description or prescription, of the ways that creating and preserving the narrative elements should be integrated into a game design will be fascinating to a gamer, the first half of the book, the parts about how storytelling works (and doesn't) make excellent reading for any storyteller in any medium.

Reality Rating B+: Because the writer is writing nonfiction rather than his usual fiction, occasionally the prose in this book comes off a little wooden. The author is here forced to tell more than show, where the contents of this book are normally presented in an interactive workshop.

I kept wanting to talk back to the book, to discuss why my particular favorite games worked, and where they fit into the various scenarios of storytelling.

For anyone who is thinking about reading the book for its storytelling pointers (which I recommend) it is very accessible to a non-gamer. The storytelling examples are taken from the first *Star Wars* movie, and that

is such a classic that most people are guaranteed to have seen it – possibly more than once.

Star Wars is also a great story for discussing the use of Joseph Campbell's monomyth, otherwise known as the Hero's Journey. Lucas has stated that he drew on Campbell extensively in the creation of Luke Skywalker and his quest. (I've even seen a museum exhibit that shows how this worked, and it was awesome.)

After reading this book, I was left thinking about some of my favorite games, and better able to articulate why they worked, and especially why they worked for me. They are all games where either the player invests themselves in a character and experiences the story seemingly first-hand (Dragon Age: Origins and Dragon Age: Inquisition) or where the player feels for the experience that the characters are going through in the story (Final Fantasy X). These are all games where the story rules the game, and the player experiences it. Yes, there is fighting and monsters to kill and occasionally silly quests to undertake, but the story is paramount. And it is such a good story that I'm willing to play it, to be in it and feel it, over and over again.

The author of Video Game Storytelling explains that one of the driving forces in a good game is making the player feel the emotions that the game creators want you to feel. For those games, it worked for me.

Now I have an even clearer picture why.

Amanda McCormick says

UNLOCK YOUR GAME'S NARRATIVE POTENTIAL!

With increasingly sophisticated video games being consumed by an enthusiastic and expanding audience, the pressure is on game developers like never before to deliver exciting stories and engaging characters.

With Video Game Storytelling, game writer and producer Evan Skolnick provides a comprehensive yet easy-to-follow guide to storytelling basics and how they can be applied at every stage of the development process—by all members of the team. This clear, concise reference pairs relevant examples from top games and other media with a breakdown of the key roles in game development, showing how a team's shared understanding and application of core storytelling principles can deepen the player experience.

Understanding story and why it matters is no longer just for writers or narrative designers. From team leadership to game design and beyond, Skolnick reveals how each member of the development team can do his or her part to help produce gripping, truly memorable narratives that will enhance gameplay and bring today's savvy gamers back time and time again. - Goodreads Book Description.

Though this book was written to detail styles for Video Game Narrative telling, I found the descriptions and instructions to be useful in every day writing. I often times find that novels that detail how to properly tell a story can cross venues, from screenplays to video games. Any author who wants to take a look into how to properly narrate a story needs to look no further than this novel - it lays out the basic elements of what is important in a story, the details that should be involved, and what you need to look out for.

I can't really say much more than that! It's an interesting read and something that I am going to happily keep on my reference bookshelf!

Adan says

A very informative book about how narrative and storytelling should be integrated into the development of a video game. The book is split into two halves: the first introduces various storytelling concepts to people who work on video games but don't know much about writing; and the second details the many ways other video game-creating roles can affect and enhance a narrative, even when it seems like they wouldn't. I highly recommend this book to anyone working, or thinking about working, in video games.

Eddy says

Great book to help explain to other people what my job of "narrative designer" actually means, and how I integrate into the team!

Morgan says

My sister and I have been reading this book for 4 months!

Combing through every page! This is one of my favorite books of ALL TIME!!!

I think it has so much potential! I'm so happy we found it!

DEFINITELY RECOMMEND!!!!

Jonathan Kerr says

Some good bits but not a lot of new information

A useful book on the importance of narrative design for game development, but I personally felt a lot of the narrative advice I had read elsewhere in other books.

A lot of movie descriptions/examples were used to explain concepts but I felt the game examples were more useful, esp the bits on ludonarrative dissonance.

Still worth reading.

Leoncio Soler says

3.5 stars

I really liked the second part of the book, I gives lots of insight from a professional who knows how production pipelines work, and the influence good writing has on the end result.

From my perspective, the first part of the book is a oversimplification on scriptwriting that might be misleading.
