

## Practices that Prevent Impressive Storytelling in Video Games

Video game developer Bungie, Inc.'s recently released game *Destiny*, a science fiction-themed first-person shooter, received much fanfare during its development, reportedly costing \$500 million to market and develop (Pitcher 1). This was Bungie's first game since becoming independent of Microsoft Corporation and leaving the software giant their hugely successful *Halo* franchise. Bungie has a ten-year plan for *Destiny*, expecting consumers to continue playing the game due to additional content Bungie will create over the next decade. While *Destiny* was a commercial success upon its release, grossing \$325 million in the first five days, the game has received tepid critical analysis (Kuchera 1). Critics complain about the game's underdeveloped narrative: players control a mostly faceless hero, defending the last vestiges of humanity against multiple hordes of indistinguishable enemies across the solar system. Uniqueness in setting, characters, and tone are nonexistent.

Due to these criticisms, *Destiny* currently holds a 77 percent on Metacritic.com, a website that averages review scores from multiple outlets. Game publishers use these scores to predict the sales performance of a title and to determine performance-based bonuses for game developers. Activision, Inc., the company that helped publish *Destiny* by contributing most of the \$500 million, had a stipulation in its contract to pay Bungie a \$2.5 million bonus if the game were to receive a 90 percent or better on Metacritic (Schreier, "*Destiny* Review Scores" 1). This bonus, unlike the more than \$325 million that the game has already grossed in sales, would go directly to Bungie to pay for wages, rent, equipment, and other operational costs.

\$2.5 million may seem small compared to the sales dollars *Destiny* will ultimately make during its lifetime, but Bungie only receives 20 percent of that revenue, with the remainder going to Activision (Turcon 1). Due to this missed mark, Bungie may be forced to lay off a portion of its sizable 500-member staff, especially if *Destiny*'s ten-year plan evaporates due to lack of player interest. Several months before *Destiny*'s release, Bungie's composer Martin O'Donnell, well known for composing the memorable music from the *Halo* franchise, was unceremoniously fired. Soon after, O'Donnell filed a lawsuit against Bungie, stating that the termination was due to a dispute over unpaid benefits (McDonald 1).

The failure of Bungie's *Destiny* is due to the underdeveloped narrative. Many high-profile game developers can create enjoyable gameplay, but without a meaningful narrative— which include elements such as theme, setting, characters, and plot— these games fall flat. The problems with video game narratives stem from the fact that developing games at the highest tier cost a large amount of time and resources, causing AAA companies to respond with business practices that create short-term profits at the expense of memorable narratives. Additionally, the methods to successfully tell stories through games are still being understood, so creators borrow storytelling practices from other media, primarily film, that do not take full advantage of the medium. If developers were to change these practices to create better narratives for their games, then they would see renewed success.

The games that incur the highest cost of development are known as AAA games within the industry, and their development costs are only increasing. The \$500 million cost for *Destiny* may not be the norm, but AAA games can cost more than \$60 million to

develop (Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc. 10). With the increasing graphical and processing capabilities of personal computers, game consoles, and mobile devices, game developers must employ more artists, programmers, and other skilled laborers to produce the most impressive-looking games to appeal to larger audiences. Since there is so much cost involved in simply producing the product, companies stick to pre-existing franchises and gameplay genres in order to reduce risk. In fact, Bungie's best known products have always been science fiction first-person shooters: *Marathon*, *Halo*, and *Destiny*. This can be seen across the industry: from *Assassin's Creed's* eight installments since 2007 to *Pac-Man's* thirty-seven iterations since 1980. Risk-averse companies find it difficult to turn away from a seemingly low-risk, high-yield investment. However, it is equally difficult for a narrative to remain interesting after the umpteenth installment, and if a game does not hold players' interest, then they will not buy it.

An equally debilitating business decision that causes poorly constructed narratives is the lack of pre-production in the development cycle. Pre-production is a period where the design of the product is planned, and it is a common part of the development cycle in the film and animation industries. In games, pre-production would allow time to plan an overall theme of a game that would have story, art style, and gameplay mechanics working together. This holistic approach to software development is known as top-down development. The team responsible for pre-production that facilitates top-down development would be pulled from the previous project before its completion.

Unfortunately, the end of a project requires the work of all personnel to ensure that it releases on time, making pre-production for the next project short or nonexistent because (*Extra Credits: The Pre-Production Problem*). This period, commonly referred

to as “crunch time” or simply “crunch,” has employees working, either voluntarily or involuntarily, beyond the average forty-hour workweek. The need to release the game to meet a specified date and expected sales numbers is so great that it becomes difficult to justify pulling staff to plan the next project. In fact, development studios tend to hire additional employees during crunch to further guarantee a punctual release, creating an oversaturation of employees who will inevitably be laid off once the game is complete.

The cycle of over hiring and laying off employees is commonplace in the video game industry, especially in relationships between the large, independent development studios, like Bungie, and the publishers that fund their projects, like Activision. Development studio Ready at Dawn Studios LLC entered a publishing deal with Sony Corporation to receive funding for their new game: *The Order: 1886*. However, the budget for pre-production was significantly less than what they would receive during full scale development of the game, causing Ready at Dawn to layoff 13 employees during pre-production, only to rehire them for production and crunch (Schreier, “Why Game Developers” 1).

These practices of layoffs and crunch are counterintuitive to facilitating an environment for developing quality games, let alone ones with creative, original narratives. During the 2013 shareholder meeting, Satoru Iwata, Chief Executive Officer of Nintendo Co., Ltd., spoke against this practice:

“If we reduce the number of employees for better short-term financial results, however, employee morale will decrease, and I sincerely doubt employees who fear that they may be laid off will be able to develop software titles that could impress people around the world... employees make valuable contributions in

their respective fields, so I believe that laying off a group of employees will not help to strengthen Nintendo's business in the long run. (3)”

One possible solution for preventing this demoralizing cycle is to switch to more of a contract-based industry like film, where programmers, artists, writers, and other developers would work as unionized free agents. Another proposed solution would have developers create a larger overlap between the conclusion of one project and the pre-production of the next to prevent layoffs and wasted time from occurring.

While these solutions may help create a more stable environment in which writers and other developers can work, better narratives in games will not occur if developers do not understand the inherent differences with telling stories in this medium. Unlike film or prose, video games are interactive, not passive. It is common practice to focus primarily on gameplay and then attach a narrative to it. This method of developing and prototyping gameplay independent of narrative is defined as bottom-up development, and is counterintuitive to good storytelling because it forces the narrative to be communicated through noninteractive methods, since they take less time to create than redesigning, recoding, and retesting gameplay to facilitate the plot.

A common example of noninteractive storytelling in games is the use of cutscenes, which are short clips of video that give the player limited to no interaction while providing exposition to forward the plot. Since plot and gameplay act independently, it is common for the inherent logic of the story to conflict with the logic of the gameplay. This confliction is referred to as ludonarrative dissonance.

In many first-person shooters like *Call of Duty* or *Halo*, a common mechanic is to give player characters and their computer-controlled allies regenerative health, where the

characters' health gradually restores itself after not taking damage for a short period of time. This creates the unbelievable image of a character riddled with bullets but still able to fight as if completely unwounded, and those same characters that could take immense amounts of damage during gameplay may be easily killed during a cutscene if the plot calls for it. Any game that attempts to immerse the player in its story will fail if ludonarrative dissonance such as this exists.

Gameplay mechanics need to share the same logic as the story, but this proves difficult in action-oriented genres, where the player's primary means of interacting with the world is through violence. In first person shooters, players view the world down the barrel of rifle, so most gameplay challenges presented are resolved by being killed or destroyed. However, a plot has to have more substance than simply killing waves of antagonists, so the narrative elements have to be informed using some other method, potentially creating ludonarrative dissonance.

*Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* by Starbreeze Studios AB is a game that skillfully intertwines gameplay and narrative. In it, the player controls two brothers: Naia, the older, stronger brother, and Naiee, the younger, nimbler brother. The siblings are tasked with traveling a great distance to retrieve some mystical medicine for their terminally ill father. Each brother is controlled using one of the two thumbsticks on a standard game controller. When moved against objects, each brother interacts with them according to their own abilities. Naia can push, lift, and carry objects, while Naiee can fit through small openings, run along narrow passages, and climb over obstacles. Each brother can only interact with objects suited to their skills, touching on themes of familial reliance and trust.

Before completing their task and returning home, Naia dies. His strength can no longer help Naiee, and the thumbstick that would control him goes unused. Eventually, Naiee comes across an obstacle that only Naia would be able to surpass. When the player experiments on how to circumvent the obstacle, they discover, without being prompted by the game, that Naiee can now be controlled using Naia's thumbstick, allowing Naiee to use his older brother's skills. This subtly informs both the player and Naia that he has learned from his brother over the course of the game. Using the gameplay itself to inform parts of the narrative, instead of expressing it through noninteractive exposition such as dialogue or cutscenes, is a method of storytelling unique to the medium that has yet to see widespread adoption.

While *Brothers* may a great example of how to combine gameplay and narrative, it is not the best example of an engaging story. *Gone Home* by The Fullbright Company, however, is a fantastic example of storytelling in video games. In *Gone Home*, you control 21-year-old Kaitlin Greenbriar returning to her parent's home after traveling abroad. Kaitlin returns in the dead of night to find her house empty, so the player must explore the house to discover where her parents and her younger sister, Samantha, have gone. The player only available interaction is picking up objects, such as notes, letters, an assortment of household items, and, most importantly, Samantha's journal. Through these items, the player learns about what Kaitlin has missed in her time away: the new house into which they have moved, her parents' strained marriage, Samantha's troubles at school, as well as her romantic life. *Gone Home* succeeds by being an exploration game, both literally and metaphorically, that tells a personal, emotional story in a medium

where most stories are created simply to support the power fantasies that provide escapism to the player.

*Gone Home* did not only receive critical success. As of February 2014, six months after the game's release, *Gone Home* had sold two hundred fifty thousand copies, about \$5 million in revenue (Conditt 1). While this amount may seem insignificant compared to a game like *Destiny*, The Fullbright Company employs only six people, who created a more compelling narrative than the 500 employees at Bungie. In fact, *Gone Home* currently holds an 86 percent on Metacritic.

The operations of most of the AAA companies in the video game industry make it difficult to create original, meaningful narratives. The race to create more profits and greater shareholder leads to upsetting practices like the annual franchising of popular video games and the cyclical use of layoffs, which demoralize employees and create less inspiring games. This has driven many developers to establish small, independent studios to create original games that are self-funded. These small studios spur innovation in storytelling that will drive people across the industry to create better narratives in games.



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