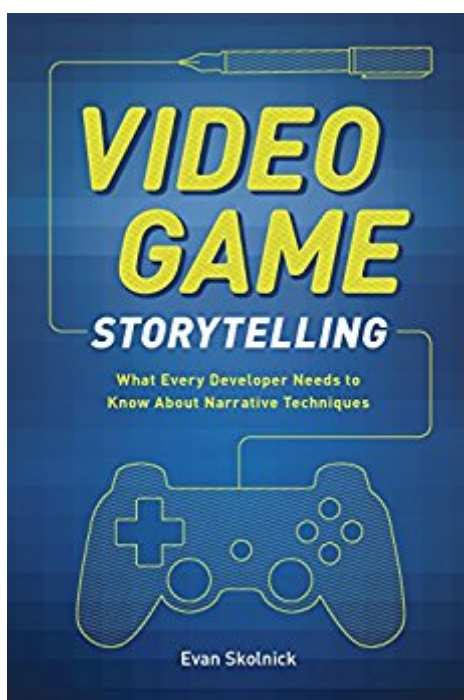


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# Video Game Storytelling: What Every Developer Needs To Know About Narrative Techniques



## Synopsis

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. From the Trade Paperback edition.

## Book Information

File Size: 2874 KB

Print Length: 210 pages

Publisher: Watson-Guption (December 2, 2014)

Publication Date: December 2, 2014

Sold by: Random House LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B00KUQGR6U

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Not Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Screen Reader: Supported

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #211,700 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #65

in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Computers & Technology > Programming > Games #112

in Books > Arts & Photography > Other Media > Video Games #122 in Books > Arts &

Photography > Other Media > Digital

## Customer Reviews

I have been enjoying this book so far. I haven't read the whole thing yet, but it's been very on point so far, and fairly practical as well. If you come from a traditional writing background, it may break some rules, but for video game writing it is pretty on the nose. I got the digital copy so I'd have it with me on my kindle and phone, but I like it well enough to consider getting a hard copy for my home library.

This book gives a great perspective of video game development from the narrative perspective and encourages a level of teamwork that any project would hope for. But in this case, it is quite specific about the relationship between the roles and why going back to the narrative is so important. I was looking for books that discussed the narrative aspects of gaming for my research on #VoiceGameDev. This is exactly what I was looking for and I would recommend it to anyone creating a voice based game as well as the video gaming it speaks to. Although some roles would be different, I imagine the same level of collaboration and respect with the narrative creators will be even more important.

I enjoyed this perspective on writing. I'm not a video game writer, but it's got useful info for anyone looking to write believable characters and improve the "hook" of their stories. The other thing I especially enjoyed, aside from the video game references, was the down to earth tone. A lot of writing advice books have this condescending voice that just grinds on me, but this book stayed light and informative without preaching at me.

This is a great book on writing for video games written by someone who has been in the industry for a while, is professional, and super friendly (he speaks at the Game Developers Conference (GDC) every year). If you are interested in learning about video game writing, or writing in general, this is a must read - and probably a good in when with the author if you get a chance to meet him at the GDC!

Good read. I managed to extract a lot of good information from it even though my area of interest isn't exactly video game writing.

I am reading this book to help me with marketing and storytelling for business. Combine this book with, "All Marketers are Liars" (Deceptive title) and anything from Abraham Hicks and you should be

set for telling incredibly moral, ethical, and authentic stories for your audience.

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 Web*, 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, playwrighting) 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.

Good book

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