GAME NARRATIVE SUMMIT

Building a Bridge Between Design and Writing

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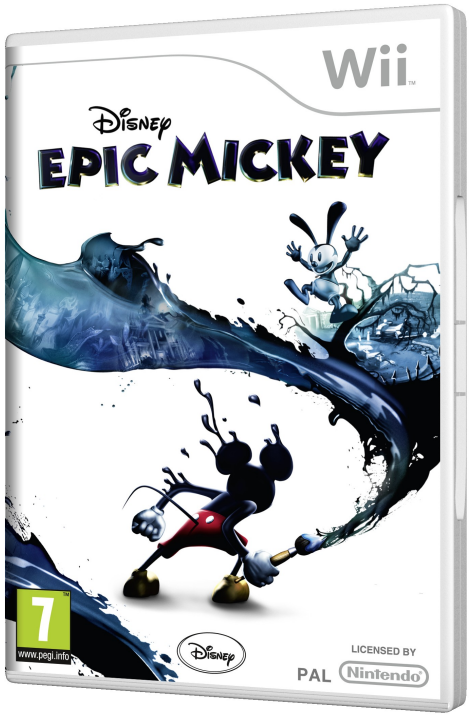
Who Is this guy?

He made
Deus Ex!

JUNCTION POINT
Disney INTERACTIVE STUDIOS



JUNCTION POINT
Disney INTERACTIVE STUDIOS

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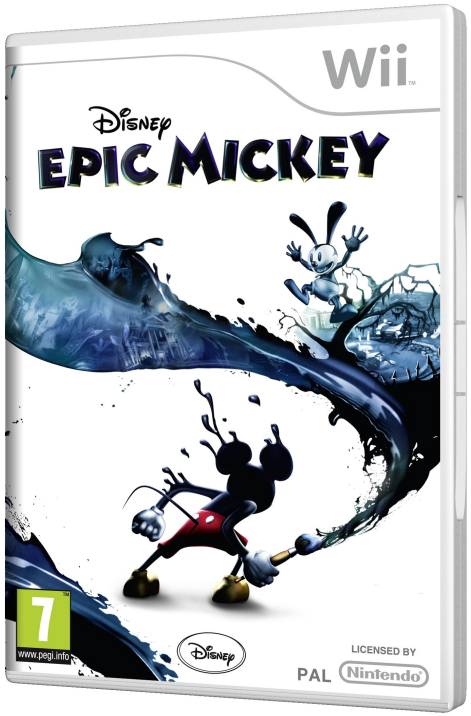
STAR WARS THE OLD REPUBLIC



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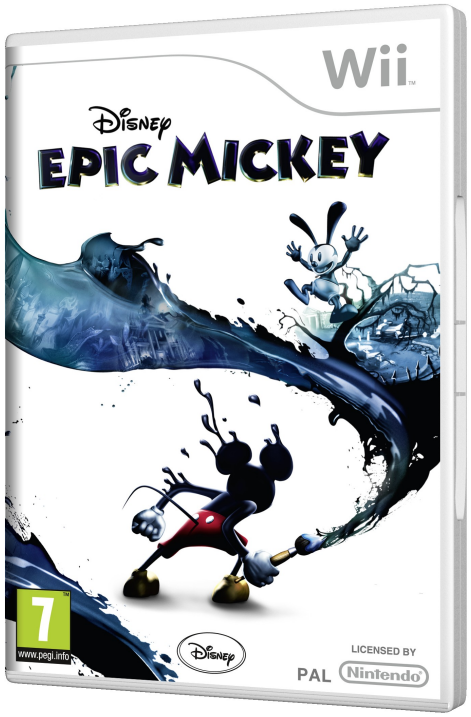

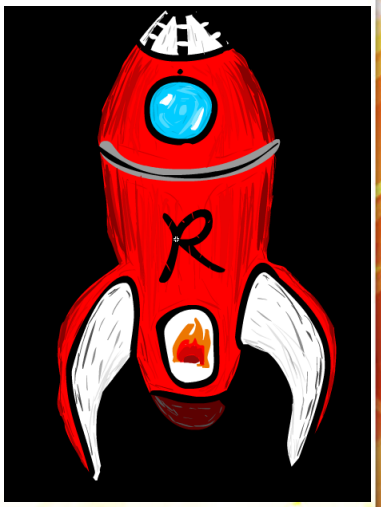

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We here to talk about:

Design

Writing

We here to talk about:

Design Writing

We here to talk about:

Design Writing

But why?

We here to talk about:

Design Writing

But why?

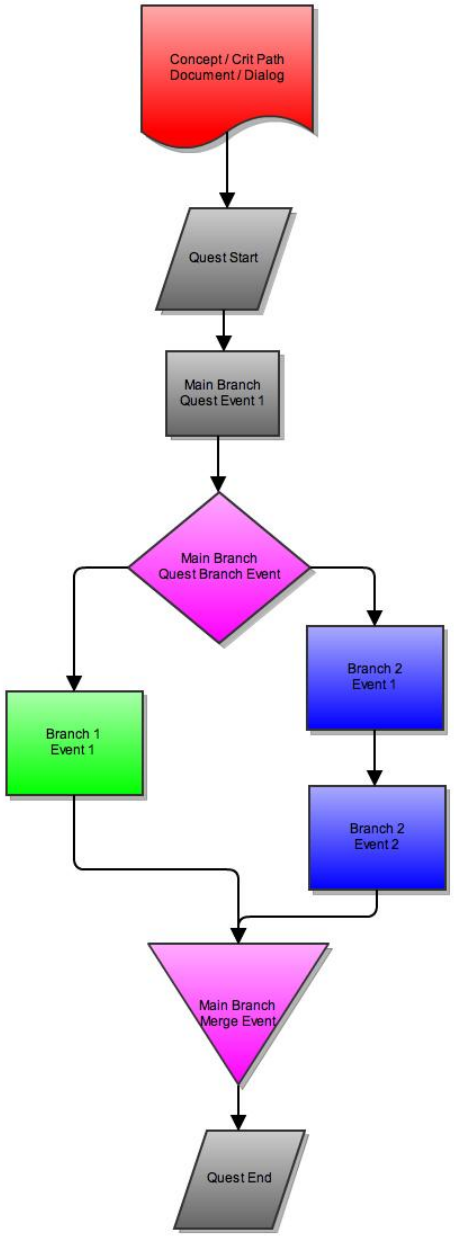
To create better storytelling experiences!

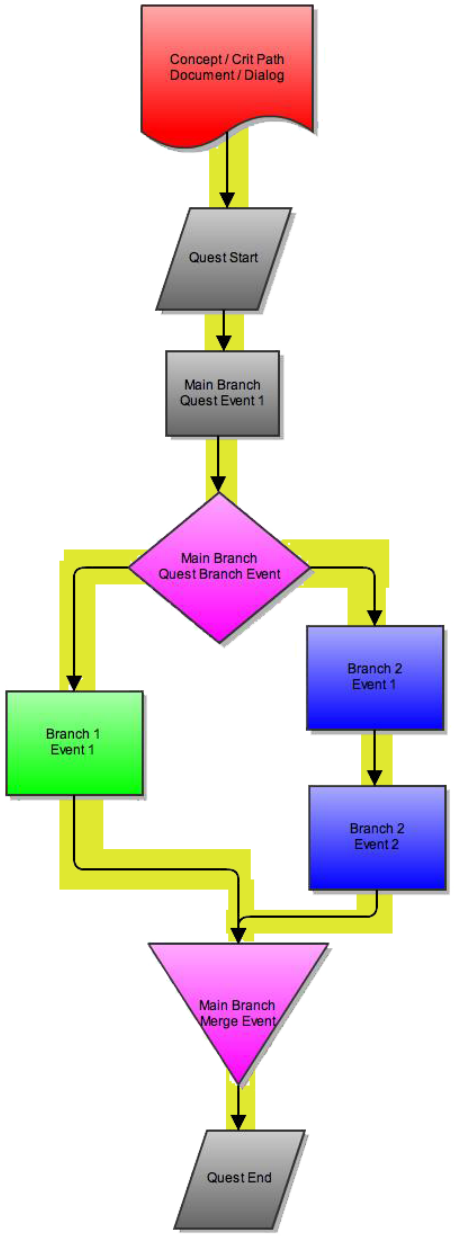
All Games are Stories

- Narrative theorist J Hillis Miller in his essay "Narrative" outlines a narrative as containing:
  - "…an initial situation, a sequence leading to a change or reversal of that situation, and a revelation made possible by the reversal of the situation. Second, there must be some use of personification whereby character is created out of signs-- for example the words on the page in a written narrative, the modulated sounds in the air in an oral narrative. However important plot may be without personification there can be no storytelling… Third, there must by some patterning or repetition of key elements.

Elements of a Narrative

- Situation - Events
  - Defined by writing, implemented by design
- Character - Players, NPCs
  - Formed in a compact between the writer and the player with some assistance from the designer.
- Form - Pattern and Repetition
  - Systems, pacing, and structure all largely controlled by design.


Concept / Crit Path Document / Dialog
Quest Start
Main Branch Quest Event 1
Main Branch Quest Branch Event
Branch 1 Event 1
Branch 2 Event 1
Branch 2 Event 2
Main Branch Merge Event
Quest End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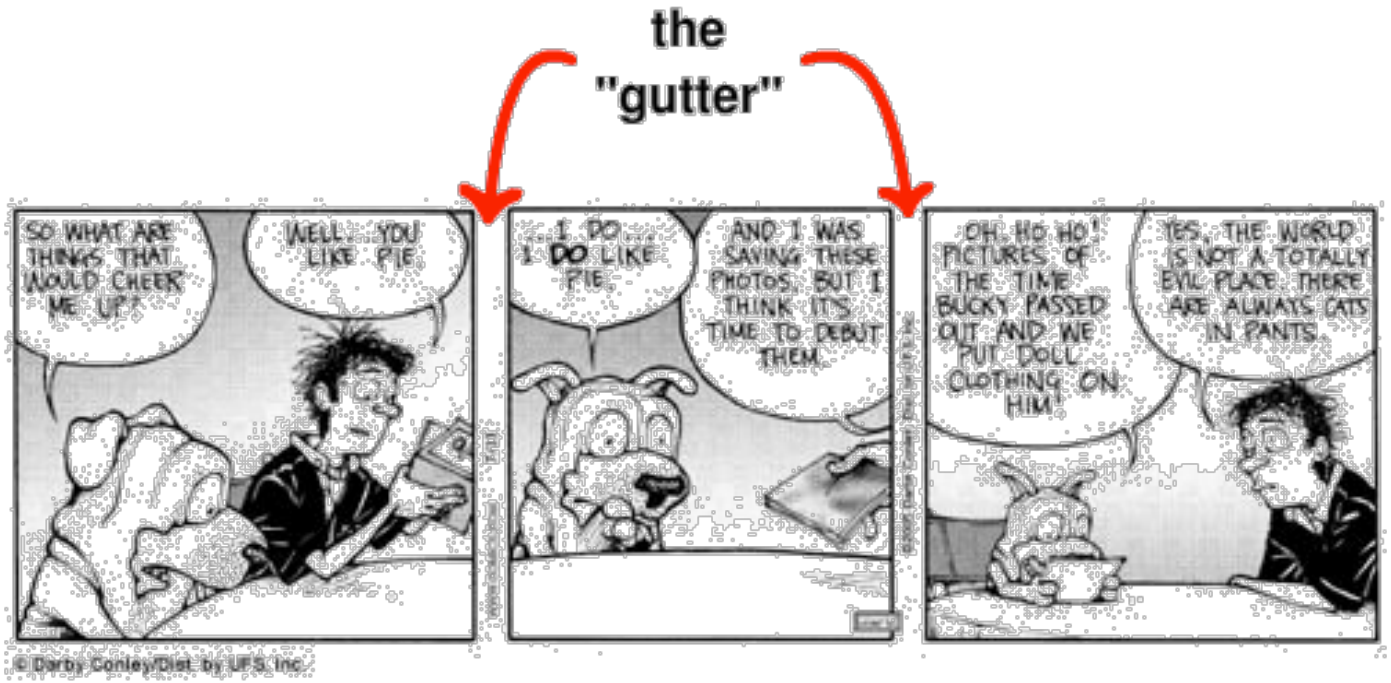
the "gutter"
SO WHAT ARE THINGS THAT WOULD CHEER ME UP?
WELL... YOU LIKE PIE
I DO... I DO LIKE PIE
AND I WAS SAVING THESE PHOTOS, BUT I THINK IT'S TIME TO DEBUT THEM
OH HO HO! PICTURES OF THE TIME BUCKY PASSED OUT AND WE PUT DOLL CLOTHING ON HIM!
YES, THE WORLD IS NOT A TOTALLY EVIL PLACE. THERE ARE ALWAYS CATS IN PANTS.
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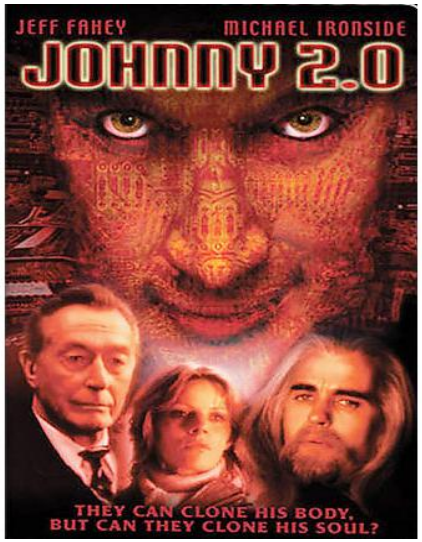
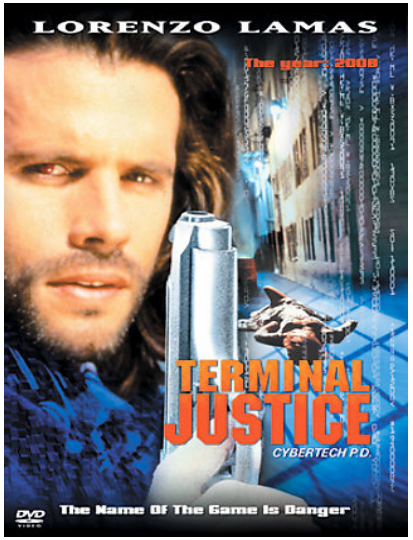
Wynne McLaughlin
Senior Designer at BioWare Austin

- I had a very unusual career path – a writer turned designer.
- For ten years I was a professional screenwriter for film & TV.





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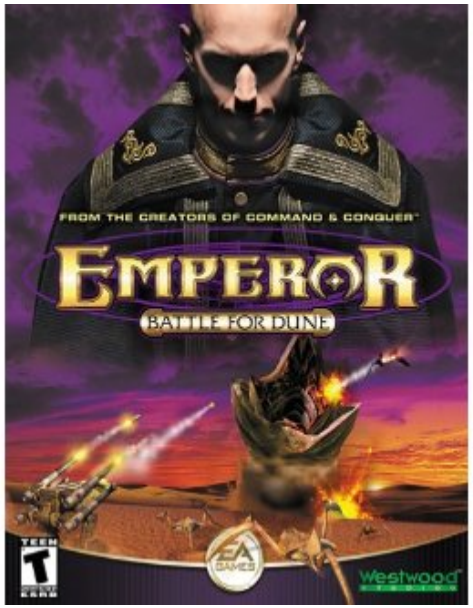
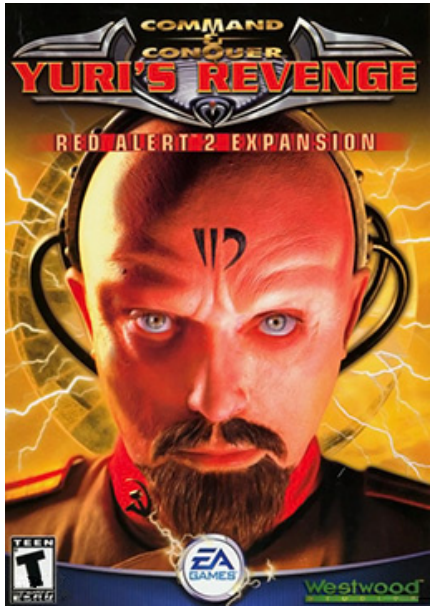
Moving To The Game Industry

- I began writing for games as a contractor for Westwood Studios in 2000.
- Became a full time game designer in 2003.
- This gives me a unique perspective.





Westwood STUDIOS

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Writing For Games as a Contractor

- The vast majority of pure "writing" positions in game development are contract positions, writing cutscenes and in-game dialog, not *actual game story*.
- Contract writers are usually hired as a game nears completion, when the story beats of the game are already locked.
- Contract writing positions are few and far between, and the competition is fierce. Full time writing positions are even rarer.

The Designer as Writer

- Most successful game designers have some writing ability.
- At the vast majority of game companies, storytelling is the designer's job.
- The design tests required for entry level positions at most game companies are at least 50% creative writing, if not more.
- Cinematic designers are becoming more and more common. They are visual storytellers, and make extensive use of filmmaking and cinematography techniques.
- Even gameplay scripters are visual storytellers.

Collaboration between Design and Writing - Why is it even an issue?

- Writing is, by nature, a solitary art.
- When there is a vast amount of writing to be done, writers must isolate themselves.
- Writing that must be voice acted and recorded needs to be done months, if not years, in advance.
- By the time design begins actual quest scripting, the writing is not only completed, it's already been sent out to be recorded by voice actors.
- By the time writing has the time to truly collaborate with design, 99 percent of the job becomes retrofitting dialog that's already been recorded to make it work with any necessary changes to the original quest design.

Hall Hood, Senior Writer

- I joined BioWare Austin early in the development of *Star Wars: The Old Republic*.
- I co-wrote the Smuggler class story and was the primary author of the Jedi Knight content.

- BioWare writers are part of the game's design team. We have a lot of up-front input into the game and collaborate closely with the other departments right up to project completion.

Collaborative Disciplines

- When crafting a story-driven game, *all* studio developers share responsibility for ensuring the best possible content.

- Great stories are built from great characters, plots and dialogue—but those are only the foundation.
- Theme, style and setting integrity are more important factors, and require collaboration.

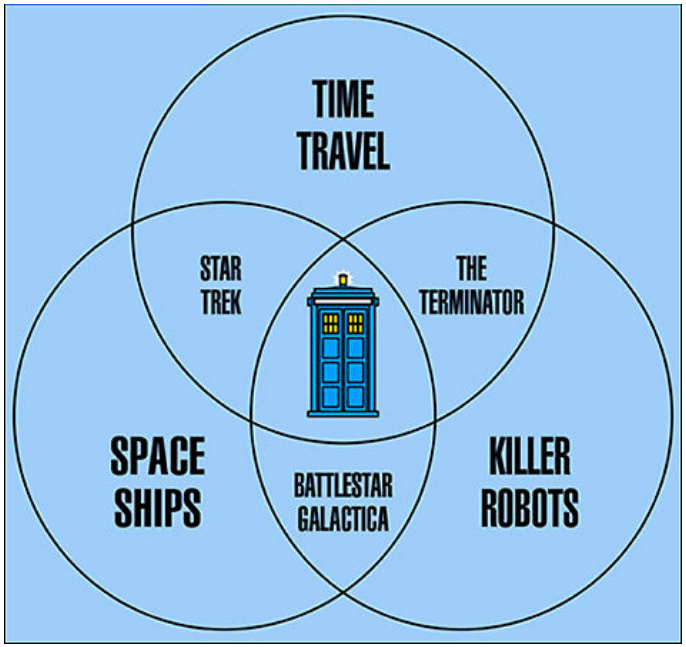
Expressing Theme

- Theme is the oxygen of narrative. You don't need to see it to notice when it's missing.
- Great stories are full of thematic subtext—they are never only about their surface details.

- It's especially important to articulate and discuss a story's themes when collaborating.

Preserving Style and Setting Integrity

- Everything created for a game, from names of people to geography of places, affects the narrative for good or ill.
- Style and setting integrity can be diluted or sabotaged completely if collaborators become careless.



- Developers must constantly ask, “Does this belong?”

What are your best practices for dealing with writers and designers? How do you foster a collaborative environment between the two?

Should designers learn to write?
Should writers learn to design?
What are the benefits and how can it be done?

Do game writers need to play games?
Do designers need to read?

What is the best way to give feedback to one another?

What does the ideal process look like in the back and forth between design and writing from the beginning of a project to the end?

What do designers and writers need to be on the same page about?