

Evolving The Emotional Content of Games

Is that a gun in your pocket
or are you just happy
to see me?



The New York Times

Where are we now?

Susan: Last December, Stephen Totilo wrote an article for the New York Times, "Challenging the Industry" <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/12/25/game-theory-challenging-the-industry/>

In it, he writes:

"Back in March, I had a chat with Jade Raymond, the leader of the megapublisher Ubisoft's Toronto studio...Ms. Raymond seemed bothered by something one of the younger developers had said to her recently before quitting her studio. It's something she was hearing from other younger developers as well. "They don't like the idea that every game is a war game, that we're reinforcing this," she said. And she added this curious observation: "A lot of the younger people who are in the industry, one of the things that really matters to them, is they don't want to feel like they're making games ..." I headlined that interview, ["What if the next generation thinks video games are stupid?"](#)

That interview and that line about what feels like a game stuck with me all year. We know what she meant, right?"

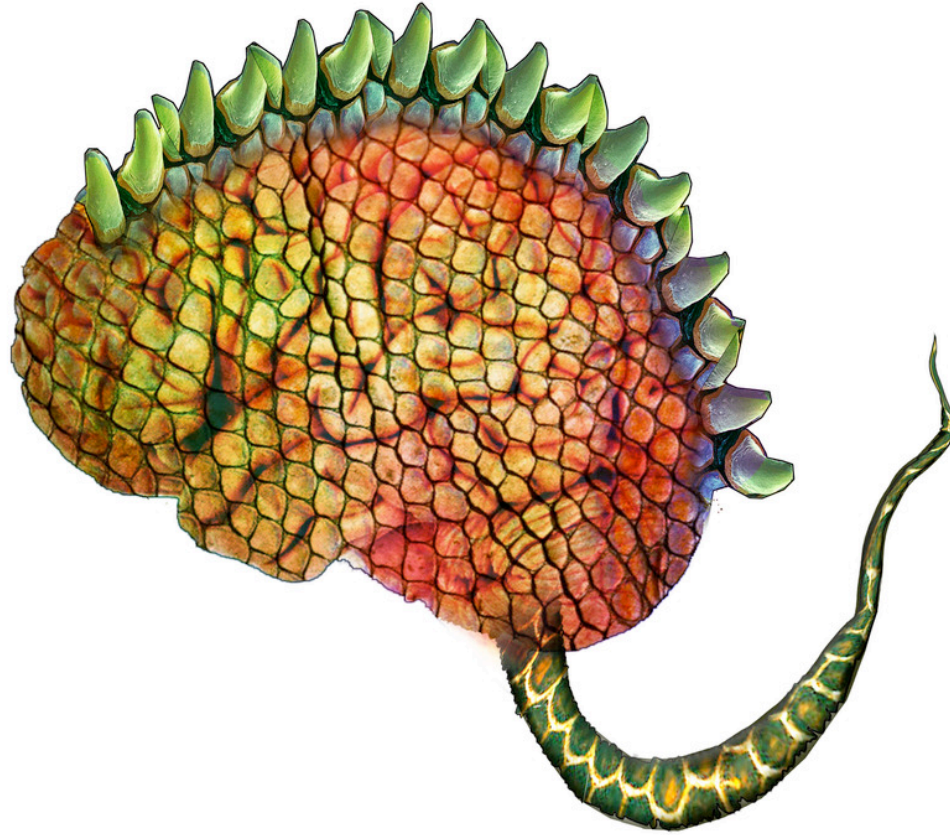
We are great at delivering power fantasies & virtual bloodlust. But is that all there is?

Most devs are smart, thoughtful, creative— why isn't that reflected in our work?

Chuck: Even at EA we want to make connected content. Dead Space team was passionate about their work

Susan: Today's question is, how can we make better games? What is standing in the way?

Animal nature, lizard brain



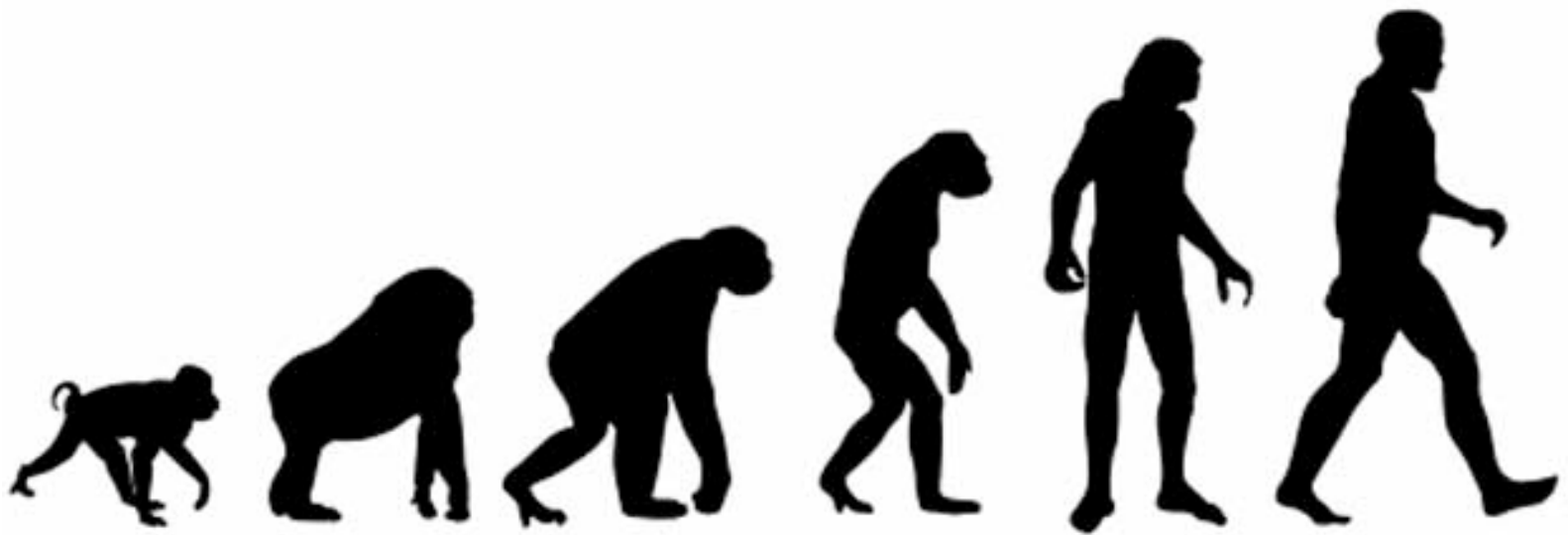
Games connect with us on an animal level

Fast-twitch games speak to our lizard brains

That's why they're fun!

But that often leaves us with is games that are stimulating and exciting – but empty at the core.

Could we evolve? If so, how?



So how do we start making games that speak – not just to our brainstem, but to our hearts and minds?

Well as it turns out, this is not a new problem. Other people have been here before us.

TV did it...

■ From 70s cheese...



TV used to be a vast intellectual wasteland.

TV did it...

▣ ...to deep dilemmas.



Now it's giving us some of the best material of all time.

...film did it...

▣ From caricatures...



Films used to be pretty flimsy, too.

...film did it...

■ ...to complex characters.



They're evolving to keep up with consumer tastes.

Our industry is next.



Today's talk is all about HOW to get us where I think a lot of us want to go.

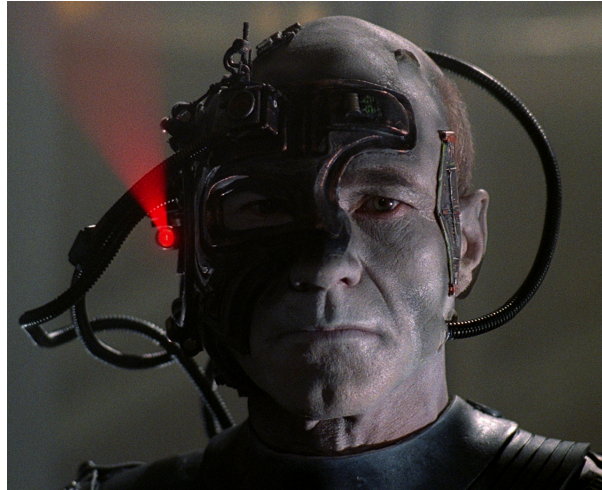
There are already studios leading the way. The industry as a whole is ready to move.

We can be this change

- ▣ As writers, we have a unique responsibility
- ▣ We can be more than advocates for plot & dialog...
- ▣ ...we can be **champions for the player's emotional journey** throughout the game

All game devs are going to play a role in this evolution. But no one more than writers.
If video games are going to change and evolve, writers are going to have a bigger role taking in crafting the emotional content of games,
So we we can create experiences that rise above the animal experience and connect with us on a human level.
And yes, that is going to be HARD.
But we would be crazy not to try. Because we are the ones that will define how games evolve. And this is a fleeting moment, one that will pass.

Hello



How many people in the room are writers? (~40% of room)

Who in the room comes from the production side, including creative directors? (~ 40% of room)

Today's talk is designed to speak to both groups.

Susan O'Connor – freelance game writer for over 15 years – titles in her portfolio include BioShock 1 & 2, Far Cry 2 and Tomb Raider.

Chuck Beaver – story producer for EA Visceral, shepherded the Dead Space franchise through all three titles.

Producers tend to see writers as goofballs;

Writers tend to see producers as the Borg.

Somehow, these two people have to get together and make the magic happen.

We're going to talk about both the creative and political challenges we'll have to overcome in order to transform our work.

A Path Forward

- Concept
- Pre-Production
- Production

Today, we're going to talk about how to craft the player's journey through these three main stages of a project life cycle.

And we're going to start this talk about meaning and emotion in an extremely unlikely place – what Susan likes to call the business room. You know, where the business happens.



Concept Phase

It's All About The Money

Here is a 2-minute MBA that breaks down how games come to be.



Market Opportunity

First, the suits look at all the games currently in the market

-



Market Opportunity

- and assess what's missing.



Studio Capabilities

Then the suits look at their
studio...



Studio Capabilities

...and evaluate their organizational capacity.

Talent, Experience, Tech



Opportunity + Capability = Biz Model

Smushing them together yields the "Business Proposition", or Business Model.
Make what the market needs. This becomes "the game".

Business analysis yields...

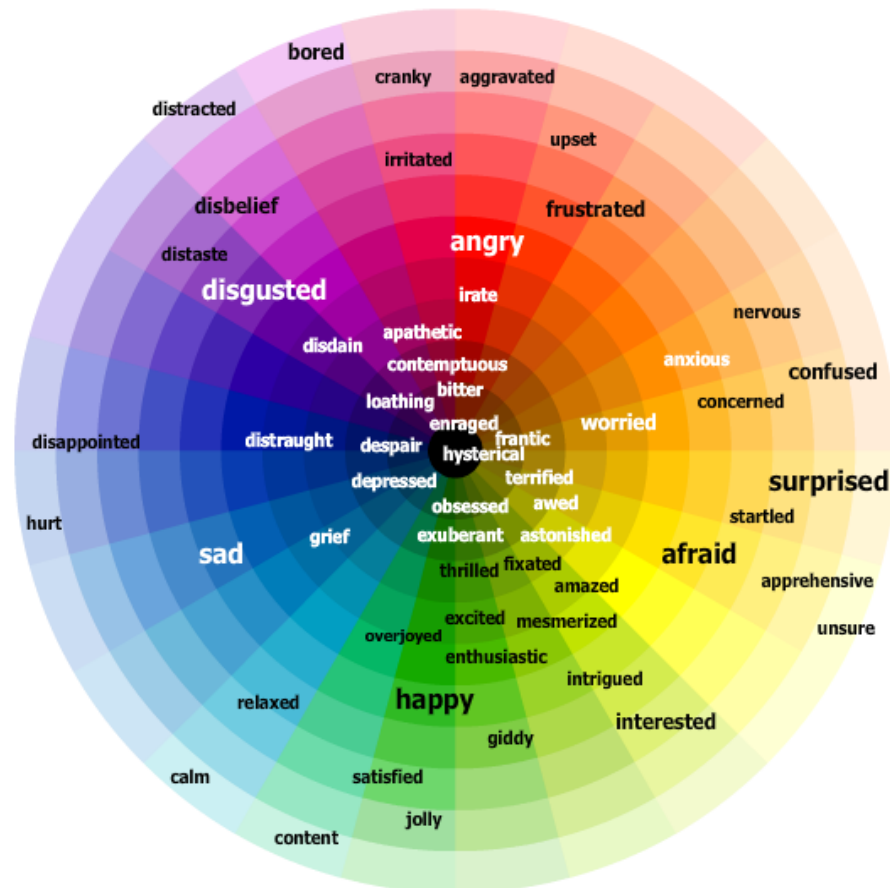
- Genre
 - Military, sci-fi, horror
- Type
 - FPS, RPG, social-turn based
- Mechanics
 - Guns, portals, conversation engine

Quite often, people look at this list and think "our pitch is done! Let's go make a game!"

But look at this list.

What's missing?

Story Emotional Core



The emotional core. The fantasy we want the player to live and feel.
Drake's: "High Adventure". Dead Space: "Tense and Foreboding"

Studios may THINK they get this because from market research and focus groups. But these tools are derivative in nature.
So we get games that feels like games we've seen before.



Vision matters

What if, instead, studios committed – at THIS level – to an artistic leap – and create a vision for their game that is built around an emotional core?

The pitch is not done until the game has an emotional core. An artistic leap.

THOSE are the studios and the games that are going to change our industry.

Who drives that vision?



Great! So who makes those decisions? Who sets that vision?

CREATIVES IN CHARGE.

That may not be you. Yet.

If you want to break the mold, become the boss.

But good news – even if you're NOT the boss, you can still make a difference in this next phase...

Pre-Production Phase

Pre-production.

Time to add form to our function.

Pre-production defined: Business requirements have been set and shipping asset creation has not begun.

Hooray! Let's write a story!

■ What could possibly go wrong?

And the writer is here! (Because you're on staff, or the studio was smart and brought the freelancer writer in NOW, when they can have a real impact.)

So here you are! Sky's the limit. You face the blank page.

You pour your heart and soul into the greatest story ever written. It's so good it makes your mom cry.

And guess what happens.



This happens! Every time. In pre-production or production, but eventually it happens. You have to plan for this kind of seismic shift NOW, in early days. As game writers, we live in earthquake country. Game design changes, and then the story changes – and if it's built incorrectly, it falls apart. This kind of chaos throws new game writers for a loop every time. But it is a reality. Game design is iterative and story has to respond. But we can still do great work - even under these conditions.. Here's how.

Tools for the player's journey

- 1. Know what everybody wants
- 2. Make the enemy your friend
- 3. Let the emotional journey trump plot

Stories in any medium use classic storytelling tools. We won't go over those here. Today we're going to focus on three tools that really make a difference for interactive storytelling.

1. Know what everybody wants

- ▣ Avatar's and player's desire lines have to resonate
- ▣ They are hardly ever the same
- ▣ But they can relate



Only in games do writers have to think about what the audience wants to do.

We cannot force a story down their throat. No matter how good it is.

So here's a trick. Create a desire line for the player character that resonates with what the player wants - which is to beat the game.

I make sure the win state for the story and the win state for the game connect with each other.

2. Make the enemy your friend

- The antagonist matters
- More in games than any other medium



Only in games does the writer have to build around a personality he can't control – the player – so how to create compelling emotional connections?

Focus on the antagonist.

We've all played games where we're up against a mustache-twirler that seems to exist for one reason only – to get in your way. That's bad writing.

Love your antagonist. That is the character you, as a writer, can control.

And then when the player goes against him, he - and the world - will feel real.

And that creates emotional connection for the player.

3. Emotional journey trumps plot

- ▣ Plots are not earthquake-proof
- ▣ They can clash with game design
- ▣ Focus on emotional journey instead



Only in games can the story events and locations and experiences change dramatically at a moment's notice at any point in development.

It's tempting at this early phase to write a great story with a lot of action, a lot of plot twists, a lot of good stuff. Guess what. That will break.

Plot at this stage is not what's important. The emotional beats, the feeling of game, the player's journey, is what matters. Game designers at this stage are thinking about gameplay. Writers are thinking about story.

Work from the overlap.

Plot is not overlap.

An emotional journey is.

Yay, good work!

■ You win! Right?

So you have done your job well, writers. You hand your materials off to your story producer and all is well. Right?



Then There's Politics

Freedom isn't free

Wrong

"Freedom isn't free" means good ideas alone don't win the war. It's not good enough to just do good work. You must engage the enemy: Politics. And, no plan survives first contact with the enemy. You must prepare for any number of possibilities.

Politics affects product

- Is the studio serious about story?
- Really? Even when it causes problems?
- Has studio done this before?
- Can you fight for story - and win?

Is the studio serious about story: Will Story drive decisions?

Really? Even when it causes problems: Like, cutting a conflicting feature? Saving a cinematic versus another asset? Scoping priorities?

Has the studio done this before: Newstory studios are likely to get very cold feet on their first encounter with a story-based conflict. It's yet another pain in the ass to deal with.

Where are you on the org chart: Off it completely, like a freelance writer?

Or on it, but too low to champion story effectively?

Will your boss fight for story? That makes all the difference in the world.

(See: slide about creatives in charge.)

Even worse...

- Many studios wait until Production to hire writers.
- That is stupid.

This entire section has assumed that a writer was involved in the process at the right time – the golden moment – pre-production.

But what if you as an exec have decided to wait until production to bring a writer on board?

Your story will be plagued with problems because it wasn't built by a professional

You may never fix your story

You'll be throwing away assets for months

Player won't have an emotional journey, at all

You may ship terrible assets and ultimately lose your job

What if, instead....



What if...

You hired writers now?

For people who think that pre-production is too soon for story...Obviously, no! Now is the time.

If you try to do all this work, later in production, you'll be in trouble.

Make the right hire and the right time. Make an impact.



Production

It's War

Then comes production.

Production

- ▣ Fun time is over
- ▣ People are making things
- ▣ Deadlines loom



Fun time is over. Fun time is OVER!
We're defining Production as when Story-dependent SHIPPING assets have been created.
Specifically, levels are in production, maybe some scripts are written, maybe some scenes or VO are recorded.

And then you call in the writer. Hey Susan, come help.

Susan: GRUMPY CAT.

What now, writers?

- Go forward.



- (because you don't have one of these)

- No one can stop the presses. **Pre-pro is over.**

And as we writers know, this late arrival happens more often than we'd like. We KNOW we can do better work if we join the team earlier in the process.

But sometimes this is how it goes. So what do you do?

You be a team player. Writers, this can be painful. But don't be the diva. They need your help: help them.

Work with them so that next time they bring you in earlier in the process.

Start looking for solutions.

Making the magic happen

- ▣ 1. Audit the story
- ▣ 2. Love on the level design
- ▣ 3. Craft those scenes

For writers, here are three important areas to focus on during production:

1. Story audit
2. Level design
3. Scene work



1. Audit the story

Look at the master narrative.

Step One: audit the story. Look at what you've got.

What is a master narrative?

Master narrative, defined

- It is not just cinematics and VO.
- “Master Narrative” includes level design.
- This narrative already exists, whether someone planned it out or not.

It's everything. It's the full player experience – not just the cinematics but the gameplay as well.

(We don't have good terms yet in this industry for things like this. Many people see story and gameplay as separate, so it's not enough to call out Story. As our industry evolves, so will our vocabulary. That will make life easier.)

The Master Narrative is already in place, whether by design or by accident.

It is not possible to hire a writer in production to “write the story.” It already exists because...

Story IS what the player DOES.





2. Level design

Is this where Harry meets Sally?

Speaking of player actions...

What story is your level design team telling?

Because God knows it's probably not yours, writers.

Story and level design are rarely integrated well. For all kinds of reasons. It's not that level designers don't care – they do – it just means that there's a lot of work on their plates.

So levels are created that have little or nothing to do with your story – and therefore the emotional journey.

It seems crazy, but this opportunity – to braid the story into the levels – gets missed all the time.

What if, instead, it became the norm? What if the writer always talked to the level designer? What if the writers were EXPECTED to talk to level designers?

Work with them to advocate for player's emotional journey – level designers are solving a problem set and you are solving a problem set. They are different but related. Find the overlap and work from there.

Writing tools for level design

- Mission objectives
- Pacing
- “The Gap”
- Natural emotional progression

So how can you as writers help the level designers create a game that is more emotionally powerful?

Help them craft mission objectives. Those objectives can serve the narrative. Really. Remember, the story IS what the player DOES. Imagination and perspiration will get you there.

Pacing – this couldn't be more important. It affects the player's emotional experience.

The gap. Open the story up in the middle of a level, rather than in scenes. Create a natural emotional progression, with cause and effect. So often in games, things happen for no reason. Make things matter. Work with the level designers to create an emotional rise and fall through their levels – and the game. Tell the designers the feeling or experience that you have in mind, and see what happens.



3. Scenes

Some producers will wait until "we need scenes" to hire a writer. AGH NO WHY GOD WHY
All is not lost. It's late, but not too late. There is still a chance to contribute to the player's emotional journey...using these tools.

Scenes!

- ▣ 1. Scenecraft
- ▣ 2. Dialog *
- ▣ 3. Performance

▣ * Funny story – I bet you were called in right about here, weren't you?

Scenecraft adds tension, gap, setups and payoffs, physical interest.

Dialogue adds wit, personality.

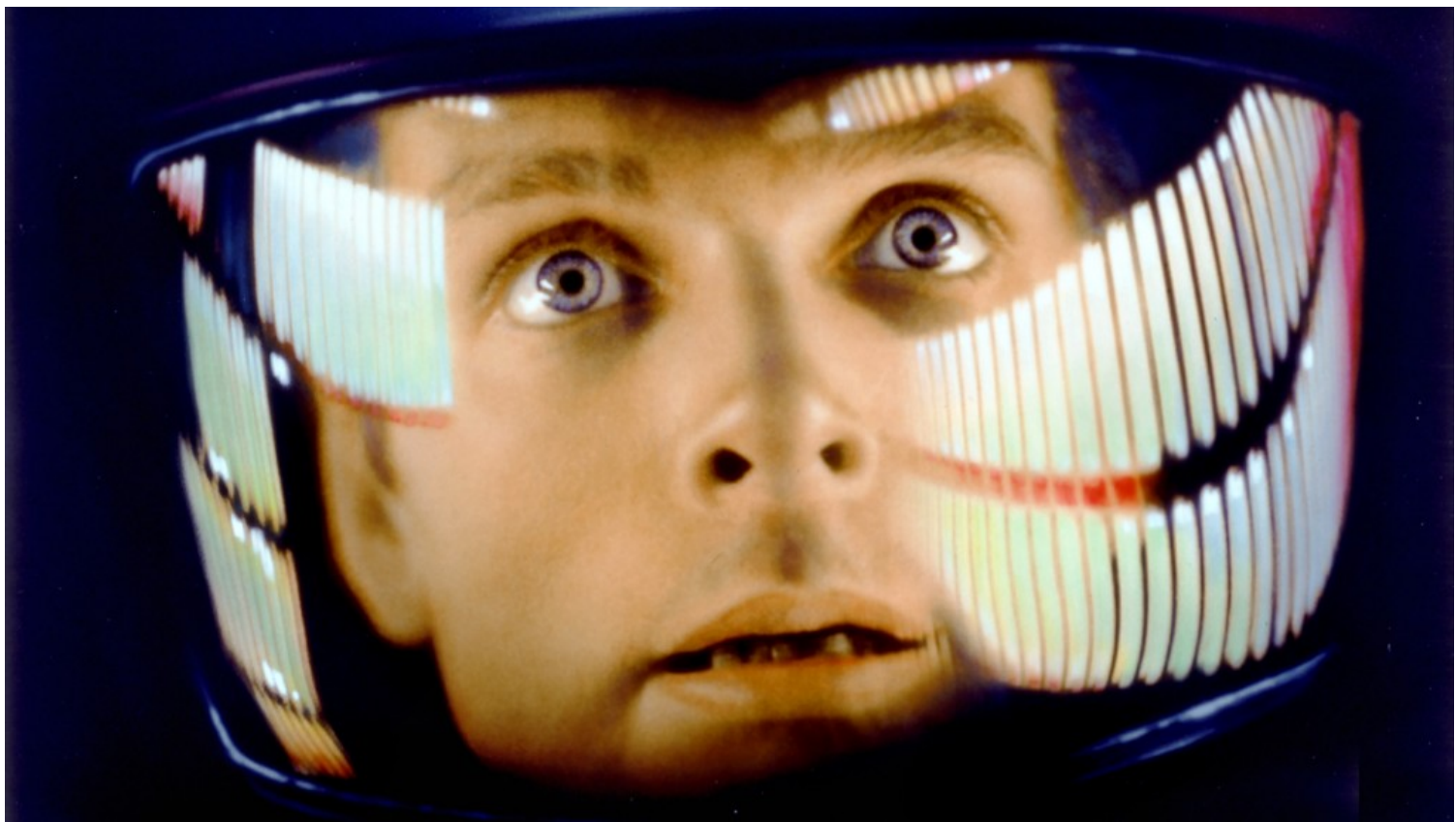
Performance delivers on the promise of the dialogue, and should not be underestimated. There is, after all, a thing called “the Oscars” that’s all about this layer.

What's great about scenes is that it gives writers a chance to practice classic storytelling craft.

The same craft that writers use in television and film.

And that is a vital skill.

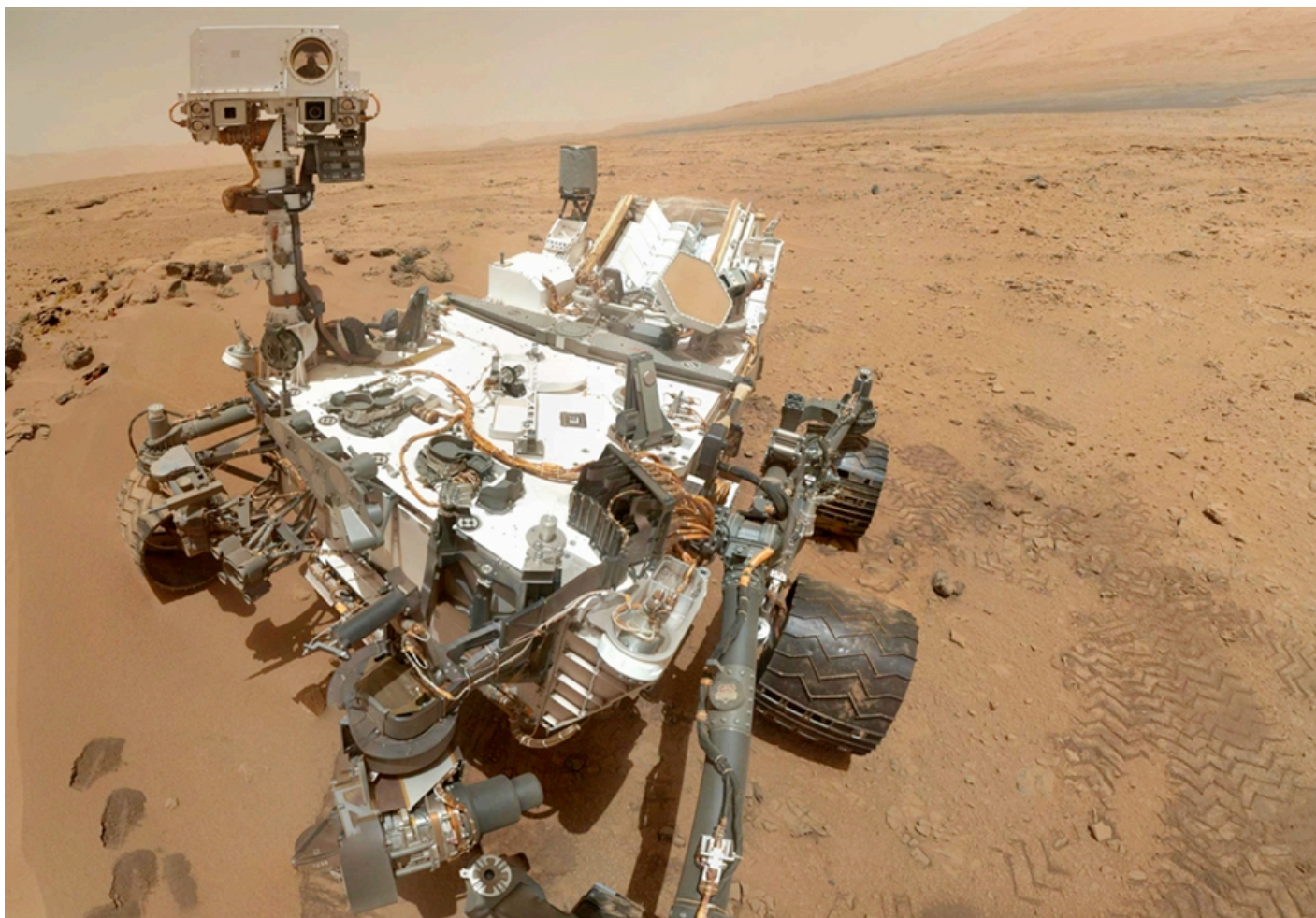
But it is only a small part of the work that we need to do.



In conclusion...

It's full of stars

Games are a new medium, that put new demands on us as storytellers. But they also open up incredible new opportunities to craft meaningful journeys and connect with players in ways that no other medium can.



So what's next?

So what's next?



You are next.

YOU are next.

The moment is now.

NOW is the time to make the games you've always dreaming of making.

NOW is the time to change our ideas about what games could be.

The developers are ready. The players are ready.

Make a game that takes us somewhere amazing - that doesn't just make us laugh or yell but makes us feel just as deeply as we do when we read a book or watch an incredible show - but do it in a way that only a game can.

So here is our last thought for today. If you only remember one thing from today's lecture, here it is.

The secret weapon of your game is not your technology or your graphics or your guns. It's the way you make your players feel.

Once you learn to harness that, you will be unstoppable.

Stay in touch

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