



Narrative Review Process

Getting Useful Feedback on your Story

Jonathan Dankoff

Ubisoft Montreal

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE®

MOSCONE CENTER · SAN FRANCISCO, CA

MARCH 2-6, 2015 · EXPO: MARCH 4-6, 2015



Who are we?

- Jonathan Dankoff
 - Does UR
- Corey May
 - Does words





NARRATIVE REVIEW PROCESS

- Why we need it
- What it is
- How it works
- Why it helps



PART 1: WHY DO WE NEED IT

- Too late to act
- Unclear feedback
- Lack of iteration
- High instability
- Low narrative investment



WHY: TOO LATE TO ACT

- Feedback can only be reliably collected once it's in-game
 - Narrative is fully integrated **late**
 - Scripts are locked, motion capture is completed, voice over is recorded
- Changes are **impractical/expensive**

Result: Narrative issues are **not fixed**



WHY: UNCLEAR FEEDBACK

- User test participants are **not critics**
 - Not good at articulating complex thoughts on narrative
 - They can broadly say what they like or not
 - They're less critical
- Feedback is general and not actionable

Result: Writers can't effectively use the **feedback**



WHY: LACK OF ITERATION

- Game and Mission design receive constant feedback - Narrative **next to none**
 - Narrative is the 2nd most important component for reviewers (EEDAR)
- Value of iteration and user testing recognized in every other aspect of production
 - Writers can be **precious**

Result: Narrative receives **less polish**



WHY: HIGH INSTABILITY

- Writers have to deal with **unsolicited feedback** from many sources
- Script reviews do not carry enough weight
- Important decisions made early on can be questioned late into the project
- Self-doubt

Result: Feedback is **difficult to parse** and organize



WHY: LOW NARRATIVE INVESTMENT

- Narrative is often considered **low priority** by people outside the narrative team
 - Many people on a project do not read scripts
- People don't always consider the game's context when working on their individual piece

Result: **Ludonarrative Dissonance**



PART 2: WHAT IS IT

- **NARRATIVE**
 - Treatment/Outline/Script
- **REVIEW**
 - Read by stakeholders who give notes
- **PROCESS**
 - Analyzed and synthesized into a report which is then discussed at a roundtable



PART 3: HOW DOES IT WORK

1. Read
2. Write
3. Analyze
4. Discuss



HOW: READ

- **Treatment** given to a group of readers (6-10)
- Two separate groups
 - **Peers** from the writing community
 - **Stakeholders** in the story from the project
 - Game Design, Level Design, Creative Direction, Leads
 - Not writers from the project (they are the client)



HOW: WRITE

- Participants have 10 days to read the script and take **notes**
- Each section has a box for notes and a short battery of questions
 - Enjoyment, Interest, Comprehension
- Given the option to **ask questions** to the writer
- A longer questionnaire at the very end covering other topics of interest



HOW: WRITE

Game Community Feedback

NRP ACO - CH: The Airport

1. Please write your name (this is for consistency in the results collection only, your name will NOT appear in the report, feel free to use a pseudonym as long as it is consistent in all questionnaires).

Name:

2. Please transcribe you script notes into this box using the following nomenclature: "P#L# Comment" where P# is the paragraph of that section, and L# is the line number of that paragraph. If the comment is general to the whole section please use "G: Comment". (PLEASE DO NOT USE DASHES BETWEEN COMMENTS, ONLY LINE BREAKS.)

Script Notes

3. Please indicate your agreement or disagreement with the following statements:

	Agree or disagree?						I gave this rating because... (Brief justification if necessary)
	Totally Disagree 1	2	3	4	Totally Agree 5	N/A	
I enjoyed this section of the script.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="text"/>
I understood what was happening in this section of the script.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="text"/>
I want to know what happens next in the story.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="text"/>
I understand the protagonists motivations for what happened in this section of the script.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="text"/>
I understand what the protagonist must do next.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="text"/>

4. Do you have any questions for the author on this section?

[Submit form](#)

Page 1 / 1



HOW: ANALYZE

- The researcher **synthesizes** the notes and questionnaires into a preliminary report
- Looks for consensus on topics as well as diverging opinions
 - Keep watch for issues of comprehension, continuity, and character motivation
- Beware negativity



HOW: DISCUSS

- Researcher and writer review report together and draft a discussion guide covering:
 - Most highly weighted criticisms
 - Most divisive comments
 - Questions from the writer to the group
- One part **discussion** group, one part **brainstorming** workshop
- Addendum added to report with conclusions from meeting



PART 4: WHY IT HELPS

- Early enough to act
- Meaningful feedback
- Clear direction
- Invest in narrative



WHY: EARLY ENOUGH TO ACT

- It provides an opportunity to **identify and solve** narrative issues **early** in the production process
 - When changes are still relatively simple and cost-effective



WHY: GET MEANINGFUL FEEDBACK

- Working with peers means writers will receive **substantive feedback**
- The focus is on **solutions** to narrative concerns, not just subjective criticism
- As all participants have production experience feedback is both **practical and actionable**



WHY: STABLE DIRECTION

- Writers now have a clear document containing **organized feedback**
- This is not design by committee:
 - **Accountability**
- Writers can make data-informed (vs. driven) decisions and **justify** them more easily moving forward



WHY: INVEST IN NARRATIVE

- Increases the chance that key creative stakeholders will **read and consider** the narrative **context** of their project.
 - Gets buy-in from various roles
- The creation of a narrative report that looks like a user test report allows us to speak to designers in a **common language**.



Impacts

- Pointed to a specific issue the writer did not know was a problem.
- Workshopped a solution to a difficult area of the story



FIN

- Super simple
- Super obvious
- Do it!
- For better stories!!!



Questions?