
THREE STRATEGIES TO MAKE YOUR GAME A WINNER

How to make your game stand out in the current market; a guide for writers, developers and studio heads.

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JOHN YORKE STORY
SHAPE STORIES THAT WORK

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There's a growing concern in the \$137b video games industry as 80% of games are abandoned by players before they reach the end.

Why do players give up on games? Sometimes it's because a game is too long, too big or too difficult. But gamers also stop playing because they are bored.

Studios and publishers are facing a crowded marketplace. Every game is a financial risk, so it's imperative they do all they can to engage their target audience. A flop can spell disaster — some of these serve as examples:

[A brief history of EA's closed studios](#)
[What happens after an indie game fails](#)

One genre performs significantly better than others when it comes to completion: narrative games have an average completion rate of 60-70%, three times higher than other games. Titles in this genre include [Life is Strange](#), [A Way Out](#) and Quantic Dream's [Heavy Rain](#). Similarly, action adventure games like *The Last of Us* or more recently *God of War* are loved for their gameplay but also for their compelling story.

Caroline Marchal, award-winning lead game designer of *Heavy Rain*, explained to us: 'story — the need to know what happens next — is, above anything else, the greatest incentive to keep playing.'

Story creates impact, engagement and a community of loyal players. See the buzz around *Fortnite*'s [live storytelling](#) and the popular [lore analyses](#) of Blizzard's *Overwatch* comic series. Stories ultimately provide meaning beyond the pure pleasure of interacting with a game. If done well, they make the experience memorable — they make it emotional. Case in point: watch these gamers react to the final scene of *Walking Dead* Season 1 by Telltale Games ([spoilers](#)).

Of course, not every game is centred around narrative — the storytelling needs of *Walking Dead* vary greatly from a puzzle game like *The Witness* — but story techniques, even if in the background, give players context to their actions. Story also [captures returning customers and increases the revenue value](#) of casual games. *Candy Crush*, with its simple gameplay, has a narrative designer.

This realisation of the power of story and its impact on player engagement has prompted shifts in the industry. 'Triple-A fatigue' was recently coined to explain why many top developers are jumping ship and setting up their own studios; 'indies have the experience and the agility to make great stories — how many great stories have been written by a committee of executives?' [says Dave Ranyard](#).

This rise in the indie scene — along with digital marketplaces like Steam which can give global visibility to small-budget games — help expand the limits of what game narratives are thought to be capable of and create opportunities for a wider range of voices to be heard.

[John Walker](#) said in 2011 that the industry was 'still years away from its 1984, its *Slaughterhouse 5*, its *Annie Hall*'. Not anymore. In today's growing industry, how do developers, writers and studios ensure they are delivering better, more engaging and progressive stories?

This paper will explore three key narrative strategies:

1. You need more diversity on your writing team
2. Everyone in development needs to think like a storyteller
3. Aspiring games writers need to think like designers

01

YOU NEED MORE DIVERSITY ON YOUR WRITING TEAM.

Game studios need to place more of a premium on representing the diversity of their user-base within their development teams. [Christy Haubegger](#) said it best for the film industry: 'when you're making a \$100 million-plus bet, it's clearly essential that you find a way to appeal to a diverse, global audience.'

A good place to start is to create an environment where female talent can prosper within development and games writing.

Caroline Marchal, creative director at Interior Night, recently spoke about [struggling to find female designers](#) when

hiring for her development team. It's not surprising considering the games industry has the '[lowest proportion of female professionals of any creative sector industry](#)', with just 14% of UK games professionals being female.

Are aspiring writers, designers and developers too intimidated to join the industry's boy's club culture? Do games studios not value the insight that female perspectives could bring to their writers' room?

Let's look at four potential reasons why games studios are not currently prioritising gender parity in their development teams.

"More men play games / women don't play the genre of game we're making."

There have been some big developments since Gary Gygax of *Dungeons & Dragons* proclaimed that 'gaming is a male thing' in 1998. Today, more women than ever are playing video games, making up 43% of the UK gaming demographic.

Percentage of male and female players per segment

				
Players per segment	86%	73%	83%	Female
	80%	78%	85%	Male
Plays 5+ days per week	37%	22%	31%	Female
	32%	23%	36%	Male

This statistic is likely to be larger as women are less willing to call themselves 'gamers'. 70% of those considering themselves 'core gamers' are male, but almost as many female gamers play more than five days a week — beating men on the mobile platform.

It's not just *Candy Crush*, *Farmville* and the Wii — women enjoy a [variety of games](#). Both genders rate strategy in their top three genres, as well as franchises like *World of Warcraft*.

Men prefer shooters and sports games but the marketing for these genres has created a

chicken/egg situation — see Polygon's article on [the history \(and power\) of gendered marketing](#): 'If the makers of Call of Duty... said they wanted to pursue the female market, it could be done.' Case in point, *Battlefield 5*'s recent inclusion of [female avatars](#).

When a market becomes saturated like gaming has, industries look beyond their existing target demographic. However, the potential for capitalising on female gamers can't be reached with so few female writers, designers and developers representing almost half the gaming population.

"A good male writer can create successful female characters."

This was the argument of game designer Jean-Max Moris — somewhat understandable, as his male writing team had created the popular female protagonist, Max, in *Life is Strange*.



Even so, Max's characterisation has been criticised by some critics as '[gender stereotyping](#)', '[one-dimensional](#)' and having '[a vibe of maleness](#)'.

Video game critic Colin Campbell recently broached the subject in '[can gaming's great women characters be written by men?](#)': 'more and more games feature women characters. More games writers are men. The skill required to convincingly write across genders is pretty high, and not commonly found.'

This has already been proven in the film industry: movies with an all-male writing team are [50% more likely](#) to fail the Bechdel test, a method for evaluating the portrayal of women in narratives.

Why risk alienating 43% of gamers?

It's in everyone's best interests to encourage gender parity in the development team, so female talent can steer story and production decisions towards a more balanced portrayal of women in games.

Tomb Raider's first female lead writer wanted to create a Lara Croft 'for everyone' in 2014. Rhianna Pratchett's script explored Lara's vulnerability for the first time and it became the best-selling game of the franchise, with 11m copies sold.

[The Guardian](#): 'this is just one example of how broadening the scope of who builds and features in mainstream games makes them better, not just different'.

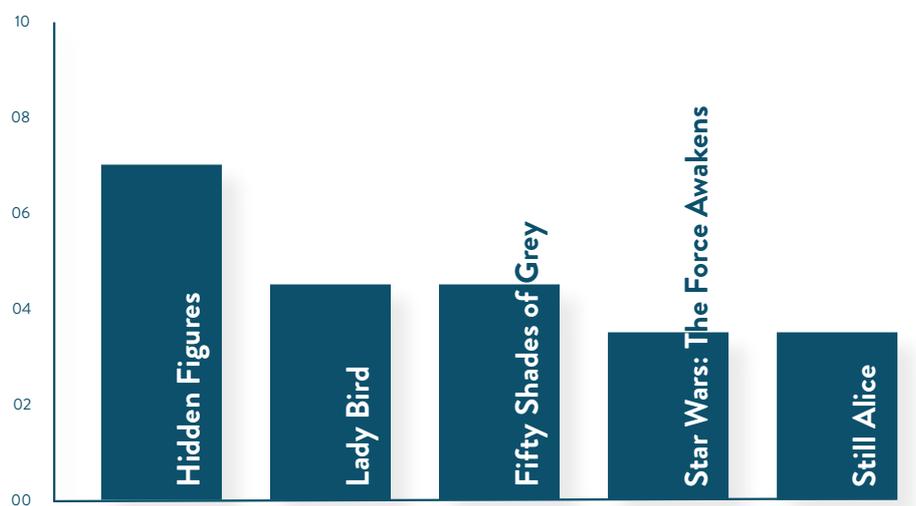
We asked Rhianna Pratchett what it's like being a female games writer in today's gaming industry on our [website](#).

**"Our game will make more money,"
if written by and targeted to men."**

Perhaps, but not if the film industry is anything to go by. There's a direct correlation between accurate female storytelling/direction and popularity with audiences worldwide.

Studio films written, produced or directed by or starring women showed a higher return on investment than their male-centred counterparts. [Forbes study](#), [BBC study](#).

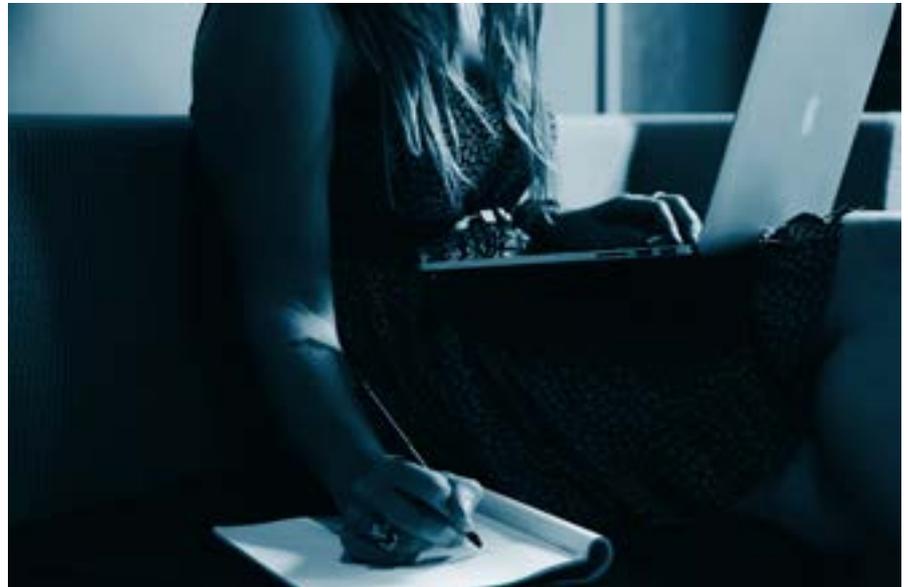
What does this tell us about how society wants to absorb stories? 'It's becoming clear that the country and the world is ready for protagonists and stories and ideas and points of view that haven't been seen before', says [Christy Haubegger, CAA agent](#).



The Oscar-nominated female led films with biggest box office takings relative to original budget.

"Other studios aren't worrying about it."

Consider the value female voices and talent could bring to your team — other studios are, and it could be a key factor to the success of your narrative.



Caroline Marchal has contributed to two of the bestselling narrative games of recent times — *Heavy Rain* and *Beyond: Two Souls*. She said of her current team: 'we've got a mix of people and I think that's important for what we're doing. I wanted to make sure that we're not telling the story of a specific group and gender for that specific group and gender' — [full interview](#).

So keen is she to encourage more female writing talent into the industry, she's

co-developed an online games writing course — [Story for Video Games](#) — with a special bursary for women: '[it would be great to have more Jade Raymonds, Brenda Romeros, Robin Hunickes and Debbie Bestwicks](#)'.

Whatever the reason for the games industry overlooking the value of gender parity within game development, its consumers are, more than ever, placing a premium on authentic storytelling.

02

EVERYONE IN DEVELOPMENT NEEDS TO THINK LIKE A STORYTELLER

As a game developer or studio, do you struggle to integrate storytelling into the production process? Perhaps story comes in as a late thought.

If writers are brought in once the gameplay and levels are set, they have to try to create a story around this existing structure or — still worse — write dialogue for pre-existing or ill-conceived characters. This lack of cohesion often feeds through to your final product.

Ludonarrative dissonance is an industry-specific term for when gameplay and narrative are at odds with each other. At its worst, it can destroy the emotional connection the player has to your game.

Ubisoft's *Watch Dogs 2* in 2016 was criticised by players for the disconnect between the protagonist's story ('I'm not a criminal') and the gameplay ('committing crimes to prove I'm not a criminal').

[Forum reviews — Retsetera](#)

[Youtube Review — F&W Game Club](#)

PC Gamer critic James Davenport scored the game a below-average 68% for the same reason: 'you can 3D print a complete arsenal, everything from a shotgun to a grenade launcher. It's strange that lethal weapons are included at all, given the peaceful ends DedSec is shooting for, and Marcus doesn't seem the type to murder' — [full review](#).

Ubisoft had a lot riding on *Watch Dogs 2* as it was their only triple-A game of the season, but it reached only 20% of the sales figures of its predecessor.

With the quality of storytelling in games on the rise, ludonarrative dissonance is entering the vocabulary of more and more critics. Review scores can have a detrimental impact on developers — up and coming developers especially: [Metacritic Matters: How Review Scores Hurt Video Games](#).

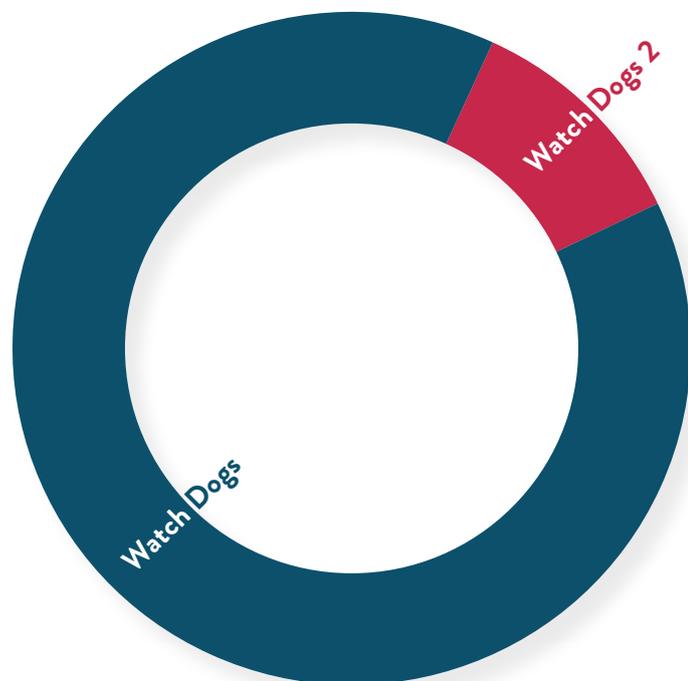
The best way to combat this is to better integrate narrative development into the production process, and to do this, you need to get all parts of development on the same wavelength: **designers and developers need to be able to think like storytellers.**

'Thinking about narrative earlier on and having a strong commitment to creating a harmonious, rather than antagonistic, relationship between gameplay and narrative is the only way we're going to get over this lack of cohesion,' [advises](#) *Tomb Raider* writer Rhianna Pratchett.

In the best games, story and gameplay evolve simultaneously. Naughty Dog (*Uncharted series*, *The Last of Us*) and Quantic Dream (*Heavy Rain*, *Detroit: Become Human*) are the few triple-A studios who get their story figured out at the same time as the gameplay and get writers on board from the start. Their game designers are often also writers.

Whether you're a sole developer or managing a development team, prioritising a basic understanding of story genre and the five-act narrative structure would enhance every stage of developing your game — pacing, game verbs, player choices, sound, setting and character design.

Watch Dogs sales figures



Few say it better than John Sutherland, Microsoft Game Studios writer: 'the principle of antagonism might be planned by the writer, but it's created by the designers, and implemented by the programmers' — see his interesting full article on [What Every Game Developer Needs to Know about Story](#).

How do you make a start on this? Enrol yourself or your team on short narrative

courses (many are online), share books on narrative structure, hire game designers who write, or simply have your game writer work closely alongside the dev team from the very beginning.

By creating this common language of narrative throughout your team, you can be sure that ludonarrative dissonance won't be found in your game.

03

ASPIRING GAMES WRITERS NEED TO THINK LIKE DESIGNERS

Ghost of Tsushima writer Brad Kane told us that while ‘a lot of writers at major studios have screenwriting training, the most valuable writers are ones who understand game design and production.’

This is reiterated by game designer **Richard Dansky**: ‘the game writer I want to work with wants to **collaborate with the team** to create the best player experience possible. That means crafting a story that shows off the features that the game is built around — no setting key plot moments on the featureless Siberian tundra for a stealth game, thanks.’

However, it’s unlikely that writers attempting to transition into video games have all the

skills Dansky and others are looking for. Few media industries or academic writing courses cover storytelling for an interactive, non-linear medium, nor game mechanics or collaborating within a development team. For this reason, Ubisoft’s Ed Kuehnel **warned** that ‘breaking into the industry just as a writer is very, very difficult’.

It’s also bred the opinion in the industry that working with screenwriters on game narratives may have more pitfalls than benefits. Game designer Chris Bateman **said recently**: ‘someone who is game-literate can learn conventional narrative relatively easily, but a screenwriter who believes that games must adapt to the conventions of screenplays is undertaking a certain kind of violence

against the radical potential of game narrative.’ This situation can be remedied in the following ways:

1. Aspiring games writers — you need to understand gameplay and game mechanics if you want to be taken seriously in the industry.

2. Game designers and studio heads — you must realise the potential of a screenwriter’s honed and diverse narrative skills to help you tell better stories.

While some elements of screenwriting are similar, the nature of storytelling for games is unique. Understanding story and gameplay will help you attain your final goal. Here's where to start:

1: To aspiring games writers.

PROBLEM

A games writer has to bow to the requirements of gameplay as well as to the limitations of game mechanics and the schedule. Can the weather change dynamically, for example?



SOLUTION

View these tips for [evaluating asset costs](#), join a dev team, learn programming, create your own game to understand the role of your developers.

Narrative needs vary greatly from one game to another. Story may take on a more linear form (*Batman: Arkham Asylum*), or be non-linear in an open-world setting (*Skyrim*).



Play games avidly. Try [Twine](#) for crafting nonlinear stories with branching narratives.

Caroline Marchal warned that 'a typical writer's sin is to think about the characters and forget the players'. [Player agency](#) is what empowers players and maintains their interest.



Continually ask yourself when writing: 'will the player feel that they have had an impact on this situation, that their actions made a difference?' Read about [understanding players](#).

Working to develop the skills above will help you change the way you approach narrative for games and bring you closer to what designers like Richard Dansky want in a games writer.

For additional insight:

David Gaider gives additional useful advice in ['do you want to write video games?'](#)

James Henry on [making the leap from screenwriter to video game writer](#)

2: To game designers and studio heads.

Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us* won a BAFTA Games Award for Story in 2014. Expectations are sky-high for their sequel in production.

Instead of looking to his fellow games writers, Neil Druckmann decided *Westworld* screenwriter Halley Gross was the best person to co-write the new script and ['flesh out the human drama'](#). At a [PSX 2017 panel](#), Druckmann credited Halley with inspiring a large chunk of the middle part of the game, and Halley spoke of her transition from TV to video games: 'ultimately, narrative is narrative and dynamic characters are dynamic characters.'

This goes to show that a writer's ability to create engaging stories can be wholly transferable, focused, and an asset to games writing — from one of the biggest games to indies.

A screenwriter's specific, familiar narrative skills could also help attract a whole untapped demographic: non-gamers.

Caroline Marchal of Interior Night wants to ['bring the *Breaking Bad* audience into video games'](#) through streamlined mechanics and a strong focus on story. She's enlisted the skills of TV writer and story consultant John Yorke during the early development process of her new game to create some parity between her narrative and that of a five-act episodic TV drama.

A screenwriter's specific, familiar narrative skills could also help attract a whole untapped demographic: non-gamers.

With most studios focusing on the existing gaming community, this is a smart move and one we will surely see grow.

No doubt, a screenwriter's honed narrative skills will help you raise the calibre of your game in the current market where 'developers are pushing at the boundaries of what game narratives are thought to be capable of, so expectations on game narratives in general is raising' ([David Gaider, *Dragon Age* lead writer](#)). If these writers only know to remedy their knowledge gaps, it'll again create valuable coherence between the two pillars of game story and design.

SUMMARY

The pressure to make your game financially successful and engaging is twice as acute in this saturated market, where critic ratings and the ability to build an active community around your game could decide the fate of your studio.

A key factor to a game's prosperity is a successful story — whether it's central or a supplement to the design.

To ensure that you implement story in the most effective way possible, consider these next steps:

- Examine the role of story within your game at the start of development
- Build a writing team that reflects all sectors of your target audience
- Write to appeal to a broad range of perspectives on an authentic, emotional level

- Ensure all members of your development team speak the language of narrative to unite gameplay and story
- As an aspiring games writer, understand the specific requirements of the format to craft compelling nonlinear, interactive stories

Find out more about storytelling in games here:

[Do Games Need Story? — Caroline Marchal and John Yorke](#)

[Caroline Marchal's online Story for Video Games course](#)

[How the Rise of Narrative Design is Revolutionizing the Craft of Video Game Storytelling — Ceros](#)

[PlayStation Experience: Storytelling in Video Games Panel](#)

[Bad Writing: Why Most Games Tell Bad Stories — Extra Credits](#)

Over seven weeks you'll master story principles for games. You'll investigate the relationship between player and protagonist, discover how to merge story and gameplay, and find ways to use those skills in a development team.

At the end of the course you'll write a story treatment for a game, and get feedback from story expert John Yorke and Heavy Rain lead designer Caroline Marchal. The course is for anyone who works in the gaming industry as well as writers intrigued by the possibilities of interactive stories.

This is a professional development course and so you may be able to get funding from your employer to do it. All participants who successfully complete the course will receive a certificate of completion evidencing their learning and study hours.

To find out more about our Story for Video Games course, visit our [website](#).

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