

# SYNTHESIZING NIRVANA –

Immersing players deeper into your games

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Mythos Productions, LLC

4/7/2008

A white paper exploring tools, methodology, and process for closing the gap between the erratic captivation of the game-player's imagination and the unrelentingly immersive experience of cinema.



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“Games are rapidly becoming the movies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but there is a chasm of disparity that forms a glass ceiling over their ascent as a mainstream entertainment medium.”

– Christopher Burns

The face of gaming is changing. Shifting. EVOLVING. As storylines become more elaborate and inventive, the tools to create them follow in match step. Player interfaces are becoming more intuitive. Textures more organic and detailed. Lighting more sophisticated. The one aspect that seems to be lagging is attention to the details of the dramatic narrative that make the overall playing experience more believable. More engaging. More engrossing. The tools required for this are not commonly found in the game studio, and the artists who use them are rarely seen on a design or development team, yet for film and theatre directors, they are fundamental skills that are employed regularly to create the immersive experience you typically have when watching a movie or a play.

This paper will introduce you to a new team-member, the “**story-director**,” who, with a set of tools and techniques, and a handful of thespians, can make an enormous impact on the quality of a game. By directing the actors and working through the story, character development, and dialog with the design team, the story-director can take a game to a completely new level as a storytelling device and entertainment medium. Additionally, this work is so familiar to the story-director that it can be done very quickly and cheaply in contrast to the expense of animating and re-animating scenes that don’t work.

Since the beginning of time storytelling has served as a vital way for all of us to know ourselves and the world around us more deeply and to make us feel connected to others. Psychologically speaking, self-knowledge through reflection by and connection with others are the primary needs for human beings, beyond the basics for survival. Stories are the vehicle for these elemental needs. First came cave drawings, then tales around the camp fire, theatre, books, and finally movies and television. These narrative devices are a cornerstone of culture and the expression of the human condition. People place themselves in the role of each character of every story they hear, read, watch, experience. Who doesn’t want to “wear the character” of any story and become something different than they are in real life? Tapping into this most basic of human needs is the single-most powerful component a game has toward ensnaring its audience. But the current approach frequently falls short due to issues that will be presented in this paper.

*“I would say the computer-game industry has failed big time. It has done a fantastic job of appealing to pure hard-core gamers. But if we are going to say we are a new entertainment medium, which we have been talking about for years, selecting to appeal to 10 million hard-core gamers is not a medium, it’s a niche. We have got to make people more emotionally involved.”*

– Lionhead Studios CEO, Peter Molyneux  
USA Today 2/18/2008



Until recently, games have been played by a single person, alone at the computer or console, but MMOGs have introduced a new level of social interaction which has spawned an entire sub-culture of evanescent acquaintances, global friendships, and occasionally, true love. And their popularity has soared because of it. Outstanding playability and a variety of other factors contribute heavily to their success as well, but at their core lies social contact delivered through story and real-time interaction with other players. Outside of these relatively-new MMOGs, gaming remains, primarily, a solitary form of entertainment, often reflected in the solitude of the hero of many games, even though we are social creatures with brainstems hardwired for the “safety in numbers” survival skill that forges community.

When games, both single- and multi-player alike, can bring the player into a more immersive, emotional, interactive experience, then we will have truly achieved “Digital Crack,” and the desires of this industry to forge a new demographic-spanning entertainment medium will be realized. This can be the ultimate in storytelling. Games are, currently, seen primarily as a form of light entertainment; however, in this paper we will pose a pathway to propelling games forward as a deeper form of STORYTELLING, positioning them as a fully-fledged and demographically universal medium of communication and entertainment along the lines of cinema and theatre, and therefore, catapulting their entertainment market share, and, consequently, their profitability, into an entirely different realm.

*“Games have the potential to be more engaging for more people than life. It is a drug. Good narrative has always been like that, providing more drama than the audience is capable of generating themselves.”*

– Gore Verbinski  
Keynote Speech, 2008 D.I.C.E. Summit

Up until recently game studios produced *games* with cinematic elements in them, and the notion of comparing them with the cinematic experience wasn’t even a thought. Over the natural course of evolution, however, these same game producers are now, essentially, creating *movies* with games wrapped around them, bringing the two worlds far closer than they ever have been. As a result, consumers have responded voraciously. In 2007, the gross annual sales for game software (console and desktop) were about \$8.5 billion<sup>1</sup> with the #1 game being “Halo 3,” which is now being made into a film. For movies, however, the total take for 2007 was around \$33.3 billion<sup>2</sup>. Although, these two worlds are converging, there is still a significant chasm between them, as evidenced by this disparity in revenue.

Games stand poised to become the next iteration in the evolution of storytelling, capturing a far larger portion of that triple-sized pie; however, before that potential can be realized, there is a missing link that must be understood, accepted, and fully leveraged.

<sup>1</sup> Wall Street Journal, February 19, 2008

<sup>2</sup> Combined box office receipts and DVD sales, USA Today, January 7, 2008



## OBSERVATIONS ON THE GAME PLAYING EXPERIENCE

### THE BLIND-SPOT

Imagine, if you will, a stone skipping across the surface of a lake, where the water is the game world and air is reality. The gaming experience is not unlike this analogy in that players are typically submerged in the game world briefly and then sporadically bounced from the clutches of engrossment in the story by inconsistent and often unrealistic game elements. Often this is the case due to lack of depth and richness in the STORY which is a consequence of inadequate CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT. The contributing factors to this lack of character development are the script itself, performances of the characters (their physicality, their movements and interaction with other characters and their environment), the quality of the dialogue and voice acting, and the staging of scenes. Notice how none of these factors are technical in nature. There is a widely accepted notion in filmmaking – when the story is richly conceived and well told the audience will forgive even egregious technical problems liberally. Take a game with a brilliant and well-executed story that also has all of its technical “ducks” in a row, and magic happens for the player. Fail in the storytelling, and no matter how technically brilliant the game is, the response will most likely be lukewarm at best.

Certain games have risen from the heap to be recognized as leaders in their genre, often with barely-adequate features such as user interface, graphics quality, and audio. Others have failed miserably even in light of massive marketing campaigns, beautifully rendered cut-scenes, organic modeling techniques, and ground-breaking player control systems. One wonders how this can possibly be. There have been numerous post-mortems on both success and failures in the game industry, but they almost always examine technical aspects exclusively.

Games have two primary weapons in their arsenal to keep players glued to their seats: novel and detailed computer generated graphics, scenery and action, and the placement of control firmly with the viewer. Both, together, will give even a poor game a longer window of opportunity to capture its audience. Even this, however, is changing, becoming a less powerful pull on the imaginations, and resultantly, the money of most game players. Contrasted against the “grab you by the legs and pull you under until it is finished” experience of movies and one can see a ripe opportunity for game studios to forge a truly extraordinary form of entertainment. We pose that the common denominator, the blind-spot, in these two disparate situations is the STORYTELLING experience created by rich character development, and offer that in the immediate future only those games providing a wholly immersive experience akin to cinema will survive.

Additionally, an interesting thing is happening in the game industry that mirrors the film world of a decade ago when digital cameras became easily accessible and everyone who thought they had a story to tell put it on tape. It is entirely plausible that a similar scenario could play out in the gaming industry within the next 2-3 years. Independent game designers, developers, and even studios are cropping up in increasing numbers, and with them new online technologies, such as “Multiverse” and “BigWorld,” that allow just about anyone with an idea and a mouse finger to try to make a game. As the



concept of the independent game studio grows and gains momentum, it stands to reason that, even more, the games with superior storylines and storytelling techniques will prevail.

Let's define what makes a GREAT story:

- CAPTIVATING STORIES are rife with fully developed characters who are believably motivated.
- ENGAGING STORIES have coherence and follow a dramatic, narrative structure with a beginning, middle, and end present and fractalized throughout the whole story.
- POWERFUL STORIES are driven by a main character that has a tangible external goal, as well as a motivating internal/emotional goal.
- ENGROSSING STORIES keep an audience engaged with obstacles that create building conflict for the main character as he/she strives for his/her goal.
- COMPELLING STORIES are told through scenes, exchanges, and dialogue built upon rich subtext that provides windows into their respective motivations and desires.

## THE HOLE

Game designers and developers are not necessarily trained storytellers. Granted, there have been great successes and surely there exist designers who are truly great storytellers, whether trained or not; however, it seems that the norm is a developer or tester who has risen through the ranks and come forth with an interesting game concept. Assuming these people to be excellent storytellers is akin to assuming an aircraft engineer could fly the jet he designs. There may be an understanding of how to do it and some similarity in job experience, but the skill set, and the facility and aptitude in using it, will be very different for the pilot.

The innate facets and technical challenges of creating a game are what a game design and development team is best at. These issues are profound and, in most cases, require years of work to truly excel at any one of them. Such is the case with STORYTELLING. It is an art and a science with many facets that take years to develop. Thus, it shouldn't be a thought that the same people who are skilled enough to make a game would possess the depth of knowledge and skill to masterfully tell stories around which their games revolve. And it is in this area that the game industry has a HOLE.

The backbone of most narrative games right now is in the hands of a writer/designer and an animation team. This is analogous to making a movie with only a screenwriter and a cinematographer. There is a vitally important missing element. The DIRECTOR. The director is essential to uncovering the emotional depth of the story as well as bringing cohesiveness to all of the storytelling elements. This work is what creates the deeply connected, rich, and immersive storytelling experience that inevitably provides the most compelling and engaging viewing/playing experience. The director accomplishes this by focusing on the development of character. Character IS story.

*"Conflict is character, character is story."*

– F. Scott Fitzgerald



In cinema, rich, multi-dimensional characters are achieved, primarily, through excellent writing, and then fleshed-out by the director with script analysis, and exploration with the actors portraying them. Staging of the characters and placement of the camera are vital to creating the immersive emotional experience as well. The subtle details in an actor's performance generate enormous reward for the viewer because the viewer is far closer to the action than in nearly any other medium. The game environment provides a very similar circumstance, as the viewer is as close to the action as the designer wants him to be, and thus, the subtlety of performance has a magnified effect, just as it does on the silver screen.

People are fascinated by movies for two primary reasons. First, movies provide an opportunity to experience alternate realities and “emotionalites.” This happens through a sort of psychological transference, where the viewer “injects” himself/herself into the role of each and every character of the story. Secondly, the fascination exists for those utterly magical “Movie Moments” of emersion in an emotional experience. We all know them, a look, a wink, an embrace, a line of dialogue, a heart-wrenching good-bye, anything that makes the character, and by extension the viewer, feel *extraordinary*. Movie Moments are specifically crafted by screenwriters and directors because they know this is the power of cinema. Infusing a game with these Movie Moments would be even more powerful as the player gets to take part on a much more personal and intimate level than is provided by viewing a motion picture. As games and cinema converge, it is logical to assume that the techniques used to create characters, performances and riveting moments should also converge, yielding a more cinematic, and thus, richer and more captivating experience.

We have examined what a great story looks like and the necessary elements to create it; however, a great story, no matter how expertly crafted can still be ruined in the telling. How many times has a very funny joke fallen on its face because the raconteur (teller) doesn't know how to tell it, or an anecdote with interesting subject matter failed to hold your attention due to the recounting?

There is a key to the weaving of epic yarn.

Within the gaming world, this steward of good storytelling, who has the skill set of a theatre and film director, operates as a “**story-director**”<sup>3</sup> and acts as a guide through the wastelands of possibility, leading the design team to the panacea of immersion. Through a process of script analysis and rehearsal techniques with a team of professional actors, the story-director is able to point out pitfalls and perils in the characters, the story, and the process of telling it. The story-director is expert at discovering what lies beneath, bringing it to the surface and ensnaring the viewer's imagination by reflecting life to him in such a way that the reflection feels as real as the seat in which he sits. We pose that this is the vital missing link, THE HOLE, in most design teams.

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<sup>3</sup> Although “Creative Directors” are part of most design teams, they tend to operate more in parallel to the movie producer, in making sure that all of the creative and technical elements come together towards the common goal. This is a very different role from that of “story-director.”



## TOWARD THE WITHIN

### WHAT A STORY-DIRECTOR DOES

Just as music, sound design and stylistic graphic detail help to create a much more visceral experience in a game; the story-director has a set of tools to accomplish the same thing. These tools, rooted in theatre, cross-over into any story-based creation, and will, just as they do in their innate environment, enrich and enhance the viewing pleasure of an audience.

Let us describe how a good story-director works his magic. As a storyteller, the tools and practices a skilled story-director uses might be summarized as:

- **Script analysis** – By analyzing the dialog and action written in the script the story-director uncovers hidden motivations, subtext, and emotionality that exist in every character interaction.
- **Working with actors** – By bringing in live actors to work with the script of the game, the story-director is able to explore, very rapidly, a multitude of ideas and approaches to maximizing the emotional impact of the text, bringing depth and genuineness to the game.
- **Motivations, desires, and obstacles** – By using these tools that originated in the world of theatre, the story-director’s work with the script and team of actors exposes the emotional undercurrent of the story in fascinating, inventive, and compelling ways. Every character, no matter how significant, has a motivation or desire, and thwarting the fulfillment of these desires are obstacles of the self, the environment, and others. This is drama at its core.
- **Blocking and staging** – By placing environmental elements strategically, and by the subtle positioning of the characters in relation to those elements and each other, the story-director is able to bring the heart of the story being told in each scene to the surface. This allows the player a profound opportunity to insert him/herself more fully into the story.
- **Placement of camera** – By making specific choices of where the camera is placed to reveal a scene, the story-director dramatically affects the sense of drama, intrigue, comedy, etc., as well as pulling the audience into the situation and relationship between characters on a very emotional and visceral level.
- **Injecting key team members into the scene** – By placing the writer, designer, or, often, the animators themselves into the scene with the actors, the story-director facilitates an entirely new experience for the team by giving them a vivid and visceral recollection of that scene, such that when they sit down at their workstations there is a new and profound sense of ownership, realism, and of “being there” that has enormous effect on the quality of the output.

*“The collision between gaming, internet, film, and animation has just occurred and things are just mutating. We are still cultivating ideas. This is a time for madness, a time for brilliance and a time to take a skeptical look at the inference that we know what the audience wants simply because they have not been given another choice.”*

– Gore Verbinski  
Keynote Speech, 2008 D.I.C.E. Summit



## WHAT A STORY-DIRECTOR BRINGS

A good story-director will, typically, have a team at his/her disposal, which will include several highly-skilled actors of various demographics, and technical crew such as camera operators, sound recordists, etc. If these people are not able to be present for a work session, the story-director *must* be very adept at identifying and casting actors who not only fit the roles, but are also highly directable so that that work is not impeded.

Within the emotionally inciting work between director and actor, it is not uncommon for the story-director and his/her team to generate multiple takes on the same piece of text in a very short timeframe. Two to three pages of script may yield 6-10 very different takes in an hour or less. This work, when videotaped, generates a much more useable form of storyboard from which the animators can work. Not only are they building from well-physicalized examples with organic blocking and realistic interactions, they are also presented with a variety of emotional choices from which to tell the story. Contrasted against the often awkwardly moving characters, and the unjustified blocking inherent in so many games, this represents a tremendous leap forward in the gaming experience.

*“With renewed zeal, traditional media companies have begun building their own video-game businesses again.”*

Wall Street Journal 2/19/2008

When you compare this against an attempt to generate similar results through the traditional animation process, the benefit becomes crystal clear. Animators are generally given voice-over tracks, a script, and storyboards from which they must figure out where to place the characters and how they should move in relation to the environment and each other. This is a very inorganic, heady approach that yields stilted, unrealistic character performances while consuming great amounts of animation time and budgetary dollars. If those initial efforts don't play well, the team must then start all over again, spending even more time and money, or, in worst-case

scenarios, simply “live with it,” because the budget and/or schedule will not allow for another iteration. The traditional game animation process simply cannot compete in a cost-, or time-effective manner with the story-director.

With the increasing use of motion-capture, the story-director's contributions expand as the physicality of characters becomes an even more potent narrative tool. The story-director can work with the actor to devise windows into the character's motivations and emotionality through the way the character expresses himself/herself and moves through the environment. This results in a player experience that is far richer and more organic than ever before.

Utilizing the story-director during recording of voice-over can also yield tremendous results. The same techniques used during the work sessions with the actors and design team can be applied in the recording studio, giving the voice-actors the best possible environment in which to perform, and the directorial assistance they need to truly bring their characters to life.





## A WORD ABOUT PROCESS

Interpenetrating the next generation of computer and console games with the qualities of a great cinematic experience will, necessarily, require a new, or at least modified, process to be implemented along with the understanding of *when* to inject these techniques and the new team member into that process. This will ensure that this work is accommodated to its fullest potential.

The table below correlates the story-director's process with the typical stages of the game design/development process:

Development Stage	Game Process	Story-Director Process
Conceptualization	Concept Document, Project Plan, Scripting, Budget, Contracts	Script Analysis, Dialog Smoothing
Pre-Production	Prototype, Technical Specifications, Design Document	Characterization Work, Movement Design, Character Analysis, Interactive Rehearsal Sessions and Taping, Improvisation, Blocking and Staging
Production	Assets, Levels, Alpha Codebase, Artistic Content Creation (Graphics, Animation, Audio)	VO Direction, Filming and Recording of VO talent, MoCap Direction
Post-Production	Re-Recording, Sound Design, Polish	Narrative Editing, VO Direction (Clean-Up) to Strengthen Story and Character
QA	Gold (RTM) Codebase	Margaritas with the Team!
<b>LAUNCH</b>		

These process improvements can be achieved in the following ways:

- Coordinate the game with as much attention to the details of character development through the performances of both voice actors and their digital counterparts as is applied to other aspects of the creating the IP.
- Determine when and where to inject the story-director into the creation process such that he can contribute optimally. For some IPs this may be during voice recording or motion capture. For others, especially those with complex storylines, that are heavily plot-driven, or are based on films or books, this may be during the conception of the idea, thru the initial writing of the script and follow into the fleshing-out of the idea.
- As the story-director works with the actors on plot- and character-development, exploring peripheral characters, developing the hero and his impact on others, and other avenues, the process of creating the game will, necessarily, require modification. In certain circumstances, a new process will need to be created to accommodate this, especially in the case of cross-genre games where plot is not typically an aspect of game play.
- Allow storyboards to serve as a starting point to a discovery process rather than as a goal to be achieved.
- Get the writer(s), designer(s), and animators involved with the story-director's work sessions, as they are able to become more deeply connected to the characters and story by witnessing and participating in the exploration by all members of the team.



## THE BENEFITS OF ADDING A STORY-DIRECTOR TO YOUR TEAM

### BETTER GAMES CHEAPER!!!

#### Better Games – HOW?

- A more robust and immersive player experience
- Games with deeper more engaging characters and stories
- Stronger, more realistic dialog
- More organic movement of animated characters
- More believable and truthful character behavior
- More organic and pragmatic environments
- Character physicality is explored and utilized as a storytelling device
- Ancillary characters are “real” – more fleshed out and imbued with life
- Creative team can “play” and explore ideas for characters and story very quickly and easily
- Animators and designers have a visceral feel for the scenes on which they work, as they have, in many cases, actually lived the experience of the scene during work with the story-director and animators

*“Video games are the fastest growing sector of entertainment, with sales in the U.S. rising 34% last year to \$8.64 billion.”*

– NPD Group Inc.  
Wall Street Journal 2/19/2008

#### Cheaper Production – HOW?

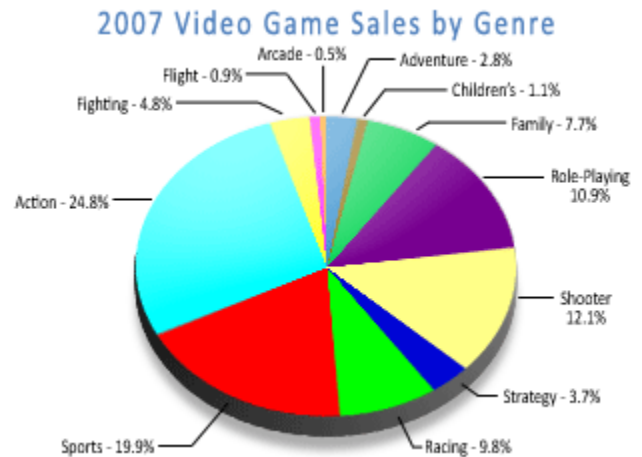
- The amount of material that can be covered by a story-director and his/her team of actors is significantly greater than could be worked on by the typical storyboard and animation process in the same timeframe
- Rapid discovery of story issues, re-writes, and modifications due to the story-director’s facility with actors and directorial techniques
- Animators are provided with much more information, physically, viscerally and emotionally, than is usual, which significantly shortens their work cycle
- A faster release-to-market schedule owing to the expeditious nature of the directorial work, and the resultant discoveries made during this process
- Cost of story-director and team of actors is far cheaper than the animation and re-animation costs in trying to develop character and story

### A BIGGER PIECE OF A GROWING PIE

As the gaming industry grows, the stream of revenue swells, but so do the number of competitors. Studios that evolve, setting themselves apart by enrapturing their audiences through profound storytelling, stand to capture a larger piece of this ever-growing pie. The pathway to this next level can be illuminated by a skilled story-director.



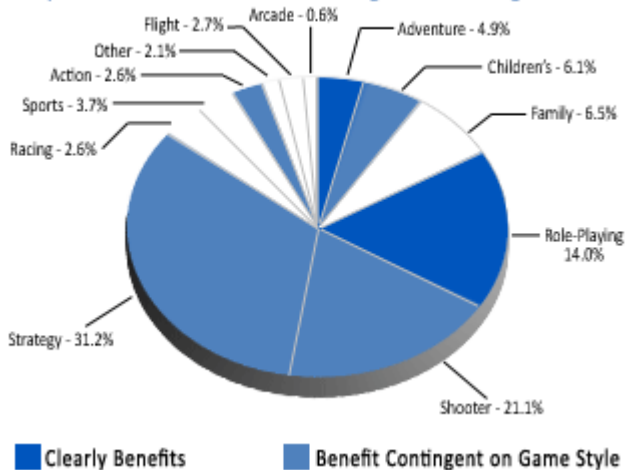
## IS THIS APPLICABLE TO MY STUDIO?



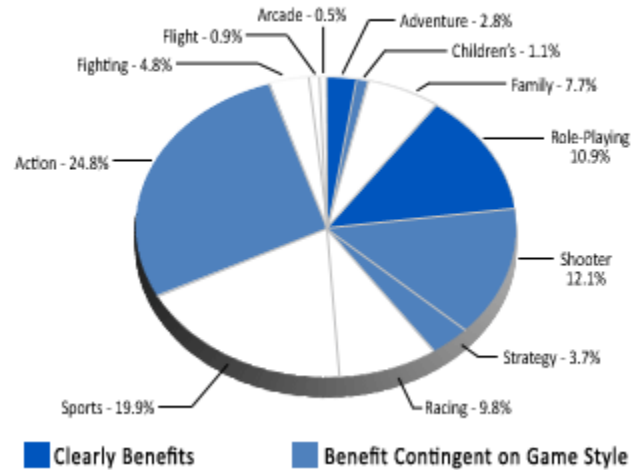
Source: 2006-2007 Home Interactive Entertainment Market Update, Arcadia Investment Corp.

The charts above demonstrate 2007’s genre distribution. Game studios producing genres such as Role-Playing or Adventure will, almost invariably, benefit significantly from adding a story-director and the work described in this paper to their team.

### Computer Game Genres Benefitting from Adding a Director



### Video Game Genres Benefitting from Adding a Director



Games that fall into the First Person Shooter, Action, or Strategy category could also potentially benefit, especially if they contain strong storylines or cut-scenes, such as the primarily-FPS games, “Painkiller” by DreamCatcher Interactive, or “Vampire – The Masquerade: Bloodlines” by White Wolf/Troika, both of which had distinct storylines and plot-driving cut-scenes. Although enjoyable, each game could have realized far greater depth, emotional impact, and player engrossment through the work described in this paper.



## DENOUEMENT/RESOLUTION

*“The only growth business for now and the foreseeable future is interactive entertainment.”*

– Take-Two Interactive Chairman, Strauss Zelnick.

Wall Street Journal 2/19/2008

A unified process is now evident, combining the best practices and methodologies of traditional game design and development along with the techniques and tools of the story-director to create a far more robust and immersive experience for the player. It is, thus, acceptable to assume that the resultant IP will be of a better quality than the same IP without this new process and can be brought to market quicker and cheaper.

As storylines in games become deeper and more involved, and games themselves strive to become a matured entertainment medium, a steward of storytelling must be present to ensure that the story is told in the most effective way possible. The professional to fill that role should be a legitimate director who is well versed in both film and theatre. Although this is obviously a tall order, a director who is also well versed in software design or at least knowledgeable of the game-design process and the inherent limitations therein would be most advantageous.

To quickly recap a story-director’s role and contributions:

- Optimally the story-director should begin working with the writer/designer as the script is being developed, in order to assist in making the story and its characters as multi-dimensional, organic, and complete as possible.
- It is said that directing for film and theatre is 70% casting, and as such, the story-director should be an excellent caster, working with the designer and producer to identify and acquire the most malleable and directable actors they can find.
- The story-director works with the actors to delve into the characters, and in doing so the characters begin to come to life, leading to the discovery of many different emotional choices throughout the material.
- The characters are fully expressed through the blocking, staging, stylized movement, and camera placement work of the story-director.
- Utilizing the same story-director and actors throughout the entire game creation process, especially during voice recording and motion capture, can yield huge benefits.
  - The actors have, by this point in the process, begun to embody the characters under the guidance of the story-director, bringing their own ideas and presentation to the material.
  - The story-director can further guide their physical and vocal performance through the use of these subtle directorial techniques to help the actors find widely variegated performances and a bounty of emotional through-lines for the animators and sound editors to choose from.

This work ultimately results in a delivery of taped footage of the worked scenes, fully staged, organically played, and emotionally engaging to the animation team.



All of these benefits are generally realized in such a way that the timeline, and hence the budget, is minimized. Playing with actors on a stage, working out kinks in story, dialog, and staging can be done very quickly, avoiding the costly issue of animating and reworking, or the often devastating scenario of being forced to live with animations or cut-scenes that just do not work due to money or time constraints.

In closing, the addition of a “story-director” to the design team will not only yield a much faster and therefore cheaper design cycle, it will, more importantly, contribute in the development of higher quality, and more sought after titles in line with the emotional needs of a wide-spread demographic that reaches far beyond the ordinary gamer and therefore will aid in generating an enormous leap in gross sales.



## MORE INFORMATION

For more information on how adding a story-director or how these concepts and techniques can benefit your games, please contact:

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