
EDGE

THE NEXT CHAPTER

The industry's finest writers plot out the future of videogame storytelling

By Samuel Horti

Margaret Atwood, author of The Handmaid's Tale and current joint holder of the Booker Prize, told Time magazine in 2012 that storytelling was "built into the human plan." "You're never going to kill storytelling," she said. "We come with it." And as it survives, it adapts. Since Atwood first won the Booker Prize in 2000, videogames have, for many people, become the primary route into other worlds. A January report from the Entertainment Retailers Association showed UK consumers spent nearly £3.8bn on games in 2019, more than the country spends annually on books.

Yet videogame narratives languish behind their counterparts in print. Novels sell on the strength of their plot, characters and writing; in games, story is often secondary to action. For every *Life Is Strange*, there's a *Fortnite*. For every *Telling Lies*, a *Gears of War*.

Thankfully, videogames adapt too, and the 2010s offered reasons to be optimistic. *God Of War* and *Red Dead Redemption* 2 proved a huge appetite still exists for traditional singleplayer stories. Despite the challenges faced by new indie studios, ambitious story-driven debuts, from *Disco Elysium* to *Firewatch*, found success. And it's no coincidence that some of the biggest failures of the decade were games with giant holes where their narratives should've been, such as *Fallout 76* and *Anthem*. The new decade brings with it a new generation, and leaves the story of videogames delicately poised. What do the coming ten years have in store?

Independent studios tend to be more willing to experiment with their stories than larger developers. They don't have to answer to publishers, or find huge audiences to cover their costs, and can therefore — in theory — take more risks. With notable exceptions, blockbuster stories have stagnated. The big-budget formula, as explained by a senior narrative designer at one of the world's largest studios who wishes to remain anonymous, is a singleplayer campaign inspired by Joseph Campbell's hero's journey (a protagonist goes on an adventure, triumphs over adversity, and returns home a changed person). It is heavy on pre-rendered cinematics, and limited on player choice. The structure is easy to understand and replicate, says the developer, and because of that it's attractive to executives.

"There's a faith that the structure will work, because everyone has seen it work," they tell us. "Often, that faith is more valuable than whatever cool ideas you've cooked up for your story. Ideas are cheap. Team cohesion and interdisciplinary trust are gold."

A further source of stagnation is that writers and narrative designers aren't given the respect they deserve. They're seen, by some studios, as "inexpert, non-collaborative, or inessential," the developer explains. "This means narrative-focused people are often not in the right rooms at the right times, where important decisions get made, which has a whole host of predictable and depressing outcomes. This is a major difference from the way narrative is treated in film and TV, where everything flows outward from the original script treatment and story bible."

This attitude, combined with the constraints of telling massmarket stories — and therefore avoiding divisive topics — can make writing for a large studio demoralising. "I have many friends who have left the industry out of frustration over this issue." But they're hopeful that can change. As companies begin giving more respect to storytellers, those writers will stop worrying about their own survival, and tell stories with renewed confidence. The indie scene will innovate fastest, but the era of big-budget, long-running live-service games — *Fortnite*, *Destiny*, *The Division* et al — could yet prove a valuable creative outlet to studios of all sizes.

These games essentially follow the business models of old MMOs or MUDs, which provide fewer narrative touchstones. The rules are therefore still unwritten. *Fortnite*'s seasons are merely a first draft, and it's only a matter of time before a studio cracks storytelling in the genre. "*Fortnite*'s black-hole stunt last year really ▶

impressed a lot of people, and I think it will inspire a lot of copycats," the anonymous developer says. "I'd love to see people start resurrecting roleplaying mechanics from MUDs and MMOs to put devs in more direct conversation with their players. Anything that gives players direct agency to interact with the story — whether that's making their actions in an event or scenario canonical, creating situations where they are able to respond in realtime to a story-critical NPC, or fusing ARG-like elements into the game to create a transmedia story where players can, say, call an NPC's voicemail."

It's hard to say exactly what that looks like, because it requires developers, both individuals and companies, to unlearn the industry's traditional approach to singleplayer storytelling. "This doesn't just mean adjusting your mental model or aesthetic taste. This means a willingness to invest in retooling your engine to deliver nonlinear or calendar-gated content. This means re-educating your entire player base. It is a big commitment with many unknowns and few common cross-industry best practices, so it's naturally quite scary to many people."

The skillset for live-service games is so different that **Aaron Contreras**, Respawn Entertainment's narrative lead, believes a new generation of developers, many coming from outside of games, is required. He points to Respawn writer Tom Casiello as an example: he learned his trade on TV soap operas and the WWE, two unlikely sources of valuable experience for his role writing *Apex Legends* storylines. "He's been thinking about continuing narratives in this format for probably longer than they've existed inside videogames. He's a great example of somebody who's going to be shaping the way the industry does that going forward."

Contreras is upbeat about big-budget storytelling. Commercial pressures will always exist, but the ever-expanding gaming audience means more stories — and more leading characters — are viable than ever before. "Ten years ago, the audience playing games was a little bit less diverse. Now, there are more people playing games out there who want to see themselves, or see their experiences, represented. It's really positive." That diversifying of ideas is not just desirable: it's unavoidable. "I don't think it will be driven by creative directors or marketing decisions, it'll just be driven by the fact that more people are playing and making games."

As stories change, Contreras believes the way players interact with them will shift: that the 2020s will see an influx of stories that could only be told in videogame form. That might mean blockbusters with more interactive, extravagant set-pieces: a Naughty Dog game where players have more agency over the story, but are still in awe of the spectacle. Or, it might mean more games like *Return Of The Obra Dinn*, which creates a story completely out of player interaction; out of manipulating time and exploring memories. "You're going to see more of that: 'There's no way you could do this inside another form of art'. To me, leaning into that is really exciting."

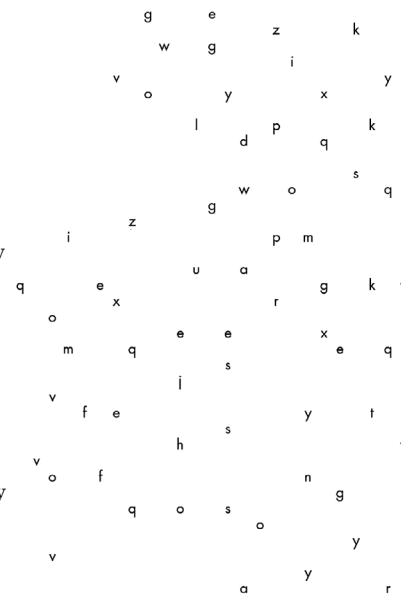
To make those sorts of games, studios will have to hire more narrative designers with technical skills, Contreras says. "Pure writers" will have a role akin to that of a concept artist, whose original ideas can spawn entire games on their own — but in the thick of development, it will be those that put the story in context of player input that prove most valuable.

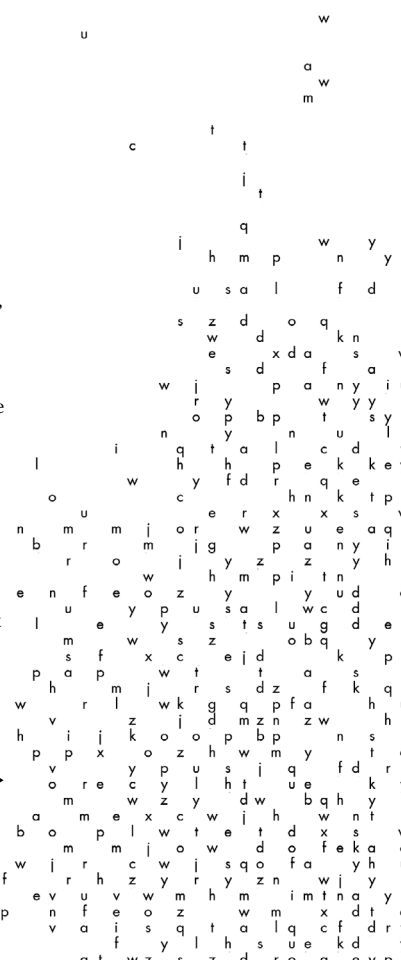
THE EVER-EXPANDING GAMING AUDIENCE MEANS MORE STORIES — AND MORE LEADING CHARACTERS — ARE VIABLE THAN EVER BEFORE

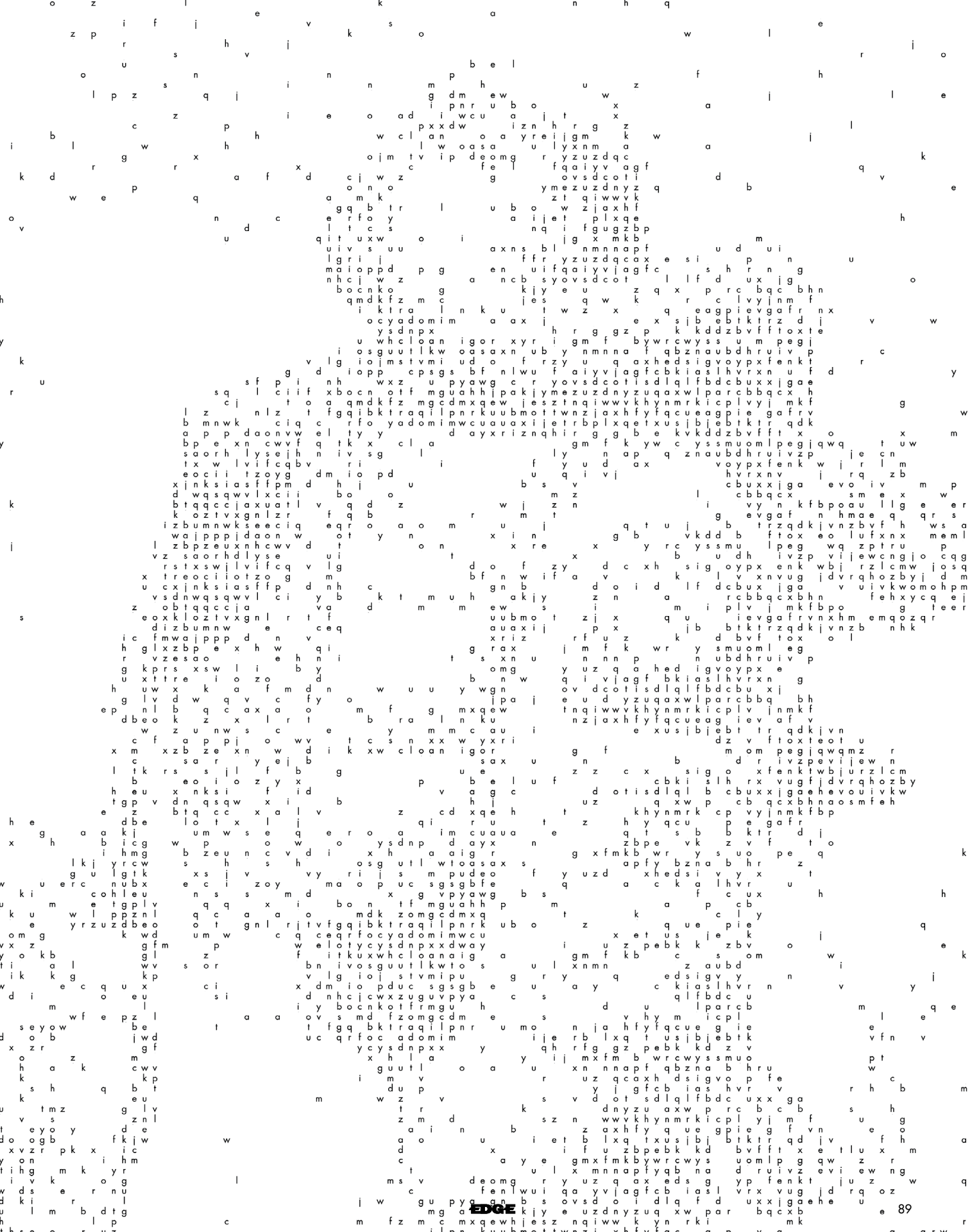
Sam Barlow, creator of *Telling Lies* and *Her Story*, spends a lot of time thinking about this sort of thing. Over the next decade, he hopes dialogue will become less intrusive: usually, the flow of conversations in games breaks to give the player time to read and select possible responses, which takes you out of the game world, he says.

Oxenfree has come closest to solving the problem, Barlow believes: by allowing players to interrupt other characters, and overlaying dialogue options on the existing scenery, conversations in Night School Studio's 2016 game felt more fluid. "It wasn't rocket science," he tells us. "It was just well implemented." In part, it worked because of *Oxenfree*'s relatively simple visuals — it didn't have to render facial expressions in detail. Creating a story that both feels natural and looks realistic is out of reach for most indie budgets: at some point that will change, Barlow says. But for now, indies should continue to use their "limitations as a superpower", he tells us, exploring a narrower set of ideas more deeply.

Barlow sees this hyper-focused approach to storytelling becoming more widespread in the ▶



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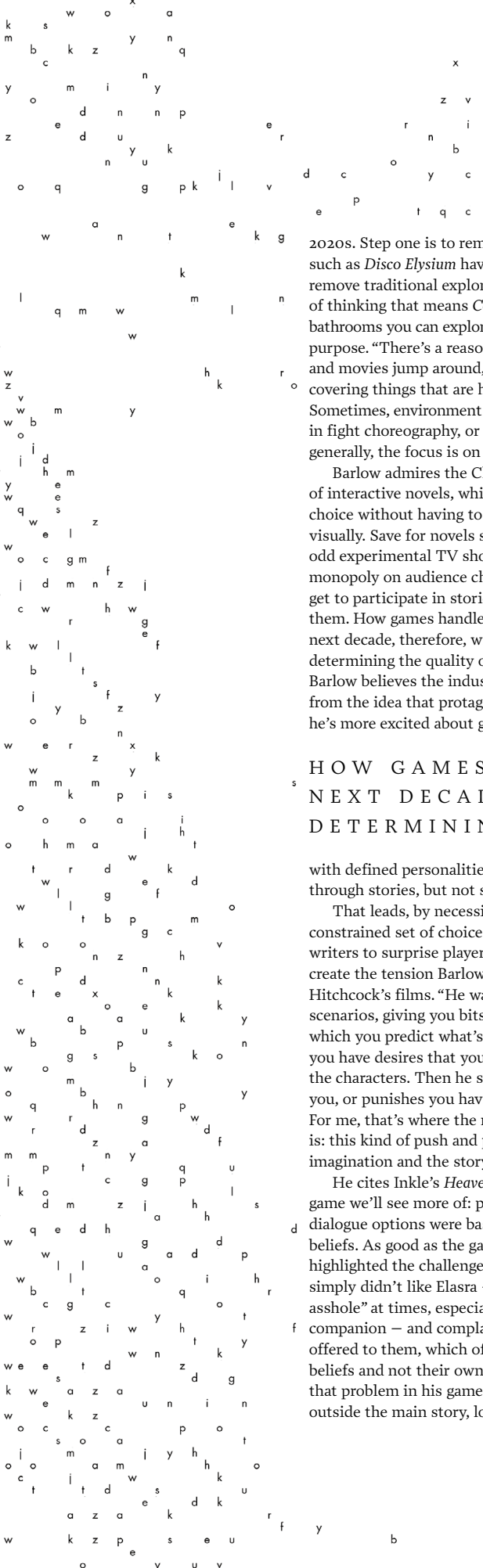

2020s. Step one is to remove combat, as games such as *Disco Elysium* have done. Step two is to remove traditional exploration; to avoid the kind of thinking that means *Control* has dozens of bathrooms you can explore that serve no narrative purpose. "There's a reason that books, theatre and movies jump around, and it's because they're covering things that are happening to characters. Sometimes, environment will be a big part of that, in fight choreography, or in a chase sequence. But generally, the focus is on character interaction."

Barlow admires the Choice Of Games series of interactive novels, which adapt to player choice without having to show those choices visually. Save for novels such as these, and the odd experimental TV show, videogames have a monopoly on audience choice: players don't just get to participate in stories, they also get to guide them. How games handle player choice in the next decade, therefore, will play a large part in determining the quality of the stories they tell. Barlow believes the industry is moving away from the idea that protagonists are blank slates – he's more excited about games starring characters with defined personalities, who can be steered through stories, but not shaped.

That leads, by necessity, to a more constrained set of choices, but it better allows writers to surprise players. It's the best way to create the tension Barlow so admires in Alfred Hitchcock's films. "He was a master of setting up scenarios, giving you bits of information with which you predict what's going to happen, and you have desires that you want to enact through the characters. Then he surprises you, or thwarts you, or punishes you having those thoughts. For me, that's where the magic of storytelling is: this kind of push and pull between your imagination and the story."

He cites Inkle's *Heaven's Vault* as the type of game we'll see more of: protagonist Aliya Elasra's dialogue options were based on pre-existing beliefs. As good as the game was, it also highlighted the challenges ahead. Some players simply didn't like Elasra – she was "a bit of an asshole" at times, especially to her robot companion – and complained about the choices offered to them, which often reflected Elasra's beliefs and not their own. Barlow has sidestepped that problem in his games by placing players outside the main story, looking in, not even giving the illusion of choice. But getting it right when the player controls the main character, Barlow argues, is another matter.

As well as picking dialogue options, players make hundreds of subconscious choices over the course of any game, such as what branch of a fork in the road to explore first, or which character they talk to most often. Barlow says studios will begin harnessing this kind of readily available data to make stories feel more personal, altering specific scenes based on the sum of players' past actions. It was something *Silent Hill: Shattered Memories*, which Barlow worked on, did more than ten years ago. For example, if players had respected authority figures in the game, a nasty police officer would deliver them bad news during a key plot moment, as a way of subverting their expectations. If the player had disregarded authority figures, another character would deliver the news.

"It's not binary: it's not like, 'Did they punch the villager or not?' It's: 'Over time, how aggressive have they been in all the possible decisions they've made?' Then you write things in a modular way or in a reactive way." This could even change how much screentime a particular character gets depending on which NPCs players are most interested in. It's the equivalent of telling Breaking Bad from the perspective of Walter White's family, Barlow says, and he plans to explore the idea in his next, unannounced project.

> HOW GAMES HANDLE PLAYER CHOICE IN THE NEXT DECADE WILL PLAY A LARGE PART IN DETERMINING THE QUALITY OF THEIR STORIES

If there's one genre synonymous with choice, it's RPGs. And for **Jan van Dosselaer**, lead writer at *Divinity: Original Sin* developer Larian, the key to storytelling this decade will be providing believable consequences for those choices. The ultimate goal is a nonlinear game that responds to hundreds of player decisions in a coherent, consistent way. Currently, that's difficult to achieve. A character might feel guilt over desecrating a temple, for example, only to step outside to murder an entire village of goblins without thinking twice.

"The more choices and consequences you take into account... all the dialogue has to follow suit, all the voice acting has to follow suit," van Dosselaer tells us. "And the gameplay still has to work, the balancing still has to work. It's why you don't see that many games going to enormous ▶

lengths to provide this: logistically, it's just a huge amount of work. But if you're able to do it well, the experience is much richer for it." One way developers will solve the problem, he says, is to make party dynamics more important, and to have allies challenge you more often. "This will inevitably lead to certain conflicts. Conflict creates drama, and drama creates entertainment." That means taking parties beyond mere sounding boards, potentially twisting them into a corrupting influence.

Van Dosselaer predicts studios will also try to tackle more mature themes that reflect our own society. That doesn't mean they'll necessarily make games about specific societal problems, but they'll build games with those issues in mind. He holds up *Disco Elysium* as an example: "It gives you choices that establish you as of a certain political faction, and it's outspoken about it in ways that are very, very interesting." Ultimately, developers will have to balance offering a specific viewpoint with the need to reach a wider audience. "It's still a business. And so you need to entertain as many people as possible."

four images in a way that makes sense? Mobile games will continue to go from strength to strength, she says, and developers working outside the mainstream, such as on romances, will gain more recognition. "There's more money there, and there's real talent, and there's more respect being given to games like that," she says. "The kinds of games and experiences that aren't necessarily usually valued, or audiences that are usually an afterthought… that's really exciting."

She also expects great things from the "mid-indie" space: studios, such as Larian, that "have enough money to be really ambitious and really interesting, but without having a complex stakeholder structure. That's where you know you can get that mix of both innovation and polish."

Jayanth's optimism about the decade ahead – which extends to mainstream games as well – reflects the types of stories she hopes studios will tell. She's tired of grey, post-apocalyptic worlds, and wants to see more sincere stories, laced with hope, that speak to a broad range of people. Heaven knows we could all do with a little more of that these days. "We get to recreate

"A LOT OF THE REALLY GREAT GAMES… HAVE SOMETHING REAL TO SAY ABOUT THE WORLD OR WHAT IT MEANS TO BE HUMAN"

Meg Jayanth, writer for games such as *80 Days* and the forthcoming *Sable*, is confident games will increasingly interrogate the world around us during the 2020s. It's essential if the medium is to stay relevant, she says. "We're a dominant cultural form. I think games will have to take on that mantle if they are to have anything of value to say, in particular to this broader audience that is used to storytelling in other mediums.

"It's going to become increasingly apparent that some games are really facing up to this challenge, and [some] don't have something interesting to say. A lot of the really great games, whether they're incredibly abstract about it or more overt, have something real to say about the world, or what it means to be human; something bigger than what's happening on the screen."

Jayanth hopes that, in the decade to come, developers question preconceptions about videogame storytelling, getting rid of its obsession with cinematic moments, which it picked up from Hollywood. Up to now, mobile developers have been asking some of the best questions, moving player challenge from the physical – can you aim this weapon at the enemy? – to the creative: can you combine these an entire world for people to play in," she says. "I think it's really easy, particularly in times of crisis and catastrophe and creeping authoritarianism, to be cynical, and to be hopeless. Yes, that's important to represent as well, but that's just one idea. There's more depth to be had with sincerity. I think it's harder, but it can be just as valuable."

As this group of developers proves, predicting the future of videogames is a difficult, inexact science. At best, they can make educated guesses, and while their predictions overlap, each provides their own story for what the next ten years will hold. What they all agree on is that narrative will be key to defining the industry's identity over the next decade, when videogames will reach more players than ever before.

For Atwood, stories were "built into the human plan"; Contreras, unintentionally echoing the author, says they are "our birthright as humans." "It's part of our identity as a species. I'm so excited to empower players to experience that in an interactive way. I'm not so interested in telling a specific sort of story – I just want to continue to tell them better inside the format of a videogame. The more of that there is, and the more diverse it is, the better it is for us all." ■


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