

Book Review

Tutored Together Around More than Dialogue: A Review of Evan Skolnick's *Video Game Storytelling: What Every Developer Needs to Know about Narrative Techniques*

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Evan Skolnick. *Video Game Storytelling: What Every Developer Needs to Know About Narrative Techniques*. New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 2014, 202 pp., ISBN NO. 9780385345828.

Evan Skolnick is a well-established game writer and narrative designer. With a background in games, comics, and books, he places great importance on the power of a story, but not a story that a writer tells alone. In his recent work, *Video Game Storytelling: What Every Developer Needs to Know about Narrative Techniques*, he captures the essence of bringing the entire video game development team together around the common goal of writing well-integrated story content within video games. The book is based on his Game Developers Conference (GDC) tutorial. Skolnick believes a development team can be guided through

Author Biography

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the very collaborative process of storytelling through a book that speaks the two languages—storytelling and game development.

The book supports his belief by offering a two-pronged, blended-learning program for video game makers. Cross-disciplinary teams are encouraged to come together to (1) learn common principles of storytelling and (2) learn how to apply them through their individual positions of video game development. Skolnick argues that the delivery of entertaining, effective, and well-integrated story content “hinges on team members’ familiarity with storytelling, their attitudes toward story’s place in games, and their mastery of a common language with which everyone on the team can discuss the game narrative” (p. 1). Video game makers can expect the first half of the book to equip them to participate in narrative design in an efficient way with the purpose of achieving narrative excellence.

Part One, *Basic Training*, supports previous research in the field that stated “as game designers and developers, we can use the same critical vocabularies, theories, and taxonomical techniques that have long been established in the field of narratology” (McDaniel, Fiore, Nicholson, 2010, p. 15). Skolnick focuses on seven narrative principles of Western storytelling—conflict, three-act structure, monomyth, characters and arc, exposition, believability, and dialogue. He does not suggest a formulaic process that dismisses a narrative expert by asking team members to embrace template writing. He provides analysis and examples of how to facilitate collaboration in a way that achieves what Walter Fisher (1984) called narrative probability—what constitutes a coherent story—and narrative fidelity—whether the story rings true in their lives. Skolnick effectively demonstrates how the heroic template may be used as a “checking tool, to be employed when something doesn’t feel quite right about a story in progress” (p. 37).

Video game makers unfamiliar with the building blocks of narrative can acquire familiarity with many differences between other storytelling forms and game storytelling. Three of them include the narrative process, the show and tell of narration, and the time clock. First, the most notable difference is that in gaming the story is not the first step of the process. “A new game almost always begins with a decision on genre followed by a concept within that genre” (p. 115). Second, traditional storytelling balances the act of dramatizing or showing the narration and telling it. Skolnick makes it clear that video game makers first try to find a way to let the player do it; their second choice is to show it; and their last resort is to tell it” (p. 57). Third, the time clock is different. “While traditional story audiences regularly tolerate 25 percent or more of the total story time being devoted to initial setup, video game players expect to be actively playing within seconds—or at the most, a minute or two—of launching into the experience” (p. 21). Scholars can expect to see how core principles, proven structures, and best practices related to narrative can actually be applied to enhance the player’s responsibility.

In the book, Skolnick makes two conceptual choices—(1) the use of selected stories from movies and (2) a focus on console and PC games vs. games on other platforms. These intentional conceptual choices do not detract from the goal of the book nor interfere or

influence creative license. Many basic concepts are first analyzed using a movie and followed up by game examples. By way of illustration, Skolnick uses four stories—*Star Wars*, *The Matrix*, *Titanic*, and *Dune*—to analyze conflict; before turning to game examples such as *BioShock*, *Far Cry 3*, and *Grand Theft Auto III*.

Just as crafted entertainment such as movies, television, and live theatre recognizes the need for quality storytelling without de-emphasizing quality scene design, graphics, or sound, Skolnick clearly acknowledges the same level of equality between storytelling and other game features. Skolnick's also emphasizes that whether a team of two or hundred it is important that no one takes an isolated approach when executing their area of expertise.

In Part 2, titled *In the Trenches*, Skolnick's goal is to provide "some global insights into how members of each discipline and every sub-group can reach across the team room aisles to work together in the service of creating a compelling, well-integrated game story" (p. 99). Skolnick begins each of these chapters with a statement about whom the content is most relevant for on the design team in terms of position titles. He encourages team members to read everything. As game development teams continue to grow in size, this encouragement is both strategic and a complement to the emphasis on the necessity of game development documentation. Global insights that may run through the team and a games' documentation include (a) decision making of team leaders and its impact on the games' story quality; (b) the caution to not let game design *plus* narrative become game design *versus* narrative; (c) characters' development as an outgrowth of a unified vision; and (d) establishing shared intent in the areas in which level design and narrative design commonly intersect. Skolnick is clear that Level Design Documents are "a good home for information on up-front narrative context and storytelling goals" (p. 139).

The continuous evolution of personal computers and home consoles allows a game to contain massive amounts of information to create larger environments, worlds, and universes in which players can participate. Environment becomes even more critical to the cross-disciplinary teams. Skolnick argues that "video games' ability to provide that experience to the player—to allow him to really feel like he is *in* the environment, as opposed to just observing it—is one of the unique and compelling storytelling elements that separate games from other entertainment forms" (p. 149). He encourages team members to carefully construct narrative in an Environment Description Document.

Skolnick also provides global insights to bring to the forefront that engineers, audio experts, and quality assurance testers also share in the responsibility of understanding narrative intent and ways they can help support it practically and technically. Researchers have often agreed that "the trick for game developers is to (1) create a story that makes sense, (2) is easy to follow, and (3) can be told in a nonlinear fashion" (Kapp, 2012, p. 67). Skolnick successfully demonstrates that individual design teams can do all three without becoming cookie-cutter experts while remaining experts who are free to grapple with storytelling in line with various nuances and practical applications related to their projects.

As a book targeted at video game development teams, it is well written and easy to

understand. With the growth in game platforms and frequency of play, it is important to continue to bring gamers back to a game. This may be achieved by expanding the discussions about how to make gamers active participants in the narrative and its outcome. Skolnick's book is effective in demonstrating that with unified thought and planning of narrative, the entire team can be free of distracting inconsistencies in their game's universe, and can be fully engaged in pulling players into compelling stories as they play their game.

References

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