VOLUME 1 | ISSUE 2 | SPRING 2006

igda international game developers association

GAME WRITERS QUARTERLY

Crafting Tales in New (And Familiar) Worlds

As we plunge into the next generation of console and PC game development, the importance of a compelling and immersive intellectual property is clearer than ever. With demand for content—and the accompanying budgets—increasing exponentially from the last generation of games, it is absolutely essential that games are created on the foundation of an outstanding original or existing IP. It is largely the charge of the game writer to ensure that the IP draws players into the game world and provides enough depth for a unique gameplay experience.

Welcome to the Spring 2006 edition of the IGDA's Game Writers Special Interest Group Quarterly. The Game Writers SIG is a collective of professionals, academics, and students set on building a community of game writers and designers, educating game developers on the role of writers and vice versa, and striving for better narrative in today's games.

This issue, we bring you perspectives from across the industry on writing for both original and established intellectual properties, a feature piece on writing dialogue for licenses by Red Storm stalwart Richard Dansky, and an exclusive excerpt from the upcoming book *Game Writing: Narrative Skills for Videogames*.

For more information on the Game Writers SIG, please visit **www.igda.org/writing.**

Cheers,
Coray Seifert
Managing Editor

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTIES: A LICENSE TO WRITE

What do you do when handed **the keys to someone else's universe?** How do you craft new adventures for well-loved characters without stepping out of bounds, or worse, **dully retelling past stories** without **pushing the envelope**? We gathered four high-profile game writers to share their opinions on these and more questions about the difficult task of writing for licensed IPs.

The Interviewees

Susan O'Connor has been writing stories for games since 1998. Her client list includes Activision, Atari, Electronic Arts, Microsoft, Sony, THQ, and Ubisoft. Recent projects include *Act of War*, *Star Wars Galaxies: Jump to Lightspeed*, and an unannounced Xbox 360 project. She is founder and chair of the Game Writers Conference. *www.storiesforgames.com*

Steve Ince is an award-nominated Writer-Designer with thirteen years of game development experience. He has played a key role in the success of a number of critically acclaimed games, including the *Broken Sword* trilogy, and *In Cold Blood*. He is currently working on a book, *Writing for Video Games*.

Matt Entin is a 3 1/2 year industry veteran. He co-wrote *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*, for which he was nominated for a GDC Award for Best Writing in 2005.

Adam Bullied's credits include Radical Entertainment's *ESPN Proboarder* and *Fox NHL Tonight,* Relic Entertainment's *Homeworld* and *Homeworld 2*, and *Need For Speed: Hot Pursuit 2* for Black Box Games/Electronic Arts. Through his consulting company *Photonsoup Entertainment*, he is currently contracted to work closely with THQ's Kaos Studios.

What's INSIDE

1. I want to create my own IP. What are the keys to creating an original, compelling universe?

Susan O'Connor: There's a million ways to skin this cat. Here's my take. If I had the opportunity to create original IP, I'd first think about my own life. Artists draw on their experiences, good or bad, to create their art. Maybe they grew up in England during wartime. Maybe they were in a near-fatal car accident. Maybe they just grew up in the suburbs with an overactive imagination.

Whatever. We've all had experiences that shaped us. And they are endless wells of inspiration. Anything can be a starting place—a person, a place, a tree. For Proust it was a cookie. Beat that! Just something that really ignites your imagination or memory. And then you can extrapolate, let your imagination run away with you. There's a long road between your personal life and the life of your new world. But that universe has to be compelling to YOU if it's going to be compelling to anybody else. It's got to really get you, sort of break your heart. And then, with any luck, it'll break your audience's heart as well.If I were creating a new universe for a game, I would think long and hard about whether or not the gaming world needs more orcs or aliens or Special Ops soldiers. But there's a lot of same old, same old in the industry. You, as creator of original IP, have a chance to create something new (and a wide-open field in which to do it).

> "I would think long and hard about whether or not the gaming world needs more orcs or aliens or Special Ops soldiers."
>
> **Susan O'Connor**

Steve Ince: Much of this will depend on the type of IP you want to create. You can't apply the same criteria to a comedy cartoon platform game as to a dark first person shooter or a fantasy role playing game. The idea of a compelling universe has very different meanings. *Sonic the Hedgehog* is an excellent IP, but would you ever think of the *Sonic* universe as compelling in the way that you would that of *Half-Life*?

The key to creating a compelling universe is to ensure that it is an embodiment of the style of the game and that the characters, locations and gameplay all sit well within it and complement one-another. If the story is layered onto the game in a superficial way, the game's universe will be superficial, too. That could be part of the charm, of course, with a slapstick game requiring a superficial setting to help the mood.

Therefore, you need to look hard at the type of game IP you are creating and build the detail accordingly. Consistency of detail is important, too, so it's best not to throw anything into the mix that is out of place.

Matt Entin: I would probably answer this question by saying what NOT to do, with the operating word in my response being "original." Do not create a universe that is a post-apocalyptic war zone, a Tolkienesque fantasy world, a retrofitted *Blade Runner*-derived dystopia, a cutesy, colorful cartoon land populated with anthropomorphic animals, etc.

As an industry, I think we pull our ideas ad nauseam from the same short deck of well-trod ideas. Walk through E3, leaf through a magazine, how many games actually catch your eye as "unique" and "different"? This industry needs a lot more *Psychonauts* and a lot less… well, I'm not the sort to point fingers.

When creating your universe, think things out to the minutest detail, even if they don't actually figure into the final product (we've all heard of Nintendo's famous highly-detailed character sheet on Mario). Write all of this down and make sure the team has access to this information. On my projects, I would constantly have animators and artists asking me all sorts of questions about the characters and the world—things I hadn't really thought about. But these things were important to them, as they sought inspiration and understanding to do their work. You also look like a jackass when you can't answer simple questions about a universe that you created.

Adam Bullied: Game developers often seem to forget that for something to qualify as an 'original IP' requires originality. This means rigorously asking "How is this different than other titles/IPs that are already out there?" at every stage of development. The games industry has become too derivative and doesn't need any more references to other games or movies. Consider how many games have featured re-enactments of the attack on

IGDA Writers SIG Quarterly

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the Death Star. It's like we have become stuck in a cycle of *Lord of the Rings*/*James Bond*/*Star Wars* clones and no one can see outside of that box.

Historically, other media evolve and advance when authors take established genres and subvert and/or violate their conventions. There's a bit of that in contemporary games, *Oddworld Stranger* for instance, but not enough. The Japanese game developers are way ahead on this, being well able to blend genres (think motorcycle mounted sword duels or farmers peacefully raising herds of mythological monsters) without contravening the consistency of their universe.

Videogames are an exciting medium because you can make anything you can conceive of, so why do something that's already been done?

2. What are the potential pitfalls of writing for established characters, worlds and ideas?

Susan: Boredom. Micromanagement of the creative process. And boredom.

There's always a danger, in working with established IP, of inadvertently creating a pale copy of the original—a Xerox of a Xerox of a Xerox. And B is for Boring when that happens.

So if I'm working with established IP, I look for the inspirations BEHIND the inspirations. Here, I'll be a goon and quote this Basho guy, a 17th-century Japanese poet: "Do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the wise. Seek what they sought." Because after all, even though you are working with established characters and places, you've still got to reinterpret it for a new medium, new audience, new experience. Otherwise, why are you doing all this work?

Steve: The biggest potential pitfall is in the area of approval. Whoever owns the IP is going to want to be sure that the developer is not taking liberties, and rightly so. A writer should ascertain what the approval procedure is and how long it's likely to take to get feedback on the work that's sent in. This time should be built into any schedule, along with some leeway in case of delays or re-work.

> "You have an audience that demands 'more of the same' but at the same time 'something new and different.'"
>
> **Matt Entin**

Another possible problem can be the budget. Because it's likely that the publisher has paid a substantial sum to acquire the license, the amount they will pay a developer to create the game can be significantly reduced. This not only means that the budget for the writer is probably tight, but it will also mean that a writer has to be careful that he or she doesn't come up with situations that will be very expensive to develop.

Matt: You have an audience that demands "more of the same" but at the same time "something new and different." That's quite a tall order. You're fortunate because you have a solid foundation, but the design process becomes this very subtle balancing act between the old and the new. Sometimes you end up with *Half-Life 2*…sometimes you end up with *Bubsy 3D*. (I just pointed a finger, didn't I?)

With *Leisure Suit Larry*, we also ran into the unfortunate situation of taking over the IP from its iconic creator, Al Lowe. This meant we started off behind the ball, as fans and critics alike lamented his lack of participation in the project. We probably lost at least five points in our MetaCritic score for that fact alone. I think if we had released our game with Al's name on it, whether he had done anything or not, we would have scored higher than our lowly 62. (By the way, the WRITING was highly praised.)

Adam: Other than the obvious limitations of not being able to violate the canons of the IP (i.e. no killing Luke or Gandalf), I think developers tend to want to repeat the core experience of previous titles in the series. This often leads to stagnant titles.

There's no reason that you can't establish new character roles, new adventure types, new conflicts, and even explore the mundane parts of an existing narrative universe. James Bond's life can't be sex, champagne and action all day, so what happens when he gets the flu and stays home? How come no one has made *Star Trek: Red Shirt* about the away team guy who usually gets killed? How about a *Star Trek* game about someone who flunked out of Star Fleet Academy or a game set in Middle Earth in which the player assumes the role of a troll who gets points for eating hobbits? Why not? So long as you're true to the core conventions of an IP there is no reason you can't try to push its bounds.

3. What's the best experience you've had working with the stewards of an IP? The worst?

Susan: They've all been great.

Steve: The best experience was when we were working on the game, *Gold and Glory: The Road to El Dorado*, which was based on the Dreamworks animated film. They were extremely helpful and let us have a lot of footage, the script, the film's dialogue track and tons of concept and background paintings, which all helped us tremendously in getting the mood and visual style right, as well as the voices.

The worst was when a project suffered from a complex approval chain and getting the okay for the simplest of things could take a lot of time and was in serious danger of affecting the

schedule. Thankfully, we were able to simplify the chain somewhat and get a faster turnaround on the feedback.

Matt: Honestly, *Leisure Suit Larry* was both the best and worst experience I've had. VUG was great; they gave us free rein to come up with a whole new world and even a whole new Larry. We were given a lot of creative freedom and it was an extremely rewarding experience.

Then of course after it was released we had Al Lowe doing his angry old man routine in the press—screaming at us young whippersnappers to get off his lawn. He really didn't miss out on any opportunity to tell the public how much he thought *Magna Cum Laude* sucked and how pissed he was that he was left out its development.

Of course, if I had anything to do with it, I would have definitely included Mr. Lowe in the process—but I'm not the moneyman in the expensive Italian shoes. Al, if you're reading this: I'm extending the olive branch; if I'm ever in Seattle I'd love to do dinner and talk jazz. I still got love for you, baby.

Adam: The worst experience I've had involved a property that was assumed to be a natural fit for a game simply because it was from a children's TV show. Unfortunately, the show was based upon an ensemble of characters exchanging witty (at least for kids) dialogue, something that doesn't translate well into games. I explained to them that games were about actions, and that their characters didn't actually do much other than sit around making wisecracks. In order to make the transition to a game, the characters had to evolve abilities that were relevant to gameplay.

I think that a good experience with an IP holder involves someone who knows that the transition to videogames will naturally change and expand the boundaries of the IP, and sees this as a good thing. Interactivity gives a player a chance to experience a diegetic universe first hand 'on-the-ground,' but that's different than watching it passively, and will require different creative choices. Games are not films, and they will not necessarily cover the same territory, but they can be complimentary.

> **"Games are not films, and they will not necessarily cover the same territory, but they can be complimentary."**
>
> **Adam Bullied**

4. How do you deal with the obstacles involved in transferring an IP from one medium, say films, to games?

Susan: Well, the problem is one that can be analyzed and dissected—sort of. First step is to look at why the IP worked so well in the original medium. What was it about the comic-book format (for example) that made this world so compelling? What are we going to lose when we made the shift to the videogame format? And, more importantly, what are we going to gain? What can we do with this IP in games that we couldn't do anywhere else? That's got to be the engine that drives the narrative design. Otherwise, what's the point (see "xerox of a xerox" comment above).

The challenge here will be to get your clients to buy in to your vision. They're used to experiencing the IP in a certain way, and they'll need help understanding how it's going to translate. So if this were my project, I'd schedule plenty of time for concept docs and prototyping. It's their job to protect the IP, which means it's easier to say No than it is to say Yes. So they set up the obstacles, and it's my job to overcome them. If that sounds like fun, it's not. But it teaches discipline. And you lack discipline! Wax on, wax off!

Steve: The biggest obstacle is when games appear to trivialize the IP. If the strength of a film or TV series is the way the characters interact with one another, it's a major problem for a writer to use that strength if the gameplay bears no relation to it. If a character-driven film suddenly becomes an action game, no amount of excellent work on the part of the writer will help because the game engine likely doesn't have the functionality to deal with those requirements.

Maintaining the voice of the characters can be tricky when transferring from a non-interactive medium to an interactive one. In an investigative story, for instance, the main character could be asking a lot more questions than in the original medium. Will this fit with the character's nature and allow you to maintain the voice?

If a game's story is to follow that of the original, how is it going to be transferred to an interactive medium? Scenes that simply played out in a film, say, now have to be interactive and this must be done in a way that is faithful to the original, be valid within the game and retain the interest of the players when the likelihood is that they have already experienced the story in its original form. Care must be taken that you don't assume players are coming to the story completely fresh.

Matt: Often when working with a film IP, you're dealing with several different parties who all have the power of veto and can never seem to agree. In one case you can be dealing with the publisher, the film's distributor, the film's director and the author of the book upon which the film is based. This can lead to several rewrites and redesigns often late in the development process. This is why most licensed titles suck.

Putting Your Words in Their Mouths

Writing for Characters That Someone Else Created

By Richard Dansky
Manager of Design/Central Clancy
Writer – Red Storm Entertainment

Imitation is sometimes more than the sincerest form of flattery. It can be the very essence of the job you're being paid to do. Now, that statement could apply to a lot of different professions—makeup artists, counterfeiters, art forgers, and so forth. But it also holds true for a particular subspecies of game writers, namely, those who are working on franchises that they did not originate.

These writers have a particularly tricky task in front of them. They must perpetuate a world and a set of characters that someone else created, and do so well enough that nobody notices the difference. And perhaps the trickiest aspect of doing so is writing the dialogue.

Dialogue is one of the most instantly recognizable aspects of a character. Tag lines—going back to the days of Duke Nukem's "Suck it down" — are one way a character becomes instantly and indelibly memorable, but there are a great many smaller, more subtle ones that add far more depth to the portrayal. Voice, tone, diction, even sentence length can go a long way towards convincing the player's subconscious that it's the same old Sam Fisher (or Samus, or Shodan, or Shun Di, or any other character you can think of, whether their name starts with "S" or not). Or, to put it another way, nobody would believe it was Duke Nukem if he interspersed his trademark bellow with quotations from Shakespeare, haikus about cherry blossoms, and glossolalia.

Even trickier is the task of writing dialogue for a character derived from a non-gaming property. There's a whole world of reference out there, often quite literally. Just think of how many spinoffs, explanatory books, concordances and dictionaries there have been for the *Harry Potter* books. Now imagine trying to stay

You really need to establish your design early on, taking into consideration any potential points of controversy, and get your respective parties to sign off on it. I mean get this in writing. That's not to say there won't be any disputes later on—but at least when they ask, "What the hell's this all about? I didn't know about this!" You can say "Yeah you did, jackass. You signed off on it." It's good to have an insurance plan against bureaucratic idiocy…but they'll probably still be difficult about it anyway.

Adam: The tools that are required to overcome IP-related obstacles are the same tools with which one deals with all creative problems: imagination, conceptual fleet-footedness, non-linear thinking, risk taking. In short, a developed creative process, the same kind that goes into painting a good picture or writing a good script. The writer must also be a game designer and have a thorough knowledge of both game mechanics and story telling, and be able to tell when one is appropriate to the other. For instance, the license for the film *Patton* would probably make an awful first person shooter, but a fantastic RTS or turn based strategy game.

> "... You can't be too precious with their ideas. It's their baby, you're just sitting it for an evening."
>
> **Adam Bullied**

Additionally, research the hell out of the previous works in the series. Consistency is what makes fictional universes work, and with a good IP you should be able to draw on multitudes of elements in previous works as your foundation.

5. What are other IP-related issues writers should be wary of (legal matters and IP ownership, for example)?

Susan: That's a question for your lawyer. Or agent. Or manager. I would definitely get one of those bad boys in your corner.

Steve: Sometimes the approval chain may stretch from the writer to the developer, publisher, a possible agent and the license holder. With each having a vested interest in the license a writer may have to contend with input from each link in the chain. The danger here is that all of this feedback may muddy the waters and make it difficult to maintain clarity in what the writer is attempting to achieve. Try to obtain some kind of agreement on the level of input from each party involved.

Matt: If you're poking fun at celebrities — leave Tom Cruise, Richard Gere and Dustin Hoffman out of it.

Adam: When you are working with someone else's IP, you can't be too precious with your ideas. It's their baby, you're just sitting it for an evening. All possible difficulties can be avoided by asking the IP holder what they want, and giving it to them.

faithful to all of that, not to mention the ominous palisade of the novels themselves. If you don't pull it off, you alienate precisely the core audience the license was intended to attract. After all, game companies don't license products because they think hard-core gamers will want the license. They license products because they think fans of the license—usually more numerous than whatever slice of demographic is defined as "hardcore gamer"—might want the game. If the diehard fan of the license gets it and notices, say, that you've made the Joker speak in sober, judicious tones while Batman talks about his youth on the planet Zarglenord, you've alienated and angered precisely the people you were supposed to be enticing. And once that damage is done, it's done forever.

(One of the deep dark secrets of writing someone else's characters is that the fans often know the license better than the people who originated it do. Fan web sites and concordances can be insanely useful resources, as they're created and fact-checked by the most dedicated fans out there. There's no shame in using a fan site as a resource. After all, the information may be better than what'd you'd get from the source, whom by now is having some trouble remembering precisely what Picard said to Data about transporter beam theory while they were fleeing from rabid Gorn exotic dancers in an episode filmed during the Clinton administration. For my part, I keep very careful notes, but use fan sites as gut checks, and don't hesitate to ask authorities to look the stuff over to make sure it sings in the range it's supposed to.)

So why do it if it's so much work. There's the obvious answer—you get paid to. Sequels and licensed games come with built-in audiences, and that makes them safer picks for publishers than new IP. Ergo, there's lots of opportunity to work in established worlds and with established characters because there are going to continue to be a lot of them out there.

There's a satisfying creative side to it as well, however. How many of us have watched an episode of a TV show and said, "If I were writing it…" Well, this is your chance. If you enjoyed the character's exploits before, how cool is it to potentially have the chance to add to the continuing mythology? It may not carry quite the same rewards as something of your own creation, but let's be honest—at this point, how many game characters are just one person's creation any more? Anything you write will go through artists, producers, marketing, management, designers, and many others, each with their concerns, contributions, and suggestions.

> **"If you don't pull it off, you alienate precisely the core audience the license was intended to attract."**
>
> **Richard Dansky**

When looked at that way, writing a character someone else originated becomes a defensive plus. "We can't do that—it violates continuity" is a surprisingly powerful way to shield aspects of a character that you as the writer feel strongly about. Nobody wants to muck with an established character without good reason and certain benefit as a result.

(Confession time: Many years ago, I was asked to contribute a short passage to the *Star Trek* tabletop roleplaying game on none other than Denebian

Writing in Someone Else's Voice: A Practical Guide

By Richard Dansky

The first thing I do when I get an assignment to write dialogue for an established character is to read everything that's been written for that character that I can get my hands on. Working for Ubisoft makes this relatively easy, as we've got good inter-studio communication, and if I need to see the dialogue sheets for an old *Splinter Cell* game, I can generally request them and receive them quickly.

When I'm reading, I'll take notes on key word choices, phrasings, and rhythms that seem to come up a lot. These are the signifiers for the character, the things that will instantly let a listener know that yes, it is John Clark or Sam Fisher or whoever speaking.

Clark, for example, uses a lot of short, declarative sentences. He rarely employs adverbs, always uses strong, active verbs, and stays away from anything over three syllables if he can help it. The end result is short, clipped speech that gets straight to the point – exactly what you want out of the legendary Six.

At that point, I play through a game or two featuring the character (or at least as far in as my decidedly non-l33t skills will take me.) Hearing the speech in-game goes a long way toward laying down an established cadence for the character, a rhythm that I can write in that hooks up with what has gone before. That's particularly important if there's one actor identified with the role, like, say, Michael Ironside is hooked into Sam Fisher.

With all of that in front of me, I can start composing. Frequently I'll take breaks to look at what I've written versus what has been done in previous iterations, to make sure the word choice and style matches up. I'll also read it aloud frequently, to make sure it has as close to the same cadence as possible. Often this features me doing my best (or worst) John Clark/Ghost Leader/Sam Fisher impersonation, much to the amusement of anyone who catches me. This is why I usually close my office door first.

You can instantly tell if you don't have the voice right. Once someone else has laid a character voice down, there's an expectation of how it's supposed to sound and flow. If the stuff doesn't jibe, it literally feels wrong. My breath comes in the wrong place, or the line drags on too long, and I just feel the intangible wrongness of it. Then it's back to the drawing board, to try to figure out where I screwed up and, hopefully, fix it on the second pass.

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Slime Devils. Having been a geek all my life, even a not-particularly-in-love-with-*Star Trek* geek, I found this opportunity to be ineffably cool, a chance to think that I contributed to something so many people enjoy. It also got me bought drinks at conventions, but that's a whole other story.)

As for the purely mercenary mode, consider this: If you do a good job with one inherited character or setting, that indicates to prospective employers that you can conceivably be trusted with others. That means more work, more chances to shine—and if you're really lucky, ultimately the opportunity to do your own thing.

And that leads us to "how to do it." The first step is research. Know what the established characters that you're writing for are supposed to know and you're halfway home. If you're writing a *Splinter Cell* game, you need to research espionage techniques and technologies if you're going to make your characters sound like they know what they're talking about. Needless to say, this can be carried too far—you don't need to look up talking badger speech patterns if you're doing a *Narnia* game—but if you don't have at least a basic grounding in your subject matter, then your characters aren't going to, either, and that's a problem if they've previously been posited as experts. Sly Cooper should know what a grappling hook looks like. Ding Chavez should know proper comm. procedure. And so it goes.

The other half of the equation is going directly to the source. Know what the character has said and done before to keep the character internally consistent. Make references to events of previous iterations of the franchise—it's both a knowing nod to the fans who have played/watched/read previous incarnations, and a way of establishing the character's roots and identity. If you have to lecture Sam Fisher on the Republic of George—forgetting that he spent a lot of time there during the original *Splinter Cell*—then you've just lost your core audience and announced yourself, and your version of Sam Fisher, as a fraud.

If, on the other hand, you're working on a baseball game and have your Boston Red Sox players taunt their virtual Yankee counterparts with references to the 2004 playoffs, you can seal the deal on authenticity for both your characters and yourself. (You may also cause mass outbreaks of people in the greater New York metropolitan area chanting "Bucky Dent! Bucky Dent!" at their televisions; but that is a whole other problem.)

> **"The first step is research ... Know what the character has said and done before to keep the character internally consistent."**
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> **Richard Dansky**

Needless to say, there are special instances. Series like *Dynasty Warriors*, for example, refine the same scenario over and over again. That means there's no need to go over what has gone before, because in the game world, there is no "before."

Something similar goes for a WW II franchise like *Medal of Honor*. The player may keep fighting the war from start to finish over and over again, but the individual soldier he's controlling cannot. This is sometimes solved by having one game refer to the parallel events of the other, but that's slightly outside the bounds of this discussion.

Ultimately, writing someone else's character is an integral part of the job. If you find yourself writing only characters you've originated, odds are that this will change at some point. As such, it's best to understand the risks and potential benefits, and to go about the task as best you can.

After all, you probably don't want to be remembered professionally as the guy who made Duke Nukem speak in sonnets. At least, not yet.

GWQ

BOOK EXCERPT
The Game as IP

From the forthcoming book, **Game Writing: Narrative Skills for Videogames** *edited by Chris Bateman, copyright Charles River Media, an imprint of Thomson Learning.*

Excerpt from the chapter, "Writing for Licenses," by James Swallow

Earlier in the chapter we've considered the matters that stem from taking an external intellectual property and turning it into a videogame; but once an original game concept has been developed, the opportunity presents itself for the game to become an IP in its own right, spawning sequels and migrating from its medium to other avenues. For the game writer, these are opportunities to carry their storyline into new arenas.

The most obvious extension of a game license is into other games, whether they are sequels or spin-offs. A game writer involved with a title should seriously consider during their tenure on a project the possibility of a sequel and address the matter with the developer if they wish to be involved in any follow-ups; alternatively, a game writer may find themselves recruited to work on a game sequel having had no experience of the original title. If a developer found the storyline or script of a title to be the subject of criticism, they may want to address that concern by bringing in outside writer talent to craft a better script for the sequel. In such a case, it is imperative to play through and absorb as much of the original game as possible, and to understand the changes (if any) that the developer requires for the follow-up.

A clear understanding of where the game IP has been will allow you to grasp the direction it needs to grow in. Finding the tone and texture of the previous game(s) is important, as the loyalty of gamers who enjoyed the original will bring them back for the return experience—and they will expect to encounter new narratives in a game-

world that are seamless with those that came before. The game writer involved in a sequel should also make time to research critical opinions and reviews of the original game, and gain an insight into the successes and failures of that title.

Most game developers and publishers have little connection with the book publishing industry, but like the games business, the book business is also one that understands the value and appeal of a licensed product. The feature film novelization, the TV tie-in, the spin-off 'new adventure;' all these are regular fixtures in bookstores, trading on the same recognition factor as licensed games. Acknowledging the popularity of the games industry, publishers have taken up game licenses in recent years to bring players into the reading marketplace. Dozens of game IPs have made the transition from screen to page, among them *Tomb Raider*, *Halo*, *X-Com*, *Shadow Warrior*, *Unreal*, *Resident Evil*, *WarCraft*, *Splinter Cell*, *StarCraft*, *Crimson Skies*, *Brute Force*, *Perfect Dark* and *Wing Commander* to name but a few; even games with such limited narratives as *Doom* have been translated into novel form. For the game writer with authorial experience (or who wishes to gain some), taking the plotline of your game script and turning it into a prose novel may be an ideal opportunity.

However, writers new to writing prose fiction may find a difficult road ahead of them, especially if the book publisher has a stable of experienced tie-in authors ready to pick up the game IP and run with it. Licensed books share many of the same restrictions and concerns that licensed games do, and an untried author may be rejected in favor of a writer that has proven their ability to pen good material on a short publishing deadline. Game writers with prose on their resume are in a far stronger position to campaign for the role of tie-in novelist.

Additionally, as the release of a tie-in book is typically scheduled around the release date of the IP subject, the game writer may not even have time to write the novel! However, many tie-in books are released after the fact, often on the back of a game franchise that has multiple incarnations and is a proven brand. Generally, it is the book publisher who will approach the game publisher with interest in an IP, although increasingly, game companies are looking to be proactive with their franchises and sell their brands. If a game writer feels that a novel is a viable spin-off concept, consider approaching the game publisher's marketing department with an outline.

Similar in process to novel tie-ins, although with a shorter turn-around and more visual appeal, are comic books. Game franchises have been part of the world of comics since the early days of videogames; indeed, in Japan it is rare to find a popular videogame release that doesn't have a comic book adaptation in the marketplace. In the West, IPs like *City of Heroes, Gunlok*, *Mortal Kombat*, *Tomb Raider*, *Killzone, Street Fighter* and *Crimson Skies* have been made into comics; like novels, it is generally the comic book publisher that approaches the game developer, but increasingly comic tie-ins are produced to coincide with game launches in order to broaden the franchise across the entertainment spectrum.

The highest profile translations of game IP come from feature films; to a large extent, the only successful television adaptations of videogame franchises have been in the area of cartoons (everything from *Pac-Man* to *Tekken*). The question of the merit of videogame movie adaptations is open to opinion, but the fact remains that Hollywood continues to tap the games industry for new film franchises. *Resident Evil*, *Tomb Raider* and *Doom* have all been turned into expensive blockbuster movies, while other films such as *Bloodrayne, Mortal Kombat*, *Alone In The Dark* and *Super Mario Brothers* have had variable levels of success. At the time of writing, the game-to-movie migration shows no sign of slowing, with big screen versions of *Hitman*, *Splinter Cell* and *Halo* on the horizon.

For the game writer, the likelihood that they will be involved in the development of a film version of their game is slim; it is more probable that the studio developing the IP will assign writers from their own stable, although there may be an opportunity for the game writer to become involved on a consultancy level, perhaps even to receive a credit as the creator of the original concept. However, generally a game writer will sign away the rights to be involved with spin-offs as part of their initial contract with the game developer. The writer keen to exploit the potential of any future tie-ins should consider this at the negotiation stages.

GWQ

Get Involved!

The Game Writers SIG pursues initiatives that benefit the industry as a whole as well as game writers by **improving industry exposure and conditions** and **providing resources to writers**.

Current tasks include:

- **Producing magazine articles publicizing game writers**
- **Collecting academic evidence of the value of game writing**
- **Improving GDC (and other conference) offerings for game writers**
- **Ensuring that game writers are properly credited for their work**
- **Collecting a list of script agencies**

The Game Writers SIG is also working on a book on writing for games entitled ***Game Writing: Narrative Skills for Videogames***, coming this summer from Charles River Media.