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igda international game developers association

GAME WRITERS QUARTERLY

A Brave New Field

Welcome to the premiere issue of the IGDA's Game Writers Special Interest Group Quarterly. The Game Writers Group 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.

Future issues will address a gamut of issues facing writers and developers, covering creative concerns, business and corporate interactions, and glimpses of next-gen story techniques from the industry's top writers.

In this issue, we'll answer the basic questions about the profession through interviews with five high-profile game writers, excerpts from design and narrative agency International Hobo's essay on Interactive Storytelling, and links to official SIG white papers.

For more information on the Writers Group, please visit www.igda.org/writing.

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WRITING FOR GAMES DEMYSTIFIED

Interview by Ben Serviss

What does a game writer do, anyway? To those unfamiliar with the burgeoning job title, it's certainly a valid question. What was once one of the many duties of the designer has since become its own field of specialization, carrying with it a brand new set of conventions, tried-and-true methods, and pitfalls to avoid. We spoke via email with five writer/designers from varied backgrounds and experiences to shed light on the inner workings of the game writer.

The Interviewees:

Clint Hocking is the first-ever winner of the GDC Award for Excellence in Scriptwriting for his work on the Splinter Cell series, and a speaker at GDC 2005. He recently served as Creative Director, Scriptwriter and Lead Level Designer on the critically-acclaimed Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory.

Sande Chen is an editor at Gamedev.net, the co-author of Serious Games: Games That Educate, Train, and Inform and a contributor to Secrets of the Game Business. She recently spoke at GDC 2005. Her past game credits include 1999 Independent Games Festival winner Terminus.

Mary DeMarle is a game designer at Ubisoft Montreal, where she served as Writer/Designer for Myst III: Exile, Homeworld 2, and Myst IV: Revelation.

Ed Kuehnel is a Writer/Designer at High Voltage Software. He has been nominated for the Game Developer's Choice Award for "Best Writing" and the Game Audio Network Guild Award for "Best Dialog" for his writing in Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude.

Ed Byrne is the Lead Designer at Zipper Interactive, and the author of Game Level Design. Past credits include Harry Potter titles for the PC and Splinter Cell. His current project is SOCOM: U.S Navy SEALs Fireteam Bravo for the PSP.

1. What does a game writer do that's so different from screenwriters and-novelists?

Sande C:
The medium itself warrants some differences. Generally speaking, game writers need to take account of the non-linearity and interactivity of video games. Players in a non-linear RPG can approach quests in any order and thus, the dialog encountered needs to make

sense in every possible situation. The "if - then" clauses seen in programming pop up in game writing just as frequently.

Additionally, unlike films and novels, writers are sometimes brought in at the end of the creative process. The game is nearly finished and it's up to the game writer to come up with a story that will fit within these constraints.

Ed K:
If a novelist wants to add a character to his story he does so with little complication. If a screenwriter wants to add a character to the story he does so, and all that's left to do is find some aspiring actor, throw him a few hundred bucks to walk in front of a camera, butcher his one line and you're done.

If I want to add a character to a game I have to convince at least seven people it's worth it, because afterwards an artist will spend a week modeling the character, then another few days animating it. Finally it has to be added to the game and any related bugs fixed, all of which throws everyone's schedule to hell. Generally you'd never do this for a minor character, so no matter how cool or hilarious the scene would be it usually can't be justified. Even adding a prop to a scene means someone has to spend half a day modeling it and everyone else has to worry about whether we can load it into the level without going over our memory limit. Writing for games is fun, but the technology is very limiting.

Clint H:
For most game writers, nothing, as it seems that most work only a few weeks on an 18-30 month project and are tasked with writing a script that will fit with a game like a dust cover over a sofa. But ideally, a game writer would be working in a very tight feedback loop with design from the beginning of the project to the end. In the beginning they help designers find thematic relevance in their system design and come up with ways to underscore and amplify the relevance of those themes in the fiction of the game. During production they will need to remain extremely responsive to continual changes in that design to improve the fiction and to keep it tightly coupled to the design of the systems and the content.

> **"...ideally, a game writer would be working in a very tight feedback loop with design from the beginning of the project to the end."**
>
> **Clint Hocking,** Ubisoft

Ed B:
There's a myriad of differences. At a high level I think the main difference is that novelists or screenwriters can control their audience, turning their heads to make sure they see every dark and brooding corner, or locking them in place so they hear every line of a particular conversation. The viewer is at the mercy of the writer.

This doesn't fly in games, since players demand some degree of freedom over how events play out, with choice a higher priority than narrative. In these cases, the game writer must understand where the player is likely to be paying attention, and where a carefully crafted piece of exposition may go unheeded.

Increasingly, rather than developing a linear narrative I see game writers creating story "networks" that keep the player free to explore or to miss interactions. This can be difficult – few writers want to spend hours writing a scene that most players won't experience.

Yet this idea of "voluntary" character interaction is taking hold. Game writers of today are forging new forms of storytelling, much like cinema did before us, and taking advantage of new techniques and tools that games uniquely provide to them.

Mary D:
Game writers have to consider more variables when writing a scene than the other two do. When screenwriters or novelists sit down to write, they know exactly what the audience learned before the scene they're writing unfolds. Consequently, they can craft dialog that's quick, smart, emotionally engaging, and conveys exactly the information the audience needs to learn in that moment.

Game writers don't have this luxury. Because their "audience" is constantly making choices that affect the order in which characters are met and story information is learned, game writers often have to write two or three lines of "substitution dialog" for a scene – lines that can be inserted if certain events haven't triggered yet. They may even have to write entirely different versions of a single scene.

At the same time, game writers have to make sure that the overall story remains coherent and emotionally engaging no matter what order the scenes are encountered. Add to that the requirement that every scene and every dialog has to be as quick, smart, and emotionally engaging as the ones a screenwriter or novelist would write, and you start to see the challenges.

2. How much input does the writer have on a game's overall design, if any?

Sande C:
It will depend on the company. As a game writer, I have found that when I have been brought in very early during the design process, the story will affect the design and the design will affect the story. Other times, I have been given free rein on entire levels and have determined mission flow. Some companies merely want a game writer to jazz up the dialog script. In those instances, the game writer has no

control on overall design.

Ed K:

It depends how far up the food chain the writer happens to be. If they're the visionary behind the game then I'd say a lot, but that's usually not the case. Normally the visionary is a producer or creative director or someone similar who has a vision for the story and the gameplay, and the writer is brought in to flush things out story-wise and write the actual dialog, taking into account the needs of the gameplay designers.

> **"A game writer can also help the designer focus systems and content."**
>
> **Clint Hocking,** Ubisoft

Clint H:

I think it really depends on the writer and how well he understands interactive design and how well he works with designers. A game writer's job does not need to be simply filling in text-boxes for the designer in order to create a fiction that justifies the design. A game writer can also help the designer focus systems and content toward creating a complete and immersive experience that works as a unified whole.

Ed B:

Until recently, it was common for designers and game producers to undertake the role of writer. However, the roles in game development are undergoing immense change and specialization right now, and it's much more common to see full-time writers on dev teams who are an integral part in the game's design evolution.

For instance, I had the privilege of working with noted game writer J.T. Petty several years ago, and I think it must have been frustrating for him to keep up with the chopping and changing our game underwent on an almost daily basis. Constant communication between he and the design team allowed him to not only adapt his work to the evolving content, but also to suggest certain situations or locations he felt would enhance the game from a narrative point of view. Many design elements in the levels or in the game as a whole were suggested by J.T. during numerous design team meetings and revisions.

Personally, I believe a writer who has several games under their belt, and who isn't continuing to push Hollywood-style techniques in lieu of working towards better forms of interactive storytelling will find they have a greater deal of respect – and conversely influence – with the games' designers.

Mary D:

A lot depends on the design team – how they view the writer and how much importance they place on story. I've worked on games where my role was limited to fleshing out the lead game designer's initial story idea and then, months later, rewriting the "designer dialog" mission scripts he sent me. I've also worked on games where I was an integral part of the design team through each stage of concept and production. In these instances, my input helped shape everything from level designs and game-play mechanics to character models, animation, and soundtrack design.

> **"...story is so much more than just plot and dialog."**
>
> **Mary DeMarle,** Ubisoft Montreal

3. Is it necessary to have someone exclusively writing on a given project?

Sande C:

For a large project, I would think it would be possible to have a writing team and a head writer. There ought to be at least one person who is in charge of the entire story to insure consistency and coherency.

Ed K:

It certainly depends on the type of project, but I'd say it's becoming more common. Games are pushing the envelope with voice over, sometimes having more dialog than an entire season's worth of television. When I started on Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude, I wore many hats in addition to that of writer. For my current project, which is very similar in size and scope, it made sense for me and another designer to write full time. We'll do nothing else for months on end.

Clint H:

It is not necessary to have a writer who does nothing but write - if he or she is qualified they can have significant input into the design. But, if you hope to have a game that compellingly integrates fiction and design, it is necessary to have someone on the project from start to finish whose main concern is the story, characters, writing, plot development and the emotional core of the game - which often resides in the space where narrative and systems overlap.

Ed B:

If you don't, you'll always run into the risk of having team members who try to wear the hat of "writer" alongside their regular duties to the team, and who simply don't have the experience or the time to dedicate towards well-executed material. Luckily, I think many companies are wising up to the idea that having full-time writers on development teams is more advantageous in the long run. As games become more interesting to wider demographics, so does the need to appeal to players on all levels – gameplay, graphics, audio – and story. In a close tie between similar titles, the better written may be the one that people end up buying, based on word of mouth or reviews.

As games edge into the territory of main-

stream arts and entertainment, players have been introduced to titles that not only deliver great gameplay, but also leverage the talents of skilled writers and talented voice and motion actors to provide immersive experiences on par with books and film. The bar is rising and the need for dedicated writers is increasing. It may not be necessary to have staff writers on the core development team now, but it's only a matter of time before it will be.

Mary D:
I think it's necessary to have someone exclusively in charge of story design on a project, and that that person should be an experienced writer. Why? For two reasons. First, because story is so much more than just plot and dialog. It's emotion and back story and character and conflict all rolled into a narrative experience which players discover through their actions and choices.

Second, because in a game, story is delivered not just by writers, but by designers, programmers, artists, audio people, composers, and voice actors working on separate disciplines to bring the story alive. Each of these people needs to understand aspects of the story to do their jobs well, but they can't be expected to maintain the full, underlying logic of how each piece fits together. That's the role of the narrative designer – a role which writers are naturally suited to because they are naturally "Keepers of the Story Logic." In order to write a good story, writers have to know how each story element fits into the overall picture, and how it must be revealed for maximum effect in order for the story to make sense.

"As games become more interesting to wider demographics, so does the need to appeal to players on all levels."

Ed Byrne,
Zipper Interactive

4. What are the main duties that you as a game writer typically fulfill?

Sande C:
It will differ from contract to contract. As a game writer, I have contributed to design documentation, story development, and even written help files! In most cases, a game writer provides all in-game text and dialog. This includes mission descriptions, character dialog, and back story.

Ed K:
A) Research things like mad so your characters, setting, and story don't sound like boring clichés. Become an expert on the world you're building.

B) Work with key executives and team members to come up with a story. Make them all happy without diluting the original vision too much or coming up with something that's too compromised (i.e. that sucks).

C) Break that story down scene by scene and write dialog for it using as few words as possible. Work with artists and game designers to make sure they aren't surprised by anything major the story calls for.

D) Set up some kind of feedback loop so you can be properly edited while maintaining a large degree of creative freedom. Separate the wheat from the chaff as far as suggestions go. Have a thick skin and revise your work until it shines.

Clint H:
Working with the entire team to come up with an overarching fictional outline for the story and setting of the game. Working with designers to ensure that design and narrative are working toward the same end. Working with implementers (like level designers) to help them understand the dramatic thrust of the content they are creating and to understand and adapt to their way of constructing pacing and flow. Working endlessly with a shifting, dynamic and often incredibly large script to keep it up to date and relevant as changes happen. Working also with cinematic directors to create script material for any pre-rendered cinematics that might 'frame' the in-game elements. Often also working with AI programmers to write 'barks' that help communicate AI state to the player.

"Believable characters and stories come organically from a good story structure."

Sande Chen, Samu Games

Ed B:
I recently wrote the basic scripts for the pre-rendered intro movies that appear in the game I'm working on now, SOCOM: U.S Navy SEALs Fireteam Bravo. I put together the initial scenarios, listed out the shots I wanted and wrote the first draft of dialogue. Then after some suggestions from the Creative Director, the scripts were passed to our staff writer who pulled them together and polished them off before submitting to the publisher. Then it was a matter of all of us giving sporadic input as the cinematics group at Sony worked to turn the scripts into high-end rendered movies.

On the whole, game writers are expected not only to flesh out the basic materials – script drafts, character backgrounds, location descriptions and so on – but also to furnish the other developers with support materials when needed. This may include supplemental dialogue for new additions to the game, writing small passages or copy for elements that the player may see in the world (on a computer screen for instance) or simply providing the publisher or marketing department with material

for promotional use.

Mary D:
First, I come up with story and character ideas which I present to the design team. Then, based on their feedback, I hammer out a plot and work it into the overall game design. Along the way, I'll typically write main and supporting character descriptions (including physical descriptions, personality quirks, and back stories); story synopses and dialog scripts, and any in-game story-related material. Depending on the project, I might also write walkthroughs that describe settings, player choices and where those choices lead, and whatever story points get revealed as a result.

> **"Every company, every team, every game has different needs for their writers."**
>
> **Ed Byrne,** Zipper Interactive

5. What are some of your lesser-known but still vital duties as a game writer?

Sande C:
Believable characters and stories come organically from a good story structure. I have spent years preaching story structure and have applied it to different forms of creative writing such as plays, poems, short stories, screenplays, and game scripts. Because I analyze the entire story in development, I have been able to suggest missions and plausible endings.

Ed K:
As a writer you will be counted on to serve as an encyclopedia of knowledge about the story, locales, and characters in your game. Artists and game designers will come to you with a million detail questions. In addition, you'll have to constantly sell your work to publishing-types, managers, and team members. You'll do a lot of writing that never makes it into the game: story summaries of varying length and detail, character bibles, location descriptions, etc.

You'll also be counted on to communicate the needs of your story to the appropriate parties: How many props are called for? How many visual effects are needed? What sound effects are needed? You'll need to provide a lot of content lists for a lot of people.

Clint H:
I've heard that some writers get handed the tasks of writing game manuals, updating design documentation, editing marketing copy, and other similar things. I think that it's probably different from company to company, but that writers looking to come in the game industry need to be prepared to find any or all of these tasks in their job description.

Ed B:
Every company, every team, every game has different needs for their writers. I've gone to writers for help coming up with names for the games I've worked on or to write a fictional email that only the most diligent player might find in a level I was making. Sometimes having a writer on board can mean a person to bounce ideas off of, which is comforting for developers who aren't confident in their own ability to write, but have an idea they think will make a great addition to the game. If it's worth doing, as the saying goes, its worth doing right—even if it means you're up to 1 AM writing a blooper script for the end credits.

More importantly I think a lot of game writers enter the industry not realizing how critical they will be to the course of production. As games become more multi-faceted and embrace larger and larger scopes, the game writer is often one of the few people on the team who has that 30,000 feet-up view of the story within the game. It's incredibly useful to have a steward for the consistency of the game's world, plot and populace, on a large scale as well as down to the details.

Mary D:
Attending voice-over sessions and helping actors understand the context of each line is a big one. Not every team I've worked with thinks about having the writer involved in voice-recording, but it makes a huge difference in quality when they do. Most teams don't hire copy editors to check in-game text and spelling either, so I've had to take on those responsibilities from time to time. I've also spent a lot of time working with animators and composers – clarifying story or character concerns and communicating the kinds of emotions we want players to experience at specific points in the game. The more a writer can collaborate with other creative disciplines, the better the overall story experience is likely to be.

The Value of Interactive Storytelling

Contributed by International Hobo. Based upon the presentation 'Interactive Storytelling in Games: What it is, Why we need it, and How you do it' presented by International Hobo at Digital Media World 2001, November 13th 2001.

From an artistic perspective, interactive storytelling represents a new, highly expressive art form. Before the 20th cen-

tury, all art was essentially reactive. A work of art was created, and it created an emotional (or intellectual) experience in its audience. Interactive art creates a dialogue between the art and the audience, creating a more immersive artistic experience.

This issue of immersion is linked to the commercial appeal of interactive storytelling. Many games satisfy the player's need for a sense of involvement in the story by creating the illusion of an interactive story. Either the game forces the player to jump through certain story-based hoops in order to progress, e.g. Sega's Shenmue series, or the game features a gameplay element wholly separate from the narrative, as is seen in Square's Final Fantasy series in which the player is engaged in largely pointless combat between story elements. In both cases, however, the player's actions have essentially no effect on the progression of the story. When executed subtly, this illusion can be quite effective; often, however, players are left asking "why can't I do that?" or worse "why do I have to do that?"

Providing a true interactive storytelling experience has the potential to satisfy the audience by connecting their actions to the unfolding story directly. This may be as simple as reflecting the player's actions in dialogue, or as complex as dynamically varying the sequence of events to work around the player's choices. Either way, this non-linearity appeals to the hardcore gamers (including the majority of magazine reviewers) offering a direct commercial advantage. It also implies a greater replay value, as hardcore players replay the game to see the other ways the story could have transpired.

Of even greater commercial value is the potential to unlock a vast reservoir of casual gamers already circling at the fringes of the games medium. The casual gamer lacks the patience (or stubbornness) to persevere with a game that annoys them, but once hooked in become intensely loyal to those games that have grabbed them. As with television and film, there are few better ways to captivate than with interesting characters and plots. However, the viewer expects no control of the outcome in the former media - in games, control of the flow of events is expected, but is usually illusory. Games with relatively easy-to-play game space, but an interesting dynamic story space have the potential to dramatically expand the size of the computer game audience.

Interactive Plots & Non-linearity

The term 'interactive plot' can be taken to be broadly synonymous with the terms 'non-linear story' or 'non-linear plot'. The term 'non-linear' is self-explanatory, but in this context should be taken to mean that the story elements (dialogue with other characters, cut scenes et al) do not occur in a fixed sequence. There is a wide range of extents to which this non-linearity can manifest in a game story. Note also that a game can be non-linear and yet still have a fixed outcome - the issue is the journey through the plot, not its conclusion.

“Providing a true interactive storytelling experience has the potential to satisfy the audience by connecting their actions to the unfolding story directly.”

The structure of a game's story determines wholly the extent of its non-linearity, and there are various degrees of interactivity of plot that can be expressed.

Linear

The most basic structure imaginable is linear: the game's story elements unfold in a strictly linear sequence. Sometimes the game play will be non-linear, but the game elements can unfold in a non-linear way. This is true of many games at the moment: the story proceeds as a series of linear checkpoints that the player reaches in sequence, although they may have freedom to explore the game world in a broadly non-linear fashion.

We can visualize the linear structure as a straight line:

The advantages of the linear structure are that it is a reliable and resource-cheap way of approaching the story.

In games with a low budget, the linear structure is often the only affordable approach.

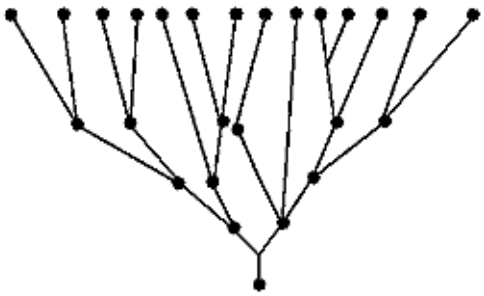
The disadvantages are obvious: it is unimaginative, and the player has no control over the development of the plot. If the game successfully manipulates the player into caring about the same issues as the characters, the disadvantages are minimized - but if the player ever feels trapped in someone else's story, the linear structure is usually to blame.

“Branches recombine at the key story points, creating a structure which is a balance between linear and branching structure.”

Branching

The branching structure is rarely used, and for good reason. The branching structure leads to a number of fatal problems, and indeed is in part responsible for the miscomprehension that non-linear stories are intractable or inappropriate for use in games. It is unfortunate that many people in the games industry believe that the branching structure is the only non-linear option available, and this may be in part the reason for the persistence of the linear structure.

We can visualize the branching structure as a tree:



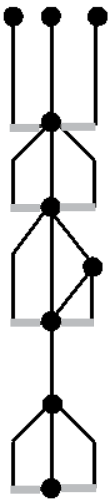
The plot begins at the base node, and certain points in the story are defined as branch points, where the plot splits into separate paths. With no recombination of threads, the branching structure leads to a number of end points equal to the number of branch points plus one (for two-way branching) or even more (for multi-path branching).

The fact that the number of end points is so huge is what is known as the combinatorial explosion. Branch in two ways four times and you have to deal with sixteen different paths (24 = 16) - and each binary branch point that you add to all paths doubles the total number of outcomes. No game could survive such a vast investment in potentially unused resources, and as a result the branching structure (when it does appear) is usually pitifully simple (often just a single branch point).

Parallel Paths

The parallel path approach (which could also be considered a fully recombined branching structure) is a tenable and useful approach to story design, used to some extent in games such as Konami's *Metal Gear Solid* (1998), and Ion Storm's *Deus Ex* (2000). Branches recombine at the key story points, creating a structure which is a balance between linear and branching structure.

In the following diagram, those story points which have a gray line through them are branch points splitting into three routes - but those paths then recombine before the next main story point. The underlying structure is linear:



Every player must through every point on the spine of the story, but there is still some freedom as to how the player reaches the next point.

Metal Gear Solid, whilst essentially a linear game, features a single segment of parallel path structure which does much to improve the player's involvement in the game's story. This sequence, in which the player is tortured repeatedly but has an opportunity to escape between the torture sessions, has three paths through it: the player escape in a couple of different ways from the cell between torture scenes, they may admit defeat to the torturer, or if all else fails, they are eventually rescued from the cell by a deus ex machina. This parallel path segment also governs a split in the games ending: if the player does not give up in the torture scenes, they will end up rescuing the romantic interest - but if they do, she is killed and the player ends up escaping with a buddy character instead.

“Every time a game gives the player a meaningful choice, they become more emotionally involved with the story.”

Although simplistic, this remains a strong example of the power of even a basic non-linear structure, giving the player a genuine moral decision to face with consequences within the framework of the story.

This example also typifies the needs of the parallel path structure's branch points: a primary path (rescue the romantic interest), a secondary path (escape with the buddy character) and a catch-all tertiary path (the player is rescued) to ensure that the plot will move forward whatever happens. In point of fact, this sequence from *Metal Gear Solid* is two separate branches (resist torture, or give up is the first branch; escape on their own, or be rescued is the second branch) leading in effect to four different paths through this

sequence, ignoring the issue of the means by which the player may escape by their own means. Only the first branch is expressed in the development of the rest of the plot, however, and in the branch at the end of the story.

The disadvantage of the parallel path structure is that more is developed for the game than is actually seen. As soon as you have two endings, only players who play the game twice will have any hope of seeing all of the story material, although this disadvantage is offset if it is expected that most players will replay the game (i.e. the game is both short and fun).

The advantage lies in the choices the player has within the plot, and the sense of connectivity with the story that is engendered. Every time a game gives the player a meaningful choice, they become more emotionally involved with the story - although of course this may only be effective if the player knows they had a genuine choice. Because many players do not expect to be given a meaningful choice, sometimes the player will play along with what they believe is expected of them, because their prior experience of games has given them no reason to believe that they are facing a genuine decision. It is important, therefore, to ensure that the player is subtly taught or informed that their actions will affect the outcome, if this is in fact the case.

For the complete article, including information on other types of interactive plots like threaded and dynamic object oriented narratives, please visit http://www.igda.org/writing/InteractiveStorytelling.htm

⇨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 of essays on writing for games, to be released in the near future.

The first annual Game Writers Conference took place October 26-27, 2005, in Austin , Texas, alongside the Austin Game Conference. GWC is the only industry event dedicated to the art and craft of game writing. This conference is for writers, game developers, and students - anyone looking for new ways to create deeper, more emotionally engaging games.

GWC 2005 was guided by a group of leading game industry professionals: Susan O'Connor, Writer & Game Writers Conference Chair; Hal Barwood, Designer/Writer, Finite Arts; Dana Fos, User Experience Manager, Microsoft; Clint Hocking, Creative Director, Ubisoft; Patricia Pizer, Lead Designer, 4orty 2wo Entertainment.

Conference details are available at:

www.GameWritersConference.com