DEVELOPING CREATIVE CONTENT FOR GAMES

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Author Greg Johnson is a game designer, artist and Professor of Game Development and Computer Art. He has 20 years' experience in teaching thousands of students in game design, digital sculpture, programming, 3D modelling and animation. In the book *Developing Creative Content for Games* he offers a compilation of material developed from his introduction to game development lectures as well as much advice for game developers. Greg is also the author of the ENnie-nominated *TOONZY!*. It is a cartoon role-playing game where you can become your favourite cartoon character in funny and hilarious settings and in which you encounter bizarre scenarios.[1] The main purpose of the title *Developing Creative Content for Games* is to take a reader, especially a student, through the whole process of game development and make them able to create specific parts of their own role-playing games.

According to Greg's official website[2], the artworks and his publications reflect themes like aviation, science, history and science fiction as well a smattering of abstract and commercial pieces. Greg's interest in table-top role-playing games is devoted to the early edition of *Dungeon & Dragons* which is the game he mentions a lot in the book. Firstly, he is taking a reader through Definitions, Systems, Mechanics and Dynamics where he explains the basic characteristics of table top role-playing games (RPG) and massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG) regarding their common features. As it is written in the pre-face, the material in its complexity is suitable for students with no practical skills and the author himself wants the book to be an education in itself. A wide range of chapters and topics lead to way in teaching games to students. On the other hand the material is not for people who are interested in more complicated tasks, e.g., in making a full 3-D video game, because it takes a year or more to put together a pro title and it is a job for a whole professional team. Anyway, the book describes complicated processes of game development because every single element is covered in depth and it takes readers deeply into an understanding of those processes. Greg puts an emphasis on learning by doing methods and after each chapter there is a nice guide with tasks and assignments by which the author encourages readers to such practical actions as playing specific games, discussing the ideas in the group of people, creating an outline of the imaginary world, characters, obstacles etc. (p. 136).

After defining the history and basic features of the game development process, the reader can start to think about creating their own game. Chapter 4 (p. 31) helps at the beginning with some advice about choosing the right game and game system. This first step requires many weeks of playtesting. Before you can start working on your own adventure,

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you will also need to choose which rule set to use. There are plenty you can choose from and over a few pages (p. 32-36) the author introduces a few of them. The second step after establishing the groundwork is to get creative and do a little brainstorming about adventure ideas for role-playing games. For better understanding your game you need to know everything including the whole background. Greg's example talks about the game Glory of Yore RPG[3] which is a fantasy role-playing game in the world of a legendary British leader. Since you are inspired by this game, you have to be educated and skilled enough to make your own adventure compatible with a somewhat generic King Arthur-based fantasy setting. Having a great idea does not mean it will be as easy as it seems. It takes considerable effort and a whole lot of trial and error (p. 39).

In chapter 6 the students receive such game design basics as knowing the most relevant game development theories, e.g., The Magic Circle which indicates the space containing a play-ground[4] which relates to the broader sense of human culture and various models of human psychology and sociology (p. 49). A great help for understanding the process of game design and development indeed is Mechanics-Dynamics-Aesthetics (MDA Theory)[5] which visualizes how information flows from the game designer to the player and how important are the roles of every single person in the team (p. 51). Understanding these kinds of processes you are able to create a final game concept document, set the philosophy of play and describe the principles behind your adventure. Coming up with a game concept document the reader is forced to identify the target group and the selling points of his/her product.

In order to take the readers deeply inside the topic they have to think about immersion. A game developer has to become immersed in his fantasy, in his game and make others forget the outside world for a while. They have several choices how to do so, playing with ideas, culture, places or using interesting plots or narratives. The book offers a wide range of detailed types of narrative for your story (p. 104) and one powerful method to weave the story into a game is by providing meaningful choices to the player. This occurs when the player cares about the outcome of each decision (e.g. the game *Paranoia*[6]) and this is the job of the story. Greg puts a big accent on developing elements like victory conditions and goals, encounters, locations, dialogue, rewards or story branches which are good and necessary to know, but students will not get a clear answer on how to make a good story as they may miss some advice or steps about how to proceed to achieve it. Readers find a lot of examples but the book tries to cover an enormous number of topics and it is too hard to do it properly. There are 25 chapters consisting of tens of subheads, some of them within 8 lines. There is no way to explain everything and the reader is missing many things. After reading the book you are not able to create fantastic content for a game, but it is inspirational for later education and development. The book makes students aware of plenty of unnecessary things which they have to think about before and during game development. However, it is really a nice guide for getting to know all the processes and for starting to think about our own business.

The last eight chapters belong to the game finalization phase but only for storytellers. After preparing a great story you have to transform it to the game and begin designing the individual parts. Beginning with writing down the scene list you have to create a map regarding laws of physics and bring your characters to life. The space does not permit the

3   NORELLE, A.: *Glory of Yore: Fantasy Roole Playing in the World of King Arthur.* USA : Mad Mutant Games, Inc., 2016, p. 12.
4   HUIZINGA, J.: *Homo Ludens.* London : Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1949, p. 10.
5   For more information, see: LEBLANC, M.: *Mechanics, Dynamics, Aesthetics: A Formal Approach to Game Design.* [online]. [2019-11-15]. Available at: <https://users.cs.northwestern.edu/~hunicke/MDA.pdf>.
6   COSTIKYAN, G., GELBER, D., GOLDBERG, E., VARNEY, A.: *Paranoia.* [digital game]. New York : West End Games, 1994.

inclusion of everything there is to know about page layout, design and production, readers should have enough information to get started and guide them through the process. Preparing the final product is about paying attention to hundreds of details.

Developing Creative Content for Games is designed for students and game developers and provides them with a solid understanding of game development, design, characterization and creation of the elements. Readers do find the analyses and critiques that have come from investigation over tens of years of Greg's experience in practical as well as in academic life. The book is rich, easy and a quick way of learning how to create interesting content for games and all you need to do so, is a notebook, pen or user-friendly text editor for your computer. The only thing left is to ask what kind of creative content for games the reader will learn from this book? Will he excel in the creation of stories, immersion or in design? All these activities are part of developing creative content for games, but it is very ambitious trying to teach it all in 300 pages. For more additional information about Greg Johnson's work and his enthusiasm for table top role-playing games, visit his website www.gregtheartist.com.

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