

Methods and tools for game writing and narrative design in professional books from 2019 to 2022*

*Metody i narzędzia do pisania gier i projektowania narracji
w profesjonalnych książkach od 2019 do 2022 roku*

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Abstract: The paper is a review of methods and tools of game writers and narrative designers in video games, as they are presented in nine book-length professional manuals published in 2019–2022. We catalogue the methods in eight areas: characters, world-building, plot structures, dialogues, narrative techniques, integration of story with gameplay, writing and editing, and production and work organisation. We also list software recommended for specific purposes by the authors of these manuals.

Keywords: games, writing, narrative design, gamedev, storytelling

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1. Introduction

This publication is the first part of our research on the craft of narrative design and writing in video games. Ultimately, in the entire project we wish to answer three research questions:

1. What theories, methods and tools are recommended in professional books for game writers and story designers?
2. How are the theories and methods related to academic narratology and ludonarratology?
3. Which theories, methods and tools are actually used by game writers and designers in their professional practice?

This paper answers the first question with regard to methods and software tools.

The research project presented here falls within the broad context of game production studies, defined as “A critical reflection of video game production” that “can uncover the economic, cultural, and political structures that influence the final form of games” (Sotamaa, Svelch, 2021, p. 8). As this paper focuses on the methods and tools of narrative design and writing, its primary concern is on the cultural aspect of the craft, less so on the political and economic ones. A more direct context for the project can be found in the field of game design studies, in which we focus on the narrative part of game design. The project as a whole will combine game design epistemology, “concerned with what kinds of knowledge game designers have and employ in their design practice” via “investigations of explicit and implicit conceptual design frameworks” (Lankoski, Holopainen, 2017, p. 1), and game design praxiology that studies “How designers work, what kinds of methods and design tools they use, and how game design is situated in the larger game development” (ibid.). This particular chapter only deals with the epistemology, explored via “investigations of explicit and implicit conceptual design frameworks” (ibid.).

Our analysis is based on nine most recent (2019–2023) book-length manuals on game writing, interactive storytelling and game narrative design. The time span assumed as “most recent” included the last three years: 2019, 2020, 2021 plus 2022 as the year of the project (including one book released in 2022 with the official date of 2023):

1. Bateman, Chris, ed., 2021. *Game Writing: Narrative Skills for Videogames*. 2nd ed.
2. Berger, Ross, 2020. *Narrative Design and Transmedia: A Writer's Guide to Storytelling in Today's Video Games*.
3. Breault, Mike, 2020. *Narrative Design: The Craft of Writing for Games*.
4. Despain, Wendy, ed., 2020. *Professional Techniques for Video Game Writing*. 2nd ed.
5. Heussner, Tobias, ed., 2019. *The Advanced Game Narrative Toolbox*.
6. Marx, Christy, 2021. *Writing for Animation, Comics, and Games*. 2nd ed.
7. McRae, Edwin, 2020. *Narrative Design for Writers: An Industry Guide to Writing for Video Games*.
8. Nicklin, Hannah, 2022. *Writing for Games: Theory and Practice*.
9. Sheldon, Lee, 2023. *Character Development and Storytelling for Games*. 3rd ed.

There are four books we initially considered for analysis, but after a preliminary reading we decided to remove them from the list:

- Finley, Toiya Kristen, 2022. *Branching Story, Unlocked Dialogue: Designing and Writing Visual Novels*.
- Kennedy, Alexis, 2021. *Against Worldbuilding and other Provocations: Essays on History, Narrative, and Game Design*.
- Ince, Steve, 2021. *An Introduction to Game Writing: A Workbook for Interactive Stories*.
- Short, Tanya X., Adams Tarn, eds., 2019. *Procedural Storytelling in Game Design*. 2nd ed.

The reason for their elimination was their high specialisation in a narrow topic. What we were searching for were comprehensive manuals on multiple areas of story design and writing. Out of the four, Finley (2022) has a narrow focus on visual novels, Short and Adams (eds., 2019) on procedural storytelling, and Ince (2021) is a very simple tutorial to Twine for non-professionals. Kennedy (2021) is actually beyond the 2019–2022 time frame and was not written as a book-length manual: it is a collection of blog posts from 2015–2018.

We also found one book of special importance: Seth A. Hudson (2022), *Approaching a Pedagogy of Game Writing*. This is not a manual for writers and designers, but a book for academic teachers of game writing and

narrative design. It presents Hudson's own research on the related art and craft, which we acknowledge as significant prior work in the same field. It will inform our next paper, which will be focused on theory.

This paper has three major sections. "Our Methods" presents the research methods. The section "Their Methods – Our Findings" is essentially an annotated summary, in which we reveal the contents of each book one by one, structured in accordance with the principles explained in "Our Methods". Finally, "Summary" synthesises the findings, and "Conclusion" comments on them in the context of further studies.

2. Our methods

Through close reading and content analysis of the nine selected books, we have extracted information grouped under three categories: theories, methods, and software.

- A. **Theories** – concepts, statements and analytical frameworks that explain how games and/or narratives are constructed and how they work.
- B. **Methods** – practical advice, guidelines, how-to manuals as well as exercises and design toolkits (worksheets, models, diagrams, catalogues, questionnaires, etc.). They are often based on concepts and frameworks taken from Theories, but their purpose is practical: to explain how to do productive things.
- C. **Software** – digital (software) tools that support game writing and narrative design. They are typically based on one or more Methods, delivering them in a digital form with useful functionalities.

The difference between a Theory and a Method is often marginal: a theoretical framework built for analysis may often be directly converted to a conceptual tool (method) used for design. For instance, the Three-Act Structure or the Hero's Journey can be applied as analytical models to study story structures in published narratives, or as practical design frameworks to create new ones. In our research, such cases could be listed both under Theories (when the book used them to explain analytically how stories are structured) and Methods (when these models were used as worksheets, toolkits, or step-by-step guides for creative practice).

Analogously, Methods often have dedicated Software tools, which are sometimes extremely difficult to separate. For instance, the Dialogue Tree is in its essence a Method, which could be used in a standard word processor, or even with pen and paper. But doing so would be so impractical that it is hard to imagine a developer using this Method outside Software, be it a dedicated Dialogue Engine or at least a Spreadsheet.

Methods may be called “tools” (and indeed, many authors call them so). However, we avoid the name “tools”, as it may equally denote software as well as nondigital conceptual tools. We prefer to speak of Methods and Software to precisely highlight the nondigital/ digital divide. If anyone wishes, they may conceptualise our Methods as ‘nondigital design tools’ and our Software as “digital tools”.

The Theories – Methods – Software categorisation was a working solution to pre-select content for further analysis. However, it could not account for the diversity of topics in game writing and design – nor did it reflect the thematic categorisation, which was already present in the source books. Compiling the structure of topics from the tables of contents, we came up with the following list of eight major topics or aspects of the writing/ storytelling craft in games:

- characters,
- world-building,
- story structure,
- dialogue,
- narrative techniques,
- story-gameplay integration,
- writing and editing,
- production and work organisation.

This list of topics does not exhaust the content of the books in question. We have selected the eight topics due to their significance: they appear in all or nearly all books that have the ambition to present the craft of game narrative design comprehensively. We decided to leave out topics addressed only in few (e.g. humour/comedy, licenced IP adaptation, localisation, working with voice actors, or procedural storytelling).

The topical categorisation cuts across the Theories – Methods – Software divide. The same topic is often addressed both in analytical Theory and in creative Methods, and Methods tend to come with Software solutions. It

should perhaps be repeated that the purpose of this paper is limited to cataloguing Methods and Software from industry-targeted books published in 2019–2022. Other aspects will be addressed in forthcoming publications.

3. Their methods – our findings

In the “Findings” section we present the results of our studies of the source books one by one. Each book is described by the same template. First of all, we list the key Methods recommended in the book for the particular eight topics or aspects: characters, worldbuilding, story structure, dialogue, narrative techniques, integrating story with gameplay, writing and editing, and production and work organisation. Secondly, we list recommendations for Software, categorised by the same topics/aspects when applicable. Thirdly, we briefly summarise the scope of the Theories, which will be addressed more extensively in a separate paper.

3.1. Berger, 2020

This book is addressed to various audiences: students, teachers and professionals, in the business of games and other narrative media. It provides practical instruction in the basics of characterisation, worldbuilding, story structures, and interactive branching storytelling, supported with case studies. It also includes an introduction to selected aspects of the game industry and its narrative-related careers.

Characters

Berger (2020) emphasises the use of character types in character design: both Jungian Archetypes, as well as stock types (superhero, supervillain, harlequin, sidekick) and their subtypes (types of protagonists, types of antagonists, etc.), which we will call Roles. As a means of characterisation in the process of development, he recommends brief Character Backstories (“bios”) and Sample Dialogue. He also presents his own “Protagonist Survey” with six questions to the designer: about the character’s role, virtues, vulnerabilities, purpose, and uniqueness. Our name for this frequently-recommended method is Character Template: a structured form, checklist or sheet with a number of predefined components.

Worldbuilding

A similar tool, named World-as-Character Survey, is recommended for worldbuilding. The name is somewhat misleading. It does not mean that designers should personify the created world, but that the process of worldbuilding should use a similar method of profiling through a structured set of questions. The World-as-Character Survey has 15 questions, ranging from the name and location to climate, geography and populations to worldviews, conflicts and major events. We classify it as a variant of the Worldbuilding Template.

Berger (2020) appreciates the value of a thoroughly crafted Story-world Lore, which should inform game documentation and be reflected in characters, story events etc. to provide storyworld consistency.

Story structure

Berger (2020) advocates the Three-Act Structure, and presents his own Beat Sheet to break the acts into more discrete steps, with emphasis on “Basic Minimal Story Milestones” in Act 3. This beat sheet is a compilation of other models, with a major presence of the Hero’s Journey, which, to Berger, “remains a tried-and-true model for game narrative” (p. 81).

In any case, the story structure should be visualised as Flowcharts and Graphs, and laid out in a Story Bible.

Dialogue

According to Berger (2020), in-game dialogue should always have a meaningful outcome that has an impact on the development of the story, or at least should result in acquiring a gift or resource or valuable information. This method is called Meaningful Choice, known in game design since time immemorial, and here defined as “the result of an interactive dialogue exchange between the player and the non-playable character (NPC)” (p. 69). Berger phrased it as if he wanted to limit Meaningful Choice to dialogue alone, but the entirety of his chapter 7 leaves no doubt that the same applies to a larger branching narrative.

Story–gameplay integration

For integration of narrative design with game design, Berger (2020) recommends the Golden Path (i.e. “the central trajectory of the game’s

experience”, p. xviii) for story structure, and Meaningful Choice for narrative design in general – and for dialogue specifically (see above).

Writing methods

Two methods of creative writing are Brainstorming for idea generation, and following established genre conventions for idea generation and development. Other methods of work organisation in Berger (2020) fall under the heading of “robust documentation”, which includes the already-mentioned Story Bible, and the documents listed below under Production.

Production

Like many other authors, Berger (2020) insists that the work of writers and story designers be governed by the general flow of game development. This includes two major things: the organisation of work in sprints and milestones (which falls within the scope of the method we call High-Granularity Scheduling), and integrated collaboration of writers with other team members on shared documents. Berger mentions the following doc types: Elevator Pitch, one-pager (which we will call Concept Doc), Game Design Doc, and Tone Document.

Software

Software types in Berger (2020) include:

- word processors;
- spreadsheets: Excel, Google Sheets;
- diagramming software: Visio, OmniGraffle, Gliffy;
- work management software: Jira, Asana, Outlook Calendar;
- presentation editors: PowerPoint, Keynote .

3.2. Breault, 2020

Breault focuses on methods of work organisation and on the contextualisation of writing/ narrative design within the larger process of game development. Therefore, the Production category includes many more items than any other. What is more, the book takes the game educator’s perspective. Breault shares his experience and insights from his position as a university teacher of game design and narrative design. The book includes teacher’s resources: templates, exercises and syllabi.

Worldbuilding

The single identifiable method of worldbuilding in Breault (2020) is (Visual) Environmental Storytelling.

Writing methods

Breault (2020) highly recommends working in small and frequent increments, preferably on a daily basis, as opposed to periods of intense crunch with long intervals. We will call this method Daily Writing. Also, Breault mentions Journalist's Questions (who? what? how? where? when? why) to ask about the game and its target audience.

Dialogue

Interestingly, Breault (2020) suggests imitation of Hemingway's prose style as a method to achieve brevity and efficiency in dialogue.

Production

Breault makes it clear that writing/ narrative design is an integral part of overall game development. His recommendations for work organisation could be equally applied to writing and non-writing developers. First of all, it includes the general timeline and procedures of pre-production and production: the Iterative Design process (create – playtest – feedback – revision) with High-Granularity Scheduling, and the large-scale production stages (first playable – alpha – beta – release candidate – master/gold), aided by Gantt Charts. This goes hand in hand with related documentation, with particular emphasis on Concept Docs and Game Design Docs. Breault's book includes empty templates as well as ready-made samples. Moreover, Breault recommends Player Types/Motivations Profiling on the basis of Bartle's taxonomy and Quantic Foundry motivation models.

Software

No particular recommendations.

3.3. Sheldon, 2023

Sheldon is an acknowledged author writing about game design, game narrative and game education. This is the third edition of the book, which first came out in 2004. As the title implies, it focuses on characterisation

and on storytelling, with much less attention given to worldbuilding. It is addressed to gamedev professionals as well as students aspiring to be ones (and their teachers).

Characters

Sheldon's (2023) tools for characterisation start with the classic 3D Character Guide (physical, sociological, psychological) based on *The Art of Dramatic Writing* by Lajos Egri. Other tools are: a quick character sheet, which is a structured Character Template (character types/personalities, professions, mannerisms, phrase/accent, clothes, attitudes/opinions); a catalogue of Character Roles (protagonist, antagonist, mentor, sidekick, servants, pets, merchants, trainers, questgivers); catalogues of Character Traits (mobility, physical skills, professions, race, sex, character emotion, conflicts, memories, characteristic action), and Character Arcs to map character growth and development. Finally, there is the Character Backstory.

Story structure

The design of arcs includes Story Arcs, based on the triads of crisis-climax-resolution. Moreover, Sheldon (2023) discusses various models of story structure: linear path (tunnel) classic which may (but should not) include the classic Three-Act Structure, Branching Paths (a maze, which is also based on linear navigation), and nonlinear open space with no pre-defined paths. Importantly, they all may be combined in one game. Sheldon's criticism of the Three-Act Structure is based on the belief that "games don't have third acts" (p. 88, original emphasis), i.e. action does not fall down from Act 2's mid-game complications to complacent Act 3's resolution in the endgame. Instead, the endgame brings more complications. Therefore, "A game's structure cannot productively be defined by acts. Or if it is, every level should be one" (p. 188). Sheldon (2023) does not hide his fascination with Nonlinear Modules: nonlinear story design based on autonomous episodes-modules – see *Story-game-play integration*, below.

Another part of story structure is the structuring of quests. In addition to single free-standing and non-repetable quests (which he calls one-offs), Sheldon presents higher-level structures: "quest suite" (a number of related one-offs); "chain quests" (a series of linked quests); and

“matrix quests” (repeatable with configurations of variables). We group them under one name: Quest Structures.

Dialogue

Methods for writing dialogue include the classic Screenplay Format and a plethora of interactive solutions: Canned Speeches (both monologic speech and conversation) to be activated in-game; Mood Meter alias Attitude Chart (when dialogue options are dependent on the character’s current mood or attitude, which may be selectable for the player); Iconic Choices (where dialogue options are not delivered as text but visual icons); Topic List (dialogue options are not written in full sentences but offered as a choice of topics); and Dialogue Tree (which in Sheldon goes by the name of “dialogue menu”). The list is completed by Natural Language/AI-Based Conversations.

Narrative techniques

We find a number of well-known narrative techniques: Foreshadowing, Point of Attack, The obligatory scene, Reversal, Exposition in Action, McGuffins, Flashbacks and Flashforwards. Interestingly, Sheldon (2023) also points to the possibility of working within particular art styles – not only verisimilitude, but also Expressionism or Symbolism. None of these are game-specific. These are standard techniques well-known in drama, literature and film, therefore we take the liberty to not define them for the reader.

Story–gameplay integration

All Sheldon’s methods for the creation of interactive dialogue (see above) could also be listed here. Besides, he mentions the Golden Path (“the optimum path a player may take through a game”, p. 150); Reactive NPCs (i.e. NPCs commenting on game action and character’s progress), and Chokepoints, i.e. bottleneck passages that are difficult to pass through but necessary to access certain areas (in order to add linear progress to nonlinear gameplay). Sheldon notes that chokepoints may be one-way, which means the player cannot go back once s/he has crossed it.

What deserves a particular attention is Sheldon’s advocacy for non-linear structures based on autonomous modules (possibly with nested

submodules), each of them integrating story and gameplay in autonomous episodes, which can be visited by the player in any order. We will call this method Nonlinear Modules. Sheldon suggests they can be used for flashbacks and flashforwards known from the history of literature and film, but his primary intention is to make the most of the interactivity and agency offered by games as a medium.

In modular storytelling, the modules are objects that include both data (story) and functions or tasks performed on the story, like the passing of tokens, setting of flags, and tracking of player actions. The idea is to bring the telling of story in games into line with how gameplay is constructed. Both can be programmed as modules. Story can be written as modules (p. 243).

Chapter 14: *Modular Storytelling* delves into the details and prospective developments of this approach to game narrative, leaving no doubt that Sheldon sees it as the future of interactive stories.

Writing methods

Sheldon (2023) insists that all major characters and plot points should reinforce the central theme, which we identify as the method of Narrative Pillars (see Despain, ed., 2020 further in this paper).

Production

We find only one method under the label of Production, namely the Game Design Document.

Software

There is one particular software solution discussed by Sheldon in some detail: a relationship system calculating player-NPC relations. This, however, is more a discussion of a particular case study from Sheldon's own experience rather than a generally applicable method.

3.4. Marx, 2021

The first edition of Marx's book came out in 2007. As the title reveals, only one-third of the book is on games. Moreover, it is not focused entirely on instruction in the art of writing and design. We find chapters on the history of video games, theory of game narrative, and information about the

industry and career prospects. This might explain why the instructional chapters altogether cover only four of the eight key topics we are tracking.

Story structure

Marx (2021) starts with the linear Three-Act Structure, which leads her to the distinction between linear progression through a pre-defined sequence of story nodes (i.e. episodes) versus multidirectional navigation between Nonlinear Modules accessible in any order. Interestingly, she does not mention branching paths, but she does state that “most games will fall somewhere between these two extremes” (p. 197). She also provides a catalogue of Quest Types.

Dialogue

Three methods listed by Marx (2021) rarely appear in our research: Weighted Dialogues (some dialogue choices accumulate numerical weights, tracking how often the player makes choices consistent with a personality trait, or a moral stance, or a relationship); Faction Variables (as system that shapes dialogue options differently by faction, race, class etc.); and Timed Dialogue with a timer bar for making the choice.

On the more standard side, Marx presents Meaningful Choice: dialogue choices that affect gameplay. However, unlike Berger (2020), she does not think that in-game dialogue should always have game-influential outcome – she positions dialogue as a valid technique for characterisation (for colour and flavour) and storyworld information (to reveal info on characters, locations etc.).

Story–gameplay integration

Marx (2021) describes three methods: Meaningful Choice (which may be either gameplay – or story-based); Breadcrumbs (“various bits of a larger story are included in quests or events, and laid out like a trail of breadcrumbs that eventually add up to a completed story”, p. 196); Game Verbs that unite player’s gameplay actions and character’s diegetic activities; and Quest Logs that add narrative text to quest progress stages and statuses.

Narrative techniques

Flashbacks and flashforwards.

Software

Software types mentioned by Marx (2021) include:

- spreadsheets: Excel;
- scripting language: Inkle, Ren'py;
- interactive story editor: Twine;
- story prototyping and iterating platform: Taleswriter;
- game engine: Unity;
- version control software.

3.5. Nicklin, 2022

This book is unique in our collection due to its deep background in academic narrative theory, which supports – but does not overshadow – practical content. It is addressed to junior professionals and university students, whose industry careers (will) start in indie games. Divided into *Part I: Theory*, *Part II: Case Studies*, and *Part III: Practical Workbook*, it is a comprehensive rundown of game writing and story design, accompanied with some information on the industry and business. It includes exercises for education and self-education.

Characters

Nicklin (2022) presents two methods for character development: *Character Sheet* (with her own 15-item template), and a few exercises that are essentially various kinds of thought-generating Seeds. Further methods of character-building are *Characterisation-in-Dialogue*.

Worldbuilding

In line with Nicklin's "form-driven design", worldbuilding is also based on tabular forms: *World Sheet* alias *Place Design Sheet*. Nicklin provides a 17-point *Place Design Sheet* for this purpose (p. 195–196). A significant part of world-characterisation is also done in a more general *Form-Driven Design Sheet*, which functionally is a Concept Doc with basic information on: sound, art, aesthetics, mechanics, gamefeel, character, player, location, hardware, and genre) (pp. 188–189).

Story structure

Nicklin (2022) presents various classic models of story structures One-Act, Three-Act, and Five-Act structures; Freytag's Pyramid; Hero's Journey; and Booker's seven basic plots. She also mentions the A, B and C plot known from film studies.

Interestingly, she does not provide models for nonlinear structures, even though she does mention branching, agency and nonlinearity every now and then. Instead, she points the reader to several examples of nonlinear and nontraditional narrative structures and audience involvement in the history of literature, theatre, television etc. She mentions Ibsen's theatre as inspiration to subvert expectations regarding story structures; dadaism as subversion of meaning; Brecht's theatre as experiments with immersion; Boal's theatre as rejection of audience passiveness; TV cast shows as examples of the removal of the single hero.

Finding inspiration in various experimental traditions of non-game narrative media may be called a method of narrative design. Nonetheless, as one person's inspiration may be highly different from another's, it is not as precise and repeatable a method as the other ones we listed.

Dialogue

The primary tool Nicklin (2022) provides for dialogue is the *Voice Sheet*: a 14-point table with information about the character (name, age, gender, personality) and the characteristics of his/her voice and speaking style (voice style, non-verbal additions, interruptions, exclamations of surprise and hesitation, etc.).

Narrative techniques

The number of literary devices in Nicklin (2022) is higher than in any other of the books under examination. The list includes: deus ex machina; red herrings; dramatic irony; MacGuffins; cliffhangers; foreshadowing; set-ups and pay-offs; reversals; allegory; imagery, motifs, symbolism; narrator(s) (perspective, focalisation, reliability, relativity); and format (here: "format" is a well-known set of situational conventions, e.g. the first meeting with the intimate partner's parents).

Story–gameplay integration

Funneling the players, i.e. attracting them to plot points (cutscenes or character development moments) placed in an open world by rewards and clues, is a method Nicklin recommends to combine player agency with authored story content (cf. Breadcrumbing in Bateman, below) Another integrative method is the creation of story-driven puzzles, for

which Nicklin provides a *Puzzle Design Form* (p. 201) integrating player's objectives with narrative context and writing specifics. She also mentions Gating the story, i.e. blocking the character's progress with "gates" that can only be passed through after the acquisition of a proper "key".

Writing methods

Nicklin (2022) mentions two standard methods of creative writing: Seeds for ideation (for characters, world, or story), and visualisation of story paths on Flowcharts and Graphs. A unique method is called Blank Page Draft Two:

It goes: write draft one of your script. Then, when it's finished, the next day, begin your second draft. Except you cannot reference draft one at all. Draft one was about finding your way, but now you know the story and the characters, so tell it from that perspective. Draft three allows you to review draft one (usually full of energy but a mess) and draft two (usually lacking in energy but structurally much cleaner) and decide what you want to take and edit, and what you want to rewrite for the balance (p. 231).

She also mentions Read Out Loud (i.e. reading your written words out loud to yourself), and a few collaborative methods: Edit Swaps (reciprocal editing with a partner); employing Diversity Consultants; and relying on external feedback. For the last one, Nicklin (2022) recommends Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process (p. 211).

Production

Her emphasis on testing, feedback and revision is aligned with the process of Iterative Design. Moreover, the tabular forms Nicklin creates in her "form-driven design" include variants of Concept Docs and Game Design Docs. Such is the *Form-Driven Design Sheet* (see Worldbuilding, above), and the *Full-Game Writing Brief* (p. 205). They are accompanied by the *Single-Scene Brief* (p. 206). Another writing-plus-production method is Paper Prototyping.

Software

Software types mentioned by Nicklin (2022) include:

- for writing and story design: Twine, Ink, Yarn, Fungus, Ren'Py;
- version control software;
- spreadsheets: Google Sheets.

3.6. McRae, 2020

McRae's book is addressed to readers interested in freelance careers. In part it is concerned with career guidance and business issues. Most of it consists in practical guidelines spiced with the author's own experiences and case samples. The text is relatively short, mixing a bit of theory with a bit of methods and software recommendations. Altogether, it provides some solid instruction, but in a fragmentary way.

Characters

As a general principle, McRae explicitly encourages story designers to follow the RPG conventions of levelling, gear upgrades, unlockable abilities etc. This implies a structured Character Template (even though it is not explicitly mentioned) and a Character Arc (briefly mentioned a few times). The only structured method for character design in McRae (2020) is an NPC characterisation template, which consists of five questions regarding self-characterisation in dialogue, characterisation by others, and characterisation by item flavour texts or in-game texts.

Worldbuilding

McRae (2020) believes that narrative design begins with worldbuilding, from which characters, creatures and stories will grow. His design method is based on the concept of narrative bits, or "narbs", coined by Ananda Mitra for social media studies. McRae sees them as miniature building blocks of the world, which should be widely distributed across NPC barks, in-game texts, visuals, and many other pieces of the world – in a way that is internally coherent and builds what he calls "world integrity" (p. 44).

Additionally, McRae has a five-step structured method of monster design. In the context of Nicklin's form-driven design, McRae's template may be seen as a Monster Design Template.

Story structure

For linear story-driven games, classic plot structures will suffice. Non-linear gameplay-driven games, however, are comparable to theme parks or interior design. Plot, according to McRae, "is most definitely not the most important part of the game story" (p. 43). What matters the most is immersion, achieved by player agency combined with world integrity.

McRae sees nonlinear narrative design as a distribution of low-granularity “narbs” (see above) that will create emergent narrative in gameplay (see below). This method is called Emergent Storytelling.

Dialogue

McRae extensively promotes Characterisation-in-Dialogue. He also provides examples of a branching Dialogue Tree.

Story–gameplay integration

This emergent narrative should emerge from the “narbs” as a result of player agency and algorithmic Procedural Storytelling. The interplay of story and gameplay should achieve “ludonarrative harmony” (p. 173).

Beside this general method of story/game integration, McRae (2020) provides three detailed ones: Reactive NPCs (commenting on game events or changes in the environment); Emotes (visual expressions of emotion); and Visual Evolution of the character.

Writing methods

McRae repeatedly distances himself from academic theory of narrative or creative writing. There is, however, one area of research he appreciates: game psychology. With regard to writing methods, he recommends psychological Player Type/Motivation Profiling on the basis of Jamie Madigan’s (2015) *Getting Gamers: The Psychology of Video Games*, and motivation models by the Quantic Foundry.

Software

Software items mentioned in McRae (2020) include:

- scripting language: Ink;
- file-sharing: Google Drive, Dropbox;
- game engine: Unity;
- videochat software.

3.7. Despain, ed., 2020

Wendy Despain is a recognised author and editor of several books on writing and narrative design, and has been so for many years. The first edition of this book came out in 2008. It balances a comprehensive instruction on

practical game writing/ narrative design tasks with insider information on the industry, hiring practices and career guidance. It includes text samples and exercises for education or self-education.

Characters

Chapter 17 by William Harms includes a structured method of character design, including: goals, worldview, strengths and weaknesses, motivations, protagonist's plot-driving purpose, and antagonists. This is a descriptive chapter without a diagram or a concise template. Nonetheless, in the context of other books, we may count it as a functional counterpart of a structured Character Template.

Other methods appear in other chapters: Character Archetypes in the form of Myers-Briggs personality types in chapter 6 by Wendy Despain; Sample Dialogue, Character Backstory and Character Folios in chapter 3 by John Feil; plus character folios and relationship map (under the name of "character matrix") in chapter 8 by Marek Walton.

Worldbuilding

Chapter 8 by Marek Walton recommends documentation types for worldbuilding: World Guide for a single game, or Series Bible for a series. Also John Feil in chapter 3 mentions various "world reference documents". We group them under the name of Storyworld Lore.

Story structure

Chapter 2 by Wendy Despain mentions the screenplay format for linear structures, spreadsheets and flowcharts for branching paths structures, and bespoke methods of visualisation of nonlinear modules on a board. Marek Walton in chapter 8 mentions "murder boards" as a customary name, reminiscent of homicide detectives pinning photos, notes and newspaper clips to a corkboard. We borrow the Murder Board as the name for this method.

Dialogue

John Feil in chapter 3 mentions spreadsheets and dialogue trees as the basic methods for writing dialogue. he highlights the importance of meaningful choice. later on, "the life of a dialogue line" in chapter 11 by Samantha

Wallschlaeger demonstrates the importance of Iterative Design in dialogue writing (pp. 147–149).

Writing methods

Samantha Wallschlaeger in chapter 11 advocates Narrative Pillars: “set of words or phrases that represent what the ideal version of the game will look like. For example, [...] Combat, Exploration, and Father/Son” (p. 143). These should be set by the team early on, and center all writing and story design around themselves. She also encourages table reads (as part of iterative design process): meetings with the team for group reading of recently written text to collect feedback for further revision.

Story–gameplay integration

Maurice Suckling in chapter 19 provides a concise definition of Bread-crumbing: “the player is led through the world by carefully nonintrusive hand holding, guided by environmentally appropriate clues signaling the direction in which to travel” (p. 262). John Feil in chapter 4 explains the Golden Path as “the most succinct and efficient way through the game with minimal or no focus on unnecessary gameplay” (p. 37).

Production

Alongside the standard *Concept Docs* and *Game Design Docs*, John Feil in chapter 3 introduces a mid-level stage named Treatment: “the second stage of a GDD” (p. 24). Other standard methods include Iterative Design with High-Granularity Scheduling. Additionally, Feil also mentions File Naming Conventions to put order and structure to game documentation.

Software

Software mentioned in various chapters includes:

- spreadsheets: Excel/ Google Spreadsheets;
- work management software: JIRA;
- flowcharts/graphs for visualisation of story structure.

3.8. Bateman, ed., 2021

Like Despain’s book, this is the second edition of an already-established title by a renowned author and editor. The first edition was released in

2011. Also like Despain's book, this collection is a comprehensive multiple-aspect presentation of the art of game writing and story design, although with less space devoted to the discussion of the industry as such.

Character

Chapter 6 by Andrew S. Walsh includes a variety of Character Roles (stock characters; protagonist types; antagonist types; NPC types) and Character Traits. Multiple sections in the chapter can be brought down to a structured Character Template, which includes: purpose, personality, traits, gender and sexuality, race, career, wealth, and family. Additionally, Walsh mentions characterisation-in-action and characterisation-in-dialogue. Chapter 2 by Stephen Jacobs presents character archetypes: their version by Carl Gustav Jung and by Joseph Campbell.

Worldbuilding

Mary DeMarle in chapter 4 writes about nonlinear narratives. She recommends environmental storytelling, which “involves first of all creating a detailed backstory that lies behind the events of the game (the lore, as it were)” (p. 85). The Storyworld Lore facilitates overall checking for consistency: “Internal consistency must apply to every character, every line of dialogue, and every branching story path the player encounters” (p. 83).

Konstantinos Dimopoulos in chapter 16 includes particular methods taken from professional urban planning, which he offers for the design of in-game cities: Burgess's model of concentric zones for city planning; Hoyt's sector model; and multiple nuclei model. He also points to Kevin Lynch's five crucial elements of urban planning: paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks. At least some of those fall under our label of the Place Design Template (a smaller variant of the Worldbuilding Template).

Story structure

Chapter 6 by Andrew S. Walsh presents the Three-Act and Four-Act Structures for linear stories. Chapter 2 by Stephen Jacobs presents the Story Arc; Freytag's Pyramid; Hero's Journey; and Syd Field's Screenplay Model. Chapter 4, penned by Mary DeMarle, discusses Branching Paths in two variants: forked paths which do not meet once separated, and parallel

paths which are later recombined. For truly nonlinear storytelling, she recommends Nonlinear Modules (as in Sheldon, 2023, see above).

Dialogue

Chapter 14 by Chris Bateman includes several types of Dialogue Engines (also see: *Software*, below), including the well-known Dialogue Tree. Moreover, Ernest Adams in chapter 13 gives an in-depth coverage of Stitching: “the process of playing short audio files containing fragments of dialogue in such a way that it sounds like continuous speech” (p. 255).

Story–gameplay integration

Chris Bateman in chapter 5 differentiates between Breadcrumbing and Funneling. Breadcrumbing is a method of showing the right way to the player. It may take many forms: physical breadcrumbing, marking waypoints, or breadcrumbs placed in dialogue or triggering events. A similar effect may be achieved by Chokepoints (“a physical location the player must pass through”, p. 94; but also “a metaphorical choke point in the plot of a game, where a certain plot event must happen”, p. 402 in *Glossary*). Funneling, by contrast, is defined as directing the player back to the right way. This is commonly achieved by killzones, narrators/companions, explicit instruction, edge of the world, funneling by area (in large worlds), or even an audio fanfare. In our research we will adopt these definitions – and it should be noted that Nicklin (2022) uses the word “funneling” in the sense of Bateman’s “breadcrumbing”, and Marx (2021) defines “breadcrumbing” in yet another way.

Bateman also differentiates between the Golden Path and the Game Spine. The Game Spine is “a sequence of actions that allows a player to progress through the core game materials and reach the end of the game. It is of particular relevance to narrative-driven games” (p. 404). The Game Path is “the optimal route through a game. It differs from the concept of a game spine (q.v.) only in that the golden path is assumed to be the route of least resistance and maximum reward” (p. 404). For our research the Golden Path will suffice as a method of structuring the game narrative around the gameplay-driven path of progression.

Reactive NPCs are recommended for MMO storytelling in chapter 15 by Richard A. Bartle, and for general nonlinear narrative in chapter 4 by Mary

DeMarle. Other methods in DeMarle include Gating the story, and Relevance Ratings assigned to distributed story details.

Writing methods

Wendy Despain in chapter 17 discusses the major formats of game writing: the Screenplay Format; Flowcharts and Graphs; Spreadsheets; and Pseudo-Coded Scripts. She also mentions traditional prose in the form of summaries or short stories, but she relegates them to game documentation used by the team to guide game development – not to be released to players.

Production

Surprisingly, the issues of production and development are not discussed in detail. Feedback, revision and iterative design are briefly mentioned every now and then as if the method of Iterative Design was self-evident. Only in specialised chapters on comedy, licensing, and voice recording do these aspects get more attention.

Software

Software mentioned in chapter 17 by Wendy Despain includes:

- Final Draft, Trelb, Celtx, FadeIn for screenplays;
- Twine, Articy: Draft, Visio, Wizflow for flowcharts/graphs;
- Excel, Calc, Google Sheets for spreadsheets;
- Twine, Ren'py, Inkle, Inform, Adrift, TADS for pseudo-coded scripts.

...and dialogue engines in chapter 14 by Chris Bateman:

- event driven: player's direct action, triggers, game state events
- topic-driven: character scripts; token-based scripts
- dialogue trees.

3.9. Heussner, Tobias, ed., 2019

This volume follows *The Game Narrative Toolbox* (2015), co-authored by Heussner. The basics of worldbuilding, characterisation, interactive storytelling, cutscenes etc. were discussed in that first volume. Therefore, the *Advanced...* book provides relatively few novelties in its Methods – but a plethora of recommendations for Software.

Worldbuilding

Tobias Heussner in chapter 10 recommends Environmental Storytelling for quest design. Danny Wadeson in chapter 4 presents a “world-building toolkit” with eight components: economy and dominant forces within it; flora and fauna; pantheons and belief systems/mythology; social hierarchy (class/caste); sport and Recreation; conflict and arms; language and communication (including proper nouns); factions and geopolitics. It is not presented as a worksheet-like template, but it can easily be converted into one (as does a sample exercise on p. 49). Hence, we classify it as another instance of the Worldbuilding Template.

Story structure

This topic was covered in the prior book co-authored by Heussner (2015). In the advanced 2019 volume, beside the Three-Act Structure mentioned in chapter 3 by Heidi McDonald, story structure is extensively discussed in chapter 10 by Tobias Heussner. His major methods combine the Three-Act Structure and Hero’s Journey.

Story–gameplay integration

The same chapter 10 emphasises the dual nature of game quests, which always combine mechanics/gameplay with narrative. Heussner advocates the “play, don’t tell” principle, defined as:

You should always seek ways, especially in quest design, of combining game mechanics with narrative elements and to use the identified mechanics to show your narrative elements and engage the players on an emotional journey (p. 126).

This idea is reflected in several methods: Environmental Storytelling (which we put under the Worldbuilding category), Iterative Design (see *Production*), and Quest Log.

Writing methods

Toiya Kristen Finley in chapter 12 emphasises the need for story editors and for multiple levels of editing: developmental/substantive on the level of worldbuilding, narrative design, plot, characterisation etc.; copyediting on the level of dialogue, instructional text and grammar, and proofreading in the level of grammar, style and punctuation. We can group

it under one label of Copyediting. Interestingly, she firmly states that “writers/narrative designers should never edit their own work” (p. 161), which seems to be at odds with most authors, who consider Self-editing an important part of the job.

Production

Cash DeCuir in chapter 11 provides extensive advice on narrative design and writing within the game development cycle, including a few techniques we can classify as Methods. One is the Iterative Design process, with which writing should be integrated. This goes hand in hand with High-Granularity Scheduling. Workload can be reduced by a planned reuse of once-created material (Reusable Material). Iterative Design in quest design also has strong support from Tobias Heussner in chapter 10: “the only one universal rule is: iteration, iteration and iteration” (p. 127).

Moreover, Heussner presents a well-structured Quest Design Flow in seven steps, from the background and high concept to the quest chain (with a graph and map) to first quest summary and player information (pp. 139–143). A similar seven-step method for writing cutscenes comes in chapter 9 by Brian Kindregan, from the kick-off meeting to playing, drafting and feedback to the animatic. We do not list the production flows as Methods, as they are larger procedures of game development which involve multiple Methods. In particular, they both exemplify the method of Iterative Design.

Software

Software types mentioned in chapter 8 by Tobias Heussner:

- languages: C++, C#, Lua, Blueprint/Visual Scripting;
- software for flowcharts/graphs: Twine; Articy: Draft;
- for 3D modelling: Autodesk Maya; Blender;
- for drawing: GIMP; Adobe Photoshop;
- for dialogue trees: Articy:Draft, Twine, YEd;
- for maps: Inkscape, Campaign Cartographer;
- spreadsheets: Excel.

...in chapter 11 by Cash DeCuir

- for work management: Trello, HacknPlan, Jira, Hansoft, MSProject, Freedcamp.

...in chapter 4 by Danny Wadeson:

- for writing, co-editing and sharing: Google Docs.

4. Summary

The analysis of the nine books results in the following catalogue of methods. We completed this research shortly before the sudden explosion of the generative AI revolution, therefore no AI-assisted methods are included. We will be tracing the influence of generative AI on game writing and narrative design in the upcoming months.

Characters

- Character Archetypes – a catalogue of archetypes, e.g. by Jung or Myers-Briggs
- Character Roles – a catalogue of functional roles, e.g. stock characters, types of villains, types of protagonists
- Character Template – a structured form, checklist or sheet with a set or pre-defined components (the Character Sheet being a popular variant)
- 3D Character Guide – a three-dimensional description of characters: physical, sociological, and psychological (which may be seen as a simple Character Template)
- Character Arc – a rising/falling line marking the character's gradual growth and development
- Character Traits – catalogues of traits: physical, psychological, behavioural, supernatural, etc.
- Character Backstory – a biography with major events in the character's past
- Sample Dialogue – sample lines of dialogue or expressions revealing the character's personality and style
- Relationship Map – aka character matrix – the list of the character's relations with other characters, typically stating their relationship status and this character's opinion/attitude toward the others
- Character Folio – a document storing all key information on the character, typically including text, visuals, and statistics (it often includes Template, Backstory, and Sample Dialogue).

Worldbuilding

- Worldbuilding Template – a structured form or checklist with a set of pre-defined components
- Place Design Template – as above, but limited to single locations or small regions
- Monster Design Template – a structured form or checklist to create monsters
- Storyworld Lore – aka World Guide, World Bible – one or more world reference documents with information on the world's history, geography, laws of nature, populations, etc.
- Environmental Storytelling – delivering narrative information in the form of visual and spatial design of the game environment
- Emergent Storytelling – runtime generation of the story by player's interactions with storyworld elements (so-called “narbs” – narrative bits) distributed across the game space to be interacted with (in addition to player agency, Emergent Storytelling can result from computer-generated Procedural Storytelling).

Story structure

- Story Arc – the rising/falling line marking the progress of action from crisis to climax to resolution
- One-Act, Three-Act, Four-Act, Five-Act Structure – classic linear models of story structure
- Syd Field's Screenplay Model – a version of the Three-Act Structure with a midpoint and two plot points
- Freytag's Pyramid – the classic five-step model for dramatic structure with exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution
- Beat Sheet – a linear model of story structure based on a sequence of multiple beats (plot points)
- Hero's Journey – the most popular variant of beat sheet with 17 (Campbell) or 12 (Vogler) stages
- Plots A, B (and C) – a standard model of linear but multi-plot structure popular in screenwriting
- Branching Paths – linear progress forking into alternative paths, which may be parallel and not meet again, or recombine later (side

quests and dead-ends, from which players return to the main storyline, may be seen as variants of Branching Paths with multidirectional movement; so can the hub-and-levels model where players repeatedly return to base between missions)

- Nonlinear Modules – episodic structure with autonomous modules (perhaps with nested submodules) that can be accessed in any order
- Quest Types – a catalogue of standard quest types
- Quest Structures – higher-order organisation of quests into groups, e.g. chain quests, quest suites, or matrix quests
- Story Bible – a reference document for the development team with all key information regarding the story
- Relevance Ratings – parameters signifying the relevance of distributed story details to differentiate essential from nonessential ones.

Dialogue

- Voice Sheet – a structured template with information about the character and the characteristics of his/her voice and speaking style
- Canned Speech – scripted dialogue or monologue triggered by in-game events or player action
- Stitching – a system putting together dialogue text from variable fragments
- Dialogue Tree – a branching structure of conversational options
- Topic/Icon Choices – dialogue choices offered not as full sentences but topical labels or visual icons
- Dialogue Engine – a digital system for structuring dialogue, based on in-game events or tokens or dialogue trees or AI language processing
- Mood/Attitude Meter – modifications of dialogue text or dialogue options based on the character's current mood or attitude (Faction Variables is a variant in which attitudes are based on group membership and inter-group relations)
- Weighted Dialogue – some dialogue choices accumulate numerical weights, which measure the character's progress in accordance with a personality trait, a moral stance, or a relationship
- Timed Dialogue – dialogue choices with a time bar introducing time pressure

- Meaningful Choice – a dialogue choice that brings an outcome that influences the game state
- Hemingway’s Dialogue – keeping the dialogue brief and efficient by imitating Hemingway’s style.

Story–gameplay integration

- Breadcrumbing – in-game clues and hints leading the player in the right direction
- Funneling – directing the player back to the progress path, e.g. by means of dead ends and killzones
- Chokepoints – physical bottlenecks hard to pass through but necessary to access certain areas, or metaphorical bottlenecks in the form of necessary events that must happen to unlock further progress
- Gating – barring the narrative (and/or gameplay) progress with “gates” that can only be opened with a particular “key” (may be seen as a variant of Chokepoints)
- Golden Path – the optimal path of progressing through a game with minimal time and effort
- Reactive NPCs – NPCs that alter their behaviour or dialogue to acknowledge the results of player’s decisions
- Story-driven Puzzles – puzzles requiring player’s gameplay action made meaningful by the narrative context
- Game Verbs – the integration of player’s action and character’s activities by the use of the same verbs
- Quest Log – aka quest journal – text description of the player’s progress and status of a quest
- Procedural Storytelling – storyworld and story structures generated by computer algorithms.

Narrative techniques

- classic narrative techniques: Foreshadowing, Point of Attack, The Obligatory Scene, Reversal, Exposition in Action, McGuffin, Flashbacks and Flashforwards, Deus Ex Machina, Red Herring, Cliffhanger, Focalisation, Metaphor and Allegory, Dramatic Irony, Set-ups and Pay-offs
- various art styles: verisimilitude, expressionism, symbolism...

Writing methods

- Daily Writing – writing in small and frequent increments, preferably every day
- Crunching – periods of intense work
- Screenplay Format – the classic text layout used for screenwriting
- Spreadsheets – Excel or other spreadsheet used to structure text
- Flowcharts and Graphs – visualisation of story or dialogue structures as flowcharts, graphs or diagrams
- Pseudo-Coded Scripts – inserting code snippets into narrative text to script variable-based modifications of the text
- Murder Boards – visualisation of story content as notes on a corkboard or whiteboard
- Brainstorming – a classic technique of rapid generation of new ideas for further selection
- Journalist's Questions – the who, what, why, where, when and how of the game
- Seeds – a method of creating the initial concept for a character, story or world around one or more prompts
- Narrative Pillars – aka core themes – central themes around which the whole narrative should be built
- Blank Page Draft Two – writing two drafts of the script, the second one written without any references to the first one, followed by the third draft based on critical selection of those two
- Read Out Loud – reading one's own text out loud to oneself
- Table Reads – group reading of newly created text with the team for feedback
- Copyediting – having one's text proofread and edited (its variant is Edit Swaps – reciprocal editing with a partner)
- Diversity Consultants – employing consultants for sensitivity reading and diversity consulting.

Production

- Concept Doc – aka pitch doc or one-pager – a short document outlining the basic ideas for the game, including its narrative elements next to gameplay, technology, core mechanics etc.

- Game Design Doc – a larger document providing multiple details on all aspects of the game, including characters, world, story structure, and story–gameplay integration
- Iterative Design – the process of game design based on the cycle of ideating – prototyping – playtesting for feedback – and revising the prototype
- High-Granularity Scheduling – planning the work as a detailed list of scheduled tasks
- Gantt Chart – a classic graph used in project management for scheduling and task allocation
- Player Type/Motivations Profiling – writing for the implied audience representing particular player types or motivations
- File Naming Conventions – a system of coding/naming files and folders to keep order in documentation.

5. Conclusion

The art and craft of writing and story design for video games combines methods known from other narrative media with methods developed specifically for player agency in digital interactive environments. This is reflected not only in the content of the industry-oriented books but also in the professional background of their authors. The more “generalist” methods dominate in characterisation, writing methods, and narrative techniques. Game-specific methods dominate in story–gameplay integration, production, and dialogue. In worldbuilding and story structure they seem to be balanced.

The identification of particular methods is to some extent arbitrary. One reason for this is the desired level of detail. For instance, we preferred to list Quest Structures as one method with three variants. Scholars aiming at a finer granularity could list each variant as one method. Moreover, there is a fuzzy boundary between a method and advice. We assume that a Method must be specific and repeatable: either a step-by-step process (e.g. Iterative Design or Brainstorming), or a tangible formal tool (e.g. Character Template or Voice Sheet), or a technology-based method of working (e.g. digital Flowcharts or Spreadsheets). Advice, by contrast,

is a general guideline which can be realised in various steps in individual ways, such as “borrow ideas from other games” or “writing dialogue starts with listening”. In many cases advice and methods can be easily told apart, but there are also boundary cases, in which we felt the decision was arbitrary.

The next step is the validation and possible expansion of the catalogue of Methods and Software types in short-format publications by industry professionals: blog posts, videos, and articles featured on websites. We will explore the largest and most influential venues: the Gamasutra site and its blogs for texts, and the GDC Vault for video lectures from the Game Developers Conference. Moreover, the actual usage of our catalogued Methods and Software items will be studied with follow-up interviews with game writers and narrative designers.

The last part of the research focuses on the Theory, in which findings from the book-length and short online publications will be discussed in the context of academic narratology and ludonarrative game studies. We will reveal which of the academic theories seep into internal industry theorycrafting and instruction – and which do not, even though they tackle the same problems as the industry.

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Metody i narzędzia do pisania gier i projektowania narracji w profesjonalnych książkach od 2019 do 2022 roku

Abstrakt: Artykuł jest przeglądem metod pracy pisarzy i projektantów narracji w grach wideo na podstawie dziewięciu specjalistycznych podręczników wydanych w języku angielskim w latach 2019–2022. Zestawiamy i omawiamy metody i narzędzia w ośmiu obszarach: postaci, światotwórstwo, struktury fabularne, dialogi, techniki narracyjne, integracja narracji z gameplayem, pisanie i redagowanie oraz produkcja i organizacja pracy. Wskazujemy także oprogramowanie rekomendowane do poszczególnych celów przez autorów podręczników.

Słowa kluczowe: gry, pisarstwo, projektowanie fabuł, branża gier, storytelling
