

Portal

E N T E R T A I N M E N T

Immersive Writing Lab – Storyworld Writing Competition

Part 2 - Characters – Goals, Obstacles, Communities and Points-of-View

It is somewhat stating the obvious to suggest that Character is crucial to storytelling. Yet the idea of Character is more complex than it might appear. And in the case of writing immersive interactive and multi-platform Storyworlds, the notion of how to construct characters is extended with new considerations.

A story may be described in terms of its Plot (this happens, then that happens then this happens.... etc) but it's characters that provide us with point-of-view, empathy, metaphor, subtext and drama within that plot chain of events. More specifically, it is Characters that give us a reason to care about the plot and make the plot events meaningful.

Writing a Storyworld, as opposed to a singular narrative, requires some broader ideas about characters, what they represent, how they work and how they relate to each other in ongoing ways. We'll break this down into 4 useful elements as a tool kit for thinking about the characters in your storyworld.

- Goals and Obstacles
- Role-Play
- Communities
- Points of view

Goals and Obstacles

In the previous guide we looked at the dramatic pressures of your Storyworld, asking what forces in opposition pressurise and make dramatic (or comedic) your world? This is to say, What macro-level Problems effect every Character in your world? This is the central energy source that will both generate and motivate your characters who will not only struggle against or with these problems, but who will also be a product of them. Characters born in a particular world are a direct result of the world; their attitudes, behaviours, personality and - in particular - their goals and objectives, are a response to the problems of the world.

In the TV series Breaking Bad for example, the storyworld is one where there are two big problems; the first is a broken and dysfunctional health system that doesn't cover peoples medical bills and the second is a huge demand for the drug crystal meth. These two big problems - Health Care and Drugs - are the forces that beset every character in the Storyworld and which every character is responding to in some way. Characters are then made interesting, dramatic and compelling when they have specific Goals and Obstacles that are in opposition to the Problem. Hence the Storyworld of Breaking Bad naturally generates the character of an under-insured school teacher who has the Goal of selling crystal meth to make enough money for his family before he dies and the Obstacle of avoiding both the police and the

Portal Entertainment Ltd.

Portal Entertainment, Studio 5, 155 Commercial Street, London E1 6BJ
07965 458585 | julian@portalentertainment.co.uk | portalentertainment.co.uk

Portal

E N T E R T A I N M E N T

other drug dealers. The problems of Health Care and Drugs are so big they are unsolvable and so the dramatic pressure is sustainable over a very long-form narrative.

These same principles of a character's Goals and Obstacles being a direct result of the Problems of the Storyworld are as applicable in an interactive multi-platform experience as they are in a TV series. The question is how do those Storyworld Pressures and Problems manifest characters with clear Goals and Obstacles across different platforms and also how the audience can be compelled to respond interactively to the same Goals and Obstacles. What is crucial for the writing of your Storyworld bible is to ensure that the very specific, personal, individual Goals and Obstacles of your characters are intrinsically linked to the problems of the world. In this way any character dropped into your world should be immediately pressurised and compelled to respond or act.

Role-Play

The idea of a motivated character with clear goals and defined obstacles is as applicable to interactive storytelling as it is with film, TV and books. In traditional narrative media we call such a motivated character an Active Protagonist with the idea that watching a character actively Doing things is better than watching a passive character having things Happen to them. In an interactive narrative experience the audience or user is most often asked to be the Active Protagonist - to play the role of a character with goals and obstacles.

Sometimes the audience will be asked to play the role of a pre-defined character, where the story tells the user who they are and the type of character they represent. In other cases the audience 'plays themselves', a tabula rasa onto which the audience are free to assign their own behaviours. In either case creating an active role-playing experience requires an extended idea of a character's goals and obstacles.

The first is to clearly define the role for the audience in active terms; does an interactive narrative in your storyworld ask the user to be the Fighter, Finder, Solver, Rescuer, Detective, Strategist, Organiser, Chaser, Escapee, etc.... What active roles does your Storyworld naturally embody? By understanding the active verbs that describe what the user will 'do' in your storyworld you can define the three core things that make for a satisfying interactive experience: Motivation, Action and Reward.

It's a mistake to expect or assume your audience will or even want to interact. It's your job - the job of your Storyworld - to Motivate them to do so. Ask yourself 'what Compels my audience to interact'? What is at stake? What is at risk? What will be lost or gained by their actions?

Once Motivated the audience will then have specific Actions and tasks to perform. What are those actions? Be specific not abstract. What are you asking them to do and how will they do it? These actions come directly out of the role you have asked them to play and the actions should be a direct consequence of the Storyworld's pressures. The audience's actions should be specific to achieving a clear goal and be made dramatic by the obstacles that prevent them from achieving those goals.

Portal Entertainment Ltd.

Portal Entertainment, Studio 5, 155 Commercial Street, London E1 6BJ
07965 458585 | julian@portalentertainment.co.uk | portalentertainment.co.uk

Portal

E N T E R T A I N M E N T

The last crucial element for engaging interactive story experiences is Reward. If you're going to ask your audience to take part in your storyworld, to role play and take action, then you will need to reward them for doing so and thus motivate them to continue to interact and role play. How are your audience rewarded? Is the story advanced? New knowledge unlocked? New spaces opened to explore? New mysteries revealed or questions answered? Of course reward systems can also involve traditional 'game' ideas of points, leveling-up, or any combination of the above.

Communities

The dominant mistake writers often make when developing and submitting their Storyworld project is to focus on a single character with a single goal and subsequently a singular plot. But we're not looking for 'a' story, we're looking for a whole World of Stories. In terms of character this often means shifting the emphasis away from an individual character and onto Communities of characters.

Any Storyworld - whether it's real-world, intimate and contained, or other-worldly, fantastical and huge - will be home to groups of character that share common goals and obstacles; in other words Communities.

Communities of characters can often be described and articulated in much the same terms we might use to describe an individual. What are the goals of that group of characters? What are the obstacles they face together? Communities will even share a personality, an attitude and a perspective. The group will collectively believe certain things and be in opposition to others.

This goes the same for Antagonists as much as for Protagonists in your world. Storyworld Antagonists are often institutions, collective entities or forces that may comprise numerous individual characters but who all reflect a consistent set of traits. Take the much loved 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer' - a project spanning TV, video games, comic books and more. The Buffy Storyworld is rich and full of near countless demons, ghosts, monsters and vampires. Yet the antagonist is a singular entity - the Hell Mouth that spawns an ongoing 'community' of antagonistic characters for Buffy and her own 'community' of friends, family and comrades to face, fight and overcome. The Hell Mouth has collective goals, obstacles and perspective that is opposition the collective goals, obstacles and perspectives of the Slayers.

Within such communities of characters there are of course tensions, disputes and a mix of character archetypes. But identifying the collected traits of the different groups that exist in your storyworld is a crucial step in being able to define a world with the potential for numerous, varying and ongoing storylines and characters that can be experienced across platforms and technologies.

Portal Entertainment Ltd.

Portal Entertainment, Studio 5, 155 Commercial Street, London E1 6BJ
07965 458585 | julian@portalentertainment.co.uk | portalentertainment.co.uk

Portal

ENTERTAINMENT

Points of View

The last element of Points-of-View is about the different perspectives that exist for the characters and the audience in your world. Where a feature film generally offers just one point-of-view, the vibrancy of a storyworld can often be measured by the range of possible points-of-view that may be experienced. This speaks to the different platforms the world may be presented on, the different paths audiences may take through the world, the ability for the storyworld to generate multiple points of entry and audience revisitation.

Compelling points-of-view stem from compelling Characters and this should prompt you to ask questions of your storyworld - What different points of view exist in your storyworld? Are they balanced and equally compelling? Does each POV effect the experience of the world and change audiences perceptions of it? Do different POV's challenge, contradict or confound each other? Do certain points of view lend themselves more to one platform or another? Are certain points of view more conducive to being experienced interactively?

Summary

A Storyworld may be full of great conceptual ideas, intrigues and fascinations, it may be visually beautiful, terrible or sublime, but it will often fail to be compelling for an audience until it is richly populated characters; Characters we can care about, empathise with, cheer for or be in fear of.

Doing this of course aint easy! But the ideas here should help guide you towards the particular demands of characters in a Storyworld as opposed to a character in a plot.

Goals & Obstacles

Audience Role-Play

Motivation Action and Reward

Communities

Points of View

In the next post we'll look at Plot, Dramatic Questions and Transformations... be sure to follow @portalIWL

Portal Entertainment Ltd.

Portal Entertainment, Studio 5, 155 Commercial Street, London E1 6BJ
07965 458585 | julian@portalentertainment.co.uk | portalentertainment.co.uk