The Fourteenth Annual Game Design Think Tank
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Group Report: Everlasting Narrative:
Developing a Rulebook for the Theory and Practice for Creating Never-Ending Narrative in Games

Participants: *A.K.A. "The Cliffhangers"*

Jake Forbes, Star Stable

Linsey Murdock, ArenaNet

Kenny Shea Dinkin, King

Anna Kipnis, Google

Emily Short, Independent

Kaitlin Trembley, Ubisoft Toronto

Bob Bates, Independent

Lynn Hogan, Wizards of the Coast

Steve Meretzky, Independent

Facilitator: Jeff Pobst, Hidden Path Entertainment

Brief statement of the problem(s) on which the group worked

With the growing dominance of free-to-play games, and games-as-a-service, more and more games are meant to be played for years instead of hours. But classic storytelling techniques are difficult to implement and maintain in live games. We set out to catalog the best practices for delivering story for a game that never ends.

A brief statement of the group's solutions to those problems

We identified four pillars for designing everlasting narratives:

- The proper use of constants elements intermingled with dynamic elements, to create structures which keeps multiple storylines open, and which never give players an excuse to say, "Okay, I'm done with this game."
- Narrative elements including a strong lexicon, an open-ended universe, and compelling characters who are constantly evolving.
- The use of mechanics to strengthen the focus on (and the power of) the narrative elements.
- The importance of involving the energy and creativity of the player community.

These four pillars are greatly expanded upon below.

Expanded problem statement

Introduction

With the growing dominance of games-as-a-service, more and more games are meant to be live on indefinitely. But classic storytelling techniques are difficult to implement and maintain in such everlasting games. It is disappointing to see developers conclude that games-as-a-service should not focus on narrative, since players of these games want and deserve great narrative.

There are shelf-loads of books on how to write stories for film and television, and the number of books on writing for video games is quickly catching up. But most of the game-oriented how-to's borrow heavily from the structural narrative assumptions of film, TV, AAA and premium games. If you're working out narrative issues while caught up in the lucrative whirlwind of free-to-play games, a good number of those structural assumptions for interactive storytelling don't necessarily fit.

We set out to catalog the best practices for delivering story for a game that never ends, including:

- How do you focus sharp narrative design in games that might just have to go on forever?
- How do you get players who don't want to read (and don't play with their volume on) to fall in love with your characters, world and IP?
- How do you best hook players with the emotional pull that only engrossing story and captivating characters can deliver, even when you're working with play patterns that are optimized to be played on the bus (or on the toilet)?
- How can you onboard new players into the narrative of a game world that may have been going on for years already?

The Benefits of Narrative in an Everlasting Game

- Player retention -- Humans have an innate attraction to storytelling, and particular to the aspects of "what will happen next". Will this character survive this life-threatening situation? How will this relationship between two (or more) characters resolve? Which side will win this conflict? Will this villain be vanquished, and if so, how? Giving players these unresolved situations will give them another reason to return to the game, in order to keep the narrative going. This is particularly important in free-to-play games, where the gameplay can sometimes get grind-y and unrewarding, or players can reach "pinch-y" points that are designed to get players to open their wallets. The desire to follow an ongoing narrative can help players to get past these points, rather than churning.
- Good will -- An enjoyable narrative generates a lot of good will from players toward the game, resulting in higher tendencies to spend money, better reviews, and likelihood to overlook bugs or design flaws.
- Encouraging outside-the-game fan activities -- game narrative is key toward encouraging players to take their fandom beyond the game -- writing fan fiction, participating in cosplay, even just discussing the game at the watercooler. Such activities are wonderful for retention, and also for user acquisition, serving as free marketing.

Challenges

- Cost, Crunch, and Burnout -- Creating a player based that is motivated by an ongoing narrative creates a beast that requires constant feeding. The demands of producing regular narrative content

is a significant developing cost. In addition, because of the unforgiving schedule-based nature of such live operations, the development of this content can result in crunch time … and not just once, but over and over again. And, as is well known in game development crunch leads to reduced morale, reduced productivity, and loss of good employees. And seemingly endless crunch will bring these negative results on much more quickly.

- Player Experience -- As a game goes on for years, the narrative universe can get increasingly complex, with a growing number of characters, locations, situations, and even terminology. Over time, this can create unreasonable demands on the player's memory and the player's comprehension of what is transpiring in the narrative.
- Narrative Quality -- The unique demands of creating game narrative -- time pressure, the need to dovetail with game mechanics, and in many cases a shortage of resources -- can lead to narrative elements which are inferior to that provided by other storytelling media. This can lead to dissatisfaction by both the game creators and the audience.

Expanded solution description

Identified Pillars

Constants Plus Change

- The "umbrella structure"
- Personal progression within a cyclical world

Narrative Fictional Elements

- A strong lexicon and semiotics
- An open universe
- Evolving characters

Mechanic Elements

- Translate story into mechanics
- Translate mechanics into story
- Procedural narrative systems with recombining story beats
- Acknowledge player choice and behavior
- Build on patterns of player engagement

Co-authorship and Community Engagement

- Narrative as a dialogue with players
- Narrative without borders

Part 1

Constants Plus Change

An everlasting narrative is a challenging, delicate balance of nurturing the familiar while changing just enough to keep the existing audience interested, all while making it possible to smoothly onboard new audiences. This section is an exploration of the problem and a set of recommendations to avoid the worst of them. Because everlasting narrative in games is a recent phenomenon, it has been useful to draw on

other mediums for examples.

Sometimes the right thing for your story is to find creative ways to keep things constant, as television shows like *The Simpsons* and *Star Trek* have done, to make it easy for a new audience to jump in at any time, while rewarding existing audiences with references to a slowly building story canon, and through rare character introductions and sunsets.

On the other end of the spectrum of successful everlasting series, are soap operas, keeping the plot constantly moving, with several different story arcs rising and falling simultaneously, in a staggered fashion. Existing audiences are perpetually riveted and rewarded with story progression, while new audiences can ease into the story by virtue of story arcs rising and falling at a dazzling pace. Chances are good that a new viewer will see a start of a new story arc during the one episode they happen upon, and be carried away by the drama.

Both extremes can feel contrived and predictable in their own ways, however, and lack the depth of a well-told story with developed characters going through meaty story arcs. Great storytelling that is everlasting creates a different set of problems (observed most commonly in serialized novels, long-running comic book series and anime). The most glaring of these is a canon with which it is overwhelming for writers to maintain continuity, and that leaves new audience members with insurmountable onboarding duties.

Why keep things constant?

Constant is comforting, something for us to latch onto in an ever-changing world, something tried and true. Quite simply, we like the familiar. The audience loves a well-defined character to the point where it might rather see them never learn from their mistakes, never get to the next grade in school (Bart and Lisa Simpson), never leave the island they got marooned on (*Gilligan's Island)*, than change. In games, nothing inspires the ire of a core audience like change to beloved characters or environments.

Besides, **change is expensive**. It often means fundamental reworkings of a character's appearance, their environment, and for games, potentially core gameplay systems, and much, much more. Players can quickly burn through content, and without systems that can nurture the status quo for some time, the audience will leave the game, possibly never to return.

Change is often not necessary. Some characters in your story may not require character development, because they provide a dynamic for others in the story (e.g. they are a foil or a villain) that is valuable for story-generation, comic relief, gameplay mechanics, and so on.

A constant world situation, such as a war, **may be a great conflict engine for your universe**, and ending it means fundamental changes to your characters' relationships that don't make sense for you to undertake.

A plot arc structure that is episodic in nature, like a TV sitcom, creates the opportunity for every episode being **a potential jumping-on point for a new audience**. It may allow a reuse of a plot point at another time.

A certain unnatural constancy in stories **allows exploring an experience at a cadence that is different from real-time**. For example, *Calvin and Hobbes* maintains a particular nostalgic moment in childhood out of which we all grow up, to reflect on and explore it further. Sherlock Holmes, Poirot, and Jessica Fletcher undertake an unrealistic amount of exciting case work, with poor Jessica being treated to an encounter with a criminal mastermind in every social situation she finds herself, all so that audience members can be riveted by puzzles. *The Last Express* centers around the same set of events that runs in real-time but could be experienced over and over again by the player from different vantage points in the world.

In short, **change is not always good**, and the reasons for keeping things constant are many and may improve your story, rather than ruin it.

Ways to Stave Off Significant Change

Staving off structural change involves **keeping existing content interesting for your core audience**, with game systems that help sustain it, and **keeping onboarding smooth for your new audience**.

For everlasting stories, it is important to put yourself on a good path from the get-go. The most important potholes are maneuverability with continuity and your story outliving the experiences of your own lifetime.

Avoid mention of any real world dates. Set a "year zero", a cataclysmic event (named poetically within the mythos of your game) that set the course for the main story arc and if timelines become important to mention, have the story refer to "before year zero" and "after year zero". The reason for this is to avoid tying yourself to a current event that is relevant and timely now but that will not be in a few years' or decades' time, when the real world has perhaps gone through some cataclysmic events of its own that become far more important, and may cause your story to feel outdated.

Build in maneuverability for your story continuity by adopting a Framing Device or another dynamic story structure. There are many ways of doing this, but here are a few:

- It could be a story within a story (Nested Storyline), as with Arabian Nights, where one character tells a story and a character in that story tells another story or has a dream, etc, giving opportunities for storylines that don't break the main continuity.
- Establish an Unreliable Narrator, or the idea that there are other perspectives to the story, opening up the possibility that the story can be retold from other perspectives. This can be combined with game mechanics in clever ways, by allowing the player to re-experience the same sequence when an inaccuracy has been resolved. For example, when Dragon Age II's Varric, who often narrates the story and is called out for lying, causes the player to play a level again in a reimagined way, sans Varric's embellishments.
- An iterative story structure, like that of Hindu Gods Vishnu and Lakshmi, who adopt various incarnations (avatars) on earth, in order to preserve and protect the world from destructive forces.

Avail yourself with building characters through back stories and flashbacks, in ways that needn't interfere with current events, whenever possible

Employ predictable change like seasonal content (Halloween or winter holidays), as it can offer an opportunity to celebrate within a lens of a game IP while giving players fresh content in a format they've already been socialized to understand.

Why Change?

"Change is the only constant in life" - Heraclitus

The most common reason to change something in a story is to **stave off staleness and lack of stakes** for your story world and characters. A happy ending can never occur in a status quo full of hyperactive conflict engines. If nothing ever changes course, then perhaps no choice matters, player choice included. There are no real stakes when players know that no one will really get hurt permanently or die, including villains. Your players will catch on that no matter the plot point that starts the story arc, its consequences will not stick. The only fun that remains, perhaps, is the surprise of unraveling the new arc back to the status quo.

Fundamentally, **a lack of substantial change doesn't reflect life**. If no one learns from their mistakes,

never grows up or ages, never sees any recognizable progression in their life, it can make your characters feel uncanny and obsolete, and eventually the audience will leave.

There may be **business reasons to change** or reboot the story, such as a different studio taking on the project, intellectual property expirations, and so on. Artistic reasons, such as collaborations or reimaginings of a character (e.g. Alan Moore's work with existing comic book characters). Or a desire to reboot a character through an alternative universe or timeline (e.g. Superman series that explore the implications of him landing in the USSR).

There may even be reasons to change things *completely*. For instance, **continuity lockout**, a situation where the **story becomes so complex** that only the most die-hard fans can make any sense of it and no developer or writer wants to go near the story because they feel they could only disappoint.

Avoiding Pitfalls with Change

"If you want to make enemies, try to change something." - Woodrow Wilson

Keep some elements as bedrock whenever anything else shifts. Whenever a critical character needs to be sunset, make sure that a familiar, beloved character and other comforting constants are there to help the transition from the old to the new. An example of this is Dr. Who, when the doctor's former companion overlaps with the new doctor.

Don't be afraid to constantly reinvent lore. As a living, everlasting story, your lore should also be living and reinterpretable.

For every question answered, make sure to ask two more. An everlasting story cannot have complete closure. There must always be something or someone new and exciting happening, or threatening the world and everything you love. There must always be an even deeper and more fascinating mystery to uncover.

Dramatically changing something fundamental to the universe can deeply reinvigorate interest in a story and world. An example of this is when Guild Wars 2 destroyed the main hub city with the Battle of Lion's Arch, allowing players to rebuild it.

Overlap your mechanics and narrative arcs to avoid simultaneous closure. Mechanics that make it easy to walk away from the game, and narrative moments that make it easy to walk away from the game, should never happen at the same time, thus reinforcing the "permission to leave". For example, if a game's mechanics give you a big moment of closure, such as completing a large collection of items, or finishing the construction of a castle, make sure that a storyline isn't wrapping up at that point. In fact, this is a great point to introduce a compelling unanswered question.

Pattern: The "Umbrella Structure"

The compelling aspects of storytelling are "What's going to happen next?" and "How is this all going to end?" The former is relatively easy to deliver in an non-ending game; the latter is the challenge.

In order to create a story without an endpoint, a live game could have a single story arc which just never comes to an end. But that would be an unsatisfying experience for a player, with nothing ever reaching a narrative resolution and answering that "How is this all going to end?" question. Instead, a live game should have multiple story arcs, so that a story arc can occasionally come to a satisfying conclusion, giving players period morsels of narrative fulfillment.

There can still be a single overarching narrative, which never comes to an end. In "Star Trek", the Enterprise never completes its five-year mission. In "Lost in Space", the Jupiter Two will never find its way

back to Earth. However, the small story arcs provide the closure that the overarching story cannot provide.

Further, with multiple subplots and storylines beginning and ending, it's crucial that they have different lengths and different endpoints. Don't end multiple storylines at the same time; don't ever answer all the outstanding questions. In a live game, you never want to give a player a reason to leave the game. After all, live games can be a grind, going on month-after-month, and the hope is that narrative is one way to keep players interested as their interest in the core gameplay starts to diminish. Having multiple storylines wrap up at the same time gives the player a feeling of "Ah, I've gotten answers to a lot of questions. I'm done. This is a good time to walk away."

Instead, make sure that you are starting one or more new storylines as current ones are nearing their endpoint. TV soap operas, meant to go on indefinitely, are a great example of this technique. You finally discover whether Ellen is going to leave her abusive boyfriend Ned, but you need to stick around to find out if Uncle Thorton is going to come out of his coma, and whether he is the father of Melinda's baby, and whether the hospital administration will find out that Dr. Babcock lied on his application papers.

This structure is referred to as an "umbrella structure", because the overarching narrative and all the sub narratives, when graphed across time, resemble a series of overlapping umbrellas:
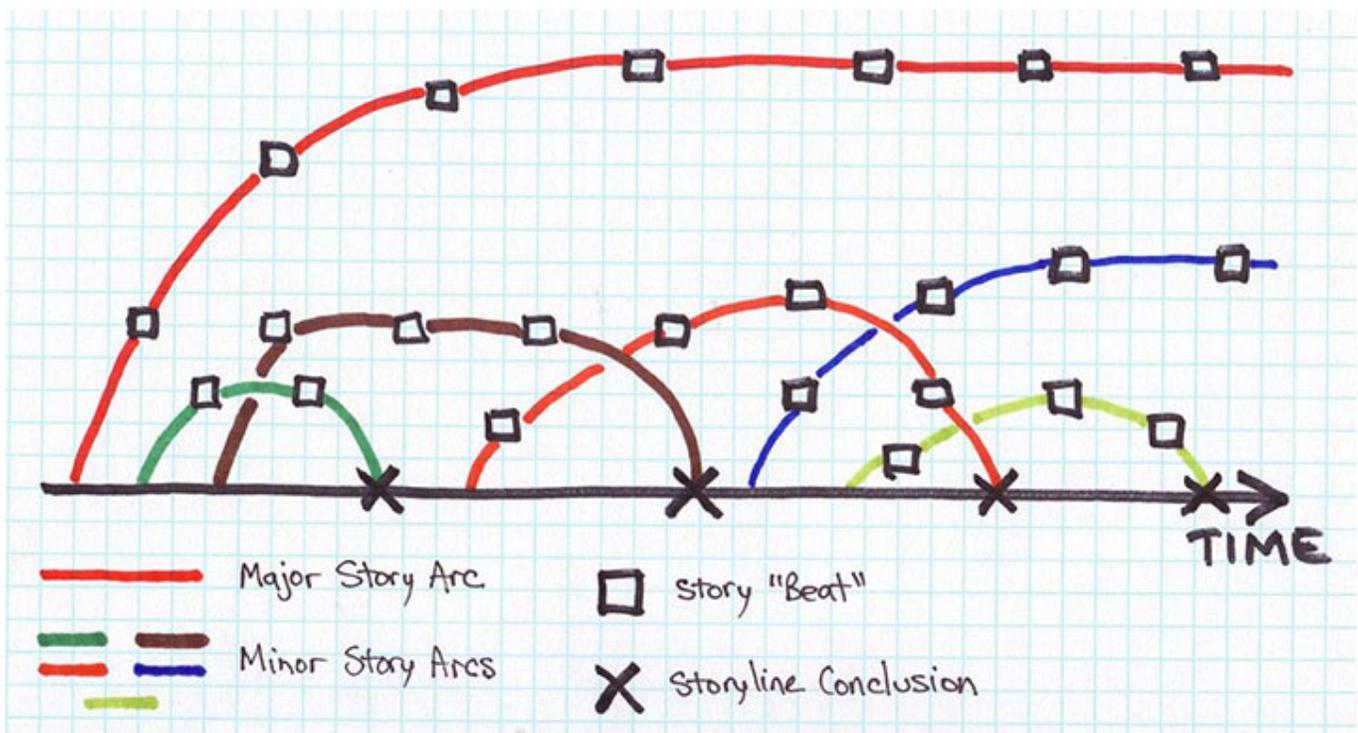
Another rule of good umbrella structure design is: don't start multiple story lines at the same time. This can overwhelm a player and give them a feeling of "falling further behind" narratively, getting farther from satisfying conclusions rather than closer to them.

Pattern: Personal Progression Within a Cyclical World

Another way to coordinate change and continuity is to create a world with a recurring cycle of events — cycles of growth and death, seasonal festivals and political elections as in many MMOs, transfer of power from one monarch to the next within a dynasty as in Crusader Kings or Reigns — but to give the player or the protagonist a trajectory of linear personal growth. This kind of design is sometimes referred to as a loop-and-grow structure in interactive fiction circles.

Playing a growing protagonist in a cyclical world means that the player sees the same or related events in

a new way on each pass. Perhaps she's leveled up, and ready for different challenges within the event. Perhaps she's taken on a new position or role, transitioning from novice to expert to teacher. The character who was once an eager child under the Christmas tree is now playing Santa Claus for a new generation; the character who was an eager activist in the 1960s is a jaded grumbler by the election of 2008. The cyclical story content can become a way of illustrating the development of an individual protagonist.

Alternatively, the player might control a sequence of protagonists in the same world. Perhaps the game is designed to offer a standard set of challenges for every character growing up and coming to power in the game universe, but with enough variation that subsequent generations can have significantly different experiences. In this case, the cyclical story content helps showcase the difference in the characters who pass through it — as most Jedi characters in the Star Wars universe experience some kind of training sequence, but there are significant variations in the details of that training, and the relationship of the characters to their teachers.

Recurring events bolster the sense of realism in a setting. They give long-term players the opportunity to revisit story arcs and settings that they particularly enjoy. They allow for interesting comparisons — for instance, Fallen London's yearly elections allow the player base to select a new Mayor of London each year, from a varying slate of candidates.

Where players are familiar with the course of a recurring event, they can anticipate the stakes, costs, and outcomes of acting in a particular way, so they experience more agency with less time spent on exposition. Elections are more important to us because we know about past elections — what they've cost, how they've been conducted, and how they've affected the world in consequence — but they still have the potential to surprise us with new factors or unexpected outcomes.

Finally, in a very large game, there may be scope to include several different cycles of different periodicity — say, a yearly election that might just happen in some years to coincide with a lunar werewolf rising — creating interesting overlaps and thematic juxtapositions.

Part 2

Principles of Narrative/Fiction Elements

Traditional narrative story arcs imply a definable endpoint. And while endpoints are not antithetical to never-ending narratives, they are often set up at staggering intersections, as explained in the Umbrella Structure section of this paper. Plots and stories begin, culminate, and end at various points throughout a live service game's cycle, and the narrative needs to be structured and designed in such a way to create compelling stories that do not necessarily arc toward a traditional ending. Even when certain stories end, new ones will emerge because the world and characters must persist.

To this end, never-ending or everlasting narratives contain three main principles, designed to invite consistent storytelling that naturally and organically can evolve and grow without losing its identity. These three principles are:

1. Dedicated Palette of Elements
2. Tonal Variation
3. Compelling Core Theme

Palette of Elements -- Bringing in a palette of elements that can be used for many stories is crucial for building a narrative that is designed for growth and evolution, rather than with a strict end point in mind. A palette of elements requires creating layered interactions, mechanics, emotions, and other inroads to the story and game. A never-ending narrative, in order to believably grow and remain exciting as it goes on, is sustained through a variety of these elements, rather than relying on one single one. Having a variety of interactions creates a range of ways of experiencing the story and the world, lessening the risk of feeling repetitive, myopic, or too restrictive.

Tonal Variation -- As with wanting to create a variety of elements for players to engage with over time, including tonal variation over the course of long-term play can freshen and enliven narrative arcs. Employing one singular tone throughout the story will exhaust its efficacy, lapse into predictability, and threaten player engagement and retention. While maintaining a coherent tonal experience is important, providing disruptions to this with different variations is crucial form maintaining interest, and importantly, curiosity. Curiosity is key to creating compelling experiences for players, and curiosity can be driven through a combination of unexpected tones (horror in a domestic setting, for example) that reinvigorates player interest and engagement. Just like providing different interactions allows for players to remain invested and interested in how they are experiencing the game and its story, tonal variation provides new hooks to inspire player exploration.

Compelling Core Theme -- In order for the variety of elements and tones introduced to feel coherent and to contribute to the story's identity, they need to revolve around a compelling core theme. Not only will this core theme provide the spine through which all the necessary variation of tones and elements can revolve, but the core theme will also drive conflicts and provoke new story thinking. A strong core theme will allow for characters to clash over and to provide varying and contrasting perspectives on that can generate quests, side stories, and even new characters. This core theme doesn't need to be present in every story and character living in the world, but it will flavor how the world is created, how characters behave, and what emotions are being generated for audiences. As the story, the world, and the characters change, this core theme will provoke new ways of thinking about these experiences, evaluating player-driven story and gameplay decisions, and will create the ground for growth and new narrative additions. Rather than being restrictive, the core theme is scaffold for conflict, for engagement, for exploration, and, importantly, for change. It is what will provide the coherent identity and aesthetic for a story that must necessarily grow and evolve as time goes on, as new stories need to be introduced, and characters need to change. Your core theme is the story's identity, and the center from which all change and growth will

revolve around.

Pattern: A Strong Lexicon and Semiotics

In a world with many stories, it won't always be possible to draw tight causal connections between all the elements. Some story lines will be written many years later than others, or by different people.

It is still possible to let different episodes and storylines — including user-created mods and purely environmental storytelling — contribute to the construction of narrative meaning, as long as we build an underlying economy that communicates thematic meaning.

Some examples of this in play include

- a player in Fallen London paying off a Bishop... with funds she got by performing a quest in service of Hell
- a player in a Harry Potter storyline choosing a House allegiance and a wand composition for his character, knowing that these choices form a shorthand for who the character is
- a player in the tabletop RPG Monsterhearts gaining a mechanical advantage over another character by searching their possessions, which she can later spend to win an argument with that character

When designing a symbolic vocabulary for use in a long-running world, it's useful to look for

Fungibility. The inventory items, currencies, and tools the player gains in one place can be used throughout the game, but with different purposes. In Monsterhearts, there's an abstract representation of "power over another character" that might be gained in many ways and spent in many others — which allows for stories to be paired more freely, rather than requiring that the player know a specific secret about another character.

Polysemy. Images and concepts that in their own right can mean more than one thing, and that take on new resonance in combination. The Major Arcana of the Tarot are a good place to look for examples of this interpretive richness in action.

Meaning grounded in specific events in the history of the setting. The Tower card of the Tarot expresses the idea of destruction following pride, based on the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel. Different decks recast this image in many different ways, sometimes exploring different aspects of the Babel story (such as the fact that it led to the creation of languages) or re-interpreting what the downfall means (such as the Wooden Tarot using a lightning-blasted forest tree, treating the Tower's fall as natural rather than culpable).

Productive pairings. Each pair of colors in Magic: The Gathering suggests an axis of similarity or difference: white vs black communicates a stark good/evil contrast; red paired with black or green suggests raw power. This turns distinct symbols into the beginnings of an expressive language, a powerful tool for both designers and players.

There are also some pitfalls to beware. It's often tempting to reach for elements that draw their thematic power from real-world cultures — for instance, a holy grail invokes Christian and Arthurian themes that will feel significant to some players without the developer having to do any additional work. However, these elements may not translate with the game into other cultures and languages — or they may constitute a thoughtless appropriation, when they are drawn from a culture different from the creators' own.

Pattern: An Open Universe

The universe/world will carry a significant portion of the weight of creating the aesthetic and themes that your players are going to be immersed in. Your universe is the literal staging to the events, quests, stories,

and conflicts players will engage with. And in order for your universe to support your narrative and gameplay in a persistent, on-going fashion, it needs to be both believably constructed and believably adaptive, which we are referring to as an open universe.

An open universe is one that believably accommodates the existing storylines and characters, but also naturally grows and extends itself for future change within those structures. This is a robust universe that contains consistent narrative hooks, as well as the potential for new hooks to be added. It contains space for existing storylines, conflicts, and characters, while not being overly restricted so as to prohibit new stories, new conflicts, and new characters to emerge. An open universe is highly additive and flexible, without breaking its own rules.

To this end, an open universe is composed of four essential pillars:

1. Regional Thematic Focus
2. Diegetic Conflict Engines
3. Additive and Flexible
4. Rebooting to Refresh

Regional Thematic Focus -- Realism is less important here than believability. So long as your world feels authentic and representative of its own rules, then players can believe in it. Whether or not it is a "realistic" depiction matters less than if players can accept its structures and rules and engage with it. At the core of a believable world is a familiarity — the ability to recognize basic components, even with different aesthetics, that are recognizable and correspond to our own understanding of the world. It is this believability that will help make your world feel like a living, organic world.

But a believable world that feels living isn't typically focused on just a singular aesthetic or theme. Our world is filled with clashing ideologies, clashing environments, and clashing social systems. Our worlds are juxtaposed against themselves, in ideology and in aesthetics. A believable world is more Frankenstein than not. This mosaic nature of worldbuilding lends itself naturally to growth and addition. Not every piece of the puzzle fits everywhere, but it connects at the proper edges, blending itself into story naturally. This puzzle-like inclination toward growth is essential for creating a universe that believably grows as the everlasting narrative continues on.

Creating a dedicated thematic focus for each region in this way inherently allows for adding new regions and new stories. When adding new regions/areas, creating them with a dedicated thematic focus drives new story ideation that prevents the story from rehashing the same plots, characters, and elements, while still connecting the overarching theme for the world and story. Worldbuilding for an open universe echoes the umbrella story: there is the overarching world/universe, but that contains individualized regions and spaces that can be in conflict with each other, so long as they all operate under the same rules as the overarching universe.

Diegetic Conflict Engines -- In addition to creating strongly identified themes for new regions/areas, an open universe should contain its own natural conflict engines. These conflict engines are not relegated simply to a single character or plot point, but are rather endemic to the world itself. These conflict engines can be the world's environment, politics, economics, but are crucially a part of the worldbuilding and how the universe operates. These conflict engines can be specific (oppressive military regimes, environmental hostility, etc.), but should be flexible and allow for the possibility for growth, extension, and addition. Conflict engines are evolving and dynamic structures that shape how characters — and players — will interact with the world and other characters therewithin.

Structuring a world as a series of diegetic conflict engines creates a myriad of elements that put pressure on the characters who live there. They provide the grounds for the basis of conflict (internal, external), and create the fabric of the universe at the same time as providing something for characters and players to fight against. Importantly, as characters fail or succeed against these diegetic conflicts, the world itself should react and be adaptive. A hostile military regime being stopped necessarily changes the world and

its rules and its conflicts. Conflict engines contain the ability to grow from their own ripple effects, since conflict inherently contains the possibility for change by its very nature of being a social disruption.

Additive and Flexible -- A significant way to achieve this ability for a universe to naturally extend itself is to write with intentional gaps. Intentional gaps should create a sense for your players that they are in a world that has rules, an identity, an aesthetic, and consistency, but that there are still unknown and, importantly, unknowable parts. Mountains in the distance imply a world beyond them, even if that world is never shown to the players. These intentional gaps are important not just for creating the space necessary to be additive and to expand your never-ending narrative beyond its current incarnation; intentional gaps also add to player investment, engagement, and curiosity. Leaving something unknown over the horizon — having your world feel like a snapshot in time and not a complete compendium without room for addition — is what creates the natural space for extension and change, but also invites curiosity and exploration from the player.

When players feel a natural sort of investigative curiosity, inspired by intentional gaps in worldbuilding, engagement and investment in both the narrative and world is encouraged. Worlds should be defined, but restricted because of that definition. There should be room for addition, change, and these intentional gaps create that space. This space left by intentional gaps in worldbuilding also drive player investment and connection, allowing them to form histories and stories based on their own emergent gameplay. These gaps, while providing the space necessary to believably change and grow your universe, also drives co-authorship with your player, which will be discussed further on.

Rebooting to Refresh -- Despite the rules outlined above, a special consideration for an open universe and the importance of a believably evolving world for never-ending stories is knowing when to reboot. Rebooting of a universe, crucially, is not a signal that that universe, story, or set of characters failed. A reboot can come from a variety of sources, including business concerns, story concerns, or the desire to create or engage with a new generation of audience.

Even the most open universe contains the potential to exhaust its own stories, conflict engines, and compelling character interactions. Rebooting can provide freshness, but also can reinvigorate a world with new stories to explore and different characters who will have different perspectives and paths to solving the situations set up under the same or new conflict engines.

Pattern: Evolving Characters

Characters are an important part of how audiences relate to stories. Their needs, desires, and motivations are what provides the necessary emotional inroads. For everlasting stories and narratives that do not have a fixed endpoint, it's important to create characters that can grow along with the story.

As mentioned in the Umbrella Structure section, characters, like plot, could simply just have a story that doesn't have an end point. But this would be ultimately unsatisfying and lead to a stunted characterization that doesn't grow, allow for nuance, and stays focused on one major plot. Keeping characters evolving, but still feeling organic to the world and universe is a key part of how to build narratives that are not meant to end. Your characters will carry the weight of your emotional tones, your connections to your audience, and creating them with a backbone that will allow them to evolve and adapt to an ever-growing world and story.

For this purpose, there are three main pillars to consider:

1. Clearly Defined Characters Designed for Growth
2. Intentional Gaps in Characterization
3. Employing the Constants And Change Rule for Characters

Clearly Defined Characters Designed For Growth -- Characters are more than just a combination of

different plot points. They are attitudes, they are beliefs, they are reactions and actions, they are their relationships. It is this specificity or mundanity in characterization that makes characters able to evolve and grow, rather than reducing them to a specific plot or plot points. Creating well-defined characters hones in on these specifics in order to create characters that can be transported into different scenarios and still feel believable.

Providing characters with a strong core and depth allows for new layers to build upon this depth to encourage growth. If your character is designed for growth, then they should be able to be transported to different plots, different scenarios, and react and behave in a consistent way. Well-defined characters can be transported between plots, settings, and situations and still feel believable and authentic. With this, the characters themselves provide the ground for natural conflicts to arise diegetically. Their unique perspectives and responses to the environment provide the ground for inter-character conflict, as well as conflict with changing structures, rules, and plots.

Intentional Gaps in Characterization -- As with an open universe, characters should be clearly defined, but not overly defined. Creating intentional gaps for characters means not writing every detail of their characterization down. It's important to define enough of the character for their identity to be consistent, but to still allow gaps for your audience. These intentional gaps gives the audience room to insert their own connections to the characters, imagine their own emotional states and stakes, and grow more emotionally connected to them. It creates an active engagement with the character. Allow your characters' histories to be partially defined to create an evolving mythology that encourage co-authorship.

Employing the Constants And Change Rule for Characters -- It's also important to understand that not every character can last forever, and that with never-ending narratives, character change serves a vital purpose in keeping stories fresh, in preventing characters from becoming parodies of themselves, and to allow the room to breathe and change as necessary. Similar to the various needs for rebooting a world, there are numerous reasons that can drive character change, ranging from business reasons to story reasons. Ultimately, though, character change is required for new stories, new connections to those stories, and for the world to evolve beyond what a specific character can offer it.

Creating a continuity of cast with overlapping changes is important for audiences to not lose all of their emotional connections at once. Successful television shows and movie franchises employ this idea of keeping some characters constant during periods of change, such as The Fast and Furious franchise, WWE, Saturday Night Live, and Doctor Who. Changing characters can communicate a new meaning, add a new layer to your never-ending story (familiarity itself of story and characters gives a scaffold to communicate meaning, so which characters change and which ones remain communicates rules and structures about your world). The importance comes from: what stays the same, what changes, and why?

Creating a never-ending narrative that is flexible, requires dynamic characters that are built for growth and can believably exist and behave appropriately in response to escalating and evolving plots and world events, but also requires recognizing when it is time to refresh stories and audience connections to those stories through refreshing the emotional connections by having a rotating cast of characters.

Part 3

Principles of Mechanic Elements

Strong narrative design depends on melding story with mechanics, allowing all parts of a game to communicate the narrative and theme.

When we're considering a mechanic that will be good for telling a lot of stories, useful questions include:

- Can this system be used by the creators to communicate information?

- How much exposition can be done via the system rather than via surrounding dialogue or narrative text?
- Can that exposition cover concepts such as motive as well as the facts of what happened?

This idea pairs well with the concept of a strong lexicon and semiotics. If you've developed certain concepts that are key to your theming, inventory items and resource costs can communicate the main ideas of a story arc with only light support from dialogue — or, if there is room for text, that text can be used to add subtlety.

For instance: if there's a trader in town who will sell stealth weapons used against his own kind, in exchange for a scrip that can only be spent to hire doctors for small children, we can embed an implicit story inside a single trade offer.

Some specialist mechanics go further: the language interpretation mechanic of Heaven's Vault allows for the player to gradually uncover meaning over many hours of play, and reinterpret past discoveries in light of new ones.

- Can the system be used by the player to explore or discover information? How much does this allow the player to form questions and then try to find out the answers?
- Games with exploratory mechanics include those with detective systems like Phoenix Wright, and research games where it's possible to look up particular information, such as Her Story or Analogue: A Hate Story. The Return of the Obra Dinn, meanwhile, leaves the player to draw conclusions based on anything at all, but provides confirmation about correct guesses.
- Can the system's verbs be used to communicate interesting choices, as well as just push the protagonist forward through challenges?
- Can the player express *why* or *how* they're acting (at least some of the time) as well as *what* they're doing?
- Can they be used to track *trends* in the player's choices, while still allowing a player to change their mind at key moments?

Even if the systemic verbs can't be changed, many systems can be made more expressive with the proper framing. For instance, a match-3 game might seem extremely unproductive from a narrative perspective, but one might attach particular thematic meaning to colors of gem or types of power-up. Gameplay elements that were interchangeable now become more or less valuable because of the narrative framing that surrounds them.

When we're in need of interesting framing, it's particularly effective to ask "how might an NPC interpret this action?" as a way to come up with narrative framings for existing mechanics. Suppose the player has a fireball spell that can be used on any wooden object in the game. This spell, most of the time, might be useful for combat or for environmental destruction; but in a story where characters have put up a maypole as an important ritual object, setting *that* item on fire might convey something specific and significant.

Meta-game framing can also work as well: for instance, Fallen London asks players to nominate particular "qualities" they possess — which might be inventory items, or might be a record of having finished a particular storyline — as part of their character profile. This player choice does nothing to change the mechanical outcome of the game, but is a reflective choice that invites the player to consider what matters to them most about their play experience.

- Does the system's telemetry suggest trends in player interest?

While the above questions could apply to mechanic development in any narrative-rich game, this is one that assumes on-going development and a prolonged feedback loop between the creators and the players. What do players most care about in the story? Where would they like to see more development of lore? What mysteries most interest them? What characters matter to them the most?

- Can stories occurring at the same time affect each other fictionally and mechanically? Is it possible for one story to shift the environmental conditions in which another functions?

This is a prerequisite for getting the most out of some of the techniques outlined elsewhere in this article — in particular, for making cyclical narratives interfere productively with one another. For example, we might imagine a game that contains both a heist quest and a holiday seasonal event. During the seasonal holiday, it becomes socially acceptable to wear masks and costumes — and that means performing the heist is easier and funnier while the seasonal event is running.

Finally, along with building narratively effective mechanics, we may want to build our game using a procedural narrative system that allows elements of stories to be reused and combined in new ways. Features of such a system might include:

- Templated story beats that can be reused with different characters. (For instance, we might have a reusable story beat that can attach to different characters, telling the story of a love triangle between the three of them — but the meaning of that story beat, its outcome, and its resolution might be quite different depending on which characters fill the relevant roles.)
- "Storylets" that have prerequisites and output effects, allowing them to be selected at appropriate moments
- Generative grammars (such as those implemented in Tracery or Expressionist) that can describe a variety of situations

Part 4

Principles of Co-Authorship and Community Engagement

We have agreed that we want the narrative to be everlasting. But everlasting for whom? The fact that you are considering an everlasting narrative means that you intend to form a long-term relationship with your audience. And like any healthy relationship, you must listen and endeavor to understand your partner's needs. "Everlasting" can mean very different, even conflicting, things to different potential audiences.

On one side, picture a simulation or live role-playing system where the player has total autonomy in plotting their own adventure with total persistence and limitless opportunities. For many, this true second life is the ultimate neverending narrative, in which the player is a true protagonist of her own story.

At the other end of the spectrum, imagine having a personal Scheherazade on call who can narrate the next chapter of your favorite story without end. A serialized page turner that never runs out of pages.

There is no right approach, and likely your game narrative aspires to be somewhere in the middle of this spectrum. Wherever your game falls, making the most of everlasting aspirations will require collaboration with your players, so understanding what you mean by "everlasting" is essential for the foundation of that relationship.

Narrative as a Dialogue with Players

Maintaining engagement with an open-ended narrative can greatly benefit from seeing that narrative as a dialogue between the developers and the community. As with any game-as-service, the usual best practices apply of listening to what players say and do through metrics and community channels. Democratizing the storytelling process by giving the community agency in shaping the narrative world states can be a powerful way to strengthen that dialogue.

An opportunity exists to expand the player's voice in the everlasting narrative is by building systems that

measure a user's behavior against the narrative context and give feedback that validates that behavior as part of a personal story. By de-emphasizing the need of a "critical path" and decoupling story from a progression to victory, an everlasting narrative can emphasize the journey over the destination with reactive systems. Let the player chose their own key moments to memorialize - their own personal canon.

The "legacy" trend in board games and rogue-likes offer great examples of how to add stakes and consequence to an open-ended narrative. For example, the "flaws" system in *The Outer Worlds* turns failures into a character-defining moment that shapes experiences to come in a subtle and sustainable way.

A common pitfall when empowering players to shape their own version of a story is to emphasize choice and external outcomes. This is especially dangerous in the context of an en everlasting narrative, where tracking branching baths can risk exponential complexity as well as splintering your players into subjective experiences that make it hard to feel a part of a shared community. As an alternate framework for your everlasting narrative, consider emphasizing a player's ability to control judgments and affiliation, rather than external outcome. Take inspiration from long-running soap operas and anime, from politics, sports, or even from tabloid journalism and conspiracy theories -- all examples of character-rich melodramas where persons of interest have long, multi-storied careers. Emphasizing identity by association can empower individual players to own their personal story while maintaining a cohesive narrative world for the community at large to discuss and engage with outside of the game.

Narratives Without Borders

While much of the fervor around transmedia storytelling has dampened in recent years, the rise of service games and narratives without end is creating new innovation around how narratives can transcend the boundaries of "game content." Looking outside of the game can make financial sense as prose, podcasts, comics and other formats can be faster and cheaper to produce than in-game narrative, and their existence in the periphery gives them a veneer of ephemerality that "canon" came content might not.

Trends in content consumption, such as the rise of longform video and audio, have led to audiences more receptive to an improvised, or stream-of-consciousness narrative, while the rise of true-crime mysteries,conspiracy thinking, and puzzle box narratives have led to fandoms built around piecing together evidence -- a sort of forensic storytelling, where the line between author and audience becomes especially blurry as central mysteries invite audiences to be participants in the process. In recent years we've seen an explosion of game players as personalities with an audience bigger than the game being played. TV shows from Lost to The Walking Dead and Game of Thrones were at the forefront of a culture of theorizing and hot takes where fans spend more time consuming meta-narratives than the products themselves. Surely there is an opportunity for games with an emphasis on everlasting storytelling to feed more such meta-engagement with the narrative. Games like Her Story, Gone Home and Return of the Obra Dinn turn forensic examination into tight stories. What would a game look like that applied a similar approach to an open ended mystery?

As anyone familiar with [Hugo winner AO3](#) can attest, the stories of our favorite game worlds do not end when the credits roll. Gameplay and level mods have a long and respected relationship to official game releases, but companies are only just beginning to recognize the ways in which liberating narrative elements for the community to play with can enrich those stories. Overwatch's design has players dropping in and out of disparate characters for intense team battles of fluid associations with little story logic to be found in a session, but because the characters were crafted for fandom with designs, backstories and relationships that spill beyond the game, it allows the community to tell stories with these characters that the core game never will, while at the same time enriching battles with narrative subtext.