Intermediate Game Design

Words as Game Design

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Monday & Wednesday 12:30 PM-3:15 PM

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Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December,
And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor.
Eagerly I wished the morrow; —vainly I had sought to borrow
From my books surcease of sorrow—sorrow for the lost Lenore—
For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels named Lenore—
Nameless here for evermore.
And the silken sad uncertain rustling of each purple curtain
Thrilled me — filled me with fantastic terrors never felt before;
So that now, to still the beating of my heart, I stood repeating
‘Tis some visitor entreatning entrance at my chamber door—
Some late visitor entreatning entrance at my chamber door; —
This it is, and nothing more,’
Rock vs Stone
Poetics: not just meaning or intent, but effect of form, sound, combos

What’s “not poetics?”

In writing, some say it’s “hermeneutics”—interpreting meaning and intent in a text.

In games, perhaps “not poetics” includes strategy, logic, analysis of better/worse choices? Whatever’s not about feel/effect!
Poetics of Language, Light, and Space
...in the realm of art all absolute statements are suspect!
The Principles of “Good Writing” (according to Delaney)

1. Use simple words with clear meanings whenever possible.
2. “There are no synonyms,” so use the precise word you mean.
   Don’t amble, saunter, or stalk when you mean walk, and vice versa.
3. Avoid the passive voice whenever reasonable.
   “Angela lifted the boulder” not “The boulder was lifted by Angela”
4. Omit unnecessary modifiers. For instance: no more than one modifier on a noun unless you have good reason.
5. For strong sentences, put subject directly against verb.
   “Suddenly, she stood.” not “She suddenly stood.”
6. Omit unnecessary “received language.” Common turns of phrase like
   “It goes without saying that...” or “As you may know...”
7. Avoid stock expressions (AKA clichés) such as “the raging sea” or “a flash of lightning”
8. Avoid be/being/are/were as standalone verbs especially if you mean “acting” or “becoming”
   “He was being very standoffish...” or “There were eight pillars standing...” vs.
   “He was acting standoffish” or “He was standoffish” and “Eight pillars stood”
9. Don’t weigh down the end of sentences with redundant information (often in prepositions)
   “I turned from my keyboard to stack my papers on the desk” vs
   “I turned from my keyboard to neatly stack the papers” or “…to stack my papers on the shelf”
10. Use a variety of sentence forms to avoid monotony. (There are a only a couple variations in this list...)
Exercise 1: Characterization

A. She was sixteen years old, and already five-foot eleven.

   B1. She was a shy girl, and tended to walk around with her shoulders hunched.

   B2. Lively, self-assured, she was cuttingly witty, though always popular; active physically, though always gentle.

   C. She was the middle child of seven, with siblings taller than herself on either side. It was a close and boisterous family, so that when Sam first came to Halifax High her stubby classmates amused her, and she was big-hearted enough to try to amuse them back. That and her basketball prowess made her very popular.

Delaney: a “hero” is always an anomaly, to be believable we must understand how (via characterization)

   Three types of actions to flesh a character out:

   HABITUAL (everyday, automatic, rote)
   PURPOSEFUL (important, needful, goals)
   GRATUITOUS (unnecessary, quirky, whimsical)

   In many readers’ expectations A & B1 are “psychologically consistent”

   But A & B2 are not “as expected!”

   The disjuncture between expectations of A/B2 create “answer a question, build a world (a character)” opportunities for C.

   What reactions show the inside (psychology, personality, mental habit) via the outside? (food, sleep, money, society… weather, time of day, strangers…)
Exercise 1: Characterization (go, create a character!)

1. Have something you can write on while standing and/or walking. Notepad, phone or tablet (if you’re fast)

2. Go find a person you don’t know (at: least don’t know well) somewhere you can observe them for a while. You can do this while walking, if you can write and walk. You can go downstairs, outside, elevators, nearby shops, etc. (It’s mid-40s outside.)

3. Watch this person and memorize as many details and impressions as you can about them. Do not write anything down during this period, just absorb everything you can. Observable details like clothes, possessions but also them as a person: behavior, face, thoughts. Stop when your mind’s full: you feel as if you can’t remember any more, you’re leaking!

4. Immediately write your impressions down. CHARACTERIZATION as discussed. Write about who you think this person is and what you can tell about them, what makes them tick. It’s completely fine to make things up completely at this point. You can guess, invent. I’d suggest keeping it relatively down to earth (no need to guess that a man waiting for the elevator is a secret agent…)

5. If you’re still near or following them… After you’re done writing, check your impressions and decide whether any of them need revising or expanding. Did you miss anything? Get anything wrong, on second glance?

6. Come back here. 20 minutes!
Exercise 1: Characterization (go, create a character!)

1. Have something you can write on while standing and/or walking.
2. Go find a person you don’t know
3. Watch this person and memorize as many details and impressions as you can about them.
4. Immediately write your impressions down. CHARACTERIZATION as discussed. Write about who you think this person is and what you can tell about them, what makes them tick.
5. If you’re still near or following them...
   After you’re done writing, check your impressions and decide whether any of them need revising.
6. Come back here. 20 minutes!
7. Summarize what’s interesting about this person, as if introducing them in a story. You may invent context details if it helps (“Halifax High”)

   A. She was sixteen years old, and already five-foot eleven.

   B2. Lively, self-assured, she was cuttlingly witty, though always popular; active physically, though always gentle.

   C. She was the middle child of seven, with siblings taller than herself on either side. It was a close and boisterous family, so that when Sam first came to Halifax High her stubby classmates amused her, and she was big-hearted enough to try to amuse them back. That and her basketball prowess made her very popular.
Exercise 1: Characterization (here’s mine)

**NOTES:**

Her eyes smile along with her mouth
She’s interested in her companion, expressing warmth
When she turns away her expression grows colder, she stops smiling as she absorbs information, thinking with a more neutral expression. She’s haughty as she checks her makeup, considers her messages
Grasping her umbrella between her legs, creating an appearance of primness
Gestures with one hand as she speaks. Holding onto a magazine with the other
She doesn’t expect much in terms of being entertained from those she’s with, she can entertain herself.
Sitting with her back self-consciously straight, the pom of her hat almost touching the wall behind her.
Talks to herself, her internal monologue is just as weighty and serious.
Gregarious with strangers she feels affinity with
Carrying a bag — it’s larger than she needs but not entirely full, she has the space in case she needs it. It’s silver, brighter than the rest of her winter-neutral ensemble topped by a drab but proud pom. Practical but saying she knows who she is. She has this bag because she thinks she might need it today, but on other days she’d pick it as an accessory, a way of livening up an outfit. Winter is not her favorite season, it means the practical outside hides her choices.

Angela owned six bags. Some had held up for years, others were recent purchases, made to complement an outfit for a special occasion—but practical too, no sense in buying an accessory to use only once, she figured? That was something her boss might do. Miss Salt: the reason she had to haul this huge bag, a shimmering tote whose silver-threaded sheen popped gaudily against her winter coat. Angela’s main function during today’s show, as far as Miss Salt was concerned, was that of a mobile storage bin.
Delaney on Information

(A) Jenny took a cold drink from the steel dipper chained to the stone wall of the corner well, where, amidst the market’s morning bustle, the women had finished setting up their counters and laying out their tools, implements, and produce minutes after the sun had risen; she had left the sandal stall to amble over here.

(B) Jenny took a cold drink from the steel dipper chained to the stone wall. With the market’s morning bustle, the women had finished setting up their counters and laying out their tools, implements, and produce. Only minutes after the sun had risen, Jenny had left the sandal stall and ambled over to the corner well.

(C) Minutes after the sun had risen above the wall, amidst the market’s morning bustle, the women finished setting up their counters and laying out their tools, implements, and produce. Jenny left the sandal stall to amble over to the corner well, where, from the steel dipper chained to the stone wall, she took a cold drink.  

**Stronger (more expected?) narrative flow: chronological sequence**

(D) Minutes after the sun cleared the market wall, footprints roughened the dust. Tent posts swung up; canvas slid down. Along the counters women laid out trowels and tomato rakes, pumpkins and pecan pickers. Jenny ambled from under the sandal stall awning. At the corner well she picked up a steel dipper chained to the mossy stones for a cold drink. As it chilled her teeth and throat, water dripped on her toes.  

**Chronological + broken up; more varied subjects, all active**
He walked into the room and saw Karola sitting there. She was beautiful. He thought of flowers. He thought of butterflies. He thought of water running in the forest.  

**Definite tone but very simple, neutral. Low on information.**

He stepped into the room—Jesus, it was so white—but Karola was sitting there. If you’d asked him, later, what he’d been thinking right then, he would have answered, “I don’t know what to tell you. I thought she was beautiful. I did, really. It’s stupid, yeah. But I thought about flowers. You think about flowers, you think about butterflies. That’s just what’s going to happen with some guys. And waterfalls in the forests, that kind of thing—I thought about them, too.” But then—right then—standing just inside the door, a dozen memories flickering in and out of his consciousness, he thought only: “She’s beautiful.”

He walked into the little room with the white plaster ceiling and the wooden two-by-fours making rough lintels above its three windows. Karola sat at a small table, her forearm in the sunlight. When he looked at her ear, he remembered the pink and white flowers in his aunt’s kitchen garden back in New Zealand. By her tanned cheek, some of her white-blond hair lifted and shook in the breeze, and he remembered the flaxen butterflies flicking in and out of the sunlight and shadow of the big Catalpa outside in the green and gray Bordeaux landscape they’d been staying in three summer months now. Just standing there, just looking at her, he felt the same surge of pleasure he’d felt, a year before, when he’d come around the rocks in the twelve acres of forest his aunt had purchased for the farm in that last, sweltering New Zealand winter, and he’d seen the falling water for the first time, how high it was, how it filled his head with the sound of itself, how cool it looked in the winter heat. Karola did that to him.

**Tone plus very different information—strikingly different in voice, and thus mood. Is this a different character? Or a different narrator?**
Tone vs. Voice vs. Mood

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He stepped into the room—a small room of wood and whitewashed walls, like many rooms of his experience—and saw Karola, still seated. He found her beautiful in several ways at once. She had beauty many men of his age would note, in her white-blond hair and the sun-dappled skin of her forearms. For him, she had beauty that jostled memories of beautiful times past, moments he’d spent in nature, on his family’s farm, away from his urbane worries.

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Exercise 2: Tone and Mood

- Get some paper out. The tools you use affect what you write.
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Find an ordinary object. But one that you find interesting somehow, something that’s not purely generic. (We have lots of very generic “small plastic cubes” around here...) You have five minutes to find something and bring it back here!

Write a paragraph about this object. You could potentially describe...
  - what it looks like
  - what it does
  - where you found it—a particular object and its setting, its immediate relations
  - where it came from before that, how it was made, the journeys it’s been on
  - what one needs to know to understand this object (its essence?)
  - no characters, plot, other elements coming into play—just describe the object
Writing

- **Get some paper out.** The tools you use affect what you write.
- **Find an ordinary object.** But one that you find interesting somehow.
- **Write a paragraph about this object.**
- **Now: emotions.** Suggest one? Maybe one that might be relevant to your setting: what kind of feelings are you trying to evoke?
- **If an emotion is a broad feeling,** let’s find a subtler, nuanced version.
  - Fear... uncertainty, anxiety, imposter syndrome, performance pressure
  - Anger... annoyance, bitterness, payback, frustration
  - Happiness... pride, relief, contentment, relaxation, silliness
- **Pick one, silently.**
- **Rewrite your paragraph** with the same information...
  ...but now shape the language to evoke that emotion. Through tone, voice (who’s thinking/giving this description? A narrator? A character in the story?)
Get some paper out. The tools you use affect what you write.

Find an ordinary object. But one that you find interesting somehow.

Write a paragraph about this object.

Now, emotions. Pick one, silently.

Rewrite your paragraph with the same information, but shaping the language to evoke that emotion. Keep the emotion secret!

Pass your paragraph to one of your partners (around in a circle)

Can they guess which emotion is intended?

Make editing comments on the paragraph you received. How could it be better? How does it flow, what are the strong words—or are there other words that might work better?

Make at least one suggestion to cut a phrase, sentence... cutting is the hardest, necessary part of revision—and so it’s often the best favor to do for each other!

I like to say that I write poems for a stranger who will be born in some distant country hundreds of years from now. This is a useful notion, especially during revision. It reminds me, forcefully, that everything necessary must be on the page. I must make a complete poem—a river-swimming poem, a mountain-climbing poem. Not my poem, if it’s well done, but a deeply breathing, bounding, self-sufficient poem. Like a traveler in an uncertain land, it needs to carry with it all that it must have to sustain its own life—and not a lot of extra weight, either.
Exercise 3: Other Points of View

• Find an image on Google... that represents something with detail (not an abstract image or a simple cartoon, should be a photo or detailed illustration/painting) but doesn’t focus on people/characters
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- **Find an image on Google**... that represents something with detail (not an abstract image or a simple cartoon, should be a photo or detailed illustration/painting) but doesn’t focus on people/characters

- **Choose an object in the image you found.** Lighthouse, wave, fence, grass, path, roof...
Exercise 3: Other Points of View

- **Find an image on Google...** that represents a place with detail (not an abstract image or a simple cartoon, should be a photo or detailed illustration/painting) but doesn’t focus on people/characters
- **Choose an object in the image you found.** Lighthouse, wave, fence, grass, path, roof...
- **Write a description of this place...** (including parts you imagine, but don’t see)
- **...from the point of view of that object.**
  What does that object notice, do, what is its place in things?