

Making a Better Quest

Captivating quests are at the heart of many classic roleplaying games. Through many twists and turns of storytelling and gameplay, quests are one of the core elements of the genre and it is up to the writers and designers to use these to tell the story in a way that keeps the player glued to the screen.

Yet often so often the elements of what makes a good quest are overlooked, which is what this document aims to address. By considering the concepts and principles that are vital to making an exciting plot, and analyzing successful (and unsuccessful!) quests in commercial games, it is possible to provide some critical analysis in something that is by its nature a creative venture. But by keeping some basic tenets in mind, shortcomings can more easily be identified during the formative stages of new quest and plot ideas.

Finding a Basic Purpose

Perhaps the most crucial aspect to consider in the creation of any quest is its purpose. Without a purpose, a quest is little more than a diversion, something disparate from the game experience as a whole. At a basic level, the purpose of a quest could be very simple, and will most likely fall into one of three categories.

These categories need little explanation, but on their own, they will likely provide little lasting interest for a player. That is not to say that they are “bad” purposes on their own, as many successful games rely on these purposes for their quests, but they are not the true force behind them.

Experience Gameplay Mechanics

In an RPG, this typically means combat. Combat is an inherent part of virtually all RPGs, and often a very enjoyable one for many players. *Diablo*, albeit considered an action game with RPG elements, pays great attention to its combat mechanic and the game would suffer greatly were it not so well implemented. Combat is a crucial element of any RPG, and should not be neglected, because players love to be given the opportunity to try out their latest weapon, magical item or spell.

Yet gameplay mechanics need not be limited to combat. Take *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* and its swoop racing. Swoop racing had to be done as part of the core plot in the game, and many players enjoyed the opportunity for a small racing-type game within their RPG experience. Yet the game suffered in the eyes of many players through another small gameplay mechanic, through a card game named Pazaak. Other examples include the lockpicking mini-game in *Oblivion* or the pipe mini-game in *BioShock*, both of which were met with mixed reactions from players.

The challenge is to ensure that any gameplay mechanic is fun for the player. Unless the gameplay mechanic is a core element of the game itself, then perhaps it should only be one option for the resolution of the quest. While combat is a vital and exciting part of any game in the RPG genre, but like any gameplay mechanic, it should not be forced on the player continually without reason.

Puzzle Solving

Puzzles are renowned for dividing players into camps of love and hate, yet they remain a mainstay of the genre. Many players like to be able to exercise their braincells on their own, and puzzles serve an excellent means to meeting this desire. Yet there are a few ways to please people in both camps.

For those that love puzzles, don't present them with something they've seen before. *BioWare* loves to include the classic "Towers of Hanoi" puzzle in their games. While the lack of originality in puzzle design is a failing, they have at least managed to present it in different forms and guises in order to add some interest for the player.

Allow the player to solve the puzzle on their own without giving them too many hints initially, but allow them to search or obtain more hints should they struggle with grasping the essence of the puzzle or its solution.

In addition, be mindful of usability. Light or color puzzles may prove to be extremely difficult for any gamer suffering from a form of color blindness, and sound related puzzles may be too taxing for those players who lack a musical ear or are hearing impaired.

But remembering that not all players like puzzles, the quest writer must cater for both camps. For those that will hate any puzzles you throw at them, unless there is a critical reason to force them to solve it, it may be good to offer them an option to circumvent the challenge some other way. However, consider that the player who does complete the puzzle successfully ought to have some advantage over the player that simply ignores it, which means either applying a penalty for skipping the puzzle, or providing a reward for finding its solution.

Reward the Player

In any quest, the player should be rewarded for their efforts. This should go without saying. If a player goes out of their way to help someone or perform some task within the game world, it should not be a thankless job. Even so, in some cases they may get little more than experience or the treasure gained from enemies during a fight, or perhaps the thanks and appreciation of an NPC. However, if the player does not benefit from putting effort into the game, they may become frustrated, or worse question whether they should even continue to play at all. Rewards provide many players with a significant motivation to keep going, if only to see the best possible items they can obtain or how powerful their character can become.

Rewards should be commensurate to the effort put in by the player, and should not be disproportionate in power compared to the power of the PC themselves. Yet the discussion of the nature of the reward itself is often very dependent on the game design, not necessarily the quest itself, and as such will not be discussed further.

Finding a More Meaningful Purpose

The three categories defined previously provide basic reasons for creating a quest. Yet they don't in themselves provide compelling reasons, as any quest can (and should) provide one or more of these aspects. The true purpose of a quest should be considered in light of its purpose **within the game**.

In order to make a successful and memorable quest, it should have some definable purpose within the experience of playing the game. Simply put, there must be a reason in terms of the overall focus of the game itself. Without this, the player may feel that the quest is merely a means to arbitrarily lengthen gameplay, without actually contributing anything to the overall game.

An example of this is the “mining” quests in *Mass Effect*, where the player must locate a certain number of mineral or gas deposits throughout the universe. There was no real challenge associated with this quest, as it merely involved exploring the universe and its planets. The player received a reward in the form of money and experience for completing the quest, yet there was no reference to the quest aside from a simple entry in the player's log. It may have served the purpose of getting the player to explore the universe, and thus stumble across many of the game's more meaningful side quests, but as a quest in itself it provided little to the player's enjoyment of the game.

Then it should be determined what purposes will result in a quest that feels an integral part of a game. Five crucial reasons providing purpose are discussed here.

Introduce/Develop Setting

One of the key elements in a game is to establish the player's position within the fiction environment in which they are placed. The player needs to have a basic understanding of the game world and their position within it.

In some cases, this may be done to a basic degree. For example, the writer might expect their players to have a basic knowledge of the *Star Wars* universe if they are playing an RPG in this setting, and likewise if the game is setting in the *Forgotten Realms of the Dungeons and Dragons* (D&D) franchise. However, this **cannot** be relied upon. You cannot be certain your audience will have knowledge of the setting, and therefore you must introduce the relevant information as soon as possible. Provide your player with the freedom to skip some of the background information in case they already know it (or perhaps are playing the game for a second time), but make sure that critical information is given to the player as early as possible.

If the player is supposed to be the reincarnation of an ancient hero, then it should be explained what this means for the world. If two particular factions in the game world do not get along and this is the reason for the player's predicament, then tell them why. The challenge is to not inundate the player with information, yet not make them feel completely bewildered by the game world. In a few rare situations, you might actually be trying to make the player feel completely confused as to their surroundings, but this is a potentially dangerous path to tread, particularly if the player or their character is penalized due to their lack of knowledge.

While the development of the setting is very important early in the game, its value can diminish as the game progresses because the player knows increasingly more about the setting they are in. However, the setting of the character's immediate surroundings are always important. By moving the character between different locations, each with its own dangers, intrigue and politics, individual locations can be developed as interesting locales within the game world as a whole. In turn, these might relate to the large scale aspects and occurrences in the setting.

The development of a setting can be done on many different levels. On a basic level, introducing new visual aesthetics is an excellent way to provide the player with an immediate grasp of the environment. If the player wanders into a sandy desert, they will expect the inhabitants to be tough and very mindful of the value of water. A dark and foreboding forest might pose few environmental threats to the player, but strange forest beasts or folk could lurk behind any tree. Yet environments alone do not provide development of the setting without an associated civilization or culture.

Take the example of *World of Warcraft*. The player starts off in a “training zone”, a confined area where they are given a very short history of the race of their character. This bears little importance on the character at the time. The main focus of the setting thereafter is on developing a basic knowledge of their current surroundings. Soon, the player levels up and leaves this area, entering a new environment, which is different in terms of both visual appeal and story. While playing the game, the player travels through a multitude of different environments, and given a mix of stories that pertain to their current location and the world as a whole. Plots becoming increasingly larger in scope as the player rises in power, often causing them to backtrack through previously explored areas, yet the setting as a whole has evolved, so the quests still add to the gaming experience as a whole.

Introduce/Develop Story

While the setting is an integral part of an RPG, it must not be overshadowed by the plot of the game. Some of the most fondly remembered RPGs have had wonderful storytelling that keeps players glued to their screens for hours on end. While the story-based RPG is just one type of RPG, storytelling is an integral part of any game in the genre as a whole, and its importance can never be understated. Each quest along the way should tell the character a little more about their predicament or the dangers that lie ahead.

The *Grand Theft Auto* series, while primarily offering a sandbox environment, has featured a solid storyline since *Grand Theft Auto 3*, giving the player an added motivation to see the game through to its conclusion in addition to its interesting gameplay. The *Baldur's Gate* series is remembered lovingly by many due to its tale taking the player starting off as the humble foster child of the sage Gorion, through to becoming an incredibly powerful character given the opportunity of being a deity.

When developing the story, a twist in the plot can be introduced masterfully through the use of a revelation that gives new meaning to previous events. *BioShock* features a wonderful example of the use of this technique, where the player is told that they have been programmed to obey the words of their supposed friend Atlas without question whenever he utters the words “will you kindly.” The presentation of this is done in a montage of the many situations where Atlas has done this, hammering home the point to the player and in one of the most memorable points of the game.

Writing a story in an RPG is a difficult task, for by modern standards, RPGs feature stories that have as much depth (if not more) as many novels, yet they must still have the flexibility to cope with a player's roleplaying decisions within the game. Let the story unfold a steady pace, giving the player enough detail to keep them interested, but not so much as to overwhelm them with details and dialogue.

Introduce/Develop a Character

If the story is one of the critical parts of an RPG, then so must be characters, as they are the means by which that story is told. Characters speak to the player, providing information on the game world, the antagonist, the troubles in the region, some problem they need solving, and countless other things. Lifeless or two-dimensional characters are easily identified by players and will often be dismissed as boring or perhaps even unimportant. Making a world of interesting NPCs will make an RPG experience seem more realistic and engage the player on a far greater level.

NPCs should have their own quirks and nuances, but they should not reveal them all to the player at once. It may take time for an NPC to reveal information to the player, and in some cases they might not trust them enough to tell them anything at all! Some quests may exist to introduce characters that might play a small part in the story's main plot, and some might merely be there to provide added depth to the NPC party members.

Everything that applies to the development of the setting and the plot also applies to the development of characters. In many ways the three are inextricably linked, especially with characters that are key to the plot. In *Baldur's Gate: Shadows of Amn*, the player hunts the antagonist Jon Irenicus only to be stopped by elves referring to him as “The Exile”. While the player's knowledge of their enemy has been as someone seeking to obtain the PC's inherent power as the child of a deity, the elves finally tell the player that Irenicus was once an elf stripped of his immortality because of crimes he committed against his race.

Finally, remember that not all characters need to be developed. The average person in the game world might have little to do or say that might concern the PC besides perhaps sharing a few rumors. In this case, it's not necessary to give them nuance. However, make sure that there are not too many of these generic NPCs, otherwise it not only decreases the perceived reality of the game world, but it can also make it hard for the player to find the NPCs in the game that are important.

Note: Character development is covered further in the section entitled “NPC Motivation”.

A Word on Twists

Twists are often a great means to provide extra depth and intrigue to the story, but be careful that they are not overused. Not every quest should contain a twist, else they become commonplace and the player will begin to expect them. Even worse the player may begin to resent the additional complication that they know must be coming.

The important point in introducing any twist in the plot, setting or a character is to ensure that it is consistent with previous information. Do not deliberately mislead the player by giving them false information, as this will only annoy the player. The best twist is one that makes perfect sense as it is presented to the player. If the game is played a second time, the player should be able to identify a things that support the twist if they already know of it. A good twist should be much like an author writing a mystery novel; ultimately, it is the characters in the book who solve the crime, but the clever reader should be given enough clues such that they could have worked out the guilty party before it is revealed to them directly.

Create Atmosphere

Atmosphere is a something that cannot be underestimated in any form of media, and games are no exception to this. Whether it is nerve-wracking tension, suspenseful horror, or high-speed action, atmosphere plays a huge part in a player's enjoyment.

Building tension is an excellent form of atmosphere, through sound and music (or lack thereof), lighting, and the environment itself. *Thief: Deadly Shadows* featured a level called "The Shalebridge Cradle" which the player is told was a orphanage that became a lunatic asylum after it burnt down. Everything about the location is foreboding, and upon entering, the lighting is dark and the sounds so soft as to be inaudible. Eerie musical chords play infrequently and the player becomes so caught up in the fact that the setting is so alien and deserted, that when a loud noise breaks the silence, it comes as a great shock and fright. This level of atmosphere truly grips the player and makes them feel involved within the game.

Interactions can be used to create atmosphere too. In *Oblivion*, while acting for the mage's Guild, the player discovers a mysterious item, a Black Soul Gem, in the quarters of a senior mage. Upon reporting this to another guild member, the player is told only "This is worse than I'd expected" and sent on their way. This piques the player's curiosity, which only satiated at a much later point while working for the Guild, and serves as a great way to make the situation seem very ominous.

While atmosphere is a great means to improve immersion, make sure that they player does not get bogged down in atmosphere by pushing it too far in one direction. If game is filled with tension and gloom, then a glib remark from an NPC party member may destroy the mood entirely, whereas in other circumstances it might come across as an attempt by the NPC to calm their own anxiety. But by the same token, the mood should not jump about too quickly, else the game will feel disjointed. Provide a steady mixture of different types of atmosphere throughout the game and players will find it very difficult to become bored.

Dilemma

In essence, a dilemma is something that causes the player to make a choice. While a dilemma may sound like it poses a difficult choice for the player, this need not be the case. A dilemma in the sense of providing purpose for a quest could be as simple as deciding whether or not to fight a dangerous adversary or whether to flee.

More serious dilemmas can be very potent tools in making a good quest. Take the example of the choice presented to the player in *Neverwinter Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer*, where the player is given the chance to devour the spirit of the ancient bear God Okku, or to spare his life. Or it could be the great dilemma given to the player in *Mass Effect*, where they must make a choice between rescuing one of two companions, knowing that the other companion will face certain death.

The purpose of the dilemma is to get the player to roleplay, for they must choose what they (or their character) would do in this situation. The dilemma is perhaps one of the most meaningful purposes for a quest in an RPG, for it gives the player the ability to affect the game world directly, and truly serves to involve the player in its development and story.

Premise

The premise of a plot is most likely the thing that many writers will come up with first, and then marry it with a specific purpose in the game later. There is nothing wrong with this approach, and as long as the quest is given a purpose, many may find it easier to work in this fashion to help the creative quest-making process.

While there are many different types of quests, it has been mooted that RPG quests can often be broken down into three main archetypes. These are discussed briefly below, and there are numerous variations on these themes. However, ultimately, a premise is something than simply requires creativity.. And while these classic archetypes are presented as examples, it is left as a creative exercise on the part of the quest writer to come up with their own quest ideas.

Defeat an Enemy

While this is a simple quest, it can take many forms and offer many complications. While some enemies might be able to be defeated through combat, others might require specific tactics, items or other aspects of the game to be completed in order for the player to be successful.

An “enemy” need not be just a single opponent; the player can just as easily be tasked with defeating an entire den of wolves as they can with defeating an ogre mage terrorizing the nearby hillside.

Presenting the player with someone to kill is a very open ended scenario. Are they being tasked with killing an evil villain, disposing of the dangerous rival of an ally, or acting for hire as an assassin? The options are many and varied.

Item Quests

In essence, this quest type involves the player acquiring and/or transporting an item (or items). The player may be given a package and must deliver it to another NPC, find or fetch a specific item and return it to the quest giver, or many other variants on this theme.

Commonly known by players as a “fedex” quest, these are something that many players have come to hate due to feeling like little more than a courier. That is not to say that this style of quest is without credit, as it has been the premise of many different plots. For example, the premise of the *Lord of the Rings* books is akin to this type of quest, except that instead of acquiring the item, the characters must take the item to a location to destroy it.

Negotiation

Giving the player an opportunity to use wit in their interactions with other characters is a great means to offer the player respite from combat or traversing the game world. This could be as simple as finding the correct means to convince a guard to allow passage to an area, or as complex as solving a murder mystery.

In *Neverwinter Nights 2*, the player is charged with the murder of a village and goes about seeking evidence to clear their name. Once this is done, the player must go to trial, presenting evidence and rebuttals of accusations using wit and the items they have acquired. Their success, or lack thereof, determines the outcome of the trial, and thus whether or not they are found guilty of the crime.

Player Motivation

Having determined the purpose and the premise of the plot, it must then be determined **why** the player is interested in undertaking this quest. While this will be strongly influenced by the purpose and the premise, the quest writer should make sure that the player is provided with a sufficient hook to investigate and finish the quest.

Reward

At a basic level, the player may be interested in a reward, and they should be given some indication that it is worth their time investigating a quest. Likely this will take the form of the character becoming more powerful or wealthy in some way. In some cases, this may be inherent in the nature of the quest, but in other cases it may need to be more explicitly detailed to the character.

The bounty offered for the death of a criminal is a clear cut reward for any player, whereas the benefit of investigating the rumors of troubles in the mountains is vague at best. While all quests need not have clear cut rewards, it is beneficial for players to be encouraged, in whatever way possible, to explore the quests on offer.

Keep in mind that not all rewards are tangible. The player might be forced to complete a quest under threat of death, or to earn their freedom from a prison, or they may finish a quest simply if it will increase their status, fame (or infamy!) within the game world itself.

Intrigue

Aside from providing a benefit to the player, a quest must be interesting. Beginning players do not want to kill rats in someone's basement to earn their chops, as this is now a very stale cliché. There must be something that grabs the player's attention and almost demands that they follow the quest.

If a player is told that a large diamond ring is being stored in the house of a rich noble and given a lead on how to steal this item, those inclined towards stealing may investigate for their own selfish desires. However, a law abiding player may decide it is none of their business at all, unless perhaps they are told that someone else is planning to steal the item. This threat would also motivate the selfish player, for they would seek to get there before their competition.

Roleplay

On perhaps the deepest level of player motivation is the desire to roleplay. If the player has a particular image of their character, be it a law abiding hero or a self-serving villain or anything between, they will like it if they are given the opportunity to act in a manner befitting their nature. The ability to make a player think about the actions of their “character” as opposed to their own actions is a sign that the player has become immersed in the game, which is something that RPGs (should) strive to achieve and maintain.

Roleplay can happen on large or small scales. In *Mass Effect*, near the end of the game, the player has a choice to save or sacrifice the galactic council, a decision which noticeably changes the outcome of the end of the game. On a smaller scale, earlier in the game, the player is interviewed by a journalist, and can choose either friendly or impolite replies depending upon their temperament. While this has no significant effect on the game as a whole, it does allow the player to feel more empathy with their character and their chosen personality.

NPC Motivation

Now the the player has been given motivation for their actions within a quest, it is necessary to address the motivations of the characters that are part of the quest itself. Keeping in mind the points regarding character development discussed earlier, the characters should be given some motivation for their actions, whether working for or against the player.

Making believable and interesting characters is crucial when writing books, and there are many authors that discuss the topic of what makes an interesting character in far more detail than can be described here. The aim of this section is to focus on the salient points as they relate to the development of a character for an RPG, but readers would well be advised to seek out such books on writing if they wish to further their craft in this area.

Villains

Villains are often the worst addressed in many cases in terms of their motivations, but it is the antagonist that has a true reason for their actions that is truly memorable. It is the enemy that the player comes to know and almost understand that really drives them towards a confrontation, and helps create a sense of purpose. However, this true motivation need not be made clear until late in the game. In fact, it is the hallmark of an excellent villain whose actions appear to serve a purpose that masks their true intentions.

Sarevok in *Baldur's Gate* sought to start a war in order to become a God, but this purpose is concealed from the player until the attack at the Ducal Palace. Before this event, it appears that Sarevok is attempting to take control of all iron trade in the region, and it is only later that his warmongering comes to the fore. But even this behaviour appears to be a simply be part of a grab for the power of becoming a Duke in *Baldur's Gate*, at least until the player disrupts his plans.

The Transcendent One in *Planescape: Torment* sought to eliminate his eternal suffering by killing off the player's (immortal) character and making him unable to remember how to become mortal. In the early sections of the game, the player is unaware of the antagonist, and is even misled by the appearance of shadows that hunt them. However, the player is eventually made aware of this antagonist, and while they do not know its name, it is obvious that it is out to kill the player. The player is given clues and finally the motivation for the actions of their enemy in the climatic confrontation at the end of the game.

Mankar Camoran from *Oblivion* was so driven by his zealotry that he sought to restore the land of Tamriel as part of the realm of Oblivion. While the player did not know this while they were hunting Mankar, the Mythic Dawn followers gave a real sense of a cult planning some doomsday event that made the player want to be a hero and thwart their plans. When the final exposition and the confrontation with Mankar arrived, the player saw all pieces of the plot fall together, and they knew they had to defeat Mankar to ensure their own survival and prevent the destruction of the entirety of Tamriel.

Friends

While villains are a core element of a quest, the player will typically have some sort of friend or an NPC to provide guidance for the quest. This may be someone who gives them a vague outline of the problem, or they may assist at many points along the way in a long and involved quest. Yet whatever their involvement with the quest, they should have just as much (and in some cases, more) of a vested interest in seeing the quest resolved.

Take the farmer in *Baldur's Gate* whose farm is filled with monsters and his son has gone missing. As a father, he is very concerned with the whereabouts of his son, and pleads with the player to find him. Yet the player has much less interest in the plot, only the promise of battle with the creatures and a possible paltry reward from the father.

The role of the player's "friends" (or at least anyone not directly opposing them) should be proportionate to their involvement in the quest. If a murderer is running loose in one district of the city killing all the beggars, then nobles may have very little to say about the matter, yet those living in the slums will be rightfully concerned and may provide the player with some leads.

Backstory

One thing to consider when defining NPC motivations is their background. Determine how they have come to be in their present situation and how this has shaped their character. By providing a backstory to the NPCs in your quest, you can present a more realistic and developed character to the player, and thus make the quest itself more interesting.

An NPC who wants the local orc chieftain dead simply because he is an orc is a far less interesting character than a NPC who has a real and definable reason for this desire. Perhaps this orc chieftain once routed a force of soldiers under the NPC's command, resulting in his shameful defeat and demotion within the local militia. Or perhaps the orc chieftain is the half-brother of the NPC, who is shamed by his presence and wants him dead. These are just two examples that could provide an excellent reason for the NPC's desire to see the orc dead, and make both the NPC and the quest more interesting for the player.

Pacing

The execution of a quest itself is an important aspect that should be considered in the planning stages. Should the quest start off with immediate danger through an attack on the player, or should it feature a suspenseful build-up and a climatic battle at its end?

Pacing often goes hand-in-hand with atmosphere, and so many of the same principles apply. Movies and books all rely heavily on pacing, as does any RPG, as the player must feel rushed at times, and feel as though they have time to act at their leisure during others. This can be affected by the nature of the game, as a sandbox game is more likely to have a more leisurely pacing because at most times, the player can simply just choose to ignore their current quests and explore the environment. A story-driven game may diminish this feeling of freedom, but the player may feel more involved with the plot as a result.

Beginning

Every quest has to start somewhere. Define how the player is introduced to the quest. Is the quest forced upon the player as an order? Are they given a rumor of trouble at a location? Does a person approach the player for help?

There are many different ways that a quest can be initiated, but each has their own nuances and potential to persuade (or dissuade) the player from following the quest. As with so many aspects of design, diversity is something to be desired, as the player will only deal with so many complaining commoners before they refuse to help any of them on principle. Invent creative ways to present quests to the player or solicit them to investigate, and they'll be far more likely to follow them up.

Complication

In many cases, quests should not be straightforward. If they were, why hasn't someone else solved the problem? While in some cases, this may be that the quest giver does not have the necessary skills to carry out the task. Farmers are not sword wielding heroes, and NPCs may lack the PC's wit or intellect.

Introducing a complication is something that can be accomplished in many different ways. The player could be hoodwinked by the original quest giver, and forced to decide between continuing on their original course or answering betrayal in kind. The player may find that they are unable to reach their intended destination, and instead must find a means or enlist help to find a safe route there.

The danger with introducing complications is that if they happen on a regular basis, players may feel they are being given the run-around. Complications frequently require the player to traverse areas to find the solution before returning to the location where the complication arose (or some other key location), which can cause a great deal of boredom as they are forced to backtrack across old ground.

Complications are good means to control the pacing of a quest, either to increase its danger through adding unexpected combat, or its tension via an unexpected betrayal, but don't overuse them.

Climax

The climax of the quest is what will stick in player's minds the most, so make yours finish with style. Some quests may end with a vicious battle, others with a glib remark from an NPC, and some with a cutscene of an antagonist brooding over the player's actions.

Note that the climax of the quest might not be its final end. If the player was contracted to kill an enemy and bring back an item from their horde, the climax would be the deadly battle, but the quest would not end until the item was given to the person who requested it. Just make sure that completing the quest after the climax does not feel like such a chore that the player does not bother to go to the effort of doing so.

Quests should manage their pacing such that the player feels like they have small climaxes throughout, perhaps accompanied by small complications to maintain their interest. Manage the delivery of the excitement so the player always has a reason to keep pursuing the quest.

Consequence

An often overlooked aspect of quest design is what happens **after** its conclusion. The quest is all finished, and might be promptly forgotten by the player, even if there was something truly memorable about it. Besides, if an RPG is filled with memorable quests, how can the player pick which one to remember? Consequences not only make the player remember their actions, but also make them feel more meaningful.

Implementing consequences might suggest that it requires that the player has been given a choice somewhere within a quest, though this need not be the case. All that consequences need is that the game in some way makes reference to the character's past actions.

Major

Major consequences are the things that should be reserved for crucial points in the game. Deciding whether to save an ally or abandon them, whether to forgo an offer of power by embracing the darker side of ambition or refusing the temptation; these are the climatic moments of games that stand out in player's minds as real turning points in the game. These may result in completely different endings within the game, or perhaps a different progression through it.

In *Morrowind*, the player is given the opportunity to join one of the games three “great houses” within the game and advance through them by completing certain tasks. However, joining one house will bar you entry in either of the other two. In *Jade Empire*, close to the end of the game, the player is given the opportunity to free or enslave an ancient spirit called the Water Dragon, a decision which affects whether the player will become a hero or a tyrant in the game's ending.

Minor

While some decisions are crucial to the game's development, many are not, and will have varying degrees of consequence for the player. In some cases, this may be as simple as receiving a smaller reward for completing a quest poorly, or as drastic as causing an NPC to leave the player's party. In some cases this might be an improvement to the player's standing within the game world, such as making some people more friendly and others less friendly. Consequences can be both good and bad at the same time.

Most importantly, the player should not be punished for simply making a choice, at least not with being appropriately warned first. In *Morrowind* and *Oblivion*, if the player joins one of the game's “factions” then killing or stealing from a member of that faction can result in expulsion or suspension from that faction. While this might seem like a potentially obvious rule, the player is still told explicitly of the consequence should they choose to act this way.

Inconsequential

Sometimes, quests need not have any real effect on the rest of the game. No outstanding penalty or bonus need apply to the player as a result of their actions and they can still have consequences.

An excellent example of this is in *Mass Effect*. While traveling on elevators within the “Citadel”, a main location in the game, the player will overhear various radio reports about recent events. Completing certain quests within the game can cause new reports to be played about the events that the player has investigated. Another example are the end-game vignettes used in *Fallout* or *Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura*, which provided various small voice-overs presented with still images depending on the player's actions within the game and the subsequent effect they had on the people and the game world.

Final Words

There is no clear cut way to determine exactly what makes a good quest, just as there is no means to determine what will make a successful song, movie or book. There are, however, guidelines that can be followed, and lessons that can be learned from successes and failures of the past.

The guidance provided here is by no means a guarantee to making a quest that all players will love (or even like!), but they are a way to help address many foibles and shortcomings that are present in poorly designed or uninteresting quests.

Above all, writers and designers must use a combination of creativity, innovation, along with a willingness to listen to the desires of players in order to deliver quests that are truly memorable.

Glossary

D&D

Dungeons and Dragons: A roleplaying system owned by Wizards of the Coast. Originally designed for pen and paper roleplaying, it is used by many fantasy RPGs.

NPC

Non-Player Character: Any character that is not the Player Character.

Party Member

An Non-Player Character (NPC) that is can be controlled (either directly or indirectly) by the player.

PC

Player Character: The character controlled by the player.

RPG

Role Playing Game: A computer game of the roleplaying genre. This definition of this genre is a question that is far beyond the scope of this document.

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