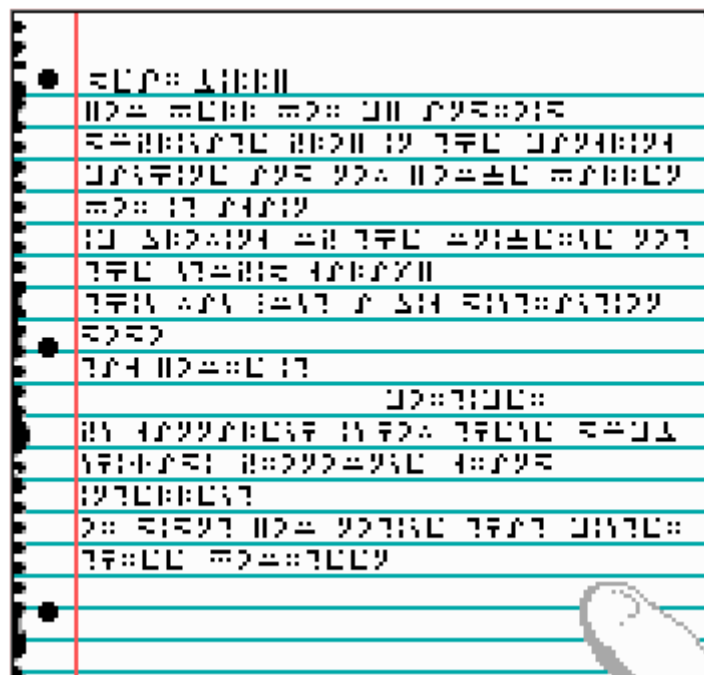


PCKF

- Modding Theory - Game Story Development



all hints and tips by Public Commander Keen Forum Members
collected by Ceilick
assembled by Nisaba

pckf.com // keenmodding.org

Table of Contents

1. Excitement & Consistency	1
2. Leading Questions	1
3. Space for Imagination	2
4. Correct Proofs & Critiques	2
5. Ingrain in the gameplay	3
6. Influence on Graphics & Level-Design	3
7. Bearing of the end story	4
8. About sequels and successors	4
9. Final pensée	5

Game Story Development (by Ceilick)

The story in a Keen mod or fan game is a necessary component for generating player excitement and enhancing their gameplay experience; it will subtly add to every level and situation in the game, motivating the player to see, play, and experience the game designer's work. For some players, gameplay and graphics are sufficient to a game experience, but even these players will benefit from how the story affects the game developer.

The story serves the developer as a creative force in game design, lending to improved gameplay and visuals. Not just any story will work. It's easy to just slap on a few sentences or make something up in five minutes, but these kind of stories won't do much to benefit the developer or player. In order for a story to be successful it will need to give the player a reason to care about what's going on and how it will end, immerse the player in the events and action, and carefully pace how much information the player knows. Let's investigate how we as game developers can accomplish these things.

1. Excitement & Consistency

A story will attract excitement and interest if it contains events that matter to the player. Too often the stories in Keen projects fall short of anything exciting. We've all seen the 'Commander Keen is on another adventure' plots, the ones where the story could essentially be anything and it just doesn't matter. While the graphics and gameplay alone in these games can be good, the games themselves will never be as-tounding or epic. They will never draw the player into the game to the same degree that a good story will do. How can we write stories that matter?

"Remember, the player is carrying out two roles: Commander Keen, and him/herself. Things that would fascinate Keen are likely to fascinate the player..." (Commander Spleen, 2003).

Keen should react to situations and information in the same way that the player is expected to. If Keen goes on the mission for different reasons than the player would if they were in the story, or if Keen's goal is something that would never be the goal of the player if they were in the same situation, the story has failed to draw the player into the game. If the motivations or actions of Keen or other characters in the story are there 'just for the heck of it' or as an excuse for the rest of the story, the player will see right through it and lose interest.

If a player is motivated to play a game because they want to find out what happens and how Keen (and they themselves) will overcome the problem at hand, that is a sign of an excellent story. Consider yourself in the same situation as Keen or run your story by a friend and question whether they would react the same way as Keen or go on the same mission or adventure themselves if given the chance.

2. Leading Questions

More than a few mods have stories that begin with "One day while Keen was exploring space..." or "One day when Keen was searching for Mortimer...". These are excuse stories. Why is Keen exploring space? What recent dastardly deed has Mortimer done to warrant a search for him?

Don't assume the player will provide their own answers. It's your job to have good answers for these kind questions in your stories, answers which the player can identify with and respond "I'd explore space for that reason" or "I'd search for Mortimer if he did that". When providing answers, keep in mind that while details can be fun, you're writing for a platformer game, not a novel. Keep your explanations and information brief and within the context of your media. You're trying to grab your audience and get them hyped up for the actual game, not just providing them with reading material.

3. Space for Imagination

As important as it is to give the player information, don't reveal everything to the player. What the player doesn't know is just as important as what they do.

"The storyline is important. I want to feel like I'm part of something that's really happening, with an air of mystery... The original games didn't really mention the underlying villain until the end of each trilogy. If I'm told "Mort's trying to destroy the Universe again--go destroy his hideout" it doesn't leave much to the imagination" (Commander Spleen, 2006).

Give the player real mysteries to experience. For example, whodunit plots in which Keen has more suspects than just Mortimer, plots where Keen doesn't even know there is a criminal mastermind, plots where Keen doesn't know the identity/motivations of his enemies, etc.

Real mysteries don't need to be central to the plot either: what are the characteristics of the alien race, the characteristics of the location, etc. Carefully spoon feed information to the player, hint at and hold some information just out of reach, leave some unanswered and unexplained mysteries (you don't always need to explain everything). Unanswered and unexplained things can provide a level of complexity and immersion for players. These things encourage the player to be a part of the story and actively think about it and its connection to the rest of the game.

4. Correct Proofs & Critiques

Whether to explain something to the player or not can be a difficult thing to judge. If you are uncertain you can always run the story by a friend (make sure your friend also cares about the game's story). Give them as little information as possible at first and see what questions they ask about the story and how they ask the questions. Are they only a little curious about something or really curious about how it will develop in the game? Are they bored because there isn't enough information or are they intrigued by the lack of information? Will answering their questions improve their experience or will it remove a mystery that otherwise would have been with them the whole game?

A friend's comments on your story can help you deal with another problem as well: unoriginality. Unoriginality is a form of anti-immersion which takes place if there aren't enough new and unique details and objectives. If players recognize plot points and similarities with other Keen games, fan or official, they aren't being absorbed into the story, they're analyzing and comparing it to those other games. Give the player new problems to deal with, new reasons for those problems, and new mysteries to solve.

You can reference other stories, characters, places, and objects without recycling them as the same plot points they were in the past. Any repetition of plot points must be dealt with carefully, you run the risk of making the player withdraw, sigh with familiarity, and just not care.

5. Ingrain in the gameplay

A lot of the story telling in Keen fangames and mods takes place in a single document that the player reads before actually playing the game and an endgame sequence and/or document. A good story will do more than that. It will ingrain itself into all aspects of the game: the levels, the graphics, etc.

"The story can say things the levels can never say, and vice versa... Xky told me sometime around when I got keen6 that ... the bloogs built almost everything following the designs of the fleex. He said the bloogs were clumsy, so keen probably was only able to get through because the bloogs made errors. That little bit of information was in my mind the entire time I played the game, and made the game much more interesting" (Stleathy71088, 2006)

As stealthy71088 points out in Keen 6, the story and the levels mesh with each other in just the right way to keep the player thinking about the story while playing the game (unfortunately Keen 6 does not do a good job of presenting this information since it lacks an in-game story document).

The player should be able to take information with them from a game's story and think about it and apply it to the levels. Clues can be given in the story for solving a particular puzzle or information on certain level types or architecture that will affect how the player plays those levels.

It works the other way around as well; you can give players information in levels, through messages or images, that they can relate back to the story. Perhaps some mysteries in the story can only be solved in the middle of the game, rather than at the end. As before, you don't always need to be explicit with what you give the player, but think about ways you can tie the story into the actual gameplay.

6. Influence on Graphics & Level-Design

If you're working out ways to tie the story into your gameplay then your level design and graphics are going to be affected. In this way, the story is a unique source of inspiration for gameplay content.

"The more detailed and final your storyline is, the easier it will be to come up with ideas for tiles, sprites, levels, etc." (Grelphy, 2005).

The story will help dictate what kinds of tiles you need, what the enemies will look like, and where and how they will appear in levels.

"It's tempting for many Keen5 level packs to have a little Korath III native running around in the middle of the Omegamatic. But in the actual Keen5, those natives only appear in the secret level. That was a rule dictated by the plot of the game and the level designers. You can make your own rules dictated by plot for your own mod. In XkyKeen3, the Spadlings were never found away from the rocky mountain tiles" (XkyRauh, 2006)

Having a good story will help you organize your game's development. If you're having trouble designing interesting levels or graphics it might be time to close the level editor or drawing utility and instead review your story document and work out some details.

7. Bearing of the end story

After Keen has completed the level objectives, the player will be subjected to the end story. The end story is more than just a chance to wrap up the loose ends of a game; it is the last chance to slap the player in the face with something awesome, something that will affect how they feel about every other aspect of the game.

Because of this, end stories need to have an element of unpredictability, they should not just deliver what the player expects or an ending which more or less states "...and everything worked out". That said, too unpredictable is just as much of a problem; answers can wander only so far from the player's suspicions before the player feels like they were cheated out of their expectations.

Some plots lead the player to suspect Mortimer is the villain but then throw in some random character who was behind everything. Don't do this! Introduce or give hints to the real villain, if Keen and the player suspect Mortimer, tie Mortimer into the plot somehow. Game developers need to be aware of what the player will expect and manipulate those expectations to create twists and surprise answers that work.

Answers that are given need to be unique and intriguing and result in consequences that are meaningful both to Keen and to the player. Answers can be stated explicitly or only hinted at, giving the player something to think about and opportunities to put two and two together. Not every mystery or question needs to be resolved; some questions should be prolonged or enhanced with new information. The mysteries that are left unsolved can be left for future games or simply remain unsolved; a cliff hanger ending does not always need to be continued.

8. About sequels and successors

In designing the end story, however, the game designer needs to avoid turning it into a development trap. A lofty story spread across several episodes can ensnare a developer in a game series that they have no desire to continue working on. Games take time to make, often years, and sometimes what looks like an awesome story for a trilogy will lose its charm as time passes. Prepare yourself for this. Unless you fully understand the time and commitment it takes to create a single game, let alone a trilogy, I highly recommend planning your stories in such a way that you can redirect the plot on the drop of a hat.

Don't trap yourself with a plot for episode 2 or three of your series in your first episode. Don't conclude your game's story in a way that forces you to design episode 2 in a specific, restrictive way. This may hurt the story and how it affects the player, but in the long run it'll allow you to create your game without the weight of a whole series over your head. It'll also allow you to avoid feeling 'trapped' in a story you have no desire of completing. I encourage both beginners and experienced game makers to think about this when writing their game stories.

9. Final pensée

Not everyone cares about the story in a game. Some people just like to solve the puzzles, kill the bad - dies, look at the graphics, and call it a day. These people don't care if there is a good story or not. Ev - everyone else does care.

If a game's story is pointless, boring, or just mediocre, these people will notice and all the effort put into the puzzles and graphics will be lost on them. What could have been an awesome mod is now just another mod in their collection simply because it lacks the words to back up the gameplay, lacks the im - mersion to make the player actively think while playing, and lacks the information to make the player care about how everything fits together. As a game developer, if you want people to enjoy your game, play it the way you intended and have your work praised, you need to provide a good story.

Author: Ceilick