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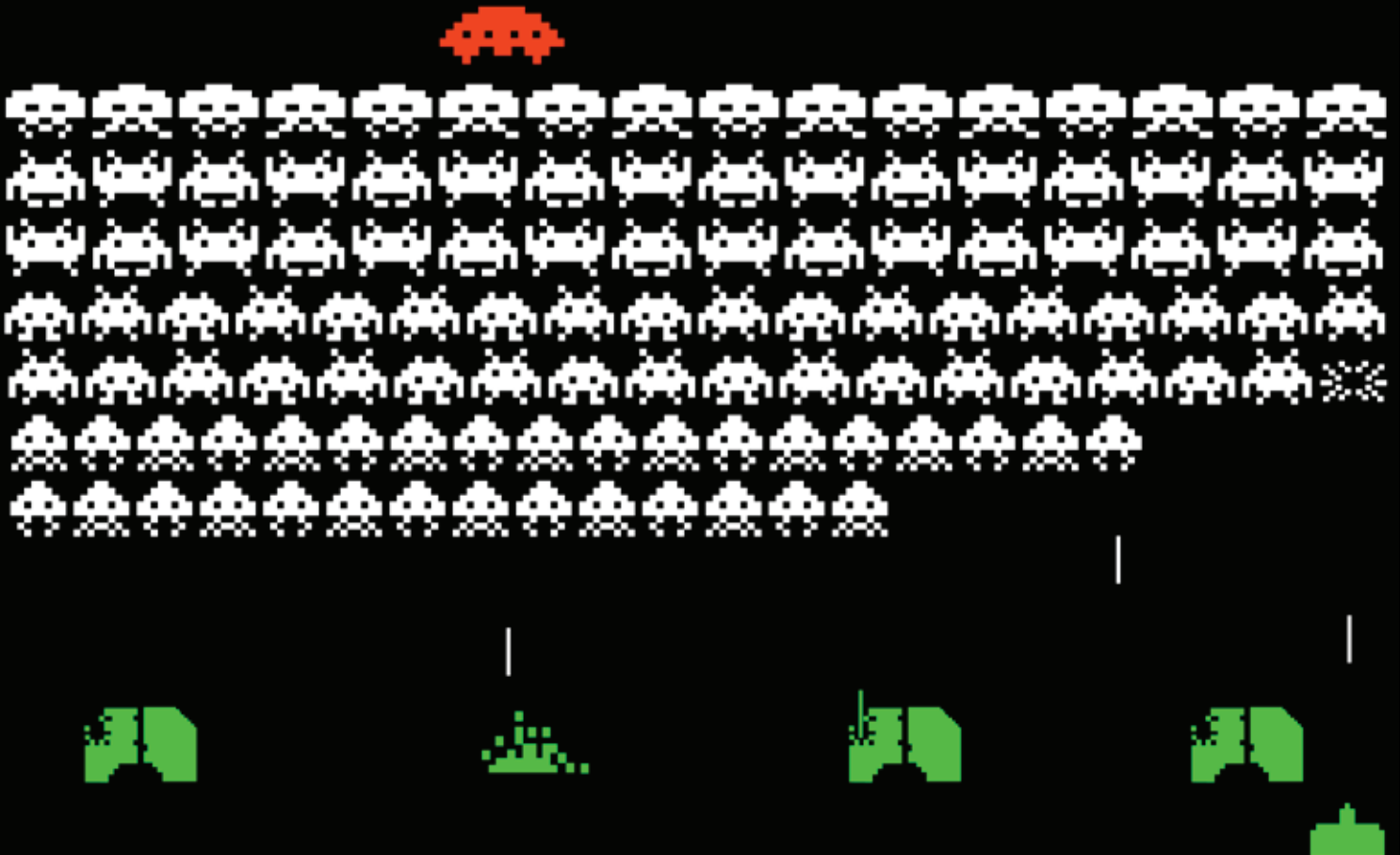
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# It's All in the Game:

## Technical Communication's Role in Game Documentation

By JEFFREY GREENE and LAURA PALMER | *Senior Member*



MANY GAMERS HAVE fond memories of gaming's early years of grey blips rallying across a black background. For the truly sentimental, those memories extend beyond the game itself to the simplest of artifacts: the instruction booklet that came with the cartridge. Everything about those booklets, from the feel of the paper and the smell of the ink to the cover artwork, takes gamers back to those formative years. The documentation's minimalist content resonated like no other type of instruction set; nary a single toaster manual has been revered in the same way.

Early game booklets had a zeitgeist that elevated them above ordinary user-support materials. The booklets were an entrée into the game itself. As both an *invitation to* and *immersion in* the alternate reality of the game, the booklet was invaluable. The backstory—or “flavor,” as it was called—was fiction at its best, with the plot and characters coming to life on the small page. No matter who was at the joystick, the basic premise of the game became accessible through clear, compelling narrative. Whether it was a quest, competition, or battle between good and evil, players were ready to start in a matter of minutes.

Functionally, game documentation leveraged what John Carroll learned in his research with computer users and manuals: Grabbing the basics and getting started were the goal. There's no joy in reading manuals; part of the delight in the game was the immediate and experiential exploration of the new digital world circa the 1980s.

But 1982 is a distant memory and games have become more and more complex in both online and offline spaces. In 2004, Martin Peterson made the case that the gaming industry and technical communication belonged together. Technical communication's facility with visual design and textual clarity seemed just the fit for an industry that had what Petersen described as no uniform, standardized way to write, document, or organize information. Technical communication could also do more than create an end-user artifact. What Peterson saw in technical communication was professionals who could, via their practices and processes, manage a game's internal development and articulate ideas for all members of the team.

So where did these ideas about technical communication, the gaming industry, and documentation go? In 2011, we're not necessarily any closer to this perfect union of the two, although we've got a rich history of documentation and enormous growth in gaming. A look at the trajectory of documentation from its earliest years to today presents us with some new possibilities for where game documentation might go, especially when games are online and form a culture we couldn't have imagined in 1982.

## Game Manuals—The Early Years

In August 1976, Fairchild Semiconductor released the Fairchild Channel F, the first programmable ROM cartridge-based video game console, to the American public. There were many advantages to such a system, but

most importantly, programmers could develop a much larger variety of games. No longer were gamers limited to whatever video games were hardcoded on their console's microchip. Software engineers could now develop an array of games for a home console and users could switch out these games at will. Of course, it would take the Atari 2600 in 1977 to truly popularize this cartridge-based system, but with the introduction of that eponymous console came a deluge of games and game manuals and design documents. Atari would rule the 1980s.

There are literally hundreds of Atari 2600 game manuals in existence, and yet for the most part, Atari games were truly a “pick up and play” experience. Little documentation was required for a user to understand and enjoy truly simplistic games such as *Asteroids* or *Space Invaders*. Still, as the complexity of video games grew during the second and third generation of consoles, so did the corresponding documentation.

There is a certain level of artistry to the manuals produced during this era. The documents mostly followed a familiar pattern, starting out with some form of “flavor text”—literally a few paragraphs, or in some cases several pages, of text devoted to telling the game's story in a compelling manner. This storytelling section was integral to how a player interacted and engaged with the narrative. Exidy's *Crossbow* for the Atari 2600 provides an excellent example of this type of text in the first few pages of its manual: “Over scorching deserts, through dark, icy caverns, around a fiery volcano, and under the leafy cover of a steamy jungle, you and five brave friends set out to retrieve the treasures stolen by the Evil Master. Your goal is his castle, far, far away.”

After the flavor text, there was generally some form of instruction or rules, followed by a definition of the controls and sometimes a section for game hints and tips. It was assumed that a player would refer to the manual numerous times during gameplay and might even want to write in the manual itself. Several early NES games provide lined pages specifically for a gamer to take notes. At the end of the manual was usually some form of warranty information.

Early game manuals sometimes performed double duty, acting not only as an instruction booklet but also as a rudimentary form of copy protection. This was particularly true of PC games such as *Wasteland* and the *King's Quest Series*, where upon loading the game, the user would be prompted to type back a particular passage from the manual. Without ownership of the paper manual (or its facsimile), an end user wouldn't be able to access the software. This process was repeated every time the user loaded the game.

## Documentation Today

In recent days, the hefty print manual has seen a sharp decline. Modern user documentation for video games is often concise and simplistic, merely involving the mapping

of buttons and the introduction of key game concepts. With rising printing costs and the introduction of jeweled CD cases in the 2000s, it's no surprise that the verbose manuals of yesteryear are disappearing. Additionally, gaming instruction and documentation has now become something that is increasingly experienced in the form of in-game tutorials. Instead of an external paper manual, players are often offered contextual instruction within the gaming experience itself.

The copious strategies and hints that were somewhat common in early game manuals have largely been replaced by published strategy guides and online FAQs. Although in the second and third generation of consoles it wasn't uncommon for publishers to produce books on individual video games offering tips and tricks for players, these books were published well after the original game came to market. The production of modern strategy guides for video games is now its own separate industry. Companies like Bradygames and Prima Games produce lengthy strategy guides—full of detailed walkthroughs, instructions, and full-color game maps—that are released alongside the video games themselves.

More than anything, the collective intelligence of the Internet has changed how gamers access expert guidance in how to play a game. Websites such as GameFAQS offer vast collections of user-generated documents that provide hints, tips, and detailed walkthroughs of video games that easily rival anything that traditional publishing provides. Self-proclaimed experts produce competing FAQs, sometimes for one title over a variety of consoles such as xBox, PlayStation, or Wii. Ardent gamers engage in lively debates on forums, arguing about which game FAQ is the best.

Although the user documentation continues to be streamlined and gutted, the documentation produced has only become more complicated and rigorous, according to Jonathan Blow. In the early days of video game development, a single programmer could feasibly complete a video game alone because of the limited capabilities of earlier systems.

Now game-design teams can include nearly a hundred individuals working together on a single title. The teams are also far more diverse. Where there used to be a solitary programmer, now there are teams of concept designers, programmers, artists, musicians, and level designers, all working toward a single vision. This is no easy task when you consider all the variables involved in developing games across multiple platforms and with diverse tools.

The stakes of game development are also incredibly high. A large-scale, multi-platform release can potentially cost anywhere from \$18 to \$28 million to develop, according to Wanda Meloni. Given the significant financial risk for a flop, it is no wonder that the design document produced during the development cycle is so vital to the success of a video game title. Design documents are produced by software engineers and

the designers themselves, rather than by a specialized technical communicator, and currently there are no defined standards for producing documentation in the gaming industry, as Peterson has noted.

## A Future for Game Documentation

To quote Peterson again, technical communication and game documentation belong together—they did in 2004 and they still do today. Despite a slide toward paperless instruction, little has changed in the basic documentation set. The small printed booklet enclosed in the DVD case replicates conventions from 30 years ago; it is, in essence, a genre like the memo or letter. The cover artwork is as compelling as ever—images frame, at a glance, the tone and nature of the game. The booklet includes the back story or basic premise of the game along with any necessary character sketches. Game functions for the remote, along with other tools, tricks, and hints, are also on the printed page.

Whereas “flavor text” and other trappings of earlier eras may be disappearing from video game manuals, there is, however, one major addition to these documents that shows how technical communication fits into the gaming world—risk communication. While early manuals were free of warnings, that's not the case today. Now booklets include legal disclaimers right next to health and safety information. Notably, the first page covers warnings for health issues such as seizures, repetitive motion injuries, or motion sickness. There are also instructions on securing the hand-held remote safely. Another significant warning is the game's rating from the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) as age-based criteria.

And the warnings continue. Because current consoles can connect to the Internet for services and game play, personal security disclaimers are now the norm, as in this excerpt from a gaming booklet:

*To protect your privacy, do not give out personal information such as last name, phone number, birth date, age, school, email, or home address when communicating with others.*

It's clearly not 1982 anymore. The innocent days of play (in private) have given way to new concerns (from the public).

## Beyond Print

While DVD-based games for consoles are still popular, MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games) dominate in sheer number of players and up-end the need for traditional documentation. To give you a sense of proportion, James Ransom-Wiley wrote that *World of Warcraft* (a popular MMORPG) surpassed ten million monthly subscribers in 2008. Most MMORPG documentation is player-generated in an environment that echoes what Steven Rosenbaum states in *Curation Nation*: There are no economic limits for content production.

Various user forums within the online game's corporate site serve as the primary locus for the community and

disciplinary knowledge of the game. Much like what we've seen with the game FAQ community, MMORPGs are a dynamic and organic community of practice. The participants in a MMORPG are creators; specific players become defined as centers of expert knowledge based on their time in the game, levels of play achieved, and relevance of content. Various stats on posts and responses show players whose contributions may be the most significant. Moderators manage the communities and provide players with links to offline resources, such as print books. Away from the corporate sphere, social media platforms like blogs, Facebook, or Twitter drive the creation of a game's informal knowledge base.

This entire digital world is one that's constantly morphing online and off. Because of this, we have a deeper documentation quandary than we may have imagined. No one would argue that gaming and its artifacts—as tangible and intangible products—have developed cultural status. The Game Preservation Special Interest Group of the International Game Developers Association proclaimed, as part of a historical initiative, that games were in dire need of preservation. Various storage formats had differing levels of durability and the hardware subject to obsolescence and decay. To lose these products of gaming's early days would be to lose a significant part of the cultural history of the late twentieth century.

This problem of digital decay and obsolescence isn't necessarily solved by our current technologies. However, what we may lose is not the bits and bytes but the less tangible nature of the community as defined by its language—the words written across the digital domain that form the essence of the culture.

## A Place for Technical Communicators and Linguists

A future for gaming documentation is one that should consider the role of linguists and technical communicators working together. Gaming has exceeded what we could have imagined even 10 years ago in documentation practices. How the game works is no longer part of just a manual or a booklet, it's part of an active and changing

culture based on language. Capturing that language and preserving it is what linguists do best. Corpus linguistics, with its focus on expansive structured and searchable repositories, is the natural fit for documenting the online communities, conversations, and culture of current gaming.

The inclusion of technical communicators continues to be required in the gaming industry. Basic materials as either booklets or online quick-start guides are here to stay. However, technical communicators and linguists working together to take documentation to a new level is the future of gaming documentation. These two professions don't just create a mere disciplinary union—they can bring real star power to the development process. Stories, dialogues, plots, and character interactions—as part of a written language—can be captured by linguists and used by technical communicators to inform game development. With this model, teams of concept designers, programmers, artists, musicians, and level designers will see greater unification in their work. The multimillion-dollar gaming industry may have a new paradigm as a result of a successful and unexpected collaboration.

Gaming's rich documentation history is one that we should remember; however, it's now time to think about what we can do to maintain the unique culture that's emerged from online interactivity and a robust community of players. Technical communication and linguistics present a powerful team for the future. ■

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