



How did I get here?

Andrew Walsh: Breaking into gameswriting

Andrew Walsh has been writing professionally for fourteen years and his credits span theatre, radio, animation, television, film and video games. Aside from television credits with Granada, HTV, Zenith North, Risk, Diamond, and Yorkshire Television on shows such as *Byker Grove*, *Emmerdale*, and *Family Affairs*, and radio work for the BBC, Andrew has worked extensively in the videogames industry for companies such as EA, Sony, SEGA, Koch, THQ Wireless, Egosoft, Games Workshop, G5 Software, P.M Studios and Bam! His games credits include *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (writer), *Medieval II: Total War* (Director) and a further 25 titles.

Hello, Andrew, and welcome to Scribe Quiz.

Thanks for inviting me.

For your first question, who are you and what do you do?

Erm, I'm a writer working predominantly in scriptwriting. I've written for television, radio, animation, theatre and film, but currently I do most of my work in videogames. I ride a motorbike and own an Aloe Vera plant that's beginning to look scarily like it drinks blood and has a penchant for dentists...

Why do you do what you do?

To keep a roof over my head and because I love it; though not necessarily in that order. When I went to university it was to study law, but with the intention of moving on to drama after the degree. Partway through this I found my heart was in writing and directing. That's the reason I do what I do, writing is something I love. I get up every morning and want to write. If I wasn't like that, I don't think I could do this job...

As for the money...that's the difference between writing as a hobby or as a profession. Not the payment bit, but the fact you have to keep writing so you can keep yourself in beer and T-Shirts. This sometimes means scribing things people will pay you to, rather than a project that sets you on fire creatively. Whatever the origins of a project, though, you still have to be passionate about it... it's easy to tell when someone's just writing for the money.

But can you actually earn a living from gameswriting?

Oh yes. I mean, it's a freelance business so you never know what's going to happen next in terms of employment and unemployment, but you can earn a decent living from games. Most writers have several strings to their bow to help soften the vagaries of the writing world. They will write across several mediums rather than just one. Others will work by teaching courses and writing articles as a separate source of income as well as a way of giving them a chance to pass on knowledge and meet other writers.

Are there things you don't like about your job?

Everyday I thank my lucky stars that I'm where I am! That said, the number of commissions demanding long hours and needing work over weekends does occasionally grate... Being passionate about your job gets you through the dark hours... that and high energy cereal bars, caffeine and a Playstation.

Do you see yourself doing this job in the future?

Gazes into crystal ball. Yes... and no. It depends what you call 'this job'. While I'm currently writing a lot of games, I started out writing for the theatre. My first paid commission was to write the play that opened the Ben Kingsley Theatre in Salford (although I'd already written and staged eight plays before that). Theatre led to television where I worked on shows like *Byker Grove* and the soaps (*Emmerdale*, *Family Affairs*) for several years.

So, well, to be honest I can't currently see myself doing anything other than writing and directing, but in what medium and on what projects... only time will tell.

Are there big differences between writing for one medium and another?

There are big differences and not all writers can make the transition between one medium and another, or should have to. If you want to, then do your research. Anyone wishing to move into radio plays, for instance, should listen to radio plays and read the advice of those who work in the field first. Oh, and it's definitely worth remembering that it's not just writing techniques that differ; the industries, people and attitudes to writing also vary wildly between different media.

So, the jump isn't always easy?

No, sometimes it can be crushing. Project to project and medium to medium, things are so different it is easy to make mistakes, to work with people who don't click with you or simply to end up on a project that you can't write.

There are projects you can't write?

Well, I've a pretty diverse CV and I'd like to think I've done a good job on most of the things on there, but every writer has their strengths and weaknesses. It depends on their voice and their knowledge, what they feel comfortable with and to be honest... where their muse will or won't take them. There are plenty of courses preaching ways to improve your writing, but in the end no one really knows where they get their ideas from or exactly how the creative process works.

So, there's no point in going on courses?

There's every reason to go on courses. I've been writing for fourteen years and I still do from time to time. Learning keeps you fresh, reinforces the basics and teaches you new tricks. However, it's always worth checking the speaker's bio and the pedigree of the course first. There are a lot of courses and not all of them are good... 'Hi, my name's John, I'm your course tutor. I once published a short story in the Reader's Digest in 1784 and my mum likes everything I've ever written.' John will then take your cash and recite things he's learned from going on other people's courses.

What courses have you done?

I did an MA in Television & Radio Scriptwriting at Salford University. That gave me a good grounding in the theory and practice of writing techniques and taught me about the respective industries too. I've also done a number of short courses and have a collection of books on writing. These gave me a bedrock of knowledge to build from as well as teaching me the language the industry communicates in... You can't debate the merits of the three or twelve act structure if you don't understand them yourself.

Television and radio scriptwriting? I thought you said you worked in games?

I do. I started in theatre, made the jump to TV and then games via lots of other work. I still write everything from articles to screenplays, but my bread and butter is writing and directing for the videogames industry.

Do games actually have scripts? Isn't it all Kasplat! Pow! Arggh!?

Not at all. The problem is that gameswriting is a new medium so a lot of people simply don't understand it, or miss the point that gameswriting is separate from other writing disciplines just as screenwriting is different from say, writing for the theatre.

So what are the key differences between writing for games and other media?

Player control; non-linear plot structures; the need to work with the game's design elements; the timescales and size of projects (some game contain scripts that are upwards of two million words) and on the list goes. I'd say that the games industry has more variants in writing technique just within itself than there are in most other media combined.

How did you get a job in the games industry?

It's more a series of jobs. I'm a freelancer working on a contract-to-contract basis.

So, what sort of jobs have you done?

All sorts. Last year I worked on a script for a mobile phone game that was only a few hundred words long, but required characters, dialogue and a minimal story. That took me a couple of days. In the same year I spent months working on *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* and several weeks in studio directing the voice-overs for *Medieval II - Total War*.

What advice would you give someone who's just starting out?

In games? Or in other media? I suppose there's some basic stuff which is the same no matter which medium you work in. First of all... work hard. The difference between a lot of people who say 'I'd like to be a writer' and those who are professional writers is the amount of work they put into their writing. When I first started I was holding down temp jobs, studying for my MA, running my own theatre company and looking for commissions. That's how I got my breaks. The writing I'd already done got me onto my MA course, the course and credits persuaded

someone to give me my first commission, all these together got me my first television job with Granada and on it went. In between all of this, I was still writing, chasing writing opportunities and taking every chance to meet people, learn about the industry and to write more material. Even now the job often demands long hours and a constant need to move forward, looking for new projects and challenges. That's why you have to really want to write if you're going to make a success of it professionally.

You talked about getting breaks, how did you get these breaks?

Er, through a variety of ways, with luck involved at each stage! I got my first job in television through a tutor (who was a professional writer) on my MA course. He liked the work I had done and put my name forward for a soap Granada were working on. This later led on to me getting a job on *Emmerdale* as a storyliner. Getting jobs comes down to your skill, CV, contacts and confidence. This is one reason it takes most freelancers an average of three years to start to earn. It takes a while for people to hear of you and for you to build up your CV. All my early work came through talking to people and through the things I'd done to build up my CV (staging my own plays, doing the MA etc) as much as my ability as a writer. You can't get a job if people don't know you exist. Once you meet people, a properly formatted CV and some scripts in your portfolio help.

What about breaking into games? Do you need to write a games script to show people?

No, but you do need to play games. Just as I said about radio, that if you were setting out to write a radio play, I hope you'd take the time to listen to some first, it's the same with games. Get to know them by experiencing them. Then, as you would with other media, look for courses or books on the subject. Educate yourself.

As for writing a games script... no, you don't generally need to write one for a sample. The games industry doesn't commission ideas from writers (I mean it's incredibly, incredibly rare for this to happen). Instead they'll look for a writer to

match to a project. That means you can use a screenplay, or theatre piece, to show your ability, but you do, do, do have to learn why and how games are different from other media.

But how can someone learn this?

By playing games, reading books. There are also some courses around now. As for books, I'd recommend *Game Writing: Narrative Skills for Videogames* (Charles River Media) and, ahem, not because I wrote a chapter for it, ahem, cough... but because it's a book written by writers for writers. As for help in navigating the industry, well, The Writers' Guild of Great Britain publish some games guidelines and the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) has its own writing special interest group (S.I.G.). Those are good places to start.

What about getting a job?

There's no formal structure to the games industry and there aren't many agents either... it's mostly about legwork and getting companies to know about you, but it's worth knowing that the games business is pretty *ephemeral* and companies which are there one day are gone another. On the positive side, when one company closes, often another opens, so do your research and keep an eye on the industry as it evolves.

Okay, we're out of time...Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Yeah. Thank God I got through a prose piece by pretending it was dialogue...that and good luck to anyone reading this who is finding their way into the world of scribbling. There are pitfalls, but it's fun. I love it...

April 2007

© Andrew Walsh

Useful links

Andrew S. Walsh

Site has list of Andy's credits, examples of his work and links to sites of interest.

www.andrewwalsh.com

Organisations/websites:

BBC writersroom

The BBC's online resource for writing for television, radio and film. Writers' guidelines, script archive, free script formatting software, newsletter.

www.bbc.co.uk/writersroom

Gamasutra

The art and business of making games.

www.gamasutra.com

IMDb

The Internet Movie Database

A great site for details on credits, synopses and in production details for films, television and games (AW)

www.imdb.com

International Game Developers Association (IGDA)

Independent, non-profit organisation for game software developers. The site features news, membership information, articles, and forums.

There is a writers' special interest group which can be found at www.igda.org/writing.

www.igda.org

Moby Games

A great site for details on credits, synopses and in production details for games (AW).

www.mobygames.com

New Producers Alliance (NPA)

National membership organisation providing training and networking opportunities for filmmakers.

www.npa.org.uk

PACT

UK trade association representing the commercial interests of independent feature film, television, animation and interactive media companies.

www.pact.co.uk

Sidelines

Game writers agency representing a variety of experienced game writers and scriptwriters with a passion for gaming.

www.sideuk.com

Skillset

The sector skills council for the audio visual industries (broadcast, film, video, interactive media and photo imaging). Information and advice on careers and training. Online media courses directory.

www.skillset.org

The Writers' Guild of Great Britain

The trade union for professional writers in TV, film, theatre, radio, books and new media. Developed guidelines for writers and those working with games in the video games industry (The Writing Game, 2006) and runs industry networking events.

www.writersguild.org.uk

writernet

National organisation that aims to provide dramatic writers with the tools they need to build better careers and redefine the culture in which they work.

www.writernet.org.uk

Events:

Animex

Annual international festival of animation and computer games.

<http://animex.tees.ac.uk/>

Develop

Annual conference and expo for the European developer community.

www.develop-conference.com

Edinburgh Interactive Festival

Annual festival which brings together games developers, publishers, producers and directors to celebrate and expand the creative culture of games.

www.edinburghinteractivefestival.com

London Games Festival

Annual festival featuring events for different games audiences including those working in the industry.

www.londongamesfestival.co.uk

Courses:

MA/PgDip Television & Radio Scriptwriting, Salford University

MA: 2 years part-time (1 evening per week) plus MA project script, PgDip: 2 years part-time (1 evening per week)

www.salford.ac.uk

TAPS (Television Arts Performance Showcase)

The leading training scheme for new television writers. Runs occasional short courses in gameswriting.

www.tapsnet.org

Books:

Character Development and Storytelling for Games by Lee Sheldon

Creating Emotion in Games by David Freeman

Designing Virtual Worlds by Richard A. Bartle

Designing 3D Games That Sell! by Luke Ahearn

Developing Online Games An Insider's Guide by Jessica Mulligan and Bridgette Patrovsky

Game Design by Andrew Rollings and Ernest Adams

Game Development Essentials: Game Story & Character Development by Marianne Krawczyk; Jeannie Novak

Game Writing: Narrative Skills for Videogames
edited by Chris Bateman

The Game Writing Handbook by Rafael
Chandler

Gender Inclusive Game Design by Sheri Graner
Ray

Massively Multiplayer Game Development 2
edited by Thor Alexander

Swords and Circuitry: A Designer's Guide to
Computer Role-Playing Games by Neal Hallford
with Jana Hallford

Writing for Animation, Comics, and Games by
Christy Marx

Writing for Video Games by Steve Ince