

Renaissance Now!

The Gamers' Perspective

By Douglas Rushkoff

The frightening news is that we are living in a story. The reassuring part is that it's a story we're writing, ourselves.

Alas, though, most of us don't even know it - or are afraid to accept it. Never before did we have so much access to the tools of storytelling - yet few of us are willing to participate in their creation. Gamers might be today's most likely candidates to helm what I hope will be a renaissance in our relationship to stories as well as the reality they mean to describe and influence.

We are living in a world of stories. We can't help but use narratives to understand the events that occur around us. The unpredictability of nature, emotions, social interactions and power relationships led human beings, from prehistoric times, to develop narratives that described the patterns underlying the movements of these forces. Although we like to believe that primitive people actually believed the myths they created about everything from the weather to the afterlife, a growing camp of religious historians are coming to the conclusion that early religions were understood much more metaphorically than we understand religion, today. They didn't believe that the wind or rain were gods; they invented characters whose personalities reflected the properties of these elements. The characters and their stories served more as ways of remembering that it would be cold for four months before spring returns, than genuinely accepted explanations. The people were quite self-consciously and actively anthropomorphizing the forces of nature.

As different people and groups competed for authority, they used their narratives quite differently. They used their stories to gain advantage. Stories were no longer being used simply to predict the patterns of nature, but to describe and influence the courses of

politics, economics, and power. In such a world, stories compete solely on the basis of their ability to win believers. To be understood as real. When the Pharaoh or King is treated as *if* he were a god, it means his subjects are still actively participating in the sham. He still needs to prove his potency, in real ways, at regular intervals. But if the ruler can somehow get his followers to accept the story of his divine authority as historical fact, then he need prove nothing. The story itself serves as a substitute for reality.

Since Biblical times, we have been living in a world where the stories we use to describe and predict our reality have been presented as truth and mistaken for fact. These narratives, and their tellers, compete for believers in two ways: through the content of the stories, and through the medium or tools through which the stories are told. The content of a story might be considered the "what," where the technology through which the story is transmitted can be considered the "how." A story can vie for believers in both ways - through the narrative itself, or by changing the level of the playing field on which it is competing.

Exclusive access to the "how" of storytelling lets a storyteller monopolize the "what." In ancient times, people were captivated by the epic storyteller as much for his ability to remember thousands of lines of text as for the actual content of the Iliad or Odyssey. Likewise, a television program or commercial holds us in its spell as much through the magic of broadcasting technology as its teleplay. Whoever has power to get inside that magic box has the power to write the story we end up believing.

After all, we don't call the stuff on television "programming" for nothing. The people making television are not programming our TV sets or their evening schedules; they are programming *us*. We use the dial to select which program we are going to receive, and then we submit to it. This is not so dangerous in itself, but, the less control we have over exactly what is fed to us through the tube, the more vulnerable we are to the whims of our programmers.

For most of us, what goes on in the television set is magic. Before the age of VCRs and camcorders, it was even more so. A television program is a magic act. Whoever has gotten his image in that box *must* be special. Back in the 1960's, Walter Cronkite used to end his newscast with the assertion, "and that's the way it is." It was his ability to appear in the magic box that gave him the tremendous authority necessary to lay claim to the absolute truth.

I have always recoiled when this rhetorical advantage is exploited by those who have the power to monopolize a medium. Back in college, I remember being incensed by a scene in the third *Star Wars* movie, *Return of the Jedi*. Luke and Hans Solo have landed on an alien moon, and are taken prisoner by a tribe of little furry creatures called Ewoks. In an effort to win their liberation, Luke's two robots tell the Ewoks the story of their heroes' struggle against the dark forces of the Empire. C3PO, the golden android, relates the tale, while little R2D2 projects holographic images of battling spaceships. The Ewoks are dazzled by R2's special effects and engrossed in C3PO's tale. The "how" and the "what." They are so moved by the story, that they not only release their prisoners, but fight a violent war on their behalf! I kept wondering, what if Darth Vader had gotten down to the alien moon first, and told *his* side of the story complete with his own special effects?

Similarly, television programming, like the many one-way media before it, communicates through stories, and it influences us through its seemingly magical capabilities. The programmer creates a character we like - with whom we can identify. As a series of plot developments bring that character into some kind of danger, we follow him, and a sense of tension rises within us.

This is what Aristotle, in his role as one of the first theater analysts, called the rising arc of dramatic action. The storyteller brings the character, and his audience, into as much danger as we can tolerate before inventing his solution - the rescue - allowing us all to let out a big sigh of relief. Back in Aristotle's day, this solution was

called *Deus ex machina* (God from the machine) and one of the Greek gods would descend on a mechanism from the rafters and save the day. In an Arnold Schwarzenegger movie, that miraculous solution might take the form of a new, super-powered laser gun. In a commercial, well, it's the product being advertised. In any case, if he's got a captive audience, the storyteller can pick whichever solution he wants and, if we've been following the story into increasing anxiety, we'll take it.

TV commercials honed this storytelling technique into the perfect 30-second package. A man is at work. His wife calls to tell him she's crashed the car. The boss comes in to tell him he just lost a big account. His bank statement shows he's in the red. His secretary quits. Now his head hurts. We've followed the poor shlub all this way, and we feel his pain. What can he do? He opens the top desk drawer and finds his bottle of Brand A Pain Reliever! He swallows the pills as an awe-inspiring hi-tech animation demonstrates to us the way the pill passes through his body, relieving his pain.

In a passive and mysterious medium, when we are brought into a state of vicarious tension, the storyteller can make swallow any pill he chooses. Only by accepting his solution can we be freed from our despair.

Interactive media changed this equation. Imagine if your grandfather were watching that aspirin commercial back in 1955 on his old console television. Even if he suspected that he were watching a commercial designed to put him in a state of anxiety, in order to change the channel and remove himself from the externally imposed tension, he would have to move the popcorn off his lap, pull up the lever on his recliner, walk up to the television set, and manually turn the dial. That's a somewhat rebellious action for a bleary-eyed television viewer. To sit through the rest of the commercial, however harrowing, might cost him only a tiny quantity of human energy until the pills come out of the drawer. The brain, being lazy, chooses the path of least resistance, and grandpa sits through the whole commercial.

Flash forward to 1990. A kid with a remote control in his hand makes the same mental calculation: an ounce of stress, or an infinitesimally small quantity of human effort to move his finger an eighth of an inch and he's free! The remote control gives viewers the power to remove themselves from the storyteller's spell, with almost no effort. Watch a kid - or yourself - the next time he "channel surfs" from program to program. He's not changing the channel because he's bored. He surfs away when he senses that he's being put into an imposed state of tension.

The remote control breaks down the "what." It allows a viewer to deconstruct the content of television media, and avoid falling into the programmer's spell. If he does get back around the dial to watch the end of a program, he no longer has the same captivated orientation. Kids with remotes aren't watching television - they are watching the television, *playing* television. Putting it through its paces.

Just as the remote control allowed a generation to deconstruct the content of television, the videogame joystick demystified its technology. Remember back to the first time you ever saw a videogame. It was probably "Pong," that primitive black and white depiction of a ping pong table, with a square on either side of the screen representing the paddle, and a tiny white dot representing the ball. Now, remember the exhilaration you felt at playing that game for the very first time. Was it because you had always wanted an effective simulation of ping pong? Did you celebrate because you'd be able to practice without purchasing an entire table and installing it in the basement? Of course not. You were celebrating the simple ability to be able to move the pixels on the screen for the first time. It was a moment of revolution! The screen was no longer the exclusive turf of the television broadcasters. Thanks to the joystick, as well as the subsequent introduction of the VCR and camcorder, we were empowered to move the pixels ourselves. The TV was no longer magical. Its functioning had become transparent.

Finally, the computer mouse and keyboard transformed a receive-only monitor into a portal. Packaged programming was no longer any more valuable - or valid - than the words we could type ourselves. The addition of a modem turned the computer into a broadcast facility. We were no longer dependent on the content of Rupert Murdoch or CBS, but could create and disseminate our own. The Internet revolution was a "do-it-yourself" or DIY revolution. The people were now the content. New forms of community were being formed.

Of course this represented a tremendous threat to business as usual. Studies in the mid-1990's showed that families with Internet-capable computers were watching an average of nine hours less television per week. What's worse, Internet enthusiasts were sharing information, ideas, and even whole computer programs, for free! Software known as "freeware" and "shareware" gave rise to a gift economy based on community and mutual self-interest. People were turning to alternative news and entertainment sources for which they didn't have to pay - and, worse, they were watching fewer commercials. Something had to be done. And it was.

Through a series of both deliberate and utterly systemic responses to the threat of interactivity, the mainstream media sought to reverse the effects of the remote, the joystick, and the mouse. Borrowing a term from 1970's social science, media business advocates declared that we were now living in an "attention economy." True enough, the mediaspace might be infinite, but there are only so many hours in a day during which potential audience members might be viewing a program. These units of human time became known as "eyeball-hours," and pains were taken to create TV shows and web sites "sticky" enough to engage those eyeballs long enough to show them an advertisement. Perhaps coincidentally, the growth of the attention economy was accompanied by an increase of concern over the "attention spans" of young people. Channel surfing and similar behavior became equated with a very real but differently diagnosed childhood illness called Attention Deficit Disorder. Children

who refused to pay attention were much too quickly drugged, before the real reasons for their adaptation to the onslaught of commercial messages were even considered.

The demystification of media enabled by the joystick and other tools was quickly reversed through the development of increasingly opaque computer interfaces. While an early DOS computer user tended to understand a lot about how his computer stored information and launched programs, later operating systems such as Windows 95 put more barriers in place. Although these operating systems make computers easier to use in certain ways, they prevent users from gaining access or command over its more intricate processes. Now, to install a new program, users must consult "the wizard." What better metaphor do we need for the remystification of the computer? As a result, "computer literacy" no longer means being able to program a computer, but merely knowing how to use Microsoft Office.

Finally, the DIY ethic of the Internet community was replaced by the new value of commerce. The communications age was rebranded as an "information age," even though the Internet had never really been about downloading files or data, but, instead, about communicating with other people. The difference was that information, or "content," unlike real human interaction, could be bought and sold. It is a commodity. When selling information online didn't work, businesspeople turned to selling real products online. Thus, the e-commerce boom was ignited. Soon the internet became the World Wide Web, whose opaque and image-heavy interfaces made it increasingly one-way and read-only - more conducive to commerce than communication.

Although very few e-commerce companies actually made any money selling goods, the *idea* that they could was all that mattered. News stories about online communities were soon overshadowed by those about daring young entrepreneurs launching multi-million-dollar IPO's. Internet journalism moved from the culture section to the business

pages, as the dot.com pyramid scheme became the dominant new media story.

And so a medium born out of the ability to break through packaged stories was now being used to promote a new, equally dangerous one: the great pyramid. A smart kid writes a business plan. He finds a few "angel investors" to back him up long enough for him to land some first-level investors. Below them on the pyramid are several more rounds of investors until the investment bank gets involved. Another few levels of investors buy in until the decision is made to "go public." This means that poor suckers like you and I can invest, too, by purchasing a newly issued stock on the NASDAQ exchange. Of course, by this point, the angels and other early investors are executing what's known as their "exit strategy." It used to be known as a carpet bag. In any case, they're gone, and we are left holding the soon-to-be-worthless shares.

Tragically, but perhaps luckily, the dot.com bubble burst, along with the story being used to keep it inflated. The entire cycle - the birth of a new medium, the battle to control it, and the downfall of the first victorious camp - taught us a lot about the relationship of stories to the technologies through which they are disseminated. And the whole ordeal may have given us another opportunity for renaissance.

Renaissance Now?

The birth of the Internet era was considered a revolution, by many. My best friends - particularly those in the counterculture - saw in the Internet an opportunity to topple the storytellers who had dominated our politics, economics, society, and religion, in short, our very reality, and to replace their stories with ones of our own. It was a beautiful and exciting sentiment, but one as based in a particular narrative as any other. Revolutions simply replace one story with another. The capitalist narrative is replaced by the communist; the religious fundamentalist's for the gnostic's. The means may be different, but the rewards are the same, as is the exclusivity of their

distribution. That's why they're called revolutions; we're just going in a circle.

I prefer to think of the proliferation of interactive media as an opportunity for renaissance: a moment when we have the opportunity to step out of the story, altogether. Renaissances are historical instances of widespread recontextualization. People in a variety of different arts, philosophies, and sciences have the ability to reframe their reality. Quite literally, renaissance means "rebirth." It is the rebirth of old ideas in a new context. A renaissance is a dimensional leap, when our perspective shifts so dramatically that our understanding of the oldest, most fundamental elements of existence changes. The stories we have been using no longer work.

Take a look back at what we think of as the original Renaissance - the one we were taught in school. What were the main leaps in perspective? Well, most obviously, perspective painting, itself. Artists developed the technique of the "vanishing point" and with it ability to paint three dimensional representations on two dimensional surfaces. The character of this innovation is subtle, but distinct. It is not a technique for working in three dimensions; it is not that artists moved from working on canvas to working with clay. Rather, perspective painting allows an artist to relate between dimensions. It is a way of representing three dimensional objects on a two dimensional plane.

Likewise, calculus - another key renaissance invention - is a mathematical system that allows us to derive one dimension from another. It is a way of describing curves with the language of lines, and spheres with the language of curves. The leap from arithmetic to calculus was not just a leap in our ability to work with higher dimensional objects, but a leap in our ability to relate the objects of one dimension to the objects of another. It was a shift in perspective that allowed us to orient ourselves to mathematical objects from beyond the context of their own dimensionality.

The other main features of the Renaissance permitted similar shifts in perspective. Circumnavigation of the globe changed our relationship to the planet we live on the maps we used to describe it. The maps still worked, of course - only they described a globe instead of a plane. Anyone hoping to navigate a course had to be able to relate a two-dimensional map to the new reality of a three dimensional planet. Similarly, the invention of moveable type and the printing press changed the relationship of author and audience to text. The creation of a manuscript was no longer a one-pointed affair. Well, the creation of the first manuscript still was - but now it could be replicated and distributed to everyone. It was still one story, but now it was subject to a multiplicity of individual perspectives. This lattermost innovation, alone, changed the landscape of religion in the Western World. Individual interpretation of the Bible led to the collapse of Church authority and the unilateral nature of its decrees. Everyone demanded his or her own relationship to the story.

In all these cases, people experienced a very particular shift in their relationship to and understanding of dimensions. Understood this way, a renaissance is moment of reframing. We step out of the frame as it is currently defined, and see the whole picture in a new context. We can then play by new rules.

It is akin to the experience of a gamer. At first, a gamer will play a video or computer game by the rules. He'll read the manual, if necessary, then move through the various levels of the game. Mastery of the game, at this stage, means getting to the end - making it to the last level, surviving, becoming the most powerful character or, in the case of a simulation game, designing and maintaining a thriving family, city, or civilization. And, for many gamers, this is as far as it goes.

Some gamers, though - usually after they've mastered this level of play - will venture out onto the Internet in search of other fans or user groups. There, they will gather the "cheat codes" that can be used to acquire special abilities within the game, such as invisibility or an

infinite supply of ammunition. When the gamer returns to the game with his new secret codes, is he still playing the game, or is he cheating? From a renaissance perspective, he is still playing the game - albeit, a different one. His playing field has grown from the CD on which the game shipped, to the entire universe of computers where these secret codes and abilities can be discussed and shared. He is no longer playing the game, but a meta-game; the inner game world is still fun, but it is distanced by the gamer's new perspective - much in the way we are distanced from the play-within-a-play in one of Shakespeare's comedies or dramas. And the meta-theatrical convention gives us new perspective on the greater story, as well. It is as if we are looking at a series of proscenium arches, and being invited, as an audience, to consider whether we are within a proscenium arch, ourselves.

Gaming - as a metaphor but also as a lived experience - invites a renaissance perspective on the world in which we live. Perhaps gamers and game culture have been as responsible as anyone for the rise in expressly self-similar forms of television, like *Beavis and Butt-head*, *The Simpsons*, and *Southpark*. The joy of such programs is not the relief of reaching the climax of the linear narrative, but rather the momentary thrill of making connections. The satisfaction is recognizing of which bits of media are being satirized at any given moment. It is an entirely new perspective on television - where programs exist more in the form of Talmudic commentary - perspectives on perspectives on perspectives. We watch screens within screens - constantly reminded, almost as in a Brecht play - of the artifice of storytelling.

The great Renaissance was a simple leap in perspective. Instead of seeing everything in one dimension, we came to realize there was more than one dimension on which things were occurring. Even the Elizabethan world picture, with its concentric rings of authority - God, king, man, animals - reflects this newfound way of contending with the simultaneity of action of many dimensions at once. A gamer stepping out onto the

Internet to find a cheat code certainly reaches this renaissance's level of awareness and skill.

But what of the game who then learns to program new games for himself? He, I would argue, has stepped out of yet another frame into our current renaissance. He has deconstructed the content of the game, demystified the technology of its interface, and now feels ready to open the codes and turn the game into a do-it-yourself activity. This is precisely the character and quality of the dimensional leap associated with today's renaissance, as well.

The evidence of today's renaissance is at least as profound as that of the one that went before. The 16th Century saw the successful circumnavigation of the globe via the seas. The 20th century saw the successful circumnavigation of the globe from space. The first pictures of earth from space changed our perspective on this sphere, forever. In the same century, our dominance over the planet was confirmed not just through our ability to travel around it, but to destroy it. The atomic bomb (itself the result of a rude dimensional interchange between submolecular particles) gave us the ability to destroy the globe. Now, instead of merely being able to circumnavigate "God's" creation, we could actively destroy it. This is a new perspective.

We also have our equivalent of perspective painting, in the invention of the holograph. The holograph allows us to represent not just three, but four dimensions on a two-dimensional plate. When the viewer walks past a holograph, she can observe the three-dimensional object over a course of time. A bird can flap its wings in a single picture. But, more importantly for our renaissance's purposes, the holographic plate itself embodies a new renaissance principle. When the plate is smashed into hundreds of pieces, we do not find that one piece contains the bird's wing, and another piece the bird's beak. No, each piece of the plate contains a faint image of the entire subject, albeit a faint one. When the pieces are put together, the image achieves greater resolution. But each piece contains a representation of the

totality - a leap in dimensional understanding that is now informing disciplines as diverse as brain anatomy and computer programming.

Our analog to calculus is the development of systems theory, chaos math, and the much-celebrated fractal. Confronting non-linear equations on their own terms for the first time, mathematicians armed with computers are coming to new understandings of the way numbers can be used to represent the complex relationships between dimensions. Accepting that the surfaces in our world, from coastlines to clouds, exhibit the properties of both two and three dimensional objects (just what *is* the surface area of a cloud?) they came up with ways of working with and representing objects with *fractional* dimensionality. Using fractals and their equations, we can now represent and work with objects from the natural world that defied Cartesian analysis. We also became able to develop mathematical models that reflect many more properties of nature's own systems - such as self-similarity and remote high leverage points. Again, we find this renaissance characterized by the ability of an individual to reflect, or even affect, the grand narrative. To write the game.

Finally, our renaissance's answer to the printing press is the computer and its ability to network. Just as the printing press gave everyone access to readership, though, the computer and internet give everyone access to authorship. The first Renaissance took us from the position of passive recipient to active interpreter. Our current renaissance brings us from a position of active interpretation to one of authorship. We are the creators.

As game programmers instead of game players, we begin to become aware of just how much of our reality is, indeed, open source - up for discussion. So much of what seemed like impenetrable hardware is actually software, and ripe for reprogramming. The stories we use to understand the world seem less like explanations, and more like collaborations. They are rule sets - and only as good as their ability to explain the patterns of history or predict those of the future.

Consider the experience of a cartographer attempting to hold a conversation with a surfer. They both can claim intimate knowledge of the ocean, but from vastly different perspectives. While the mapmaker understands the sea as a series of longitude and latitude lines, the surfer sees only a motion of waves that aren't even depicted on the cartographer's map. If the cartographer were to call out from the beach to the surfer and ask him whether he is above or below the 43rd parallel, the surfer would be unable to respond. The mapmaker would have no choice but to conclude that the surfer was hopelessly lost. If any of us were asked to choose which one we would rather rely on to get us back to shore, most of us would pick the surfer. He experiences the water as a system of moving waves and stands a much better chance of navigating a safe course through them. Each surfer at each location and each moment of the day experiences an entirely different ocean. The cartographer experiences the same map, no matter what. He has a more permanent model, but his liability is his propensity to mistake his map for the actual territory.

The difference between the cartographer and the surfer's experience of the ocean is akin to pre and post-renaissance relationships to story. The first relies on the most linear and static interpretations of the story in order to create a static and authoritative template through which to glean its meaning. The latter relies on the living, moment-to-moment perceptions of its many active interpreters to develop a way of relating to its many changing patterns. Ultimately, in a cognitive process not unlike that employed by a chaos mathematician, the surfer learns to recognize the order underlying what at first appears to be random turbulence. Likewise, the surfer understands each moment and event in his world - like a toss of the I-Ching coins were once understood - as a possible reflection on any other in the entire system.

The renaissance experience of moving from game to meta-game allows everything old to look new again. We are liberated from the maps we have

been using to navigate our world, and free to create new ones based on our own observations. This invariably leads to a whole new era of competition. Renaissance may be a rebirth of old ideas in a new context, but which ideas get to be reborn?

The first to recognize the new renaissance will compete to have their ideologies be the ones that are "rebirthed" in this new context. This is why, with the emergence of the Internet, we saw the attempted rebirth (and occasional stillbirth) of everything from paganism to libertarianism, and communism to psychedelia. Predictably, the financial markets and consumer capitalism - the dominant narratives of our era - were the first to successfully commandeer the renaissance. But they squandered their story on a pyramid scheme - indeed, the accelerating force of computers and networks tends to force any story to its logical conclusion - and now the interactive renaissance is once again up for grabs.

Were I in the futurism business, I'd predict that gamers will be the next to steer the direction of our renaissance, and that they may have entirely better results. For, unlike businessmen or even politicians, gamers know that the reality they are engineering isn't real. This is why cheating is not really cheating - but merely playing from a new perspective. It's all play. Where gamers may have formerly been competing from within the game, now they meet and compete on an entirely new level - and, in comparison, they fight as gods. This is powerful perspective from which to operate, and one that may grow in popularity as games become an even more central entertainment in mass culture.

Without even a convincing business-to-business strategy on which to hang their market hopes, increasing numbers of hi-tech speculators are coming to the irrefutable conclusion that they just spent billions of their own and other people's money on a communications infrastructure that amounts, more than anything else, to a network gaming platform.

No, the internet is not a content delivery system. It's not a way to download movies or even songs. It is a way of connecting gaming consoles. The only questions left are whether processing will be done on centralized servers or within the consoles, and how to cope with latency problems in transmission. The rest is a done deal. The gamers (remember who started this Internet craze, after all...) managed to convince the world to build them the most expensive toy in the history of civilization.

To some, this might seem like a sad turn of events. I don't think it is.

Renaissances afford us the ability to rethink and redesign our world using entirely new rule sets. The shift in perspective, itself, however, is probably more valuable than where it takes us. It is an open window - a moment when the very control panel of our world is up for grabs. For as surely as it opened up, this window will close again once a sufficient consensus has been reached. We will then go on, accepting some new, albeit more dimensionalized, picture of reality as the truth, and mistake yet another map as the territory.

Our present, mid-renaissance moment, however, is a window of opportunity. It is like the peak of a mystical experience or psychedelic trip - that moment when the journeyer thinks to himself, "how will I remember this when I am back to reality?" More often than not, the psychic traveler will scribble down some words ("I am one! It is one!") that appear nonsensical in the light of day - even though the insight they mean to communicate is quite penetrating.

So, assuming that we can even do it, what is it we want to embed in the civilization of the future? What would we want to remind ourselves of, once this little window has closed? I'd think, more than any ideology or narrative, the most important idea to associate with our renaissance is the notion that we are, as individuals and a collective, the writers of our own stories. And who or what might best accomplish

this grand, trans-dimensional communication of autonomous, communitarian values?

I'd place my renaissance bet on the gamers' perspective: the very notion that our world is open source, and that reality itself is up for grabs. For, more than anyone else, a real gamer knows that we are the ones creating the rules.