

Adventure Gamers Interview

Terry Dowling interviewed by Marek Bronstring

Published October 8, 2003 @ www.adventuregamers.com/article/id.292

One of the most successful adventures released by The Adventure Company in recent years is the beautiful and atmospheric Schizm. Now, as the sequel Chameleon is being prepared for release by TAC in November, we sat down with designer Terry Dowling to get his thoughts on the games, first-person perspective adventures, and much more!

What can you tell us about the basic plot for *Chameleon*?

It's very much a classic science-fiction adventure. A young man named Sen Geder awakes aboard a derelict space station in orbit around a desolate world. He learns from a holographic recording made two centuries before that he's being punished for causing the destruction of the planet he sees below. Sen has no memory of this or even who he is. Before he can be told what the second part of his punishment is to be, the recording device is destroyed. Though the station has been largely gutted and the bulkheads sealed, Sen has to find a way down to the valley that's the only habitable spot on the entire planet. There he encounters two feuding tribes—all that's left of the planetary population after two centuries of global war. One is essentially technocratic, the other fiercely naturalist—though these aren't quite the hard and fast stereotypes you'd expect. Sen is able to use some Chameleon tech from the old days to impersonate members of each tribe and go among them. In his explorations, he discovers that things aren't entirely what they seem, that there's a lot more to what's going on in the valley than he first thought.

If the main character finds himself in a state of amnesia at the start of the game, how will the player get to discover the game's backstory?

There's an important (and I hope satisfying) reason for the amnesia. It's used quite often in adventure games and novels, I know, just as so many detective novels have such 'givens' as a troubled detective with flaws in his character, the street woman with a heart of gold, etc. I want gamers to discover the backstory with Sen as they go along. The initial recording gives some key information, then, as Sen explores the wrecked station, a mysterious machine called a Companion gives more, and so on. As in any good novel, any good story or movie, the world opens up as the gameplay progresses.

What kind of characters will you be able to speak to?

Members of the different tribes, a mysterious nomad named Arko who has a hideout in a beach location, and more of these very intriguing constructs called Companions which Sen will find scattered across the landscape. Some gamers like to be told everything up

front; others like to put things together themselves as they go along. The latter is ultimately the best way, I feel. Let's just say that the valley on Sarpedon is a very interesting place, with lots of clues for the gamer to put together and a sequence of events that builds to a rather unexpected conclusion.

How would you describe your working relationship with Detalion?

It's been excellent, a true dream run for me. All my dealings have been via email and mail with Maciej Miasik, Detalion's game developer. They're in Rzeszow, Poland and I'm down here in Sydney, Australia (Detalion Down Under, as I call it), and Dreamcatcher, our publisher, is in Toronto, Canada, so it's truly an international project. Maciej speaks and reads English very well, but most of the Detalion team don't, so there are additional concept and text translation challenges that otherwise wouldn't exist. But the main thing is that there's a tremendous amount of respect and goodwill between us. They've been gracious, patient and accommodating. I know it's been said by a lot of development teams, but we love what we're doing.

How is writing adventure games different from working on your print fiction, and which is preferable?

They're very different creatures. I love the shorter print narrative forms – the short story and the novella in particular. For a start, as author you're completely in charge of how well a story does. It's a sobering responsibility. You're responsible every step of the way. Being only two games in, I have to reserve judgment about how writing adventure games can be. So far it's been exciting and very satisfying, but there are different story challenges to be met. For instance, the interactivity factor in modern computer adventures means having puzzles to solve, clues to find, information to get. Print narrative can't work that way. By its linear nature, page sequencing etc, it has to keep carrying you along whether you've got the clues, paid attention or not. A computer adventure can literally strand you in the world until you solve a puzzle that lets you pass a certain point. That can often be annoying and ruin pacing and suspension of disbelief. But so far finding clues and solving puzzles are the best things we have to keep the gamer immersed in the gameworld long enough for the mood and setting to work their charm. That's the other essential. The gameworld has to be fascinating, intriguing and fun to explore in the first place. A game like *Riven* is justly a classic because of how well the puzzles are integrated with setting and story. They feel like natural parts of the world being presented, which is exactly how it should be.

How did you first get involved writing computer games?

Purest chance. I tend to regard computer games as vehicles for storytelling, and—like many gamers—will often use walkthroughs so I can have the game story experience, go on the journey without getting bogged down too much in aspects of gameplay that spoil or delay story. Dedicated puzzle solvers have an entirely different view about this, of course. I enjoyed *RHEM*, for instance, but it annoyed me that there wasn't a kitchen or sleeping area for our poor protagonist. That one omission violated the logic of the gameworld. As a professional storyteller and journalist, a game—like a film—has to

work at the level of story first and foremost. When I was stuck on a timed puzzle in Reah, Detalion's first interplanetary adventure for L.K.Avalon, I emailed its developer, Maciej Miasik, introduced myself and asked if he could help. I wanted to continue the journey, you see. Maciej checked out my home site to confirm who I was and very kindly replied. He provided both the puzzle solution and asked whether I'd be interested in coming up with a title and background story for their new game: the one we all now know as *Schizm: Mysterious Journey* (or *Mysterious Journey: Schizm* in North America). This involvement soon grew to providing a full story outline and shooting script for the twelve or so characters that were needed. I began doing maps of Argilus, devising continents and oceans and locating the different settings our characters visit, even naming different balloon fields and floating cities, though we really only visit one of each.

The Mary Celeste theme seemed a good way for explaining the familiar 'empty landscape' situation you find in so many adventure games. Having an ancient, highly ritualised society with a planetary defence system looking out for its citizens seemed a good justification for the puzzles we encounter. This planet has been visited and its people exploited in its past and they have arranged to protect themselves. The dual protagonist arrangement was already in place and, since the characters couldn't feasibly be visible to each other, the 'schism' idea of having different dimensions at work became a key element of the story. But most of the visual and puzzle aspects of the gameworld already existed. I had to come up with characters and fit a story around existing material, which was a real pleasure and a great learning experience.

Were you pleased with how *Schizm* turned out in the end?

Very much so. It's the DVD version that won us the Grand Prix at Utopiales 2001 in France. The only downside was that, for compression reasons, the CD-ROM version of the game had to sacrifice 40% of the story, so most of the mission logs were left blank and the animation features limited. To make matters worse, two of the least capable actresses had their lines left in. Naturally that concerned me as a storyteller, and I do urge those interested to check out the DVD version – if only to get a clear idea of what the sphere is that the fish balloon lifts out of the egg-shaped structure in Matia's Zone.

Was a sequel to *Schizm* always planned?

Unofficially, yes. A lot depended on how well *Schizm* did, of course, but early on Maciej indicated that he hoped we would collaborate again. There's so much goodwill between us that we all wanted such a collaboration to continue. I genuinely regard myself as an honorary member of the Detalion team for any projects where they feel my services can be useful. It's great fun and it's exciting.

Were there any specific challenges in writing the central character for a game that uses a first-person perspective?

The main challenge with first-person POV is that you automatically have the character's thoughts and background knowledge to draw on, and these things need to be given or

their absence explained in a convincing way. Hence the use of the amnesia factor in so many games. Sen's amnesia, however, exists for very important reasons, as I said. Someone needs him to have no knowledge of his past.

What is the strength of a first-person adventure as opposed to a third-person adventure?

First and foremost the degree of immediacy and immersion, the extent to which the gameworld becomes the gamer's own. Third-person games put you at a distance, make it an armchair perspective, as in a 'god-game'. For me there's a crucial lack of involvement. It has to become your world. You can use action and violence in a first or third person shooter, for instance, to force immersion and involvement but it's always at a price. People are smarter than many games let them be. They just need a chance to reconfigure their attitudes, as it were, and learn to appreciate subtlety.

In my view, first-person POV is the optimum game story format. Third-person POV is too detached, too much like the passive participation of watching a movie, observing the actions of others. It's usually hard to give third-person POV truly immersive interactivity too. It's real enough in games like *Silent Hill 2*, *American McGee's Alice* or *Grim Fandango*, but often adventure games end up with dialogue options to create a sense of interactivity. I find the dialogue choices in some quite popular games a very tedious way of giving backstory. In *Chameleon*, it's mostly first-person POV with third-person cutscenes showing character interaction when necessary information is being given.

Do you anticipate you'll be working more with adventure games in the future?

I'd certainly like to. This truly is an important artistic and narrative medium. It won't replace print narrative but it can be as powerful as cinema. We've been talking about developing one of my own books for our next collaboration. I can't tell you how exciting the prospect of that is.