

Storytelling across platforms

 By [Charles Siboto](#)

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One of the truly great things about stories is that there are many ways to tell them and share them with each other. Stories are in our DNA as a species. We tell beautiful stories and we tell ugly stories. Just look at the stories in the last few weeks' news: ugly stories like the outrageous instances of rape and murder of women in our society and beautiful stories of women standing together to try to repair our broken society in the political arena; the disheartening story of a sports hero who became a villain. I recently finished rereading *Final Crisis* (2009) by Grant Morrison, one of the truly great grand-scale comic books I've had the pleasure to experience. In it, one of the race of celestial beings monitoring the multiverse notes that her race has become contaminated by interacting with the beings that they oversee: "We all now have names and stories; there are heroes and villains, secrets and lovers." To be human is to tell stories. I'd go as far as to say that being sentient is to tell stories.

There have been a lot of cool goings on across all my favourite storytelling media and this has led me to thinking about how we tell each other stories and how we tell them across different platforms. A very cool thing happened at this year's D.I.C.E (Design, Innovate, Communicate, Entertain) Summit. Gabe Newell, the CEO and co-founder of powerhouse gaming studio Valve, sat down to discuss storytelling with well-known filmmaker JJ Abrams. In their keynote address they discussed the idea of making films based on *Half-Life* (2008) and *Portal* (2007). If you're a gamer you probably know that these titles are classics and have each redefined the gaming landscape on their release. If you aren't a gamer trust me when I tell you that these games are a big deal. Believe the hype.

The idea of a movie based on a video game franchise is by no means new: it's just not been a very successful thus far. Films and video games seem to be like *Aliens* and *Predators* - they don't play together nicely. More films based on video games have tanked than not and vice versa. Sure, ventures like the *Resident Evil* (2002 to 2012) movies and *The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay* (2004) video game turned out all right, but there's a *Far Cry* (2008) movie directed by a very misguided Uwe Boll and too many terrible movie game adaptations for every success. Film and gaming are sibling media and if they get over their family squabbles they can make magic together.

DVDs over books or video games

Movies have been a very successful storytelling vehicle since their inception because of how accessible they are to

everyone. After a hard day's work most people would rather curl up with a DVD than a book or a video game. This quality allows movies to complement the other storytelling media. Comic books and fantasy and sci-fi novels have increased in popularity because of the movie franchises based on them. Technology has reached an apex where it's able sincerely to translate fantasy worlds like Middle-Earth and Westeros onto screen. But even with the limited technology of the late '70s George Lucas brought us Star Wars, which means that there really just is no excuse not to be able to translate good stories onto the big screen.

Newell and Abrams touched on the difference in storytelling methods between the two media. Film is a more passive form of presenting a story, the viewer can buy into the characters' lives and even fall in love with them, but they are never participants. Conversely, gaming is a more interactive medium and the player is in charge of how the story plays out (pun always intended). Even in a tightly scripted game like Half-Life 2 (2004) you feel the pressure of it all being up to you to save the human race from the invading aliens, the Combine. Games like BioWare's Mass Effect (2007 to 2012) series take the interactive element further by adding serious consequences to your actions. I let a character die in the first game and it made life hard in the second game when his people weren't all that warm towards me and assisting with my mission. These are things to consider when telling stories across these media. Players used to hitting zombies over the head with a crowbar as Gordon Freeman may feel odd having to just watch him hit zombies over the head in a movie.

Some semblance of a story required

This is where the power of imaginative ways of storytelling comes into play. Movie audiences are more used to good plots than gamers. Action films and romantic comedies aside, most people require some semblance of a story in their movies. Gaming has been a shoot-'em-up affair for the most part - we only started getting good stories recently. This is the ideal time to combine the storytelling techniques of film and gaming. Film is at a point at which it allows filmmakers to tell stories

that they weren't able to just a few years back. Life of Pi (2012) was thought to be unfilmable, but Ang Lee and his team made it happen and it's one of the most visually astonishing films of all time.

Gaming is going next generation and there's a strong emphasis on imaginative ways of telling stories and presenting them to gamers. Nintendo is leading the charge with its Wii U already available and doing good things. Sony has officially announced the PlayStation 4 at its 20/21 February, 2013 conference. It didn't reveal the actual console, only the hardware specs and the new controller. The ideas surrounding the console and the videos of the games are quite impressive, though, and have me excited about the future. We're awaiting news from Microsoft regarding the next iteration of the Xbox, but so far all the next-gen players (pun always intended) are focused on cross-platform sharing. This is why Gabe Newell and JJ Abrams' D.I.C.E address was so important and goes beyond just a Half-Life or Portal movie. Filmmakers and game developers need to share information and learn to understand one another's media to tell their stories across platforms successfully.

ABOUT CHARLES SIBOTO

Charles Siboto is a delightful, youngish person. He firmly believes that kindness matters and cannot abide people who are asshats.
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