Twitter Thread by Alexander Freed

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Someone asked me recently about breaking into the video game industry as a writer / narrative designer. There's so, so much good advice out there that I only tend to hit this topic on rare occasion. But it's been a while, so let's go!

(Why my answer is worth anything: I've been doing this for about fifteen years and I've hired a lot of writers and editors. Why my answer isn't worth anything: My view of the industry is fairly narrow and I haven't tried to break in for a while, so I'm arguably out of date.)

First: Write, write well, and write video games. Published non-games material is great, but at this point there's no reason not to put together a Twine game or similar to add to your portfolio. Show you're interested in the medium.

If you're applying to a job that requires a writing test (most companies serious about narrative will require one), do what the test says. Follow instructions. Show you can deliver what your client is asking for. Do it well.

If you're submitting other samples, make them diverse in style / tone / character voice--show range. If you want to be artsy and experimental, you can INCLUDE that but it shouldn't be the focus. I want to know someone can tell a straightforward story adeptly. Basics first!

I'm going to highlight that "character voice" part for a second. A lot of game writing is dialog writing. If your characters all sound the same, you've got a problem. Plenty of other advice out there on how to differentiate voice, so I won't belabor the point.

Also, uh, don't offer up samples that aren't your best. If you're a mediocre humor writer and the company doesn't specifically need funny writers, don't include your mediocre "funny" sample.

I always prefer to see a writer who has some professional experience already--even if it's not in video games. Journalism, pen-and-paper games, advertising writing, whatever. Give me proof that you can write for an editor, on deadline, and get paid.

Why does this matter? Because some writers are brilliant but when they arrive in an office and are told to deliver a 3-page plot summary by Friday, they wilt under pressure. If I know you can produce on deadline and take feedback, I'm reassured.

Don't be afraid to showcase your expertise and passions in your samples, either. Do you have specialized knowledge in a subject related to the project? Are you able to reach out to an underserved portion of the audience?

If I've got two equally skilled writers applying to a job and an existing writing team that's not terribly diverse (in pop culture diet, in cultural background, in professional background, in ethnicity, in gender, etc.) I'll favor the applicant I see bringing new perspectives.

Not every company will feel that way, granted. There are places that want a monoculture. Their games tend to have obvious weak spots, and you may not want to subject yourself to working in such a place. Your call.

If you're straight out of school and have no professional writing experience, you're not doomed! If you can write well and work with others, there's a place for you out there. But that brings me to the second big point...

If you're a writer looking for entry-level jobs, don't set your heart on working for a specific company (or on a specific franchise!) Maybe you want to make open world AAA games about '80s cartoons?

That's a fine goal, but your first job may be writing for a mobile Match 3 game with a regency romance theme. Be okay with this. Be excited about this! It's professional experience, and it'll make finding the next job easier.

(This is another reason why having a diverse range of creative influences and familiarity with different genres and audiences can help. If all you care about is writing space marines, you've made your job search much harder... and you'll be a bad regency romance writer.)

There's a lot of work out there for game writers--maybe more than there's ever been. Look at studios in AAA, in mobile, in VR, etc. If you can't find permanent work, maybe you can find contract or freelance work. Maybe you can team up with a tiny indie studio.

Getting the second job may not be easy, but it'll likely be easier than getting your first... so long as you've got a good track record.

Third big point: Be a good human. If you're skilled at socializing and networking, apply your good humanity there. If you're not, well, that's okay, too. Follow people on Twitter, lurk in the back of conferences, and pick up knowledge that way.

Most important, though, is that you come across as a good collaborator. Game development is not for auteurs. It's for people who can sit down together, passionately invested in their differing ideas, and work out compromises.

You don't need to be charming. Social awkwardness is fine. Stubbornness can even be fine. But I need to feel like you're someone who's going to work with me to solve problems, not fight with me over those same problems.

That's everything off the very top of my head, I guess? Man, it's been a while since I've done this. I know there's a dozen game writers who follow me who tweet better advice than this daily... feel free to out yourselves here and drive traffic to your fonts of wisdom!