
TWENTY TWENTY-FIVE GAMEDEV MANIFESTO

BY
ADRIÀ REINA

TOKYO, JAPAN
31 March 2025

Table of Contents:

- PREFACE
- PLAYER EXPERIENCE
- NARRATIVE DESIGN
- INTERFACE

PREFACE

I have witnessed the passage of time through the games I play. Gaming's evolution mirrors humanity's own journey. As the video game industry matures into a form that transcends platforms, services, and devices, it forms interconnected ecosystems that shape culture and player experiences worldwide. I, too, have evolved alongside this journey. With audiences engaging across an ever-expanding spectrum of genres and mechanics, each iteration builds upon the last, shaping a shared global consciousness that must be recognized as we move forward. Now, to carry itself into the future, the industry must move past its own insecurities, just as I have. We can no longer start from a blank slate every single time. It's time to establish a set of guiding principles that elevate the medium, breaking down unnecessary barriers and fostering innovation and creativity as a driving force that pushes it forward. Therefore, this manifesto, a foundation for the future ahead.

PLAYER EXPERIENCE

- A. Respect your audience: trust in their intelligence and literacy. For over half a century, interactive entertainment has been embedded in global culture, with modern frameworks and current control schemes in place for more than three decades. Over this time, we have fostered a shared global consciousness in gaming, forming a universal understanding of game design and mechanics. It's crucial to build upon this collective knowledge, recognizing that today's players are well-versed in interactive media. As the medium continues to evolve, we can no longer start from a blank slate with each new creation.
 1. Games must no longer be designed as if those playing them have never touched a video game before unless it's specifically aimed at children or first-time players. Assume an average level of interactive literacy; design with this in mind. Even in the rare case that someone's very first gaming experience happens to be with your game, trust that humans are intelligent, resourceful, and capable of figuring out the basics on their own.
 2. Avoid excessive hand-holding. Trust players to engage with the world and interpret its cues on their own. Constant guidance through camera movements or other visual indicators is unnecessary.
 3. Acknowledge the meta aspect of modern gaming, knowing that today's players have instant access to the internet through their connected devices. As people turn to the web for answers, engagement, and community-building, the same extends to video games. Games now exist within a broader digital ecosystem, where players can easily find solutions through guides, videos, and discussions. Embrace this meta-dimensionality and avoid unnecessary guidance that slows down the experience.
- B. Make the full range of gameplay available to the player as early as possible (if not right from the start). While characters' abilities and gameplay options often unlock gradually throughout a game, minimize this pacing. Players have unlocked all sorts of powers and movements countless times. Put all the core mechanics and abilities on the table early.
- C. Basic game mechanics do not need to be broken down, either through tutorials or disguised as part of level design. From the moment the game begins, it must acknowledge the player's interactive literacy, providing a direct path to the core experience without frequent tutorials, constant intrusive message screens, or an overly scripted first playable section. A certain level of literacy is assumed.

- D. Players' time and agency must be respected. Allow them to engage with the world and its lore on their own terms. Once a game is released, it belongs to the players and is no longer in the hands of those who created it.
 - 1. Do not impede the player's free will. If they choose to take a particular route, even if it goes against the narrative path or seems illogical, allow them to do so. Player agency must be respected, even when their choices don't align with the expected narrative.
 - 2. Avoid sections where gameplay is restricted, such as areas where the camera is suddenly locked or where only slow walking is possible with normal speed or running disabled. Respect player agency; if they choose to slow down and engage with the moment, they must be free to do so. If they prefer to move faster and skip ahead, they must be able to do so without obstruction.
 - 3. Allow players to interact with the world based on the game mechanics and physics introduced so far. Let them utilize the mechanics in their own way, avoiding situations where only a specific mechanic, as explicitly imagined by the development team, can be applied, or where physics suddenly disregard previously established possibilities.
- E. Avoid fake walls, temporary barriers, or any sort of artificial obstruction that impedes progression, such as those that force the player to clear all enemies before being allowed to move forward. Unless arenas are central to your game's creative value or to a specific section, these elements usually signal weak level design or poorly thought-out mechanics. If players are tempted to skip ahead or bypass large sections, the fault lies in the design. Don't restrict movement, rethink your systems instead.
- F. If only one action is possible in a given situation, there is no need to bind it to one specific action button. Whether it's 'A,' 'B,' 'X,' or 'Y,' or their respective keys on a keyboard, any action button, or a set of them, should trigger the intended action, as long as that action is meant to be triggered with one of the action buttons. For example, if a chest can only be opened (without options to interact in other ways, such as moving or damaging it), or a wall can only be climbed, a set of action buttons may trigger the intended action, either directly through the default interaction button or indirectly through an alternative input, such as attacking to open the chest or jumping to climb the wall. The game should recognize the player's intent; requiring trial and error to find the specific correct button creates unnecessary friction.
- G. Stamina bars should not deplete during cruising or simple movement situations. If your game includes a stamina bar for combat, climbing, or similar actions, consider how it affects movement across long distances. Forcing players to constantly monitor

the bar, release the run button just before depletion, wait for it to recharge, and then repeat this constantly is no fun.

- H. Loot intended for crafting must feel meaningful and purposeful. Excessive junk or repetitive, valueless items dilute the significance of crafting mechanics. Crafting that requires an abundance of insignificant items, or continuously adds materials that are difficult to differentiate instead of reusing existing ones, undermines the player's experience and the logical flow of crafting.
- I. Every cutscene, sequence, or long animation must be both pausable and skippable, regardless of how important the story in the game is or how much effort went into crafting a specific narrative moment. Not every player will engage with the narrative in the same way as its creators. They might just want to play, have already seen the sequence, or simply prefer to skip ahead. Respect the player's time. Let them skip what doesn't interest them.
 - 1. The 'Start' button (Menu, Options, +) on controllers, and 'Esc' or 'P' on the keyboard, is the default for pausing any non-interactive moment in a game.
 - 2. Enable skipping of cutscenes and non-interactive sequences by holding pause or any action button for a set duration. If only one action is possible in a given situation, there is no need to bind it to a specific button. If the player presses an action button during a sequence, the intent is clear. There is no need for a different button in each game; skipping must be simple and universal.
- J. Any action button press instantly progresses dialogues, close messages, and any other form of on-screen text. Dialogue and messages progress immediately, even mid-sentence, when an action button is pressed.
- K. Recurrent animations should have shorter versions that are toggleable and may be turned off entirely, such as those for summoning, special attacks, finishers, or takedowns.
- L. Keep the Game Over or End screen and related animations brief, ensuring the player can resume gameplay as quickly as possible. While the first End screen can be impactful, repeated viewings after multiple deaths or failures lose their impact and become repetitive.

NARRATIVE DESIGN

- M. Prioritize storytelling that feels native to video games. While cutscenes and scripted sequences, which are often non-interactive or involve minimal player input, are effective tools, overusing them is draining for the player. Similarly, artificially restricting character movement to force-feed story through lengthy dialogues, animations, or voice-overs has also proven counterproductive. Draw from other media when it fits while maintaining a focus on expanding and refining video games' own unique storytelling methods rather than simply choosing to replicate other media's.
- N. Delay the narrative just enough for the player to engage with the gameplay first. Games often begin with a cutscene, followed by a prologue or first section filled with dialogues and additional scripted sequences. But why front-load so much story and lore before the player has even had a chance to try the gameplay? If they don't enjoy the mechanics, they might quit the game altogether before the story even matters. Keep the introduction brief, let the player play first. Once they're engaged and immersed, then unfold the story in detail.
- O. In this medium, when it comes to non-interactive narrative moments, less is more (unless cinematic storytelling is central to your game's creative value). Generally speaking, cinema exists for purely scripted, passive storytelling, and while cutscenes, dialogues and animations can be a powerful narrative tool in video games, these must be concise to minimize waiting times and maximize active play.
 - 1. If you can't tell a great story, don't let a mediocre one get in the way of great gameplay. If the story doesn't elevate the experience and your characters are one-dimensional, don't sweat it, it's fine. Don't disguise limited storytelling strength with artificial complexity. Embrace simplicity, keep dialogues, cutscenes, and scripted sequences short.
- P. Scenarios must progress naturally and seamlessly, keeping in mind that gameplay segments take precedence over rather passive narrative moments.
 - 1. Avoid brief, unnecessary non-interactive narrative moments and animations that interrupt gameplay flow. Place passive narrative moments either before or after gameplay segments instead of switching back and forth constantly between the two.
 - 2. Avoid brief, unnecessary gameplay interactions sandwiched between largely non-interactive, passive narrative moments. If a cutscene, scripted sequence, or animation is the best way to advance a scenario, use it without hesitation. While prioritizing active play is essential, gameplay that feels sterile offers little joy. Don't force players through unnecessary or

uninspired disjointed gameplay sections that weaken the overall experience.

- Q. Never fake agency: avoid making cutscenes, scripted narrative sequences, or animations interactive without a clear and purposeful creative reason. Quick-time events and scripted button prompts do not deepen immersion. Pressing a certain button at a predetermined moment does not, by itself, create engagement or enhance the experience. True immersion comes from gameplay that respects the player's agency and contributes meaningfully to the narrative. Let every moment serve the story with intent, not illusion.
- R. Do not artificially extend the main storyline with unnecessary backtracking or uninspired obligatory quests. If the journey is on the shorter side, celebrate it: there is no issue with that.

INTERFACE

- S. Allow players to rebind keys and customize the behavior of certain key presses, such as choosing between a single press or holding the button for actions like 'run' or 'crouch,' or adjusting the analog stick or mouse sensitivity.
 - 1. Motion-based controls, vibration, and controller speaker sounds must be optional, with the game remaining fully playable without these features enabled.
- T. Keep button hold times for actions like skipping or dropping reasonable: 1.5 to 3 seconds is enough. Longer wait times serve no purpose.
- U. Allow players to enable accessibility features before the first narrative sequence or gameplay section begins, including subtitles, closed captions, colorblind aids, hearing impairment features, alternate control schemes, and other visual or gameplay-related tools to ensure inclusivity from the outset.
- V. Allow players to configure graphic and sound settings before the first narrative sequence or gameplay section begins (where supported, outside of conventional consoles).
- W. The autosave warning screen displayed at the start of every game is obsolete and must be deprecated. For over two decades, autosave has been a standard feature in most games, there is no need to announce it at the beginning of every session. Players are familiar with this function, and the presence of the autosave icon in the corner of the screen is widely understood as an indication that progress is being saved.
- X. Strive for a HUD that communicates only what's essential, and let players disable non-essential elements.
- Y. When signaling injury or damage with a colored screen effect, such as red, keep it subtle. There is no need to drastically tint the screen with an intense color that significantly diminishes visibility. A gentle hue, either along the edges or across the screen, is all that's needed to convey that the situation is critical.
- Z. Enable players to return to the starting menu or to reload their save data at any time without forcing them to exit the game and navigate through the system's interface.

31 March 2025

<https://twenty-twenty-five-gamedev-manifesto.com>