

About Me

Howdy!

My name is James Cavin. Lars told me that you're looking for a writer for an RPG Tower Defense game.

I'm currently a Senior at A&M working on an English degree in the Creative Writing track. I write a regular [humor column](#) for the school paper, the Battalion. Last semester the university's Drama Department produced a comedic ten minute play of mine, *Interviewing*. I have also taken two Game Design classes under Professor Vinod Srinivasan, where I made small games like *Zombies Drank My Beer*, and worked as part of a team on larger projects like *Hat of Angel* (Art, Programming, Concept and Level Design) and *Gunstrafe* (Programming, Level Design and some Art). Outside of class, I have continued to make several games on my own, such as *Skywayman* (made in a month to submit to IGF) and *Most Shocking* (made in two days to submit to a GameJolt contest). I also worked on early writing and level design for Lars' environmental tower defense game, *Super Energy Apocalypse*.

Game Stories

From what Lars tells me, the game you are designing is an RPG with tower defense combat mechanics, where the "towers" are actually characters that will be leveled up, gain new abilities, etc. in RPG fashion. These characters will visit a variety of interesting locations and defend against hordes of enemies during combat, all while gaining experience and advancing a plot.

When it comes to game stories, a lot of people tend to just try to make an awesome story without thinking about how it fits the game. I personally think this is a bad idea. The story absolutely positively has to explain the game mechanics. Loads of games ignore this and the result is a bizarre disconnect between the reality of what the player does, and the reality of the story. ("Why does it matter that that character just got shot? They've been shot hundreds of times before! How about the regenerating health, or the fifteen medkits I'm carrying? Oh, this is a cutscene, the game's rules don't count here.") This is the difference between a game that's just gameplay with a side dish of story, and a game where the gameplay and story are interwoven to form a single polished product.

The Bare Bones of the Story

So, if we look at the basic mechanics of this tower defense game, we have characters defending an object across an interesting assortment of locations. Whatever story we have, it needs to explain these three things:

- 1) **Characters.** Whatever the story is, it needs to feature an interesting assortment of diverse characters, each with different abilities, that all grow (both in gameplay and story terms). Furthermore, these characters need to be able to be introduced slowly over the length of the game (just as new content will be introduced to the player). Whatever abilities the players have need to be explained in the story (i.e. being revived, regenerating health, etc).
- 2) **A McGuffin.** For this tower defense mechanic, the characters will need to be defending something (A "McGuffin" to borrow Hitchcock's term) from the hostile forces. Therefore, the story needs to explain the game mechanics of the McGuffin. Why will the game characters fight to the death to defend it rather than run away? Why does the enemy want it so badly that they will send wave after wave of mindless minions after it? Why can't the McGuffin defend itself? If the McGuffin has in game powers, where did those powers come from?
- 3) **A reason to travel.** If the only motivation is for the characters to defend the McGuffin, then there is no reason for them to move at all. However, we want the characters to have to defend the McGuffin in a variety of locations against increasingly difficult enemies. Therefore, the plot needs to explain why the characters are carrying the McGuffin on a journey of increasing difficulty.

Considering these three things, we get a bare bones plot structure:

A motley assortment of heroes attempts to take a McGuffin (highly valued by both them and the opposing force) from point A to point B. Along the way, they gather more allies and overcome increasingly difficult challenges, before finally reaching point B victoriously.

A Random Example

Alright, let's flesh that out a little bit. Lars mentioned that one of the "McGuffins" you all had discussed was a female psychic character, who would have various psychic powers that could influence the other characters

(such as buffing up their abilities, etc.) using energy gathered from dead enemies. So for the story to feel cohesive with the gameplay, I would have to explain all these mechanics. Why does she gain energy from dead enemies? Ok, we'll say that she's a psychic vampire, feeding off their life energy. But why can't she move and use weapons to defend herself like everyone else? Ok, let's say she's frozen in stone – the only way she can interact with the world is telepathically. Why would she be frozen? Perhaps it's deliberate. Maybe she's a dangerous criminal, or a military experiment deemed to risky to continue and being moved to storage. That would fit with being a psychic energy vampire. So then the other characters could be the guards transporting her. But why would she use her awesome psychic powers to help people that are just trying to lock her up, and why would they give their lives up to defend her? How 'bout they're fighting a common enemy, and the only way that they can survive is by working together. This also gives us a certain amount of natural tension between the characters, which is great for characterization and character development. The characters start out completely distrusting one another, but through the course of the game slowly turn an uneasy alliance into an actual friendship (this was done incredibly well in the cooperative campaign of Splinter Cell: Conviction...well, up until the point that the game forces you to kill your buddy, but I'm off topic).

So far, we've got a dangerous military experiment being transported by guards to a more secure location. But what about the enemies? Why do they want to attack? Why do they single out the psychic? Well, maybe they recognize the powerful potential, and want her as a weapon for themselves. Let's bite the cliché bullet and say that humanity is at war with an alien race. A war against a race of telepathic hive mind monsters (which nicely explains the in-game behavior of the enemies), that we're losing pretty badly. The psychic McGuffin character is a military experiment fusing human and captured alien DNA to attempt to create something to combat the enemy. Only, the unstable combination has created something even more dangerous (could be our last hope, could be our complete undoing if it goes wrong). While the human forces move the experiment to a more secure location for research and development, the aliens sense the powerful telepathic presence, and send their best troops to intercept. The human ship is ambushed and boarded (great combat tutorial material there) and gets shot down in the ensuing fire fight. Crashed on a hostile alien planet, the few remaining human forces attempt to regroup and escape. Of course, the only one that can interface with alien technology is the one with alien DNA. So if the guards want to live, and the psychic doesn't want to be assimilated into the hive mind (a fate worse than death, etc.), they're going to have to work together.

By applying the limitations of the gameplay mechanics, we can create a story that fits a million times better than if we just set out to write a

cool story. Rather than just gameplay with a serving of story, we'll have a unified package of awesome, where each component supports the other.

Some Further Examples

Of course, this is just one idea. Using this method, I've come up with a variety of other examples:

I. Feudal Japan

A band of defeated samurai attempt to carry their near mortally wounded lord back to his fiefdom on the other side of Japan. The enemy wants to capture the lord to cement their victory, while the protagonists know that his survival can rally their other armies and save the day. As they travel, more surviving samurai are discovered scattered throughout the countryside, while the enemy's hunt intensifies.

(Alternatively, the lord could already be dead, and his loyal vassals would be trying to save him the dishonor of having his body captured and displayed – a big deal in feudal Japan – while the enemy wants to capture the corpse to demoralize the remaining troops.)

(Even further alternatively, the whole point could be to cover up the fact that the lord is dead at all so that his troops will continue fighting, while the enemy is trying to expose his death.)

Pros: Has a cool historical flavor

Cons: Limits the enemies to various kinds of human soldiers

II. The Fabric of Reality

An eclectic team of “fixers” from the Bureau of Temporal Anomalies holds the apocalypse at bay by fixing tears in the fabric of reality using the FORFD (Fabric Of Reality Fixing Device – actually just Einstein's brain in a jar with a couple of double-A batteries taped to it and a can of sardines...it works, don't ask us how we figured that out). Sounds easy enough, until you realize that there's stuff on the other side that desperately wants to get through. And it's not going to ask nicely. Did we mention that Recon Team 7 hasn't been heard from in 48 hours? Of course, if you could find survivors, they might be able to help you out...if they haven't turned.

Pros: Explains why there's a time limit to enemy's attacks (you closed the rift that they were coming through), allows for a certain amount of mystery that can be explored as the story goes (why is this happening, who's responsible, what's on the other side?), allows for lots of interesting enemies.

Cons: Pretty gonzo.

III. Mad Science!

Dr. Mad Scientist has finally created his ice cream and puppy destroying Death Laser, and from his secret island base is threatening destruction of a scale the world has never before seen. Luckily for the world's puppies, our crack team of super commandos has parachuted onto the island to plant an EMP device on the Death Laser before the evil doctor can set it off. Oh, except that their plane was shot down. ...Well, don't worry, I'm sure the surviving commandos can regroup and escort the EMP across the island before the doctor's minions tear it to pieces. Right?

Pros: Allows for all sorts of interesting monsters as enemies

Cons: A little goofy, puts the heroes on the offense, not much suspense in the story (most of the mystery is explained upfront "it's a doomsday device – go kill it.")

IV. Once Upon a Time in the Sahara

A bunch of French Foreign Legion deserters trying to carry stolen treasure out of enemy territory. I mean, the regiment was butchered, why shouldn't the survivors try to get rich on their way out? At first it was just bandits trying to get at the treasure, but then the creepy guys showed up. Yeah, the ones with the hoods and weird shadows that do things shadows shouldn't be able to do, like stab you in the face. ...We're starting to think that maybe the treasure isn't just a treasure. Not since it started vaporizing people. And now the voice in my head is saying that if I don't do exactly what it says, the things under the sand are going to wake up.

Pros: There's not enough French Foreign Legion games

Cons: Beau Geste meets Lovecraft might be a bit of a niche audience.

In Closing

Now, this is just based off of the few details I know about your planned game mechanics. If you are interested, just let me know the specifics and I can throw together some more accurately tailored ideas. I've got no problem working on a deadline (I turn content into the Battalion on a weekly basis). Honestly, I enjoy working with limitations because I feel that it forces me to be more creative. For instance, when the drama department produced my short play, they cast a girl to play "Jack," so I had to rewrite the entire play to make that character female. The end result was radically different and in my opinion, superior. (You can get the original [here](#) and the new and improved one [here](#)). So if there's more specific mechanics, or a story setting/genre/arc that you've settled on, I'd have no problem working within those parameters.

Thanks for considering me,

-James Cavin