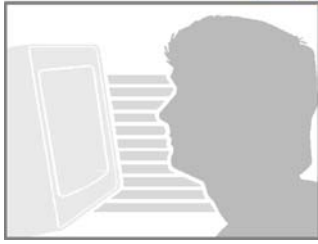


# Usability Interface



The Newsletter of the STC Usability SIG

Mini Edition, Volume 11, Issue 2 | October 2004



## *Why Game Documentation is Essential to a Satisfying User Experience*

By Martin Peterson

With each passing year, video games are becoming more popular with Americans of all ages and the industry is spending more on the creation, publication, and distribution of newer, more technologically superior video games. This trend presents an opportunity for professional writers and communicators. One might assume that the only need for writers in the video game industry is for the production of a game's instruction booklet. This generalization is far from the truth.

Documentation and information organization are an integral part of video game construction. Currently, there exists no uniform, standardized way to write, document, or organize information in the gaming industry. Because the industry is still young and still developing norms, a gap is evident in the knowledge and methods used. As the necessity for quality video game design and hence proposal documents increases, this knowledge gap presents an opportunity for technical communicators. The video game industry may be one of the directions we, as technical communicators, will move toward in the near future.

Currently, game programmers and designers usually generate all the documentation associated with a game. Technical communicators, who are trained to decipher complex information in order to make it understandable would be better suited for this task. Documenting a video game idea is the backbone on which the rest of the video game production rests. Respected technical communicators Carol M. Barnum and Saul Carliner comment on the importance of documentation in *Techniques for Technical Communicators*, saying, "As a technical communicator, you want readers not just to read the document, but to use it" (Barnum and Carliner, 1993)

Many technical communicators specialize in design. These design skills can also aid technical communicators in crafting highly effective, usable video game documentation. While little usability research of video games exists,

the technical communicator can analyze the design for usability purposes—a skill needed to create video game documentation effectively. Rob Houser and Scott DeLoach researched the usability of video games in order to find ways to increase the usability of business applications. The two researchers comment on the lack of research in video games by saying, "The primary purpose [of research] is to get technical communicators thinking about design, perhaps in a new way, and to lay the groundwork for future research in this area. We believe that by analyzing the design of game applications, designers of business applications can gain insight into how to help their users learn while they complete their tasks." (Houser and DeLoach, 1998).

Game documentation is also used as a reference tool for others on a video game design team, so the importance of usable and understandable documents becomes apparent. Richard Rouse, a computer game designer, writer, and programmer, elaborates on this important fact by stating that, "Development documents can be a key way of 'holding the reins tightly' on a project, to make sure it does not spin out of control because of the impractical ambitions of team members." (Rouse, 2001).

As this article has shown, documentation is important to the overall success of a video game. The ideas of the professional designer or creator must be well-documented and understandable so that the rest of the video game development staff understands what it is they are creating. With effective documentation, programmers and game coders have clearly articulated ideas that they can refer to while designing the game. Technical communicators have a place in the multi-billion dollar gaming industry.

The industry is still young and those willing to "get in on the ground floor" and embrace the "bleeding edge" of gaming technology could find success in the gaming field.

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[www.stcsig.org/usability/newsletter](http://www.stcsig.org/usability/newsletter)

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## Game Documentation for Technical Communicators

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## References

Carol M. Barnum and Saul Carliner, *Techniques for Technical Communicators* (Needham Heights, Massachusetts: Allyn and Bacon, 1993).

Rob Houser and Scott Deloach, "Learning from Games: Seven Principles of Effective Design," *Journal of Technical Communication*, 45, no. 3 (August 1998): 319-329.

Richard Rouse, III, *Game Design: Theory & Practice*, (Plano, Texas: Wordware Publishing, Inc., 2001).

## About the Author

Martin Peterson is a second year graduate student in James Madison University's Institute of Technical and Scientific Communication (ITSC). Martin's main interests are in gaming and electronic entertainment. A majority of his academic work has been in research of the electronic entertainment genre and where technical communicators fit in. His motivation for writing this paper was to expose the opportunities available in this growing field for technical communicators.

## Letter to the Editor

A reader writes, "I would like to write a book review but I don't know how to get started. Can you please give me some suggestions?" Here are helpful suggestions from the good people of Write Place, St. Cloud State University to help you write a book review:

- Introduce the work:
- Provide your reactions to the book
- Conclude by summarizing your ideas

Close with a direct comment on the book, and tie together issues raised in the review. Briefly restate your main points and your thesis statement. If you like, you can offer advice for potential readers.

*This information was written by Maria Escales for LEO and the Write Place, St. Cloud State University. © 1995, 1996, 1997 The Write Place. The original text is available at <http://leo.stcloudstate.edu/acadwrite/bookrev.html>.*

### Quotable Quotes

"Do your little bit of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world."

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

## Member News

### *SIG Bits*

This column describes what's going on in the SIG. *Usability Interface* welcomes stories about local Usability SIGs. To have your announcement of a meeting or activity published, contact [david.dick@telenet.be](mailto:david.dick@telenet.be).

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## Welcome New Staff to the Newsletter

We welcome Ruth Haworth, Lynda Chiotti, and Jocelyn Williams to our Copy Editor team.

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## UsabilityNJ

On October 27, eleven members of the UsabilityNJ group gathered at Pershing Technology Group in East Brunswick, New Jersey, USA, to hear Harry Blanchard of AT&T speak on "Conversational Re-prompting in Natural Language Dialog." The presentation discussed the special points that distinguish a natural language interface from a directed dialog interface, and was enlivened by audio examples from real systems, and by findings from a usability test conducted on one such system. After the one-hour presentation, a half hour of spirited discussion ensued.

Planned meetings during the remainder of the 2004-2005 year include a variety of practical and theoretical topics of interest to user experience practitioners, such as the November presentation on "Creating Useful Taxonomies: Metadata, Taxonomies and Controlled Vocabularies." The group's email contact list has grown from about 40 members in the autumn of 2001 to the current count of around 160. Those interested in usability events in the central New Jersey area can join the group at <http://finance.groups.yahoo.com/group/UsabilityNJ/>.

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## How Many Members

Between April and August 183 members joined the Usability SIG. Welcome!

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## Don't Be Alone When You Attend a SIG Meeting

The next time you attend your chapter's Usability SIG meeting, consider bringing a guest. Introducing a non-member friend or co-worker is one way to encourage membership growth. When your SIG grows, it can offer more and better services, including seminars, workshops, Web sites, and newsletters.

## Membership Renewal

You can renew your membership to STC and the Usability SIG at [www.stc.org/duesRenewal/Renewal01.asp](http://www.stc.org/duesRenewal/Renewal01.asp).

Log in using your member ID and password. In no time at all, you're ready to enjoy another year of STC!

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## Upcoming Conferences and Seminars

Information about upcoming conferences and seminars is published on our Web site at [www.stcsig.org/usability/resources/conferences.html](http://www.stcsig.org/usability/resources/conferences.html).

For the latest list of telephone seminars see [www.stc.org/seminar](http://www.stc.org/seminar) for the calendar.

## STC's 52nd Annual Conference will be held in Seattle, Washington, May 8-11, 2005

Most members can register for the conference using the form provided in the *Preliminary Program*, which will be mailed with the February issue of *Intercom*, or online at the [STC web site](http://www.stc.org). Online registration is not yet open.

Full-conference and one-day registration rates appear below. The last day to register for the conference at the advance rates is April 22, 2005.

	<i>Advance</i>	<i>Onsite (after April 22)</i>
Member	\$495	\$570
Nonmember	650	725
Student/ Retired	120	175
Member, One-Day	255	330
Nonmember, One-Day	335	410
Student, Retired, One-Day	120	175

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### **Features**

Game Documentation for Technical Communicators  
Evaluating the Usability of a Game  
Mobile Phone Games Designed for Girls  
How Usability and Audit Contribute to Product Design  
Designing High Fidelity Home Pages

### **Columns**

From the Editor: Are Games Supposed to be User Friendly?  
Pulse of the SIG: Elections and Hurricanes Don't Intimidate Me!  
SIG Bits  
Letter to the Editor  
Tooling Around: Cross-Referencing Step Numbers in Word

### **Conferences**

Call for Proposals: Special Issue on Accessibility and Technical Communication  
STC's 52<sup>nd</sup> Annual Conference  
Moving Forms to the Web

### **The Book Shelf**

Web Application Design Handbook: Best Practices for Web-Based Software