

MIDLIFE GAMER CONTRIBUTORS' GUIDELINES (Correct to 13/08/11)

PART 1: THE TECHNICAL STUFF

Much of this might seem like common sense. Most of it probably is. So apologies if I come across really condescendingly here. But maybe it's not common-sense. Who am I to know? All I know is I'd like to spend slightly less time editing Midlife Gamer articles, because I'm busy, and also really, really lazy. So here's a list of some common, and less common, errors that copy tends to be subbed with – and what to do in order to avoid them. Blue means good, red with an asterisk means bad.

Comma splices

Sentences are split into clauses. Some sentences – simple sentences – only have one clause. Others have several strung together. A comma splice, which should be avoided, refers to the use of a comma to separate two independent clauses when a co-ordinator is not also present.

Um.

Okay. Maybe examples would help.

This is a simple one-clause sentence.

This is how I might write a clause, and this is how I might add another. The comma may or may not be required; it depends on whether you feel the sentence requires one to be clear.

**This is how I might write a clause, this is how I might subsequently bugger up the sentence with a comma splice.*

Instead, you should use a semicolon; beware, though, as they can be overused. Instead, consider using a full-stop. Short sentences are nice.

More game-related stuff might help, actually.

**The artwork is lovely, it really helps to immerse you in the game world.*

The artwork is lovely. It really helps to immerse you in the game world.

The artwork is lovely; it really helps to immerse you in the game world.

The reason the one in red is bad? Well, because the two clauses in the above sentence are independent – i.e. they can function as separate sentences while remaining grammatically correct and semantically meaningful. You have two choices when placing two independent clauses next to one another: you can join them with a co-ordinator („and," „but," „however..."), you can hinge them with a semicolon, or you can split them into two separate sentences. Commas are used to add subordinate or relative clauses within a larger phrase – these are clauses that are sufficiently linked to the original clause to warrant being joined to them, and unable to function as their own sentence.

In fact, let's take a look at those.

Subordinate/relative clauses

Hands up: I couldn't explain the difference between these two without looking them up. But for all intents and purposes, they function in the same way. Let's stick with the same example, concerning the artwork.

The artwork is lovely, which really helps to immerse you in the game world.

The clause following the comma is a relative clause (I think). It can't be an independent clause because this doesn't work, as there's no subject in the second one:

**The artwork is lovely. Which really helps to immerse you in the game world.*

Now, actually, while the above construction is technically ungrammatical, it's kind of acceptable if you're trying to represent a gargantuan pause in order to emphasise a point. It's a stylistic matter. Do it if it works, but be careful.

Anyway. You'll notice the relative clause is there to add more information about the artwork and its role in the game. You could also have this:

The artwork, which is lovely, really helps to immerse you in the game world.

Notice that, by subordinating the fact that it is lovely, rather than the fact that it helps to immerse you in the game world, changes the focus of the sentence. Note that, if you want to subordinate something in the middle of an existing clause, you must wrap it in commas. As was the case with that last sentence, funnily enough.

Contrast both grammatical examples above with this, which doesn't subordinate anything:

The artwork that is lovely really helps to immerse you in the game world.

Okay, so that sentence phonetically grates a little bit. But it is grammatical. And you'll notice here that the focus is again different. I'll try keep this as non-technical as possible, but take a look at the phrase boundaries:

[The artwork that is lovely] [really helps to immerse you in the game world.]

[The artwork,] [which is lovely,] [really helps to immerse you in the game world.]

The subject of the first example is "the artwork that is lovely" – i.e. the specific artwork you have identified as being lovely. In the second example, the subject is simply "the artwork," which you also happen to mention is lovely. Specific vs. Nonspecific. This can be quite hard to identify in writing unless you try as hard as possible to master

The that/which dichotomy

Feel free to break this rule if you have a load of "that's" knocking about already, and want to avoid fierce word repetition. Otherwise, try to follow it.

"That" adds additional information about the subject to the existing clause.

"Which" adds additional information about the subject to a subordinate or relative clause.

So, once again:

The artwork that is lovely really helps to immerse you in the game world.

The artwork, which is lovely, really helps to immerse you in the game world.

**The artwork which is lovely really helps to immerse you in the game world.*

**The artwork, that is lovely, really helps to immerse you in the game world.*

And again, you'd usually use "that" to specify the subject and "which" to add a "by the way" piece of information about it.

Okay. Let's move on.

Its/it's

"It's" is the contracted form of "it is."

"Its" is a possessive pronoun.

It's a great game.

Its artwork is lovely.

**Its a great game.*

**It's artwork is lovely.*

Consider "its" alongside "his" and "hers." Nouns take an apostrophe to indicate possession; pronouns don't.

Equally, the same rule applies for

Whose/who's

whereby "whose" indicates possession and "who's" is the contracted form of "who is."

Whose game is this?

Who's the developer who made this game?

**Who's game is this?*

**Whose the developer who made this game?*

While we're on "who"...

The who/whom dichotomy

This will be the next major change to the English language, most likely, with “whom” becoming an archaic form. I'm all for change, but, for now, it's probably best to stick with the rule.

It's a simple one, too:

“Who” is a subject.

“Whom” is an object.

English phrasal structure is SVO – subject, verb, object. So in the following sentence, the first word is the subject, the second is the verb, the third is the object. You know that, I know. Sorry. I'm just trying to introduce a point.

Gary ate Martin.

Now, obviously, that's a bit of a strange thing to say. So, with a tone of disbelief, you might respond:

Who ate whom?!

And you'd be right to do so, because “who” replaces the subject “Gary,” and “whom” replaces the object “Martin.” What you definitely wouldn't say is:

**Who ate who?!*

Nor would you say this, which is even more bonkers:

**Whom ate who?!*

The colon

Is what you shit out of.

It's also a very smart punctuation marker that signifies equivalence.

The game is generally great, but there's a problem: the voice acting.

Note how, in the above sentence, the “problem” and “the voice acting” refer to the same semantic item. Improper use usually means you've put a colon where there should be a semicolon, or vice versa.

**The game is generally great, but there's a problem; the voice acting.*

**The game is generally great: there's a problem with the voice acting, though.*

Capital letters

This might seem re-he-heally obvious, but I have seen copy submitted that makes a few errors here.

Proper nouns, which include people's names, company names, product names etc., have a capital letter at the start of every word.

Mass Effect 2.

Microsoft Game Studios.

Greg Giddens' beard.

**Mass effect 2*

**Microsoft game studios.*

**Greg giddens' beard.*

**Greg Giddens' Beard. (Unless that becomes an entity in its own right, which, to be fair, is totally plausible. Or it was before I had to chop it off)*

Standard nouns, and everything else that's not at the start of a sentence, do not have a capital letter.

The game.

**The Game. (Unless you're talking about The Game, in which case you just lost it.)*

Is that it? I think that's about it.

PART 2: THE STYLISTIC STUFF

I hope this didn't come across like a horrible English Language lecture so far. I intended it to be a guide to refer to should you be unsure about something or other, which spreads all the way from the basic to the complex. Of course, if there's a stylistic reason for you to break any of these rules, and you're confident in doing so, then that's great, and totally acceptable.

At Midlife Gamer, we want to encourage writers to develop their own voice, but equally we do need to ensure the site maintains a consistent tone. So there are a few things we need to keep in check. And when thinking about style, I tend to enjoy going by a set of rules that reads something like the following:

1. When you go back and read over a piece you've just written, if you stumble over anything, reword or repunctuate it. Clarity is key.
2. Long paragraphs are intimidating. Split them into short, snappy ones.
3. Never write something an articulate human being wouldn't say aloud. For example, people tend to contract things like "it is" unless there's a reason why they're emphasising the "is." I tend to think it's best to write this way too.
4. Words like "graphics," "gameplay," "narrative," "mechanics," and a whole load of others are so, so common in games writing. Want yours to stand out? Think of smart alternative ways to express your point.
5. If you feel passionately, use passionate language. If you thought a game was exquisite, say it was exquisite. If you thought it was good, then it probably only mildly impressed you, so don't. (Equally, though, "good" is a bit bland for the reader.)
6. On that note, taboo language is an extraordinarily powerful tool we have at our disposal. Use it proudly. Overuse it, however, and it loses its magic.
7. Exclamation marks make it look like you're shouting in a high-pitched voice! Sometimes this is effective! But it mainly isn't! So probably don't use them much.

8. Never exaggerate to make a point. Emphasise elements through sound, passionate wording. Don't just make shit up. (The graphics aren't so bad they look like they're out of a bad PS2 game, seriously.)
9. Read Quintin Smith's „Games Journalism: What Not To Say“ list and obey it like a games-journo bible.
[<http://videogames.wordpress.com/2009/11/>]
10. Stick to the rules as if your life depends on them. Break them as if no one will remember you otherwise.

Some specific words and phrases

Videogame - not "video game".

First-person / Third-person - not "first person" or "thirdperson".

Roleplaying game - not "role-playing" or "role playing".

Real-time / Turn-based strategy - not "realtime strategy" or "turn based strategy".

Singleplayer / Multiplayer - not "single-player" or "multi player".

Quick time events - not "quick-time events" or "quicktime events".

Open world - not "open-world", when saying the game environment is one. Open-world – not "open world", when saying it is an open-world game.

Non-linear - not "nonlinear" or "non linear".

Well-crafted - etc. Not "well crafted". However...

Brilliantly crafted - etc. Any adverb other than "well" doesn't need a hyphen.

PlayStation 3 - not "Playstation 3" or "Play Station 3".

Xbox 360 - not "XBox 360" or "Xbox360".

Unreal Engine - etc. Not "Unreal engine".

Word counts

There's no maximum word count for a piece of work, although there is a theoretical one. Don't exceed 2000 words for a review and keeping articles under 4000 should keep readers from getting bored.

iOS and Android reviews should have a minimum of 300 words. I always prefer more though. See some of Jon Browns iPhone reviews to see what I consider to be the very best word counts.

Other reviews should be a minimum of 500 words. Again, I would prefer 700+ though.

In the end the most important thing to consider is: does the review share your full opinion of the game and is it interesting to read.

Format

You will never, ever need to use bold. If you want to emphasise a word, make it *italic*.

Numbers upto and including ten should be spelt i.e. one, two, three etc. 11 upwards should be figures.

Deadlines

You will often be asked to produce a piece of work by a deadline. Please take this term literally: the line at which, should you cross it, you will be made dead.

Edits

We will often make minor edits to your work. We endeavour to specifically feed these back to you, but sometimes time constraints mean we can't. Please don't take edits personally. We're just doing our jobs.

Sometimes, more substantial revisions may be required, in which case we'll throw the piece back at you and let you know when we need the second draft by.

Exclusive publishing rights

By submitting work to Midlife Gamer, you agree to grant us exclusive publishing rights. This means the article may not appear, and may not have appeared, anywhere else, either in print or online. If Midlife Gamer ceases to exist one day, this may be waived.

Similarly, if you have been provided evaluation code for preview or review, if we've shipped you off to an event, or if we have provided you access to an industry member for interview, it's generally courteous not to produce similar pieces of work for other publications based on the stuff we've gone out of our way to sort out for you. If you're unsure, ask first.

Scoring

You'll be including a score between 1 and 10 with your review copy, won't you? Yes, you will. Here's what the numbers mean. Please try to be consistent.

10/10 The absolute cream of the crop. A 10 does not necessarily mean a perfect game, but it will almost always be a revolutionary, hugely significant masterpiece. It will probably be tremendously innovative, and it will certainly refine its genre beyond what any similar title has achieved in recent times. A 10 out of 10 signifies a game that will likely go down in history as one of the greats of its era, and giddily talked about for years to come.

9/10 These are some of the best titles on the market today. A 9 out of 10 game will be highly polished, achieving its goals superbly, with only barely significant problems preventing it from gaining the highest accolade. 9 out of 10 titles remain thoroughly entertaining, atmospheric and engrossing from start to finish, and are almost certain to be among our favourite games of a given year.

8/10 8 out of 10 games are very good. They may have a few minor problems – perhaps a couple of pacing issues, a couple of bugs, a couple of plot holes, whatever – but they nevertheless stand high above the majority of titles released. They might be innovative, exquisitely polished or mechanically excellent, but for whatever reason, these are hugely enjoyable games, and come highly recommended.

7/10 Good games. These titles aren't by any means perfect, but their strengths certainly outweigh their weaknesses. A 7 out of 10 game will provide plenty of entertainment and value for money, sporting competent mechanics and a solid design vision. It might be a little glitchy, perhaps it doesn't do anything particularly new, or maybe the pacing falters slightly every now and then. But despite this, it will remain enjoyable throughout, and be a worthwhile purchase.

6/10 These are decent games, though there will be better options available. These could be solid, perfectly functional and largely enjoyable games that don't quite inject enough imagination into their presentation; or they could contain great ideas but be hampered by slightly underwhelming execution. A 6 signifies a game that certainly provides some reasonable entertainment, but one that might not be ideal for everyone.

5/10 These are okay games. 5 out of 10 titles aren't by any stretch of the imagination 'bad', but there's not a lot to separate them from the reams of other releases available. Perhaps they rely too much on tried and tested mechanics, without injecting much of their own personality. Or perhaps they revolve around good ideas, but the mechanics can't quite match the ambition. Perhaps they would have been good games had it not been for shaky technology. Whatever the reason, while these games do provide some entertainment value, you might want to check out a demo before making a purchase.

4/10 These games are slightly below par. A 4 out of 10 score is for titles that do a few things right – perhaps their mechanics are reasonable; maybe they look great; maybe there are a few moments of greatness buried deeply here – but fail to impress on a greater level. They're hampered by a number of problems that mean they're unlikely to make any real impact, or be remembered in the months and years to come.

3/10 These games aren't very good. A 3 out of 10 title isn't necessarily a complete disaster – there may be some sparks of intelligence or thought here and there – but for the most part it will fail to impress. This may be for a variety of reasons – game-breaking bugs, a crippling lack of creativity, shaky mechanics etcetera – but the result will be the same: a game that provides only a small amount of entertainment value, despite a handful of reasonable elements.

2/10 A 2 out of 10 score signifies a poor game. These titles do very little right. Maybe they look okay, or maybe there are a few minutes of fun to be had every now and then. But a combination of unimaginative design, below-par mechanics and other problems severely hold these titles back, making them impossible to recommend.

1/10 The lowest mark available. A game scoring 1 out of 10 is at the very bottom end of the quality scale, offering little or no entertainment value. These games are severely troubled, conceptually flawed, and executed terribly. There will be very few, if any, redeeming qualities to a title scoring a 1 out of 10. Avoid at all costs.

PART 3: THE PROMISE THAT WE LOVE YOU REALLY

Sorry for all the formalities. We love you really.