Writing for Animation, Comics, and Games

SECOND EDITION

Christy Marx

CRC Press
Taylor & Francis Group

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Second Edition

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CRC Press
Taylor & Francis Group
Boca Raton London New York

CRC Press is an imprint of the
Taylor & Francis Group, an **informa** business

Second edition published 2022
by CRC Press
6000 Broken Sound Parkway NW, Suite 300, Boca Raton, FL 33487-2742

and by CRC Press
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

First edition published by Routledge 2007

CRC Press is an imprint of Taylor & Francis Group, LLC

ISBN: 978-0-815-37938-6 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-0-815-37937-9 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-351-21598-5 (ebk)

Typeset in Garamond
by codeMantra

To Randy, LoML

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Preface

"*Writing is easy. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and open a vein.*"

Walter Wellesley "Red" Smith

If you've opened this book, you either are a writer, consider yourself to be a writer, or are determined to become one. Not any old kind of writer, but a professional writer. And not any old kind of professional writer, but one who writes for animation or comics or videogames or maybe all three.

It can be done. It can be done if you're driven enough, passionate enough, persistent enough, and too plain stubborn to be easily turned aside.

One hopes you're not here for the status, at least not in the "real" world. Even someone as wildly successful as Stephen King is treated with scorn by some in the literary establishment because he writes "pop" fiction. You can guess the esteem with which an animation writer or comics writer or game writer is held outside their fields.

In fact, a lot of people seem oblivious to the fact that the products of these media are written at all, leading to this particular exchange that I've had more times than I can count.

"What do you do?"

"I write animation."

"Oh, you're an artist."

"No, I *write* animation."

"Do you draw the pictures, too?"

"No, I write the script. You know, the action, the dialogue."

<blank look>

One also assumes you're not here looking to get rich. While it's certainly possible to earn a good living, the odds of becoming fabulously wealthy from working in these fields are against you. Writing is hard work. Getting a job writing is even harder.

If you're the type of person who reads this and says, "I don't care. I love animation! I love comics! I love games! I have things to say. I have stories to tell. I have words to shape. I *must write*."—then I greet you with open arms. Welcome to the madhouse. Let's start the tour.

Acknowledgments

I owe a great many thanks to a great many people who helped and supported me during the writing of this book.

My deepest thanks to my editor, Sean Connelly, who has the patience of a saint and then some.

Thanks for invaluable input from Bob Bates, Ellen Guon Beeman, Kurt Busiek, Peter David, Jason Dravis, Mark Evanier, Dave Grossman, Matt Householder, Maureen McHugh, Sarah Reimers, Terry Rossio, Alex Segura, Lee Sheldon, Sarah W. Stocker, Len Wein, Marv Wolfman, and many more than I can name.

Special thanks to Wendy and Richard Pini, Stan Sakai, and Kurt Busiek for permission to reprint art from their books.

Yet more thanks and appreciation to the helpful people at Blizzard Ent., DC Comics, Episode, Marvel Ent., Naughty Dog, Ubisoft, and Zynga who granted me permission to use material.

I gratefully remember the people who assisted with the first edition: Amy Jollymore, Doug Shults, Stan Wakefield, Skip Press, Randy Littlejohn, Anne Toole, and Heather Ash.

Tip of the hat to the terrific team of staff members at the WGA, and my fellow professionals in the Animation Writers Caucus and the Videogame Caucus.

And enormous thanks to the readers who buy this book instead of pirating it. I appreciate the respect it shows. Enjoy the knowledge that you have contributed directly to my survival as a writer.

If you did pirate this book, consider showing your respect by supporting me on my Patreon: https://www.patreon.com/christymarx

Author

Christy Marx has an eclectic career as a transmedia writer, TV and animation series developer, game designer/narrative designer working on live-action TV, film, animation, PC games, mobile/social games, console games, MMOG, comic books, graphic novels, manga, and non-fiction educational books. She has won the WGA Animation Writing Award and game design awards for *Conquests of Camelot* and *Conquest of the Longbow*. Other credits include Babylon *5, Twilight Zone, Spider-Man, G.I. Joe, Jem and the Holograms, ReBoot, Conan, Beast Wars, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Birds of Prey,* and *Amethyst*.

Introduction

I write when I'm inspired, and I see to it that I'm inspired at nine o'clock every morning.

Peter De Vries

This book is designed to be useful to three main categories of readers:

1. The student or amateur who wants to break into one or more of these fields.
2. The writing professional working in another field who wants to move into one of these fields (for example, the TV writer who wants to write games or the book writer who wants to write animation and so on).
3. The non-writer professional working in a related area of these fields who wants to move into writing (for example, an animator who wants to turn scriptwriter, a game tester who wants to write game stories, and so on).

Think of this as your nuts and bolts manual for what a writer needs to know to create scripts for animation, comics, or games so that they're in the right format and follow the right rules. It is totally writer-centric, not an all-inclusive guide to related areas such as art or programming.

It is about the *craft* of writing, the practical rules, guidelines, tips, and tricks that will prepare you to approach these fields on a professional level of competency.

What this book will not do is teach you *how* to write. I'm assuming that you know your basic three-act structure; that you know how to create a character with motivations, needs, and desires; and that you know how to type, spell, and use correct grammar. If you don't know these things, close this book and turn your attention to learning the fundamentals of writing. Find your voice. Practice your art. When you've done that, you're ready for the craft guidance you'll find here.

Transmedia Overview

The most valuable of all talents is that of never using two words when one will do.

Thomas Jefferson

In the course of a long career in writing, I discovered that the most valuable action I could take as a writer was to diversify. This is especially true when writing in more volatile fields such as animation, comics, and games where the companies, the business, the corporate hierarchies, and the entire field can change radically in a short time. Animation in particular tends to be cyclical both in content (comedy versus action-adventure) and in opportunity (booms and busts). It's tremendously useful, if not downright life-saving, to have several arrows in your writer's quiver.

This book concentrates on the three fields of animation, comics, and games for these reasons, discussed in more detail below:

- Similarity of craft
- Convergence of media
- Transmedia writing.

Similarity of Craft

Animation, comics, and games fall into the category I think of as "shorthand" writing. This is in contrast to prose writing where a writer can write plot, description, and dialogue to any length, and can cover all of the senses—sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell—using both external storytelling (description, dialogue) and internal storytelling (thought processes, emotional description).

This specialized form of "shorthand" writing requires the discipline to write within a structured format, to pare description down to an absolute minimum, to boil dialogue down to a pithy essence, and to tell concise, tightly plotted stories.

They are visual media, in which the writer must have a strong ability to visualize the story, to see it in the mind's eye, and to translate that to paper. Being visual media, bear in mind an important, longstanding rule: show, don't tell—which simply means make the storytelling as visual as possible, and don't rely on *unnecessary* exposition.

Granted, these guidelines could apply to live-action film and TV scriptwriting as well. One of the significant differences between live-action and animation/comics/games is who reads and interprets the final shape of the material. In live-action, you are primarily writing for the

producers and directors who will then shape and interpret that material, most especially the director who is the main filter for determining how the script will be converted to a film or TV show. In animation/comics/games, you are writing more directly for the artists who will interpret and create what you've written. True, there are still producers and sometimes directors involved, but it is the storyboard artist and animators who interpret your animation script, the comic book artist who interprets your comic book script, and the designers, animators, and programmers who integrate your games script. It's more about communicating to your co-creators than about trying to sell your words to a film or TV executive.

Two of the formats—animation and games—require exterior writing techniques. Everything must be conveyed primarily via two senses: sight and sound.

Comics is an exterior/interior storytelling form that allows more latitude in conveying information about the other senses and the character's thoughts, but it must all be done within the communication realm of one sense—sight. An exception to this is digital comics that include limited animation and sound, but they aren't a significant part of the current comics field.

Another aspect these three formats share is that they're dominated by the same genres. Broadly speaking, those are fantasy, science fiction, and action-adventure (I include superheroes in one or more of these categories). They require writers who understand these genres and are adept at writing within their boundaries. If you want to write for animation, comics, and games, you probably already have an interest in these genres. You'll want to stay current on them because you'll be expected to understand references to other books, movies, TV shows, or games in those genres. It's not unusual for the people who hire you to depend on those references and comparisons to convey what they want you to infuse in the current project.

This is not to exclude other genres such as sports games, causal games, sims, and so forth. Sports games or sims don't translate well into animation or comics, by their nature. Those genres are important parts of the videogame medium, but it's fantasy, science fiction, and action-adventure that provide the most connections between the three media covered in this book.

Convergence of Media

The process of corporate acquisitions and mergers continues to accelerate, steamrolling across the media landscape. Far from creating a level playing field, this process is reducing the diversity of creative markets and putting control of our media into far too few and too powerful hands. Animation studios, comic book companies, and game studios are absorbed by media giants and become another cog in a huge media machine.

As you can tell, I view this type of consolidation as not beneficial for either the creative person or the general public.

Like it or not, convergence has taken over these fields. One big corporation can publish the comic and novelization, produce the movie or TV series, and create the game—all based upon one property that they own and control. Consider two characters: *Batman* and *Spider-Man*. Both were published as comic book characters long before being adapted for television, movies, and animated series. Batman's publisher, DC, is part of the massive Warner Bros. empire. Thus, we see many variations of Batman appearing on TV, in movies, in games, in books, in toys, and every other kind of licensing you can imagine. *Spider-Man*'s publisher, Marvel

Comics, has been absorbed by the massive Disney dynasty, which can similarly release the IP in a vast range of forms.

Games such as *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, *Mortal Kombat*, *Resident Evil*, and *Final Fantasy* were turned into movies with many more games-to-movies in development. *The Witcher* game franchise became a Netflix series. TV series such as *The Walking Dead*, *Game of Thrones*, and *Stranger Thing*s were spun off into games. It's worth noting that *The Walking Dead* is a notable example of a comic book launching both a highly successful TV series and game series.

The *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* went from a small, indie, satiric, black and white comic to a major IP that has spawned movies, animation, games, toys, and endless merchandising.

The mobile game app, *Angry Birds*, was made into animated films and comics. This type of transmedia development is all over the place.

The smaller, independent companies struggle to survive in this world of convergence. The smart ones recognize how important it is to control a property, rather than only doing work-for-hire that is owned by someone else. As often as not, the smaller studios are themselves acquired by new media conglomerates who seek to pull together various assets (animation studios, publishing arms, game development studios, a means of distribution) to make sure their products reach the widest audience.

Selling a property can come down to finding the initial platform on which to launch it and expand from there. For example, Platinum Studios formed specifically to use the format of comics as the initial platform to put an idea in front of the public, and then use the comic book/graphic novel to sell the idea to movies and TV. The big money is in film and TV, but the published comic gives them a property that they control and that they can sell to get at that big money. One such project was *Men in Black*, so you can see that this is a successful strategy.

Convergence isn't limited to visual media. Over the years, I've developed or written animation based on dolls, action figures, remote-controlled cars, interactive toys, comic books, arcade video games, pulp fiction, TV series spin-off, and a classic SF novel.

Everywhere you look, you see convergence. Games are made into movies, TV series, and comics. Comics are made into movies, TV series, and games. Movies and TV series are made into animation series, comics, and games. The marketing ties between these three fields—animation, comics, and games—have never been stronger or more directly related.

Consequently, the reality you face more and more as a writer is the mega-corporation domination of the remaining markets in which you can work. It has narrowed down the number of markets, raised the stakes so that the big corporations are more fearful of taking risks, and increased the tendency of the corporations to create product based on their own properties rather than seeking original work. Knowing the formats in this book increases your odds of getting ahead in one or more of the converged media.

Transmedia Writing

Comic books have been a major source of material for animated TV series for decades. Stan Lee began turning Marvel comic characters into animation series in the late 1970s. Comic book writers living in New York migrated to Los Angeles to take advantage of their backgrounds in the comic book field to start working in animation. Famous comics writers such

as Roy Thomas, Steve Gerber, Len Wein, and Marv Wolfman were amongst this early wave of transmedia writers who had the foresight to cross over to a new but related medium. It was a comic book story that gave me my break to write animation and my background as a scriptwriter that opened to the door to writing games.

There have been live-action scriptwriters crossing over to write animation, big names in TV such as Joss Whedon and J. Michael Straczynski writing comics, and writers moving from comics into film, TV series, and games. Not only are the fields themselves converging, but the writers being tapped for those fields are more frequently writers who see the potential in writing for these other fields, or do it simply because they have a love for it.

More and more writers are seeing the value of transmedia writing, either for the opportunities it presents or for the love of the other forms of media.

This leads to one final reason I chose to cover these three fields in one book—because I can. Many writers have worked in two of the three fields, but it's still unusual for someone to have a large degree of experience in all three. I've had some rare and wonderful opportunities, not to mention dollops of luck, which enabled me to create and write animation, create and write comics, and design and write games. It's given me the experience and perspective to bring it all together in one place.

To that I'll add this caveat, every writer has a different range of experience from which to draw and no one book can give you everything. I would advise you to read more than one book about writing for these fields. In the "Resources" chapters of each section, you'll find recommendations for other books.

Transmedia Advice

In each section, I give advice and tips that are specific to animation, comics, or videogames. What I want to give you *here* is general advice that applies not only to these three forms of media, but pretty much to any form of creative media.

- First, I'll cover advice on conducting oneself as a professional.
- Next, I'll give some advice and tips on creative aspects of writing.

Business Advice

The topics are:

- Attitude
- Deadlines
- Collaboration
- Gender and age.

Attitude

For the student, beginner, or non-professional, it's important that you cultivate the attitude of a professional even before you get your first job. A professional understands that writing for

animation, comics, and games is a *job*. You are expected to perform to certain standards, to know your craft, to know about the business, to listen well, to come up with creative solutions to notes and suggestions, and to do it with a business-like attitude.

While you do want to have faith in your creative vision, you also need to have the wisdom to pick which battles are truly vital enough to take a stand that could cause conflict. The most common mistake a non-pro makes is to react defensively to requests for changes as though personally wounded, to refuse to make changes that are required, to fight over every little thing instead of knowing which battle is worth fighting, to worry that everyone is out to rip her off or steal her brilliant idea, or to behave in a touchy, over-sensitive manner.

If you have a defensive attitude, get rid of it. If you want to be an *Artiste*, rent a garret and write poetry. Develop thick skin. Remember that notes and feedback are not a personal attack on you. These are professional fields where your job is to give the employer what they want when they want it. It's about getting the job done, making deadlines, and doing a great job of writing in the process.

When you absolutely need to take a stand to protect the integrity of your work, take it. Be prepared to make a strong professional argument to prove your point based upon the craft of writing, not your emotions. You can't simply say, "Because I think so."

You can and will have a lot of fun writing for these fields, but never forget that it is, first and foremost, a job and you must act like a professional.

Deadlines

There are few things more vital to succeeding in these fields than meeting deadlines. Animation schedules are tight and have a tremendous amount of money tied up in getting each phase of the project done in a timely manner, not to mention having storyboard artists, animation studios, actors, and many other stages of the production dependent on getting the script in time.

If you slip up on getting a comic book done on time, the sales slip and you'll be regarded as unreliable, and you can cause major headaches for your artist, colorist, letterer, and editor.

Games also have big money riding on tight deadlines, along with a host of programmers, artists, animators, composer, and so on whose deadlines will be affected by a writer not meeting a deadline.

Make it a hard and fast rule to *never miss a deadline*. If you truly find yourself in an unavoidable situation, talk it out with the person who hired you. Never take the avoidance route or refuse to return messages. I learned that the hard way.

What it gets down to is this general rule: a decent writer who always turns in a useable script on deadline will get more work than a brilliant writer who doesn't make deadlines.

Collaboration

These three fields require a high degree of collaboration with artists, producers, story editors, directors, programmers, and any number of other people in both the executive and creative ends of the business. This is most emphatically true for animation and games because there tends to be even more people involved in the process.

You'll receive notes and feedback from any variety of people depending on the project. In animation, from story editor, producers, more producers, the producer's petsitter, maybe a toy executive—whoever is allowed to have a say. In comics, probably primarily the editor,

but your artist is your partner, not a hired hand, and should be treated as such. In games, you might get feedback from anyone on the design team—publisher, producer, designers, programmers, animators, and so on.

For all three fields of writing, you need good people skills. Amongst those people skills are ability to listen, ability to clearly communicate your own ideas, ability to praise and find constructive ways to give feedback, flexibility in adjusting your own ideas to the needs of the project, a good sense of humor (a small amount of self-deprecating humor goes a long way), and the ability to set aside temperament and ego for the good of the project. It also helps if you genuinely enjoy interacting with other people and can show interest in their goals, desires, wants, and needs.

Thoughtfulness pays. Express your thanks, send a card, give an appropriate gift, or make some other gesture when someone helps you out. Let people know that you're aware they exist, and that includes the receptionist at the front desk or the person in accounting who helped you get reimbursed for expenses on a trip.

Gender and Age

There is another commonality to animation, comics, and games that I want to touch upon, without laboring over it. They have traditionally been dominated by white males, on both the creative end and the customer end. It is more true for games and comics, less so for animation.

When you evaluate the images, characters, and stories that are put forth, it's easy to see why the male-dominated fields churn out male-dominated types of entertainment. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. "We have to make X game or X comic because we have X audience." But if all they put out is X games and X comics, then they never will attract the other 50% of the potential audience—girls and women.

Happily, we're seeing changes in these fields with more attention being given to the female audiences, minorities, and other groups that have been under-represented such as the LGBTQ communities. Unhappily, we're also seeing push-back that can get pretty nasty. Don't let that stop you.

As a writer, it's your job to think about who you're writing for, but it's also your job to push the boundaries and look for ways to reach new audiences, or to reach the under-represented audience that *you* represent.

There is also the issue—in the United States—that many people think of these media as being "for kids." Animation, comics, and games suffer in this country from the attitude that they are for children. Breaking that barrier and creating an adult art form in this country has been an uphill battle, to put it mildly—yet there's no good reason for this except that we as a culture have generated this mindset—and why? Why should we equate visual storytelling in any medium with children's entertainment?

There has been far more progress than I honestly expected to see during my career. We have *The Simpsons*, *King of the Hill*, *Adult Swim*, adult-rated comics, and a recognition of an older audience for games. All the same, there remains a large sector of the society that wants to throw comic book retailers into jail for selling adult comics to adults, sue game companies for the content of games, and heavily control the content of animation. This is a dangerous form of censorship in which the narrow-minded want to determine for everyone else what is

"adult" and what isn't. You need to be aware of this issue. More than that, I urge you to take a stand against censorship before you find your own creations on the list of "banned" works.

Having said that, the realities of the audience, or *what is perceived to be* the audience, must still be addressed when you sit down to write a script. That is one more part of your job.

Creative Advice

Here are some thoughts, advice, and tips for transmedia writers on these topics:

- Fantasy Language
- Junk Words
- Get a Life
- Personal Rewards and Responsibility.

Fantasy Language

It's easy to forget how modern some of our phrases are when writing dialogue for a fantasy project. "Fast as lightning" is fine, but "faster than a bullet" is a problem if your characters only use swords. You don't want to hear Conan the Barbarian say, "Wow, cool." or "C'mon, guys."

Be careful to avoid anachronistic slang. It was jarring to hear characters in the television adaptation of a big-name fantasy videogame use terms such as "ego" and "reverse psychology" in a world where those terms would have no meaning.

The Marx Fantasy Dialogue Scale

I came up with the Marx Fantasy Dialogue Scale to differentiate the various ways in which fantasy dialogue could be spoken, ranging from colloquial/modern (#1) to High Epic/Poetic (#5). Here's an example:

1. He doesn't know what he's doing.
2. He does not know what he is doing.
3. He does not know what he does.
4. He knows not what he does.
5. He knows not what his purpose is, for confusion lies heavy upon him.

You would rarely want to use #5 because it's wordy and sounds least natural to modern ears. Using purely colloquial language can sound jarring in some fantasy settings.

This can be applied beyond fantasy dialogue. The key things that affect how colloquial or how epic your dialogue sounds or looks are:

- **Contractions:** Contractions sound more colloquial; not using contractions creates a different, more formal pattern to dialogue.
- **Word arrangement:** How words are ordered affects how the dialogue feels. On the above scale, consider how the arrangement of words changes the feel between #3 and #4. Another example is *Star Wars'* Yoda. Yoda's inverted word arrangement created a distinct feel for that character's speech.

- **Sentence structure:** One type of character might speak in short, choppy sentences. Another might speak in long, flowery sentences full of conjunctions. For a young audience, you'll want to keep sentence structure shorter and simpler.
- **Tense and grammatical usage:** In the above scale, note the difference between #2 and #3. Both are written in present tense, but the change of "doing" to "does" alters the feel of the dialogue.
- **Word choice:** As a writer, you need to think about every word you use to convey character, emotion, action, mood, and imagery. In terms of dialogue, you should ask yourself whether your character would use one word over another, and if so, why? Does your character speak in concrete terms because he has no imagination? Is your character inclined to speak in metaphors or poetic language rather than being straightforward? Does your character speak in riddles or vague esoteric language in order to sound enigmatic?

Junk Words

If you're anything like me, your everyday speech is riddled with words such as "very," "really," "just," and various other stray words we use for added emphasis. I think of these as junk words because most of the time, they don't need to be there. We tend to use them out of habit.

As a writer, you should be aware of a tendency to add junk words to your writing, especially dialogue. There are times when they fit, of course, but you should question every usage.

A junk word often detracts from the true emphasis of the sentence. Consider this sentence: "Are you really sure?" When spoken naturally, the emphasis falls on "really." In terms of dialogue intent, the key word is "sure." By removing the junk word "really," the emphasis correctly falls on the key word where it belongs: "Are you *sure*?"

Another example is: "She was very patient with me." Removing the junk word "very" puts the emphasis back on "patient" where it belongs: "She was *patient* with me."

In the three forms writing this book covers, every word counts, because either they add to time (verbal recordings) or they add to text (taking up limited space). Cleaning out junk words will strengthen and tighten your writing.

Get a Life

I've encountered a few too many writers whose only influences seem to be limited to the one medium they want to work in or to current pop culture. The worst mistake people in these fields make is not being grounded in the real world. You need to know your medium well, of course, but you also need to have a breadth and depth of other influences and experiences.

Experience life, read, talk to people, and listen to how people talk. These areas of writing require diverse knowledge which includes understanding political systems, religious systems, mythology, economics, geography, how cultures develop, and many other aspects of world-creation. Inform yourself about diverse ideas, attitudes, and cultures. Travel. Visit other countries. Study mythologies and histories from ancient to modern. This will also help you acquire an ear for coming up with names that are appropriate to what you're writing.

If you write about shooting guns, go to a range and fire some guns. If you write about archers, loose an arrow or two. Ride a motorcycle. Fly a plane. Go scuba-diving. Take some martial arts. Do whatever you're capable of. You'll have a better handle on many of the things

you write about if you at least attempt to *do* some of them. Get life experience to balance out what you learn from passive research.

Personal Rewards and Responsibility

The personal rewards of pursuing creative work can be immense, but there is some level of responsibility that comes with it. Some people write to earn the respect of their peers, some to win awards, some yearn for status, and some are simply driven to do it. Seeing your name on the TV screen, on a book, and in game credits can also be its own reward.

Whatever the motivation, there is nothing quite like hearing from the people who experience your work and who actually make it possible for any of us to have careers as writers. I'll never forget the sheer ecstasy I felt when I was standing in a comic book store and I heard someone behind me raving to the store owner about this fantastic story he'd just read… and I was able to turn around and say, "Thanks! I wrote that!"

Or the profound impact of knowing that an animation series has touched and shaped lives far beyond simple entertainment, even inspired them to pursue their own creative dreams or helped them survive difficult times in their lives. Or getting mail from someone who was moved to pursue an area of study because he was so intrigued by material in my adventure game.

Examine what drives you as a writer, but never forget that your work is reaching the eyes or ears of people of every age and type who can be impacted by it in a positive or negative way. It's rewarding to hear from people for whom your work had a positive impact, but accepting that your work can have a positive impact means accepting the corresponding reality that your work could have a negative impact. I don't mean the rare, unintended incident where a troubled soul uses your work as inspiration to commit a wrongful act. The Beatles certainly never had Charles Manson in mind when they wrote *Helter Skelter*. This doesn't change the truth that what you write has the potential to impact another person's life.

It's too easy to shrug off taking responsibility for your work by saying "It's just a game. It's just a cartoon. It's just a comic book."

They can be far more than that, and they can change lives for the better without preaching or moralizing. Merely writing about the human condition, the choices we all face, and the consequences of those choices can be enough. Whether your work will do that or how it does that is up to you. Know what you want your impact to be. Don't ignore your responsibility to shape minds and move hearts.