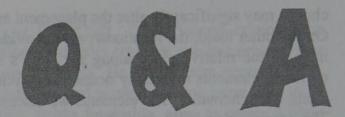# INTERACTIVE
WRITER'S HANDBOOK

DARRYL WIMBERLEY • JON SAMSEL

Q & A

TERRY BORST

Bio

Terry Borst has co-written the interactive screenplays for WING COMMANDER III and WING COMMANDER IV. (Wing Commander III has been nominated by the Interactive Academy of Arts and Sciences for Best Writing & Wing Commander IV is the most expensive video game ever made). His "traditional" screenwriting credits include the TV movie sequel to the DeNiro film MIDNIGHT RUN, the independent feature film PRIVATE WAR, and an episode of the BBC action-adventure television series BUGS. In addition, he has performed uncredited rewrites on USA Cable movies and independent features, and developed screenplays for the producers of The Hunt for Red October and other independent producers in Hollywood. He is currently writing and designing a new interactive title and developing other projects in both the interactive and television arenas.

In the past, he has published both poetry and fiction, and is a member of the Writers Guild of America as well as being listed in the Directory of American Poets and Writers. His parchment includes a Master of Fine Arts from UCLA and a Bachelor of Arts from UC Berkeley.

Interview

WHAT IS YOUR PROFESSIONAL WRITING BACKGROUND?
Originally I was a fiction and poetry writer. Professional in the loose sense of the word since generally, fiction and poetry don't really pay [LAUGHS]. I went on to film school and received a Masters degree at UCLA. Since getting out of school, it's been the usual screenwriter's route-- working on a bunch of low-budget features initially-- slowly working my way up the ladder.

ANYTHING PRODUCED? One feature film called *Private War* which I co-wrote. There were unaccredited re-writes on a few other USA cable-type of films as well. Right before the *Wing Commander* projects, my writing partner (Frank DePalma) and I wrote the screenplay for a television sequel to *Midnight Run* which Frank directed.

HOW DID THE WING COMMANDER ASSIGNMENT COME ABOUT? As is often the case with assignments, it was being in the right place at the right time. I friend of ours who used to be a creative exec at Fox was working as a story editor/creative exec at Electronic Arts. She called us and said 'Gee, there's this interactive project that's in need of a screenwriter. Why don't you send me a sample?' We send samples out all the time-- if I had a nickel for every time I sent a sample out, I'd be a rich man and could retire...

[BOTH LAUGH] Little did we know at the time that the sample was for Chris Roberts, the designer of the *Wing Commander* franchise. He was looking for Hollywood screenwriters who could turn a completely computer-generated project to one that would incorporate a great deal of live action video. Chris Roberts liked our sample and BANG-- we were hired.

HOW DO YOU COLLABORATE WITH ANOTHER WRITER ON AN INTERACTIVE PROJECT? It's no different than collaborating on any other project. Frank and I have been writing together for ten years. We've been doing this sort of thing so long, we've got a system down. The way it doesn't work is the way people tend to think it should work-- which is something out of *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. Unfortunately, it doesn't quite work out that way because it seemed like they had a lot more fun. Our methodology starts off with my partner and I in the room together. We're face to face. We try to structure the piece with 3 x 5 index cards in order to work out each scene in advance. We see how the scenes fit together in terms of a traditional three-act structure.

JUST LIKE A FEATURE ASSIGNMENT? Well, there are differences. With a feature screenplay, the number of scenes is 45-50 scenes for a two-hour movie. So that's 45-50 index cards. With interactive projects like *Wing Commander*, the number of scenes totaled 200-300 index cards. Instead of tacking the cards to a bulletin board, Frank and I had to put them on the floor. The great thing about index cards is that you can lay them on the floor and walk around the structure of your story. The cards can double as your flow chart. We have a couple of photographs of the two of us standing amid some pretty wild structures.

I'LL BET. Flow charts are really a vehicle which allows us to discuss every scene in detail...the beats of the scene, etc. By the end of this exercise we know our structure so well, we are able to go off separately. One of us can write Act I while the other person is writing Act II.

We modem stuff back and forth constantly to make changes to each others work. The closing to our writing methodology is essentially putting all the pieces together. So you could say that our methodology has three acts as well...the beginning is when we are together in the room, the middle is when we are off separately writing, and the end (when we have the luxury of doing so) is when we work together in the same room, dotting the I's and crossing the T's.

AS A DESIGN TEAM MEMBER, WHAT IS THE WRITER'S ROLE IN THE PRE-PRODUCTION DESIGN PROCESS? In the interactive arena, I'd say it's different from project to project. I think the biggest single factor is how close the project is to production. On *Wing Commander III* for instance, we were brought in extremely late in the process. They (Origin) had tried unsuccessfully to create a script in-house. The first day of shooting was set. Cameras were ready to roll. The gaming elements had been determined. The interface had been designed. But they still didn't have a screenplay.

HOW FAST DID YOU HAVE TO WRITE THIS THING? We had a first draft completed in three weeks.

YIKES! That's two hundred fifty pages of material. It was insanity. We went to Austin, Texas for three days and sat down and talked with the producer, director and game designers about everything. From that point on, Frank and I were pretty much left to our own devices.

THAT WAS A RISKY VENTURE ON THEIR PART. True. But we would ship off bits and pieces as soon as we could to get feedback from the team. I think we synced up nicely under the circumstances. *Wing Commander IV* was different because we were on the project from the start. What that meant was that we were much more involved in aspects of game design. Wing Commander is in essences, a flight sim. At the heart lies the missions that you fly. The design team had to come up with all new missions and our initial role as writers was to provide suggestions or the skeleton for each mission. We'd say things like 'wouldn't it be great for the story if at this point we had to land on the planet surface after taking out a bunch of tanks...maybe there's a ship landing as you're landing and you have to shoot that ship too. Things like that.' Once the missions and overall

story concept were agreed up, we went off to write the treatment. After that was delivered and approved, we went off to Austin again for another three-day marathon session with the design team. So on *Wing Commander IV*, we worked much more closely with the game designers throughout the scripting process.

DID YOU GET ALONG WITH THE DESIGN TEAM MEMBERS? Often times, we'd want to do things one way and the game designers would want to do things another. Frank and I do not claim to be expert game designers or puzzle-masters. We know story and we'll take no back seat to anybody in terms of story, character, narrative and so on. Game designers know what has been done before and what will be an entertaining experience for the user. Both sides would constantly push the creative envelope. But Chris is the guy who had to make the final call. The buck stopped with Chris Roberts.

WERE YOU ABLE TO IMPROVE UPON YOUR INTERACTIVE SCREENPLAY FROM WING III TO WING IV? Well, that was our goal. To provide a greater integration of character and gaming so that the experience is as rich as possible. We really wanted to integrate the story flow, the gaming flow-- all of the elements.

HOW DOES THE INTERACTIVE WRITER INTEGRATE THE GAMING ELEMENT INTO A SCREENPLAY? The term "gaming" has such a wide definition. I guest *Myst* is a game but there is no winning or loosing. Winning and loosing has always been associated with games. I guess the best way to integrate gaming into the screenplay is to first define the type of experience you're trying to provide the audience. Is it going to be a "transport sim" experience like a flight sim or driving sim? Or is it a shoot-em-up twitch game? Or is it an emmersive exploratory experience like a *Myst* or *7th Guest?* Once you define the gaming genre, the trick is to develop something new and original. That's not easy to do. And that's probably why interactive projects rely on a creative team rather than on one individual.

IS THE GAMING ELEMENT MERELY A DIVERSION FROM THE LINEAR NARRATIVE? The interactivity should not be a diversion. This is an entirely different new medium we are working with and what it should not try to do is simply ape what previous mediums delivered. The experience of watching lice-action video, for example, on a computer screen is simply not going to compete with a 70mm theatrical film. Why in the world should anyone sit down in front of there computer and involve themselves with this new experience? It's not

because they will be enveloped in this rich, filmatic visual and sound experience. It is the interactivity. That's what is brand new. As a writer, the idea is to explore where the interactivity can take the audience. The audience gains some control over the narrative, but not complete control. The boundaries of the world must still be created and defined by the writer/designer. What we end up with is a more collaborative experience between the audience and the writer/designer. That's exciting. My goal then as the writer is to get beyond the stop-start experience that interactivity is today. We are still trying to figure out how to do this.

HOW DO YOU DECIDE WHICH PLAYER POINT-OF-VIEW TO INCORPORATE INTO YOUR PROJECT? There are basically two models that I've seen used. First person P.O.V. is pretty cool but there is very little inter-action possible. Your mouse or joystick has a limited amount of verbs at its disposal. I think it's six. Up, down, left, right, forward, backward. Or you're given some text choices for example of how to respond to somebody. The options boil down to yes, no, and maybe.

The alternative P.O.V. has been the third person where you have an alter ego that's on-screen. By definition, that's a more distancing experience and less emmersive. As an industry, we are struggling with these issues every day. Unfortunately, so often interactivity is simply a diversion. Ultimately, it should be the beating heart.

WHERE DO YOU STAND ON INTERFACE DESIGN? One of the most exciting aspects of this new media is there are number of possible interfaces that can work for any given project. In film, there is basically one interface (unless you consider the option of filming in either black and white or color). It doesn't matter if you are watching a French film or a film from Hong Kong. The grammar has been established. We understand a cut and how a montage works. In interactivity, everything is open for interpretation and manipulation. I think interface design comes down to your audience and the type of experience you want them the have. *Johnny Mnemonic's* clean interface has its merits. A very busy interface can be a lot of fun too. What you do want to have is an intuitive interface. Unfortunately, I still haven't met a truly intuitive software interface. Even though the Macintosh system interface is described as intuitive, it's not for someone who has never worked on a computer before. If I sat my mom down in front of a Mac, she'd still be doomed. I've seen enough people wave mousses in front of their computer screens hoping that something would work [LAUGHS].

AS AN INTERACTIVE WRITER, HOW DO YOU BEGIN? LET'S TRY AN EXERCISE. I'LL TELL YOU MY STORY IDEA AND YOU TELL ME HOW YOU MIGHT MAKE IT INTERACTIVE: JACK AND JILL WENT UP A HILL TO FETCH A PAIL OF WATER. JACK FELL DOWN AND BROKE HIS CROWN AND JILL CAME TUMBLING AFTER. I first need to identify three things. The audience, what your aiming for, and what kind of genre that you're going for. There are a few questions I'd ask about my audience. Would I like to create an experience where my audience is in the world with Jack and Jill? Is this a world where Jack and Jill and the player grow as a result of their experiences together? Or are they solving a mystery of some kind? Is that more what this experience is about? Is this about the player showing Jack and Jill what he/she knows?

Next I'd try to flush out more of the story. What is it that the player is aiming for? After Jack fell down the hill, what did Jack do? Chase after Jill and give her holy hell? Does he leave Jill and never see her again? Why were they at the top of the hill? Does are story actually start earlier? What is the goal of the experience? Once that's defined, I'd identify how the player interacts with this experience. Will the player become a character that interacts with Jack and Jill? Is the player Jack? Is the player Jill? Can the player become Jack or Jill? Is it possible that the player be Jack one time and Jill the next time? These would be my initial type of questions.

The next thing I'd do is identify the genre of the piece. Is it a twitch game? Is this a children's title? Is this an educational experience? What the experience is not going to be is an important as what it finally becomes.

But you know, the most important thing to consider before you start writing is what interests you.

LET'S TALK ABOUT SCREENPLAY STYLE. WHAT DOES THE PAGE LOOK LIKE? A "proper" screenplay format hasn't yet been established in interactive media which is good because we are still figuring things out. The traditional screenplay format for feature took years to develop. I've seen scripts from the early 30's and a style was definitely evident at that point. But that was with the advent of sound...in film, all the modern elements we've come to know were locked down.

In *Wing Commander III & IV*, we felt that what was important was to create a screenplay that would look as much like a traditional feature screenplay as possible. Why? Because actors had to read it and a crew and to break it down. Traditional Hollywood elements were being brought into a CD-ROM game.

IF TRADITIONAL HOLLYWOOD ELEMENTS WERE NOT GOING TO BE INCLUDED IN A PROJECT YOUR WERE WRITING, WOULD YOU HAVE USED THE SAME FORMAT? That would depend on the project. I wouldn't necessarily be a need to use a feature screenplay structure. On *Wing Commander III*, for example, the initial in-house effort to write a script didn't look like a feature screenplay at all. Nobody on the set would have known how to read it or budget it. Now we still had to do some new and different things. We had to create a document with a structure that we thought would best serve the project as a whole.

K-271

When Blair arrives at the new nav-point, he
sees...

...A cap ship. But unlike any he's ever seen. *
It is sleek, massive, and devoid of insignia.
It also appears unescorted.

IF Blair accepted the IFF codes, he receives a   *
transmission from his wingman (OR Sosa IF he's   *
flying solo) --   *

                  WINGMAN OR SOSA (COMM SCREEN)   *
     Activate IFF codes, Colonel.   *

(NOTE: IF Blair's wingman is Catscratch OR a
Red-Shirt, he is now vulnerable as usual.)

IF Blair activates the Confed IFF codes
(available through his comm channel menu), he is
able to fly close enough to the cap ship without   *
meeting any resistance to begin firing on its
engines, bridge, and turrets. But as soon as he
opens fire, those sleek, unmarked fighters he's
seen before (Black Lance ships) will emerge from
the cap ship and defend it.   *

IF Blair does NOT activate the Confed IFF codes
(OR does not have them), the Black Lance
fighters will launch from the cap ship long   *
before he gets within range to attempt disabling
it. This stiff resistance will make his
objective very nearly (but not completely)
impossible to achieve.

(NOTE: IF it's not completely used up, Pliers'
cloaker will be very useful here.)

Once the cap ship is disabled, Dekker comes on   *
Blair's screen --

                  DEKKER (COMM SCREEN)
     Fire us in there, boss.

Blair fires his pods. After a moment --

                  DEKKER (COMM SCREEN)
     We're in, boss. Keep those
     bogies away from me while I do my
     thing.

Blair must now fend off attacks from remaining
Black Lance fighters until he's bought Dekker
V amount of time.

Borst/De Palma - Wing Commander IV - Series K - 5/31/95 (PINK)

(Sample page from "Wing Commander IV," an interactive game
produced by Origin Systems; written by Terry Borst and Frank DePalma)