



» OFFICIAL PLAYSTATION INTERVIEW

# RHIANNA PRATCHETT

Hailing from the U.K., Rhianna Pratchett might not be a household name in the U.S., but plenty of her games are. The writer behind *Heavenly Sword* and *Overlord* started out as a staffer on the U.K.'s *PC Zone* magazine, only to decide to "pursue the pajama-based life of a freelancer" until she was offered a position writing *Beyond Divinity* (PC, 2004). Since then Pratchett has been responsible for crafting the stories behind several hits, with her latest project, *Mirror's Edge*, due out on PS3 later this year.

**PTOM: Was your choice of career motivated by a personal love of gaming?**

Rhianna Pratchett: I'm a longtime gamer (since I was about six years old) and I like to pursue the unconventional. I trained as a journalist, but I'm not really sure that my tutors ever saw reviewing, previewing, and writing features about games as *proper* journalism. It definitely wasn't in the curriculum. Certainly, I got my first writing gigs because friends, who needed their commission slips filled, knew I liked games.

**How and to what extent does gameplay impact your approach to writing the story?**

Fairly majorly. I'm writing stories for the gameplay; they're not games playing my stories. (Although, who knows, maybe one day...) Gameplay and genre have a big impact on the kind of story you can tell and the means by which you can tell it. So being a gamer certainly lends itself well to understanding the needs of gameplay.

**Do you have to tailor your story to fit the game or is the game built around the plot?**

Most of the time, it's the former. Developers will usually focus on gameplay and level design, before the details of a story and characters are worked out. There might be some semblance of a story idea in place, a partial cast, maybe, before I come onboard, but usually building all that is my job. The exception is *Heavenly Sword*, which had a first-draft script in place when I came onto the project. Although that still required lots of work to flesh out the characters, scenes, and journeys. By and large, it's game first, story later—but we're slowly moving toward more of a hand-in-hand relationship.

**How did you get involved with *Heavenly Sword*, *Mirror's Edge*, and *Overlord*?**

Basically, a lot of networking—making contacts in the industry and buying a lot of drinks. I was lucky in that all three of those projects found me. *Mirror's Edge* also involved two (possibly gay) tortoises. But someone has to buy *me* a drink to hear that one.

**Speaking of *Mirror's Edge*, how do you write for a character that's never really seen?**

It's amazing how attached you can get to a voice and how much emotion can be portrayed by a good voice actor. You just have to pay extra attention to the clarity of the dialogue and its relationship to the gameplay. Plus, work carefully with your actors to make sure they understand the context and delivery needs. Characters you don't see, but do hear, can be great aids to interactivity. Gnarl, your evil mentor in *Overlord*, is mostly conveyed through voice as he speaks telepathically as you explore the game world. Likewise, Merc, Faith's Tracker in *Mirror's Edge*, mainly speaks via a little communication unit in Faith's ear—just techie telepathy, really!

**What can you tell us about the world of *Mirror's Edge*? How will it distinguish itself from other dystopias?**

The city in *Mirror's Edge* isn't really a dystopia. We are genuinely trying to do something a bit different. If anything, it's a Nanny State taken to extremes. For many of the people that live in it, it's a utopia. It's a city that works well. It's a city that cares. It's a city whose white-tooth-filled-mouth would make a little "ting" noise when it smiled. It genuinely wants its citizens to be well-housed, well-schooled, healthy, and secure voters, and will do anything in its power to achieve that. What's more disturbing about this city is not so much what the authorities have done, but the fact that people have allowed them to do it; that civil liberties have been given up willingly for a comfortable life, for the greater good. But then paradise always has a price.

**Were parkour and free-running interesting aspects to integrate into the storyline?**

They certainly were. I focused a lot on the freedom of movement and about how pushing your body can give comfort to your mind. There's certainly an underlying theme about the nature of mental and physical freedom.

**Both *Mirror's Edge* and *Heavenly Sword* feature strong female leads. Was this intentional?**

I'm not entirely sure you can do this kind of thing accidentally—but yes, as far as I'm aware they were always going to have female leads. The industry can be a little unsophisticated about its character depiction. And in all fairness, this goes for male characters as well as female ones. The ripped, gun-totting, all-action hero, is as much of a cliché as any female character that was ever forced into a chain-mail bikini.

**Do you think a strong storyline plays a much more important role in a game's success?**

I think it's started to, yes. The cracks, when held up to other entertainment forms, have become all too apparent. It's starting to be properly addressed, though. Developers are taking narrative more seriously and there are a lot more professional writers and narrative designers about, these days.

**What kind of advice would you give someone looking to get into writing games?**

Firstly, have a read of the two books that the IGDA Writers' Special Interest Group has produced: *Professional Techniques for Video Game Writing* (edited by Wendy Despain) and *Game Writing: Narrative Skills for Videogames* (edited by Chris Bateman). They're full of really useful information from working professionals. Secondly, play a lot of games, make sure you have a good understanding of gameplay. Lastly, go to as many game events, conferences, and talks as you can and reach out, make contacts, network; you never know where it may lead.

In general, games are much less linear to write for than other entertainment forms. They usually require a strong knowledge of the gameplay and level design, to do right. The saying "Writing is rewriting" has never been more appropriate than for games writing, because the needs of a game can change so much during a development cycle. This requires a huge amount of flexibility on the part of the writer. Plus games writing is still a fairly new discipline, so you're often dealing with people that have some pretty unrealistic expectations of how the creative writing process works. So partly your role is as an educator, as well. Have I put you off, yet?

## Rhianna Pratchett 411

AGE: 31

GAME THAT GOT ME INTO GAMING: *Mazogs* on the ZX81

FIRST JOB: Washing Hair

BACKGROUND: Former games journalist

FAVORITE GAMES: The *Thief* games, anything by the late, great Bullfrog Studios, *Vampire: Bloodlines*, *BioShock*, *Portal*, *Half-Life 2*, *Psychonauts*, *Planescape Torment*, *Project Zero*, *Age of Mythology*, *Evil Genius*, *World of Warcraft*, and the *Diablo* games, to name but a few.

FAVORITE BOOK: *Frankenstein or My Family and Other Animals* (for a comfort read)

FAVORITE WRITER: William Goldman

HERO: Mary Shelley