

Interview: David Dunham, lead designer, producer and programmer of the award-winning strategy storytelling game, *King of Dragon Pass*

Conducted by: Jeffery Klaehn
jklaehn@gmail.com
Independent Scholar, Canada

Abstract

David Dunham was the lead designer, producer and programmer of the award-winning strategy storytelling game, *King of Dragon Pass*. He is also the owner of A Sharp, the software development house that published the game. In this interview he discusses how *King of Dragon Pass* came to be; its approach to story, lore, mythology and world-building; how the game's artwork, which is static, functions as visual narrative within the broader context of the game's world; emergent gameplay elements, player choice and context-sensitive actions; story and narrative possibilities within roleplaying games; and the writing of his forthcoming game, *Six Ages*, the spiritual successor to *King of Dragon Pass*.

Author Keywords

King of Dragon Pass; Mythology; World-Building; narrative, storytelling games, game design, roleplaying games

Interview

Q: Do you remember when you first became interested in games?

David Dunham: Not really, I've played games as long as I can remember. Maybe watching my grandfather play solitaire (with cards, of course) before I could read was a factor. I certainly played a lot of board games as a kid. I learned to program in 7th grade, and made my first game that year. It was a football simulator that ran on an Olivetti 101 programmable calculator, which was all that I had available back then.

Q: To an audience unfamiliar with the narrative possibilities that roleplaying games can offer, how might you characterize a roleplaying experience?

David Dunham: This is always an interesting question, since that term has a different meaning for a computer game and a tabletop game. In general, on a computer you have a character as your single playing piece, and usually progress through the game by gaining abilities and levels – which is arguably the same thing as the original tabletop RPG, *Dungeons & Dragons*. But paper RPGs have moved on. They're collaborations between players, and often emphasize actually playing a

role. Tabletop RPGs usually involves at least one player (the gamemaster) making up a story. Play is usually in moderate length sessions, picking up after the events of the last session left off. So while it might be planned or not, you can often end up with something like a TV series with a narrative arc. I'm probably using "usually" too much but that's because the whole thing relies on player creativity, so there's a ton of variety. And the RPG genre has had an influx of innovative indie games. It's hard to characterize as one thing. But between dice and player input, you're telling a story that you don't necessarily know the ending of.

Q: Please tell me about the genesis of *King of Dragon Pass* (KoDP) – it first released 1999 but an updated version was released for iOS in 2011 and since then versions have also been released for Android and for PC via Steam. Why did you initially set out to make a storytelling game?

David Dunham: The genesis was much earlier, in a tabletop RPG I ran in the late 1980s. It was a mashup of the *Pendragon* game rules, which were designed to support a game where the characters would eventually get old and retire in favor of their children, and the fantasy world of Glorantha. Greg Stafford wrote *Pendragon*, but he had also created Glorantha, a place where myths had power. Over the years, he fleshed out Glorantha. One of the interesting bits of history lasted about as long as a *Pendragon* series, so it seemed like it would be a good blend. I wrote to Greg Stafford and got a little additional background material for the game. Since it was set in an area called Dragon Pass, my game was *PenDragon Pass*.

I kept in correspondence with Greg, and came to realize that some of our ideas about what would make a good computer game were aligned. And that a multi-generational game set in Dragon Pass was something that we both thought had potential. I was in a position where I could actually make the game, so I licensed the use of Glorantha from Greg.

To skip ahead, KoDP was out of print, and the iPhone had come out. I wanted to let more people play the game, and I wanted to do something for iPhone. I did some design mockups, and realized that the game would work just fine. I just had to redo about a third of the work — the user interface.

KoDP did fairly well on iPhone and later iPad, and I was able to find a publisher with the expertise to port it to Android, and later to Mac and Windows, its original PC platforms.

To circle back, why did I want to make a storytelling game? I'd played a computer game called *Castles*, which had a very light story element. To me this was far more interesting than the castle-building game. Maybe because storytelling is intrinsically interesting? People are pretty much hardwired to tell stories, after all. I figured that my game should focus on story, and that other game elements should be in support of that. And I wanted to tell more than one story — there were certainly adventure games (like *Monkey Island*, which is another influence), but they generally tell a specific story.

Q: What challenges were involved in making the game?

David Dunham: There had never been a game like KoDP before. In some ways it very much resembles that roleplaying series I mentioned: it's a bunch of small episodes that combine into a story arc. But as a computer game, it needed to be replayable, so the episodes needed to combine

in arbitrary order. In other words, it was an emergent narrative. So it was impossible to know how it worked (as a player experience) until it worked as a piece of software. Mostly it did work, but combat in particular wasn't as interesting as it was common, and my QA lead, Rob Heinsoo, came up with a way to spice up combat.

We also did our best to keep the game immersive. Ideally nothing reminds you that you're not in Glorantha, affecting the destiny of an Iron Age clan. Our UI design tried to reinforce this. I know we got some requests to show graphs, but that would have broken the fantasy. So you get the information from your advisors instead. On the other hand, we weren't showing the buttons and scroll bars you were used to on a computer, so we ended up resorting to tooltips.

One UI challenge was making sure that colorblind players could play the game. It took several iterations with our designer to get radio buttons that were distinguishable. The scope of the game turned into a bit of a challenge, in that fully testing every branch of every scene took quite a while. And with a large emergent narrative, tuning the economics could be a problem. In general though, we had a very strong team, and there weren't really any insurmountable challenges in making the game. The real challenge was selling it, which we actually failed to do — we'd hoped to find a publisher. So we had to scramble to learn how to publish a CD-ROM in a box.

Q: How would you characterize the approach to story, lore and mythology in KoDP? What inspired the world-building and narrative elements of the game?

David Dunham: Icelandic sagas are a big influence. They tell stories of settlement, farming, and heroism that play out over generations. And they do it in an economical style. It's not an accident that KoDP has a Saga screen (though really this is a player aid, so you don't need to take notes while playing).

And Greg Stafford was also a fan of the sagas. The bulk of the mythology, lore, and world-building in KoDP came from his work on Glorantha. I can't really speak to his inspirations, but we really tried to portray Dragon Pass as a real place. We used modern language, but avoided anachronistic phrases. The people have a value system appropriate to living in a low-technology world with a pantheon of real gods. Or I should say, peoples, since different cultures (and species) have their own value systems.

We wanted it to feel like real stories in a real world. They're about people who worry about who to marry and their wealth and status. And they often take some time to fully play out. The basic approach to story was to build it out of small elements, which we called "scenes." Most of these are completely standalone, though they have requirements (i.e. a scene requires you to have at least one ally, or to own a treasure, etc.). A few must follow a previous scene, but we tried to avoid branching in the conventional sense.

One nice aspect to the self-contained scenes was that lots of people could write them. Robin Laws wrote the vast majority, but three other team members created them too. And later, we had a contest for fans to write scenes.

The game wanted to include 'hero-questing,' which was a pretty cool element of Glorantha. You

can send a hero into the Otherworld to re-enact a myth, on behalf of your clan. But although Greg had written a lot about hero quests, and had written quite a few Gloranthan myths, it turned out there really weren't that many complete myths that would work. Robin Laws ended up writing all but one (which was actually two of Greg's myths which I combined into one).

Q: The beautiful artwork within both the original and updated versions of KoDP is very much in the style of a storybook or graphic novel – how does the art, which is static, function as visual narrative within the broader context of the game's world and storytelling?

David Dunham: In many cases, the artists would include not only the main situation, but something secondary that helped reinforce the idea that this was a living world. In one example, a visitor speaks at the market. But in the background, a cutpurse is stealing from someone. This is something that I later turned into a new scene, refocusing the art by covering the opposite side with the text explanation.

We actually learned a fair amount about the previously published world of Glorantha from the art. For example, how the women who worship the warrior goddess combine men's and women's dress, since they live in both worlds. Or how the roofs of clan halls are painted to accommodate magical flyers.

Q: What does good writing within the context of video games mean for you?

David Dunham: Obviously it needs to be good writing. It doesn't really need to portray a scene the same way it would in a novel, since it accompanies illustrations. But it still needs to build the setting and convey a situation, and help create an emotional response in the player. It needs to support the other elements of a game – that is the visuals and audio. KoDP is a little unusual in that a lot of its writing is in the form of advice, spoken by your seven advisors. It can be commentary, to give players context for a decision or to illustrate the speaker's personality. As advice, it needs to help the player make an informed decision. We also use it to help flesh out the world. The Bad King Urgrain advice does both. Individually, it tells you what not to do. Collectively, you learn the story of the hero who overthrew him. But my favorite is when one advisor directly talks to another. To me, this makes the advisors into people and not just playing pieces.

Q: Please tell me about Robin Laws' contributions to KoDP.

David Dunham: I hired Robin as a writer, but defined that fairly loosely. His role was to come up with the vast majority of the hundreds of interactive scenes. To make them work, he also came up with a number of game systems, such as how we track tribal politics. As I mentioned already, he also had to create a number of myths. Eventually, I decided he had done so much that I gave him credit as a co-designer.

Q: How do gameplay and narrative co-exist and interact within KoDP?

David Dunham: Although there are other gameplay choices, such as raiding or building up clan magic, narrative choice really is the main gameplay element in the game. So narrative is not a

separate thing, it is the game. The rest of the gameplay is really to support the narrative.

Q: How do the dense gameplay mechanics of KoDP enable emergent gameplay elements which involve player choices and context-sensitive actions?

David Dunham: Although there are stock narrative elements which occur in any game, most scenes can occur in any order. To give them meaning, they connect to the economic system. If you're asked for a gift, that can have a very different meaning depending on the size of your herd. And the person asking could be different each time. Helping another clan which is normally poorly disposed to yours is a very different choice than helping an ally. That's one reason we had such a detailed system of relationships between clans. There are feuds, alliances, favors, slights, a history of raiding, and more. This mostly depends on your choices in the game, so your play history can directly provide context.

Even the game's initial setup is considered to be story choices made by your ancestors, which provides context.

Q: How do you deal with the issue of wanting to give players the chance to replay the game, and how does this influence story and narrative elements?

David Dunham: We wanted to create a narrative game that could be replayed, partly because much of it took the form of a strategy game, and people expect to play those again. This is one reason that the scenes tried to be standalone, and contain elements that could be changed each time.

Given the length of the story arc, some scenes were intended to repeat within a game. In addition to randomizing characters, we also provided text alternatives, so it would not read identically each time. A typical boxed game in the late 1990s was supposed to deliver 40 hours of game play, so that was one of our targets. This is one of the reasons there's a short game and a long game.

So replay was certainly an important goal. We probably went a lot further than we needed to, especially by adding more scenes when we reworked the game for iOS. But this also makes the game different for every player, and gives them their own unique stories.

Q: KoDP is extremely unique in terms of the roleplaying opportunity it enables for players –

David Dunham: It is the definition of unique. I really believe it is one of a kind and unlike anything else, which makes me sad, because I'd like to play a game like it. There are at last games that have been influenced by it — I've enjoyed *Fallen London* and *Banner Saga*, to name the ones I've played.

I think part of what makes it unique is that it does its best to immerse you in a fantasy world, to the point that you cannot do well in the game unless you play not yourself, but a member of the world. "Think like an Orlanthei," our tips page says. We could do this partly because we had such a rich mythology available, so we could coherently and consistently show what being an Orlanthei meant (including what it doesn't mean — this is partly the Trickster's role).

And you have to roleplay because we tried to make the story choices have no obvious best answer. You can't game them (except for the game's hero-quests, but that's a special case).

Another reason is that unlike a computer RPG, you aren't playing a character. You're really playing the entire clan. And your character creation choices aren't about classes or statistics, they're about attitudes and morality.

Q: As we're undertaking this interview, you're currently working on the spiritual successor to KoDP, which is called *Six Ages*. What can you tell me about the writing for this new game?

David Dunham: While I'm attempting to make a game of slightly smaller scope, and use KoDP as a roadmap, *Six Ages* is still a very large game for a small team, and is thus a long way from release. So I can say very little (both wearing my marketing hat of not wanting to have our message forgotten by release, and my designer hat of not knowing what will have to change once the game can be played).

I am working again with Robin Laws, and he and I did learn a lot from making KoDP and other games since. We're trying to simplify some of the underlying game systems so that we can understand it better (i.e. have better levers for the emergent behavior), and so that players can understand it better.

The basic writing process is much the same. I've given Robin some overall guidelines, and he sends me scenes. I review those, largely with an eye to troubleshooting what might happen when they're plugged into an emergent system, but also editing text, or keeping things consistent with my grand vision. Robin takes that feedback into an account and gives me a revision.

When a scene is coded (our scripting language requires only light changes to what Robin writes), QA might notice text that doesn't work in context or in certain flows. Usually I'll do the edits or write connective sentences.

One change we plan: with KoDP, Robin gave us his assignments and was done. He didn't really get the chance to see how things actually worked. This time, we're dividing up his time, with a break in the middle. The idea is that that he will come back to a moderately complete game and be able to assess how things work, and make changes or add anything that turns out to be needed. But our goal is to take all the things that made KoDP a great narrative game, and do them again, but even better.

David Dunham and A Sharp can be visited online at <http://www.a-sharp.com/>