On taking inspiration from family history

Video game designer and writer Jordan Mechner discusses finding the lighter moments in a dark family history, the unexpected resonances between past and present, and staying curious.

October 9, 2024 -

As told to Rebecca Hiscott, 2930 words.

Tags: Writing, Comics, Games, Beginnings, Business, Family.

Your career has included video game design, screenwriting and filmmaking, writing books and graphic novels, and illustration. Do you go through periods where a particular medium is calling to you more than another?

Sometimes a particular medium calls me for a particular project. *Replay* could only have been a graphic novel, and it was one I had to draw as well as write. The desire to do that book came hand-in-hand with the desire to dive into the challenge of writing and drawing a graphic novel. *The Last Express* was always going to be a point-and-click interactive adventure game with a strong cinematic feel. Later, I adapted *The Last Express* as a film screenplay for Paul Verhoeven, and the idea of writing a film that would be a thriller, an adventure, was what drew me back*. *It seemed like it had a universe and characters that could lend itself very well to that.

Why could *Replay* only be a graphic novel, and one you had to illustrate yourself?

The graphic novel is a very personal medium. But it also can describe things that are epic, historical, things that would be too expensive or just don't lend themselves to cinema. In a graphic novel you can go from an intimate conversation to a map of the world, or to something that happened in another century, and it feels completely natural. Movies are all about rhythm, and it's an audiovisual experience that happens in real time, so to jump around works differently than it does on the page. And the fact of drawing as well as writing, that complete creative control, is something you can't do as a screenwriter, and you can't do in quite the same way as a writer collaborating with an artist.

I didn't start out with the ambition of one day drawing my own graphic novel, although that was my ambition as a kid, when I was 10, 12 years old, drawing comics. But I stopped for 30 years, during which time I was making video games, writing screenplays, making short films. I started drawing again about 15 years ago as a hobby. I started carrying around a sketchbook and drawing my kids, people in cafes, airports, street scenes. I didn't think I drew well, but working with artists had reawakened my desire to draw, so I just enjoyed doing it. I enjoyed the sense of progress. Even if the drawing didn't come out, the act of sitting for five or 20 minutes and drawing what I saw around me felt good. It's like a meditation. It's a way of observation that's not judgmental but that really reawakens the senses.

In the course of filling 30 or 40 sketchbooks with my drawings, I started to show them to my friends who were graphic novel artists. They looked at my drawings very thoughtfully and gave me tips and encouraged me. At a certain point they started to say to me, "You should draw a graphic novel." I said, "Oh, no, I'm a writer, not an artist. That's just my hobby."

But at a certain point, I realized I was serious about drawing. It had become a mode of expression that was engaging and important to me. That made it possible to do an autobiographical story in a way that hadn't been available to me before. So *Replay* took its form from the collision of those two things.

You've published personal work before. You have two journal collections, *The Making of Karateka* and *The Making of Prince of Persia*. You've published some of your sketchbooks. But *Replay* is not just your own story, the story of a turbulent time in your family's life, moving from the US to France. You're also telling the story of your grandfather and father making the opposite journey, leaving Europe during World War II and emigrating to the US. What was the process of creating that?

The structure of *Replay* took a while for me to find. At first I didn't know if it was going to be one book or three. I had the idea of doing an autobiographical story: a graphic novel memoir of my career in video games, going back to the 1970s and the Apple II, making *Karateka* and *Prince of Persia* in the 1980s.

Then there were the stories my father, my grandfather, and my aunt had told me as a kid. As an American in New York, I had a very safe childhood, in which I could do comics and spend all my time learning how to program games on an Apple II computer. My dad's childhood had been spent on the run, as a Jewish refugee in occupied France. My grandfather had also fought as a soldier in the First World War, on the Austro-Hungarian side. When my grandfather retired as a doctor, he spent three years compiling a family memoir. It filled four volumes, with photographs and documents. So the detective work that's often such a big part of that kind of story was already mostly done. The idea of digging into the historical research I would need in order to depict all of this accurately also appealed to me.

Then there was the third piece, which was to do a present-day memoir: a graphic novel about my experience as an American expat coming to France, the father of teenagers, in the midst of trying to save my second marriage, and working with a video game team in a different country to try to make a new *Prince of Persia* game.

At one point I thought that these could be three different books, or even four. I tried to find ways to weave these together, but for a long time I just couldn't. My worry was, how can you put World War II and a city being bombarded next to game development?

The thing that made it click into place was talking to my editor, Lewis Trondheim. He made the observation that by moving to France with my two kids, and for a while separating them, was what my grandfather did, but in the opposite direction and under less pleasant circumstances. It was right in front of me, but somehow I'd never thought of it this way.

I suddenly started to see incredible, unexpected resonances between his story and mine. For example, the fact that my dad, my grandfather, and I always seem to land next to the sea. They came from Vienna, and my dad ended up with his aunt on the Atlantic coast of Northern France in Le Touquet, then in a fishing village in Vendée, La-Bernerie-en-Retz, and ended up in Nice. When I came to France in 2017, I came to Montpellier, which is on the Mediterranean. When my grandfather was separated from his family, he went to Havana. He spent his exile looking at the Malecón. As soon as I started to draw these things, I realized that I was drawing the ocean and seagulls in every timeline, in every place. When you read *Replay* you see that there are so many points of transition between the stories that make it flow and make each story more meaningful because of the juxtaposition with the other timelines.

When I was trying to structure the story, I thought of the movie *The Godfather Part 2*. It's one of the few movies that really makes that work. One reason I hesitated [to write a book with multiple timelines] was because there were so many movies I'd seen where there was a present-day frame story and a past story, and as a viewer I ended up wishing they had ditched the frame story and just told the past story. [For example] *Julie & Julia*—I would have rather seen a movie of just Meryl Streep as Julia Child during World War II. I was worried that mine would have the same problem and people would be like, "I don't care about this guy moving to France and making video games." But *The Godfather Part 2* made it work, and the transitions between the generations always felt welcome and interesting. So I looked to *The Godfather Part 2* as an inspiration.

I found myself refreshed by the transitions between the timelines. I found myself really rooting for *Princess of Persia*. There was something very natural in the way those different emotional stakes flowed. It was a pacing I really appreciated as a reader.

There's a lightness there. There are moments of lightness, too, in my grandfather's story. I didn't need to invent that because I just drew from the things they told me.

My dad and his cousin and his aunt's boyfriend in Nice were stamp collectors. They had the same nerdy passion for collecting stamps and making books and putting them in order that I had as a kid for collecting comics and computer games. I felt like that connected us through the generations. So many of the anecdotes my dad told about his time in Nice, from the touching to the tragic, involved the stamp-collecting hobby.

A lot of the anecdotes he and [my aunt] Lisa told were funny. She was someone with a great sense of humor, who connected with people and found a way to continue enjoying life no matter where she was. As compared to many Holocaust stories where you feel like the emphasis was on sadness and suffering, here I felt like the lighter moments make it possible to feel the darkness. Because otherwise it can be kind of deadening.

There's a panel where my aunt's boyfriend took my dad to the post office to buy stamps as a 10th birthday present. This was under Pétain [whose government collaborated with the Nazis], so I drew a French government poster of the time, with school children and Pétain and the Tricolore. At that time, they had kept the French flag but changed the meaning. Instead of *liberté, fraternité, égalité,* the three colors represented *patrie, travail, famille*—fatherland, work, family—the "traditional" values, reflecting the same right-wing fascist politics of the Nazi regime, but this time with the French flag. To juxtapose that with the excitement of a little boy going to the post office to get stamps to add to his collection gave it a kind of depth, made it possible to evoke that time and place of France under occupation.

Even in the World War I stories that my grandfather told, there were unexpected moments [of lightness], like finding a piano in an abandoned house on the Russian front and playing Strauss waltzes with another soldier. Because it was his own experience, these details let me project myself into my grandfather's story.

Narratively, it's also a powerful reminder that joy and curiosity continue to exist amidst hardship. That's how people survive it.

Yeah. Also, our desires are the same. What matters is trying to keep your family together, trying to find love and be with the person you love, and to be able to pursue our interests, our passions, to do what we love. Those things are universal. On the one hand, the stakes are higher and life is more dramatic when our life is in danger. But on the other hand, no matter what situation we're in, we deal with what's given to us and we try to take advantage of the opportunities that are given to us.

Victor Frankel says in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* that emotions are like a gas that expands to fill the available space, and even though the concentration camp he was in was incomparably worse than the comfortable, bourgeois life he had before, the range of emotions constricts or expands to be approximately the same in both places. I thought that was interesting.

You moved many years ago. Each country, I think it's fair to say, has a very different culture and rhythm around work. Do you feel like your work or the rhythm with which you work have changed since moving from the US to France?

One thing that always appealed to me about France was, I felt, a certain enjoyment of life. A balance. The appreciation of good food, meals with friends, time spent with one's family, with one's kids—those things were woven together in France in a different way than in the US.

There are so many small things that point to larger differences between the cultures. On vacation with my kids, on a beach in Carnon, I was struck by the fact that I never knew who the other people were [in a professional sense]. Like, when a guy's in his swim trunks on the beach with his kids, you have no idea what he does for a

living. Somehow, in the US, you always knew. You find out within the first 10 minutes of meeting someone whether she's a lawyer or an editor, whether he's a big shot or a cog in the machine. In American culture we have a tendency to define ourselves by our profession, our status in that profession, and by material wealth. Not that those things don't exist in France, but you don't see it when people are on vacation, and it doesn't come up in conversation quite so quickly in Europe. This is a generalization, of course.

Work culture is also very different. There's the cliche that people work harder in the US and get more done. Within France, there's also the cliche that people in the south of France are especially laid back. If you want something to happen on schedule, you might get that in Paris, but you shouldn't hope for that in the south. I haven't found that to be true, either. Whether it's a 35-hour week or the 80-hour week people are so proud of working, I think we get more done if we have a defined time to do it in. If we know we're going to be at the office all day and we're going to be ordering pizza at the end of the day, then people start to work less efficiently and spend more time getting off-task. You're sitting at your machine, staring at the screen. Hours can go by during which you feel like you're working, but you haven't actually accomplished anything. And sometimes the things that move a project forward can be done in a conversation that takes 60 seconds.

It's sort of like what Frankl said about emotions—work fills the space you give it.

Yeah. I think a lot of work culture is cultural, and what actually is getting done sometimes doesn't express itself directly, it expresses itself in other ways.

I'll wrap up with a *Prince of Persia* question. You've worked on multiple *Prince of Persia* games over a span of years. You worked on the first one as a young solo developer in an indie studio environment. Reading *The Making of Prince of Persia*, one of the things that stuck out to me was how you were so involved in the creation of the game, right down to the packaging. As you've been making games with bigger studios, have you still had that same level of control or care for every single aspect of the craft?

I've had a very different role in the *Prince of Persia* projects over the years. For the first game, I was the author. Making a game [back then] was almost more like writing and drawing a graphic novel. But the game industry evolved with *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*. I was part of a larger team in Montreal, and it was a Ubisoft project. There was never any question that I would have a special influence on how the game was marketed or the package or any of that. But as a part of the team, I was intensely involved in the creative aspects of the game itself.

For the sequels, *Warrior Within* and *The Two Thrones*, I wasn't involved at all. A different team in Montreal made those games. I was back in Los Angeles, writing the screenplay for the *Prince of Persia* movie. There, again, I was the first screenwriter, but four other screenwriters came after me. So by the time the film was actually shot I was in no sense the author of that film. I was the guy who had created the video game the movie was based on, and I had written the first version of the script. But I was on the set in an honorary role. I didn't have any responsibility as far as how the movie was being shot.

You're not telling Jake [Gyllenhaal] how to say his lines.

No, definitely not. But he did let me hold the Dagger of Time and press the button to see if it worked.

Jordan Mechner recommends

When working, take breaks. Go for a walk. The best ideas often don't come while sitting in front of a screen.

Focus on your passion, but also stay curious and interested in fields you know less about.

Take every chance to learn history (including your family's and your own). "Those who can't remember the past are condemned to repeat it." —Santayana

Whether it's a great movie or book to discover, a meaningful action you should take, or a person or a piece of information that could change your life, the most important things often don't advertise and thrust themselves on

us. We might only notice them if we’re quiet and paying attention.

Keep a journal.

Name

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Vocation

author, graphic novelist, video game designer, screenwriter