

In the room with writer Kevin Shortt

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The second annual [Toronto Screenwriting Conference](#) runs at Ryerson University's Ted Rogers School of Management April 9th & 10th.

All this week, *Playback* will feature Q&As with some of the all-star cast of writers leading the Conference, including writer/producer/director Pen Densham (*Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*), animation writer Butch Hartman (*The Fairly Oddparents*), gaming scribe Kevin Shortt (*Avatar: The Game*), comedy writer/executive producer Christine Zander (*Nurse Jackie*) and Leonard Dick (*The Good Wife, Lost, House*).

A Q&A with Kevin Shortt

Kevin Shortt is a scriptwriter and story designer at Ubisoft Montreal where his writing credits include James Cameron's *Avatar: The Game*, *Far Cry 2* and *LOST – The Video Game*.

Over the last 10 years, Shortt has written for many interactive projects ranging from online campaigns to episodic comedies to AAA video games. Shortt's early television writing credits include *So Weird* and *The New Addams Family*. Shortt will lead a workshop on Writing for Video Games.

What is the one piece of advice would you give to screenwriters today?

'Write always.' That was the advice I got and it's good advice, but the one bit of advice I'd share is to read scripts. Lots of scripts. Go online, download the scripts. Read them before you see a movie, read them after. Read genres you love, genres you hate. I've learned so much from simply reading others' scripts and seeing what worked and what didn't. I've stolen many great ideas from the scripts I've read... and I've said too much now.

How is writing for games different than writing for traditional screens?

A video game is not a passive experience. So as the writer, you are not the sole author of the experience. The players are active participants, and you always have to consider them. Not just how they will react to what you're presenting them, but how they will try to break what you've presented them. How will their actions alter the story and how are you going to keep control of that story without destroying the players' sense of agency? I'm getting a headache as I write this.

Is there a screenwriter you admire? Who and why?

There are many screenwriters I admire, though the Cohen brothers stand out for me. *Raising Arizona* was the first script I'd ever read that leapt off the page for me. They have a style that breaks from classic screenwriting conventions and they write in a way that guides your attention in an unforced manner, avoiding overt camera directions. It's an unobtrusive style that is a joy to read every time. I always try to approach my scripts in a similar fashion.

What has been your biggest challenge in your career?

This might sound typical to the point of cliché, but honestly, my biggest challenge has been staying focused with my writing. I can drift from an idea quicker than I should. I've let scenes go when they needed more work. Just dedicating as much of my time as possible to writing is my number-one challenge and it really shouldn't be that way. As difficult as writing is, when everything's clicking and the pages are singing, it's the greatest feeling I know. I try to hold on to those moments... at least until the next morning when I want to burn the previous day's work.

What is the strangest line you've written?

"What, you don't like the flowers?" Our hero to a proud warrior. For the game, *AVATAR*, we had a mission where the player had to collect a flower to give to the mightiest warrior among our Na'vi clan... that's right, a flower. We wanted to change the objective, but time wouldn't allow that. So we called it a weed instead to try and help things along. Nevertheless, we wanted the hero to acknowledge the odd mission as we figured the player might be thinking the same thing. When the warrior snaps: "You try to buy my trust with this?", the hero gives his 'flower' line. I'm not sure it's the strangest line, but it ranks up there.

Read more: <http://playbackonline.ca/2011/04/07/in-the-room-with-writer-kevin-shortt/#ixzz1IrmnKUi8>