

Your Gift, From Author Jill Murray's Newsletter, *Context Switch*.

Hey there!

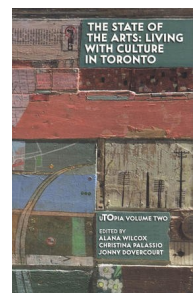
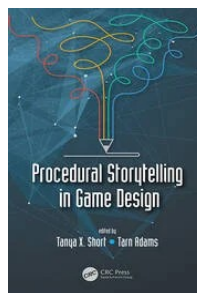
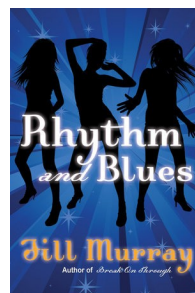
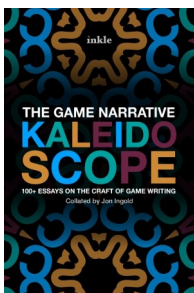
If you're reading this, you're probably signed up for my newsletter, [Context Switch](#). Thank you so much! You're awesome. I hope you enjoy this essay, and find it useful, inspiring, or validating in some way.

A few quick words about me, and my newsletter:

- I'm an [author and game writer](#), based in Montreal, Canada
- I've written [novels, essays, and videogames](#), a few of which you might even recognize
- I'm currently completing my MFA in Creative Nonfiction, and working on nonfiction books-- one about my grandmother, and another that's still a bit of a secret
- I'm obsessed with creative lives and jobs, and all the ways creative people find to combine all the stuff they do, to make a sustainable living. [My newsletter](#) explores this through interviews and links, as well as updating you any time I have a new piece of writing out, or workshop coming up.

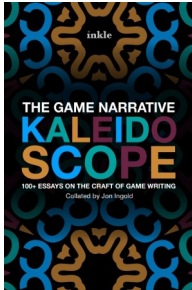
Thanks for reading, and have a great day!

- Jill Murray



Perfectionists Hate This One Simple Trick (Finishing Things)

by Jill Murray



This essay originally appeared in Inkle's *The Game Narrative Kaleidoscope: 100+ Essays on the Craft of Game Writing*, which I highly recommend picking up if you have even a passing interest in writing for games.

I stood, riveted in place, at a big box bookstore in downtown Montreal. Although I was no stranger to bookstores of all sizes and specialties, I'd recently started writing a novel, and this was the first time I'd taken it to heart: *Man, there are a LOT of books here.* My head spun with overwhelm.

In my two continuing education writing classes at the University of Toronto— one for short stories, and one for The Novel, I was surrounded by writers who were more observant than I was, who had an easier way with prose imagery, whose ideas were more complex or more complete, who were better read, funnier, or more serious.

But surrounded by towering shelves of books that stretched to distant vanishing points, I had a second thought. *ALL of these books can't be GOOD.*

And then: *Surely I could write one of the bad ones.*

My heart rate began to slow to normal.

Earlier that year, my short story teacher, writer Kent Nussey, had shared his mantra.

"Writers' block is the failure of the ego."

I remember feeling simultaneously pwned and liberated. I didn't *have* to write well. The motor of any writing was to start by writing *anything*. Good can come later.

Flanked by the big box store's synthetic wood shelves, I took a deep breath of air freshly scented with a spray formulated to smell like buying power, and I asked myself, *what does every single book in this bookstore have in common with all the other books?*

The answer came to me:

They're all finished.

It was almost too easy. Most of my classmates were never going to finish a novel— a long slog riddled with traps and setbacks. Brilliance can inspire writing in bursts, but it doesn't sustain for the duration. That takes a grimy stubbornness— a drive to do little else but finish.

Videogames are like books. We're told that there are too many of them. That they have to be brilliant and timed perfectly to stand out and find an audience. For a creator, it opens a paradox: it might be true, but it's also irrelevant. It doesn't change the basic necessity that every game in that market be finished enough to share.

We've all seen it: a creator stops to assess their game, mid-development, and finds it lacking according to criteria that seem brand new. It's always been single-player, but what if multiplayer sells better now? The creative director just played a game with branching narrative— why doesn't ours have that? Cinematics are so yesterday, let's make everything procedural instead. Let's make it longer, or more challenging. Whatever we're doing, it isn't enough.

So the game is changed. Now it's less finished than it was last month. Mass impostor syndrome builds within the team, disguised as high standards. In the

quest for brilliance, the end becomes unreachable.

Because my goal is to finish, my feeling about impostor syndrome is that you can just go ahead and do it: get in there and impost. See how long you can get away with it before they notice. We become what we pretend to be, so if you can keep pretending long enough to finish, you'll have achieved realness.

Scope control is my friend in this endeavour: *What would make this project finishable?*

It's usually not enough to avoid taking on new objectives. Often when I see a deadline barreling toward me, I need to trim some of my starting assumptions too. Sorry, "darlings," it's off to the Next Project folder for you.

But the gamers! I sometimes think as I stare into the bottomless depths of my own unplayed game library. *Their demands are so big and their thumbs-downs, so ready! What if I can't satisfy them?*

"Failure of the ego," my imaginary pocket-size teacher growls in my ear from his eternal perch on my right shoulder.

I'll never satisfy the gamers. Not all of them. I only need to satisfy the players of *this* game, the ones who can only play — say it with me now — if it's finished.

With every cut, my ego screams and my project thrives. I will take on something bigger and fool them more, next time.