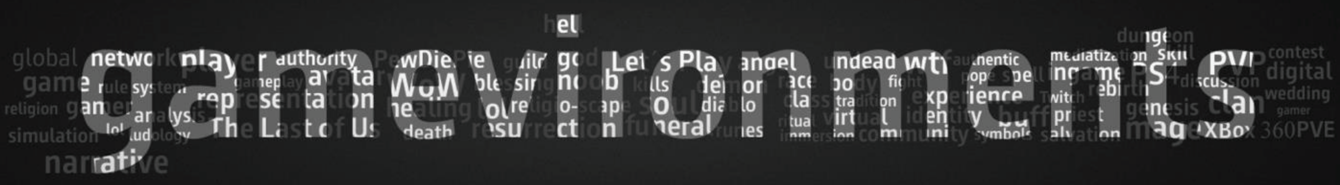
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# Interview with Matthias Kempke on *Ken Follett's The Pillars of the Earth*

by gamevironments

**Abstract**
Matthias Kempke, freelance game writer, narrative designer and creative consultant for games, speaks about his work on the 2D adventure game *Ken Follett's The Pillars of the Earth* (2017/2018) and his other projects.

**Keywords:** game developer, Ken Follett's The Pillars of the Earth, gamevironments

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## Q1: You work as a freelance game writer, narrative designer and creative consultant for games. How did you start working in this area?

I started as an indie adventure game creator. I have always been a great admirer of game worlds. My favorite fictional places were the Caribbean islands from *The Curse of Monkey Island* (1997). When a friend of mine programmed an adventure game engine in 2005 and asked me if I wanted to create a game I told him: sure!
And here we are, 12 years and a few games later! I didn't start creating games because I wanted to write a story but rather to draw a game world. Since I did the first game (*What Makes You Tick,* 2007) all by myself, I also had to write it and animate and edit the sound. So that's how I got into game writing, narrative design, and game making in general.

After finishing my second indie adventure (*What Makes You Tick: A Stitch in Time*, 2010) I wanted to stop making games. It was really exhausting. But I couldn’t. Weeks after *A Stitch in Time* was done, I developed a new concept (together with my brother) and pitched that to Daedalic Entertainment in Hamburg in 2011. I had just finished my master's degree in Japanese Studies and wanted to move to Hamburg where I was born. So when I found out about Daedalic it felt like fate.

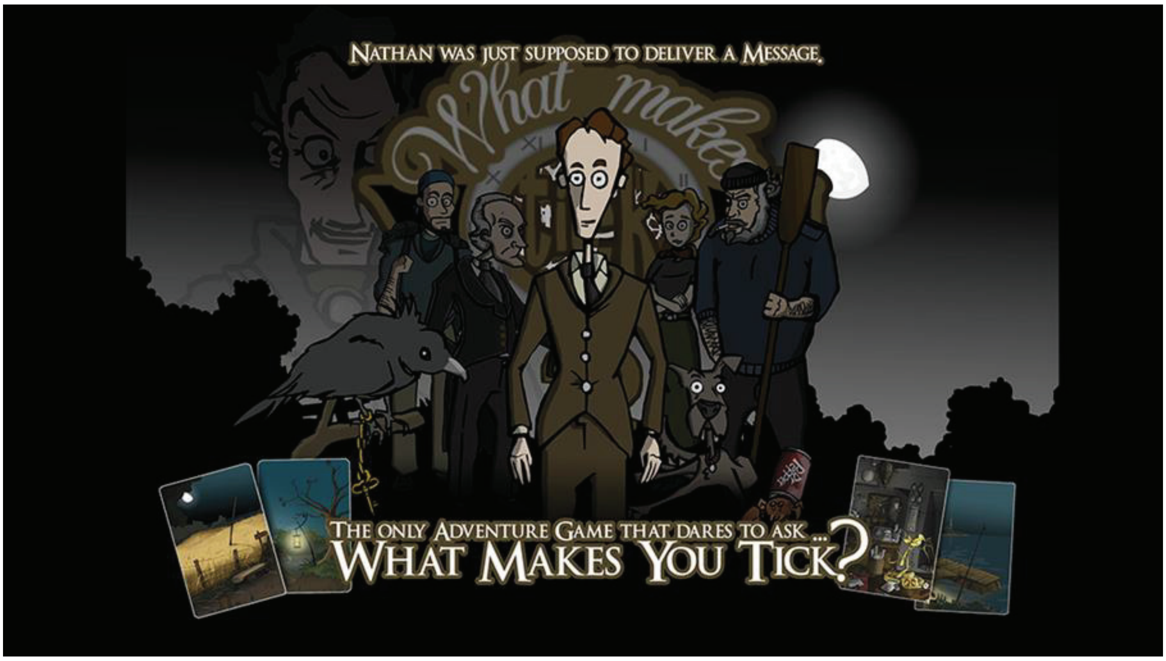
NATHAN WAS JUST SUPPOSED TO DELIVER A MESSAGE.
What makes you tick
THE ONLY ADVENTURE GAME THAT DARES TO ASK...
WHAT MAKES YOU TICK?

Figure 1. *What Makes You Tick* © Lassie Games.

Figure 2. *What Makes You Tick: A Stitch in Time* © Lassie Games.

Daedalic was already known for great adventure games back then. They agreed to do the game, and so I found myself in the position of creative lead for the game I had pitched which would eventually become *The Night of the Rabbit* (2013).

I stayed at Daedalic for six and a half years. Then I felt the urge to set out for new adventures and decided to go freelance. Since then I have been involved in a number of exciting projects and worked with a lot of great people. If you love organizing your own work, freelancing can be a great option.

## Q2: To date, what have been your most important achievements? How did they come about?

Every game is an achievement I am proud of. My first indie games might not be perfect when you compare them to large productions but to me, they convey an artistic vision and mood that is very important to me. Playing them feels like coming home.

The same goes for *The Night of the Rabbit* (2013). I learned what it takes to work with a large team and together we successfully sailed through a massive storm of a production. It was a challenge to go from indie game designer to creative lead for a team with 20+ members.

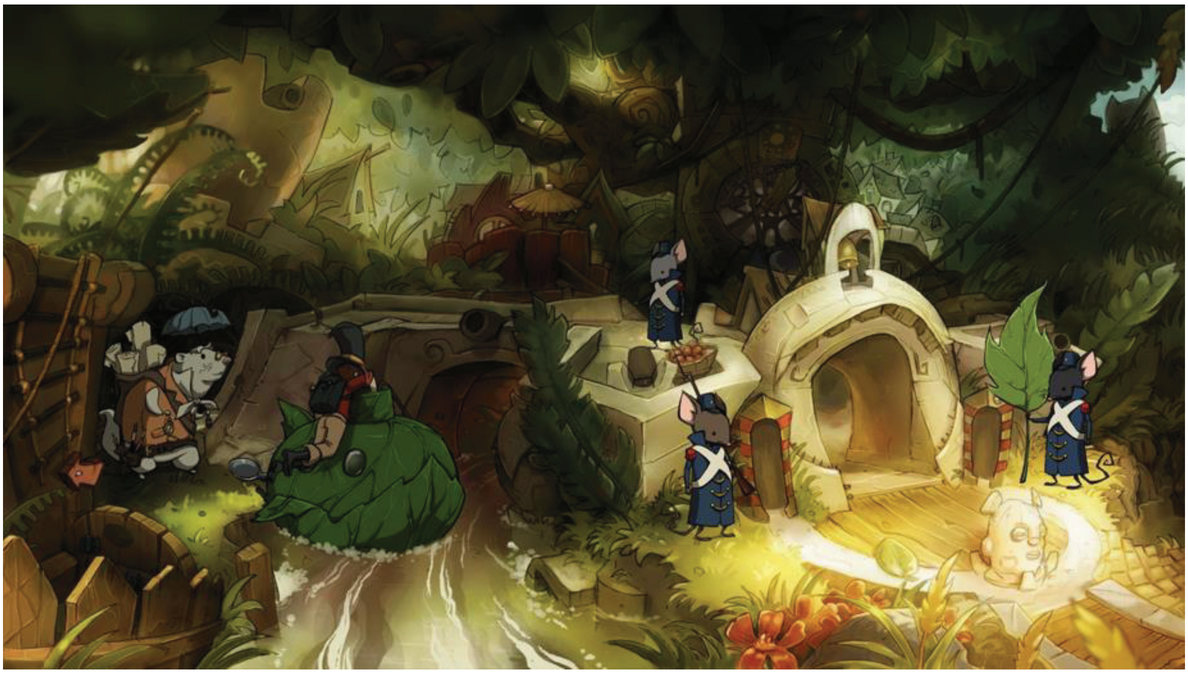

Figure 3. *The Night of the Rabbit* © Daedalic Entertainment GmbH.

After that, I worked on different projects and concepts, and then the largest production I was involved in so far began. The development of the epic 2D adventure game *Ken Follett's The Pillars of the Earth* (2017/2018) took more than three years. That was one of the moments where we put to use everything we had learned so far. And the game turned into something special, I believe.

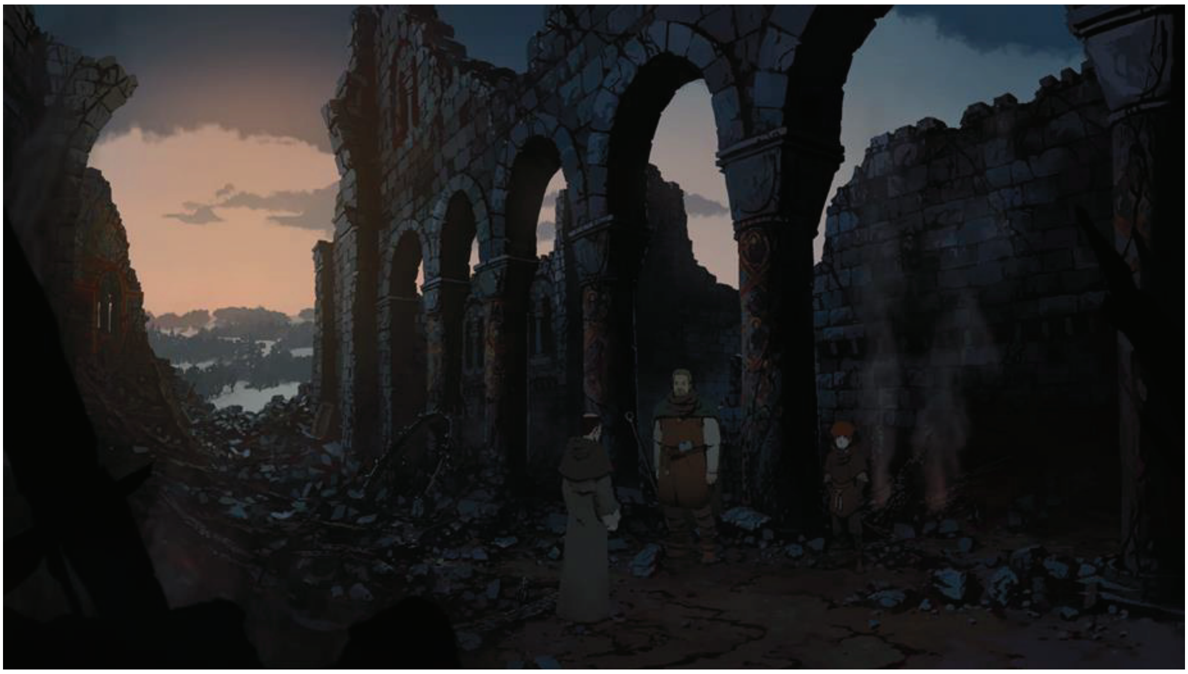

Figure 4. *Ken Follett's The Pillars of the Earth* © Daedalic Entertainment GmbH.

### Q3: When, how and by whom was *Ken Follett's The Pillars Of The Earth* created? Were there any challenges?

The original idea to adapt Ken Follett's bestseller as an adventure game was conceived by Daedalic's CEO Carsten Fichtelmann in 2014, I think. Daedalic was cooperating with the German publisher Bastei Lübbe. They were publishing Ken Follett's works in Germany and were able to put us in contact with him.

I was asked to pitch to Mr. Follett himself how his story would work as a 2D adventure game. That was an exciting day. Fortunately, he liked the idea and so, not soon after, we went into pre-production. I took over the role of creative lead and leader game writer and game designer, and later on was joined by my colleague Kevin Mentz (Writer and Creative Lead for Daedalic's *Memoria*, 2013).

One of the things I love about my job is to work with stories and ideas - especially those that I have no clue about at first. As a professional writer and narrative designer, it is essential to be able to work with all kinds of source material and stories. In this case had never read the novel and had never been a big fan of historical fiction - well, that quickly changed!

My personal goal was to work with a well-known IP and make it work in another medium. This was entirely different from making up your own story.

A big challenge was the scope. We were technically limited in our 2D engine. Our team went to incredible lengths to create a huge living and breathing game world that feels very mature and contains hundreds of characters. Another challenge was to convey the serious and emotional stories without falling into the trap of classic adventure game tropes. This was something that Kevin and I wanted to avoid - we wanted to put the interactive story first.

## Q4: What is unique about this game, and in what way is it innovative?

Usually, adventure games contain a lot of puzzles. We wanted to focus on the story and emotional decisions. So we took the story apart and retold it in a fashion that would allow players to actually play all three major characters and take part in the events of the novel.

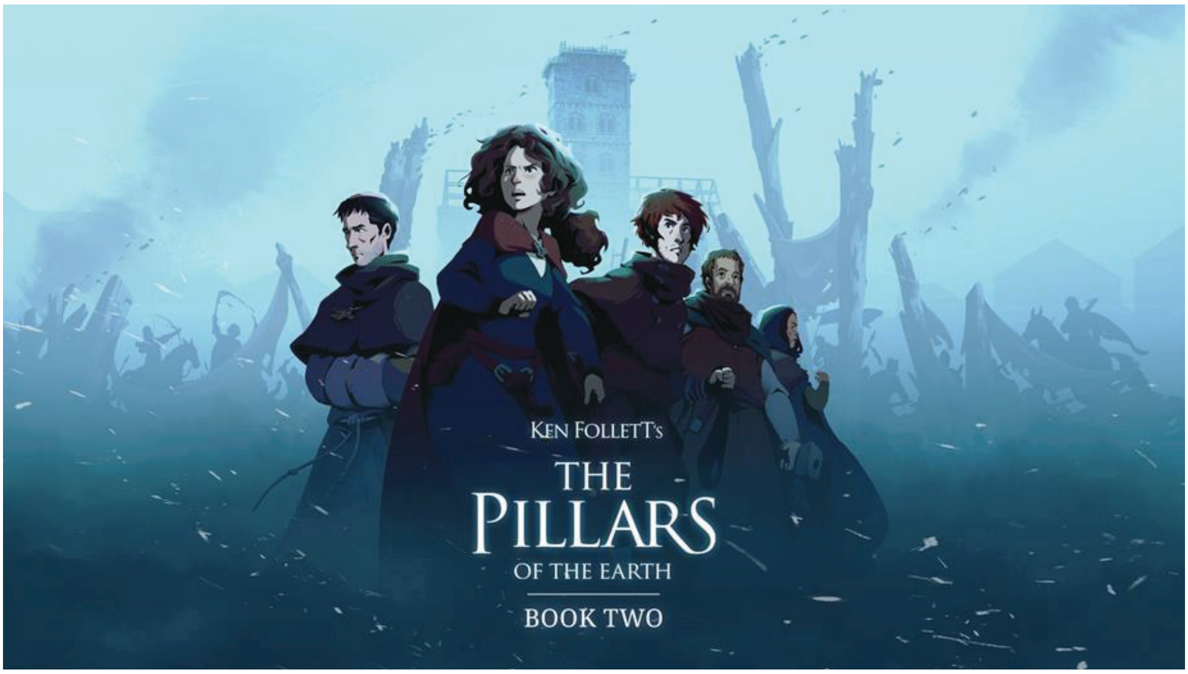
KEN FOLLETT'S
THE PILLARS OF THE EARTH
BOOK TWO

Figure 5. *Ken Follett's The Pillars of the Earth* © Daedalic Entertainment GmbH.

Retelling the story meant that we had to read the novel again and again, and get really close to the characters. We would change the story and add to it to allow for different decisions and a branching narrative, to bring the places to life and make them explorable and interactive. Of course, the epic tale still had to fit the budget.

Kevin and I decided we wanted only to add interactions that would fit the 12th-century setting and would not feel contrived or forced. We wanted to create *puzzles* that felt like natural, emotional, authentic interactions - always with an emotional twist. Interactions that weren't unnecessarily hard or complicated so the story flow would not be interrupted. For me it was very important to create an adventure game world without adding a lot of negative feedback through trial and error gameplay. (Eg. *I can not do that*., *The key does not fit here*. and so on.) I like it in classic adventure games, but for this emotional tale we wanted to take a similar approach like Telltale Games.

The main story still unfolds like it does in the novel, but players can make a lot of decisions with fateful consequences. Decisions you make early on still have consequences late in the game.

Mix all that with an epic orchestral score, great art from our artists, great voice actors and hard work on details to achieve historical accuracy and then you get what *Ken Follett's The Pillars of the Earth* (2017/2018) is all about. I am very proud of how it turned out.

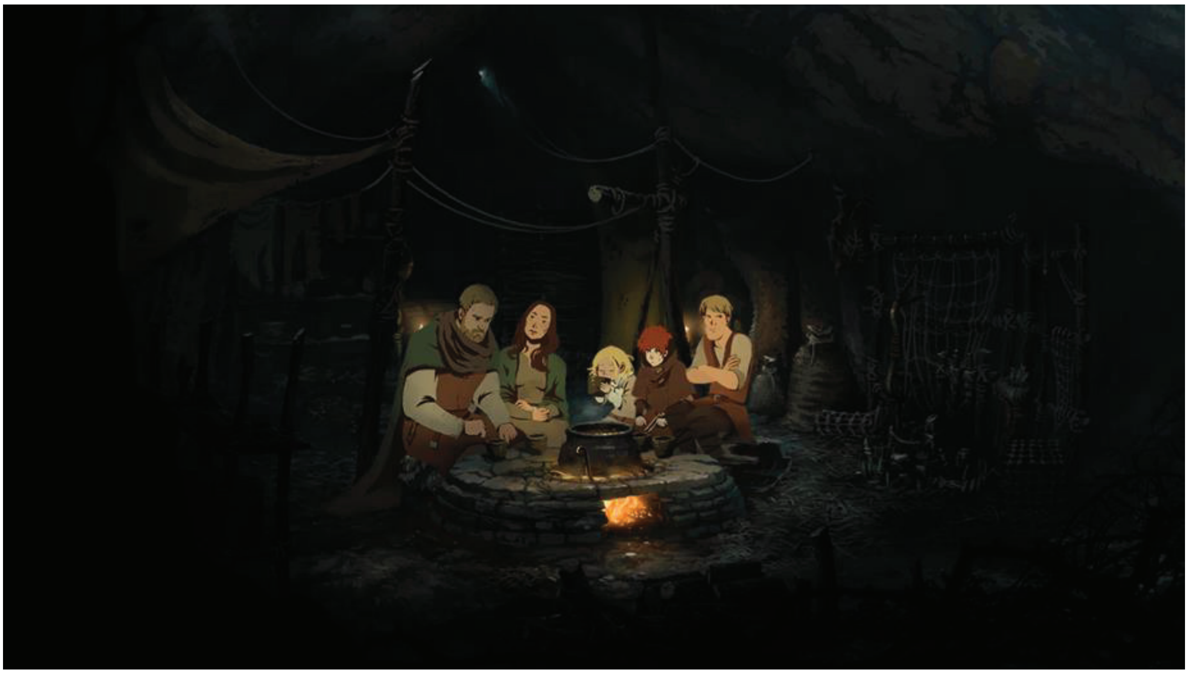

Figure 6. *Ken Follett's The Pillars of the Earth* © Daedalic Entertainment GmbH.

## Q5: What role, do you think, does religion play in this game?

One of my main focus points as a game writer, aside from the love story of Jack and Aliena, was the story of Philip, the monk. While I really like Follett's original Philip, I chose to add questions of faith to his storyline. Just like in the novel Philip is betrayed by his greedy superior Bishop Waleran and punished for his own aspirations in the most brutal way - many of the people Philip swore to protect and his best friend are killed.

In the novel this doesn’t really affect Philip’s faith. In our adaptation, I made Philip a little more of a naive believer in the beginning, and then these events make him question his faith. These are the moments where players are involved and journey with Philip through despair and hopelessness. Then they decide whether Philip starts to believe in God again or whether he *only* believes in the good that people can do. We do not tell players to believe in God or not. We just show them a man who is losing his faith and then finds it again. In that, he becomes an inspiration for Christians and atheists alike as we see someone who dares to make a fresh start and learns to trust in his friends and himself again.

In that way, I hope the religious aspects that have always been elements in the original story become a more central theme and then open up fundamental questions that transcend religion and can be meaningful for everyone. That’s what I was aiming for as a writer.

Religion as a power system is more criticized than in the novel, as well. The question who shapes beliefs and why is now as important as ever, I believe.

Figure 7. *Ken Follett's The Pillars of the Earth* © Daedalic Entertainment GmbH.

## Q6: In what way do you decide on new endeavors, f.e. do you follow an established process regarding how you formulate your projects?

I started out as an artist. I was driven by inspiration and then worked hard to create MY game. Now I see myself as a professional who is hired to do a job. Still, working on a narrative project is a personal process - I have to evoke emotions, and that means I have to develop emotions first. I have to feel them to make others feel them: excitement, mystery, mindful exploration, fascination. On the other hand I have to make sure all plans for a project are realistic and that the team and I can deliver on time.

In that way I approach all projects from two sides: art and planning. Emotions and organization. Switching between these two sides is something that is hard to learn, but when you can do it, it creates a very efficient workflow.

I do enjoy to work as an artist just for myself, but so far I have refrained from creating large projects like my first two adventure games on my own. It is hard and risky. The good thing about working as a hired gun is that you can utter doubt whether a project will sell and you can make suggestions - but in the end, your clients decide whether to take the risk and then I do what I am being paid for and what I love: I work with great teams to tell interactive stories.

### Q8: If it is possible for you to share this information: What is your next project about, and when and where can we look out for it?

I am working on several things right now. The next big thing will be the 3D Horror Game Ad Infinitum that is now going into production at the newly founded Hekate GmbH in Berlin. They already have a great design concept and a great plot, and I feel honored that they asked me to work with them as a writer and narrative designer.
I am also working on an interactive mobile story, which is very exciting because I am very much in love with the plot I developed. I hope that will see the light of day this year!

Figure 8. Matthias Kempke (photo by Lars Christiansen).

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