

Characters

Better Game Characters by Design

a psychological approach

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Chapter:
Player Characters

Player-Characters

- They are the interface through which players experience both the physical and social landscape of the world
- Psychological Principles: Four Layers
 - Visceral Feedback
 - Cognitive Immersion
 - Social Affordances
 - Fantasy Affordances

1. Visceral Feedback

- A person experiences the world through the senses. The body is constantly reacting and adapting to what is encountered.
- The visceral level of a player-char is the sensory experience that a player has of that character
- The player takes on the player-char's body in the game world and adapts his or her reactions to the affordances of the game world and the capabilities of the player-char.

Visceral Feedback

- Facets of this layer include
 - what sorts of physical powers the character has
 - how it feels to control them and to move through the world
 - The general effects that actions have on the senses
- P-char becomes the surrogate body for the player through which the visceral qualities of the world are experienced

Visceral Feedback

- Sports games give p-chars a much greater level of athletic ability (strength, speed) than the player likely has in everyday life
- Platform games give p-chars much greater leaping capabilities than real life
- Text-based adventure games provide the player with options for witty repartee that she would probably not be able to rapidly generate left to her own devices

Visceral Feedback example:

FIFA08

Be a Pro

- skill moves
- immersive engine
- Be a Pro

2. Cognitive Immersion

- A person also considers information in a more deliberate way and makes decisions about what to do next
- Problem solving and taking actions require the player to inhabit the action possibilities of the player-character
- The player must map herself cognitively onto the player-character
 - If the player tries to do things that will not work, then this mapping is not working well. E.i. to try to use a non-existent jump button to maneuver in the game-world
- One aspect of crafting a strong p-char is creating smooth and intuitive cognitive immersion for the player

3. Social Affordances

- Social world gives context to the game
 - Between player
 - Player-characters and NPCs
- Regions of the brain devoted to recognizing social cues (faces, voices)
- Player-chars act as an interesting bridge for the player into a game's social world
 - It can give a sense of social presence when viewed from a 3rd person perspective
 - They model the social role and emotions the player should be inhabiting in a game through their actions and reactions toward NPCs in cut-scenes
 - They offer the player a chance to don a social mask when interacting with other people (MMOG or manipulating a party)

Social Affordances

- An engaging player-char needs the right social affordances for the gameplay situation at hand:
 - Clear social role and personality
 - Customizability of appearance
 - Social cues in multiplayer situations
- The player will feel more immersed in the role of the p-char to the extent that NPCs reflect the player's social role and qualities back to him during gameplay

Fantasy Affordances

- Psychologists in the psychoanalytic tradition have touted the importance of stories and other fantasy vehicles in helping both children and adults come to terms with concerns, explore emotionally laden or thorny problems, or to create a foundation for making an important identity shift
- Games can provide this sort of outlet for exploration and processing
- Powerful p-Chars are often those that speak to many players' real-life hopes, fears, and issues. They offer players a chance to enact them and explore possibilities

Examples

- Half-Life:
 - The player's physical control in the game is limited to choosing and firing weapons and navigating terrain
 - Compelling social and fantasy kill-or-be-killed world around the player's visceral and cognitive experience.
 - NPCs resonate with and underscore the player's psychological perspective on what is happening.

Half-Life



- Player-character:
 - Gordon Freeman,
 - a low-level scientist
- An error procedure at the facility brings dangerous aliens
- Evolution of the p-char from lowly lab assistant to competent alien-killer
- Interactions with NPCs
 - are brief and practical
there is no time for forming relationships

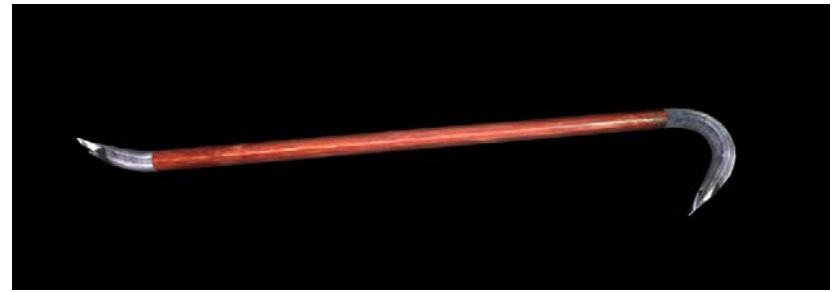
 - NPCs that offer their help act frightened and distant, tend to stick to business, plausible reactions to the chaotic situation



- Half way in the games, he discovers that marines are not on his side, but want to silence him



- The “shoot first, ask questions later” tactics of shooter games have been extremely well-motivated by the player-character’s persona and positioning within the game world



- The kinesthetic properties have been well-chosen to match his social and fantasy persona.
 - Gordon's first weapon is a crow bar, a plausible beginning for a scientist working with what's ready-at-hand as he struggles to figure out what's going on.
 - Killing the crab-like aliens with a crow bar is an extremely satisfying visceral experiences
 - By the time Gordon encounters the Marines, he has managed to acquire weapons and expertise that are a match for theirs
 - The frantic pace of game challenges underscore Gordon's sense of urgency
- The fantasy layer of the player-character meshes smoothly with the cognitive and social strategies inherent in the game genre





The Sims



- Likened to a “living dollhouse”, The Sims allows a player to tailor individual characters, as well as their living quarters, to his own vision
- Players make choices about the Sims’ jobs and activities and direct their everyday lives (they are fed, well-rested, social connections)
- The Sim chars’ interactions with one another are an integral part of gameplay, the player must keep her Sims socially engaged and content
- Sims chars do not actually talk, instead they speak an unintelligible language that has very clear emotional range





- The Sims' flexibility extends from social styles into the fantasy aspect of the game.
 - **Sims chars act as tarot cards** for teasing out the fantasies of players, who create stories that arise from the visceral and cognitive activities in the game
- Players seem to hop between experiencing their Sim characters as extensions of themselves and as separate agents.
 - Will Wright, in an interview with Celia Pierce, talks about how players switch from “I” when they are controlling a Sim, to “he” or “she” when the sim does something unexpected or undesirable. **Sims walk the line between self and other**, and allow the player to explore identities and fantasies in a flexible and low-risk way

Tools, Puppets, and Mask

- Not every game needs full treatment of player-characters at all four levels.
- The core game play of some games can lead to irrelevance or minimal value of a particular layer.
- There are three styles of in-game player representation that emphasize subsets of layers of player psychology



Tools



- Don't require much of a social persona for player
 - WarCraft III
 - Player doesn't have a direct character interface to the game, uses HUDs
 - DDR
 - No social interaction between the player and anyone in the game world
 - Two players can interact socially in "real life" if they like, as they dance
- These games provide a tool or interface for the player during play, rather than a highly realized player-character

Puppets

- Games with relatively short cycles of play that are mostly about physical prowess may not require much in the way of fantasy and social qualities in p-char
- P-char personality can come across in the style of movements and visual characteristics
- Social persona is defined mostly through nonverbal interaction in real time between the player-char and NPCs
- This sort of player-char as puppet



- The strength of puppet player-chars lies in the joy a player feels in physically manipulating them and in watching the results of his actions on-screens.
- Puppets often have super-human qualities, grace in movement, extreme strength and accuracy
- Examples:
 - Super Monkey Ball 2
 - Donkey Kong
the tiny hero is bouncy and indefatigable
 - SSX 3, the grace and flair of athletes



Mask

- Mask are p-chars found in games that have a major social component
- Example: Star Wars Galaxies, There
- A major component of game play in this sort of games is interacting with other players, as they are represented by their own mask
- Donning an alternate social face gives people the opportunity to explore alternate social personas, new versions of the self that may be very different from the everyday
- It is highly desirable to provide players with visceral feedback and interface mechanisms for social expressions. Ei, /wave



Wrap-Up

- A player-char's layer information comes as much from her movement in response to the player's real-time controller actions as it does from watching elaborate cut-scenes
- Strongest player-characters are deeply grounded in the visceral and cognitive layers; social and fantasy selves emerge from these roots rather than being conveyed through a linear story

Design questions

1. Visceral

- What does it feel like to move as this char?
- What is fun about it?
- What powers does the player have that he probably does not have in real life?
- What is it like to watch this char move?

2. Cognitive

- Does the player's own instinct for what to do next in the game mesh well with the cognitive strategies that this char would have?
- Does the char feel like a natural mental skin for the player?

3. Social

- Does the char's social persona fit well with the basic gameplay style and motivations?
- Is the social persona and appealing?
- Does it mesh well with the cast of NPCs and their social roles?

4. Fantasy

- Is this a char that the player wants to experiment with being?
- Does the char's backstory and motivation sit well with gameplay?

Signals to detect when the layers don't line up

- The player may start to feel dissociated and dissatisfied with what is happening
- Visceral out of alignment with fantasy:
 - “this char looked much cooler on the box and in the opening movie. I can't do the cool stuff I thought I'd be able to”
- Cognitive out of alignment with visceral
 - “This char is really frustrating to use – I keep trying to do stuff that makes sense, but the game won't let me”
- Social out of alignment with visceral
 - “Why can't I talk to the other chars? How come this char doesn't remember me? I'd normally solve this by talking to someone, but I can't.” or “I don't want to have to talk to him. Why I can't just shoot them?”
- Cognitive out of alignment with fantasy:
 - “The cut-scenes in this game are really annoying and irrelevant. I wish I could skip them” or “I really like the cut-scenes but it's really boring to play the game itself because the parts of the chars I like have nothing to do with how I play”