

Character Design:
Perspectives to building
engaging player and
non-player characters



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Game Development, ITU Spring 2009

Agenda

- Social psychology for character design (Isbister)
- Film, dramatic writing & game design patterns (Lankoski, Bjork)
- Player character design
- Production tasks
- Critical Stage Analysis: guidelines

Social Surface

- We all react to the surface qualities of people we meet.
- This extends to game characters, too.

Social surface

- In 'real life', first impressions can be very difficult to shake off. So social psychologists have studied them in great detail.
- Here are some important points from all that research...

First Impressions

- Three useful first impression findings:
 - Attractiveness
 - Baby faces
 - Stereotypes



Attractiveness

- Halo effect
 - More intelligent
 - Better at their job
 - More money from juries(!)

- Biological vs. Cultural attractiveness
 - Signs of health and fertility
 - Even features, healthy teeth, youth



Attractiveness in games

- Most game characters are attractive.
- Unattractive characters are used to produce powerful effects in players (and critics).



Baby faces

- Baby features lead to automatic reactions and assumptions “overgeneralization”
 - Large eyes
 - Round face
 - Small nose
 - Small brows



Baby faces and games

- Often used in games oriented toward children, but also used in adult-friendly games.



Baby faces and games

- Useful traits for a player character?
 - Trustworthy
 - Needing the player's care
 - Likeable
- Depends upon the player's fantasy self...i.e. the fantasy and the fiction

Stereotypes

- Mental shorthand very useful in a crowded, fast-moving world.
- But can distort our impressions to match the pattern already in our minds.

Stereotypes in games

- Used frequently in games.
 - Evil enemies
 - Noble heroes
 - Transgressive gang members
 - Mafiosos



Stereotypes in games

- Can work even better when used and then broken and transformed
- E.g. Guybrush Threepwood as witty pirate



Designing social surface

- Some Guidelines:
 - Make (almost) everyone attractive.
 - Use baby faces to inspire care and warmth, not respect.
 - Trigger stereotypes for speed and break them for depth.

Left 4 Dead: before



...and after



Practical Questions

- People look at surface to gather important information about how to interact.
- There are a few very practical survival questions we can't help asking about one another.

Practical questions

- Friend or foe?
- How powerful in relation to me?
- i.e. How characters embody players' goals in games



More design principles

- Agreeableness
- Dominance
- Personality traits

- ...check out the readings for detailed examples on how expressions, postures, eye contact communicates these

Another perspective

- Murray Smith's theory of characters in film in *Engaging characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*
- ... meets Egri's *The Art of Dramatic Writing*
 - Lankoski & Bjork:
 - [Character-Driven Game Design: Characters, Conflict, and Gameplay](#)
 - [Gameplay Design Patterns for Believable Non-Player Characters](#)

Emotional Game Design

- Emotional game play experiences matter, since emotionally salient material is remembered better than neutral material.
- Emotion creates memorable meaning
- ‘emotions depend on evaluations of what has happened in relation to the person’s goals and beliefs’

- Keith Oatley, *Best Laid Schemes*

Events, Agents & Objects

- ‘emotions are valenced reactions to events, agents, or objects in a world’
 - Ortony, Collins & Clore:
The Cognitive Structure of Emotions
- Designing emotional responses to gameplay is about building worlds with particular events, **agents**, and objects

Recognition

- refers to the process of constructing a character from the player's perspective
- Recognition depends on features such as:
 - perceivable traits of the character (body, face, voice)
 - descriptions of the character (e.g., name, title, profession)
 - actions of the character; and reactions of other characters toward the given character.

Alignment

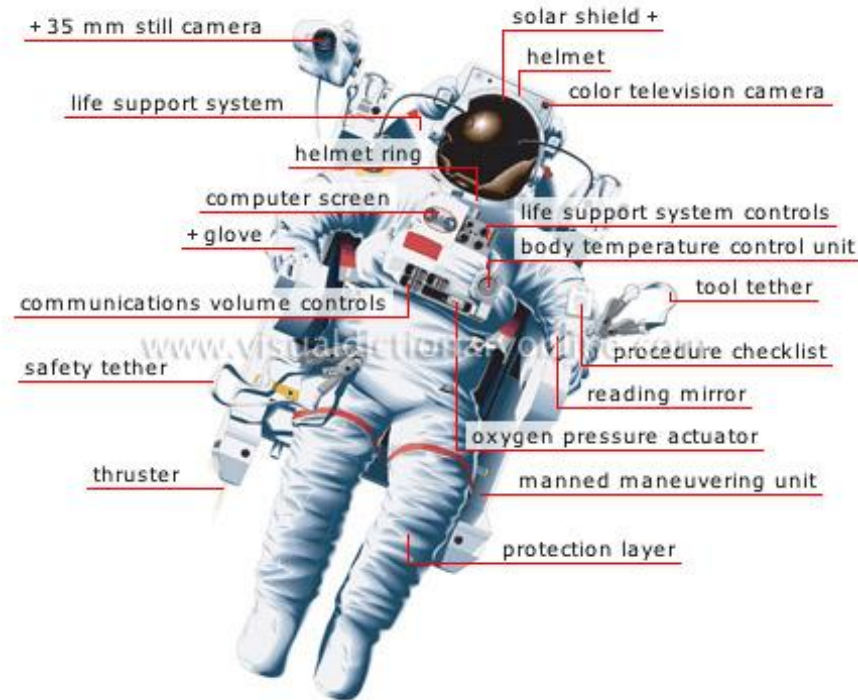
- How the characters and player are related in terms of control and access to information that enables recognition.
- Besides how a character is controlled, alignment relates to what and kind of access is offered to a character's thoughts, affects, and actions.

Allegiance

- Allegiance is about how the players evaluate a character;
- to be allied with a character, the players typically need to perceive the PC having desirable or preferable positive traits or qualities (such as beautiful, skilled, similar moral or ethical values).
- Notable techniques that can be used to prompt positive evaluation of the character are as follows:
 - physical beauty
 - expressions of affection or fear
 - moral evaluation in relation to standards set in game world (i.e., character needs to have morally better than other characters)
 - via gameplay: patterns for social networks & conflicts

Player Characters

- More than a protagonist to watch...
- Player characters are the spacesuit for the player in the game world.
- The 'suit' has certain affordances to it.
 - Control structure and physics
 - Game mechanics
 - Backstory driving events



Player characters

- The best player character designs map these affordances in intuitive ways to the player's psychological expectations.
- Creates a feeling of a seamless 'real' whole for the player.

Player characters

- Four Psychological layers
 - Visceral
 - Cognitive
 - Social
 - Fantasy
- Misaligned layers can create irritation in players; i.e. make the game worse

Visceral

- Feeling of the controls
- Choices in weapons or other interaction modes such as dialog
- Physics of the world
- Sounds, sights— atmosphere.
- If 3rd person, responsiveness of the character visually to player action.



Cognitive

- Problem solving tactics that must be used based upon game mechanics
- Linking these to the player character's abilities and motivations.
- Creating power ups, weapons, and the like that feel plausible and would be likely problem solving strategies.
 - Crow bar / gun
 - Health packs in Left 4 Dead



Social

- Social interactions with other characters that fit the player character's motivations and status in the game world.
- Interaction mechanics that feel adequate for what the player wants to do.
- (Graceful handling of interaction limitations)



Fantasy

- Who is cool?



Integrating it all

- Pushing for coherence and essence
- = Subtractive design (Miguel's lecture!)
- Double-checking for misliagned layers

Examples of misalignments

- Visceral out of alignment with fantasy:
 - “This character looked much cooler on the box and in the opening movie. I can’t do the cool stuff I thought I would be able to.”
- Social out of alignment with visceral
 - “Why can’t I talk to the other characters? How come this character doesn’t remember me?” Or “I don’t want to have to talk to him or her. Why can’t I just shoot them?”

Production Tasks

- *Production tasks*
- Make a critical stage analysis: guidelines follow
- A corner of the game should be **playable**.

Critical Stage Analysis

- Project managers should ask everyone on your team to respond in writing to three simple questions.
 - 1. 3-5 things that went right during the period
 - 2. 3-5 things that went wrong during the period
 - 3. 3-5 things that could be improved for the future
- Incorporate a rating scale of 1 to 5 (1 being the most important, 5 the least) for respondents to rank their five answers to each question, in order of importance

Critical Stage Analysis ...

- Be honest and accurate
- Be respectful
- Don't complain for complaining's sake
- Goal: finding issues early on, so you can correct them before it's too late.
- Project managers: handle the material sensitively, keeping it anonymous if necessary

Critical Stage Analysis ...

- Template here:

http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/2826/goodbye_postmortems_hello_.php?page=2

- Project managers should collate the results in a summary document, and share with team within 2 days of gathering all the information (and with instructors by 20 March, coinciding with next week production task deadlines).

Next Lectures

- Friday the 13th: Advanced AI
- Tuesday, March 17th at 10:00:

Søren Lundgaard (ex-Deadline) on
Project Management/Agile methodology