

Character-Driven Game Design Approach: A Position Paper for NGRN Workshop

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In my doctoral research I am developing a design method for character-based games. In order to propose a design method that is grounded on understanding how character-based games guide players and playing experience and understanding aesthetics of games (especially relation of formal features and aesthetic experience). Research implies that people react human-like entities (e.g., game characters) like they were people (e.g., Reeves, Nass, 1998), including empathizing with game characters (see, Morrison, Ziemke, 2005). However, some theorists have been critical toward the idea that computer game character have more than a functional role (Aarseth, 2004; Eskelinen, 2004; Frasca, 2004). For example, Espen Aarseth claims that the representation of a character he is controlling is irrelevant, because the appearance of the character does not make him play differently. He states: “When I play, I don't even see her [Lara Croft's] body, but see through it and past it” (Aarseth, 2004). However, it is not uncommon to find game reviews as follows:

Character development is important for any game, but the emotional investment in Uncharted's three heroes is strong. Nathan's “everyman” look might not appeal to some at first glance, but his character is likeable and sympathetic, again thanks in part to the great cast of voice actors. By the end of the game, you genuinely care for him and want to see him succeed. Likewise, Elena is a great cohort. She's never an annoying damsel in distress, and like Nathan, you're concerned for her by the end of the game. (McGarvey, 2007.)¹

There is an interesting tension between the above cited game critic and theorists. Why does this disagreement exist? The reason, I propose, is that reactions to characters are relatively automatic and subconscious (e.g., Morrison, Ziemke, 2005), and the approaches used by Aarseth, Eskelinen, and Frasca might not be adequate to

¹ See also, (Gerstmann, 2003; Hurme, 2008; Puha, 2004; Puha, 2008; Salminen, 2008).

discriminate all the nuances of a play experience. While one can be aware of one's own emotional state, in many cases, according to Damasio (2005, pp. 187-196), emotions influence experience and behavior without one being consciously aware of it. In addition, one's preferences and skills likely have some role in what kind of games one likes.

Game designers have noted that games promote rather limited range of affects. Warren Spector says: "We can re-create, in very limited ways, emotional states, especially the 'easy' ones—fear and adrenaline. (We do terribly at more subtle emotional replications—sadness and humor.)" (Cited from, Scholder, Zimmerman, 2003, p. 87.) Richard Rouse also notes: "Unfortunately, many games' emotional ranges are limited to excitement/tension during or conflict, despair at repeated failure at a given task, and then elation and a sense of accomplishment when the player finally succeed." (Rouse, 2005, p. 6.)

I propose that an answer to widening the range of gameplay related emotions lies in the use of game characters; the use of social conflicts instead of violent ones, for example, might widen the range of affective responses to game events.

The fact that games limit player choices is important in shaping a playing experience. Grant Tavinor, for example, argues:

What guides the action in videogames are [...] *material possibilities for interaction and objectives* that must be achieved—and often discovered—given these possibilities. (Tavinor, 2008, my italics.)

Jesper Juul (2005) highlights the relation of game system to the fictional world of a game. Juul argues that game space and fictional world have a special relation that other game elements do not have:

[A] game world can present fictional world and determine what players can and cannot do at the same time. In this way, space in games can work as a combination of rules and fiction. (Juul, 2005, pp. 163.)

I agree that game space determine what players can do in the game. I propose that *player characters* have similar features. An avatar can present a fictional character and determine what players can and cannot do. In addition, the system can make some things easy or hard to perform. For example, the game system in *Thief Deadly Shadows* (Ion Storm, 2005) promotes sneaking past guards and demote fighting one's

way through the guards. This means that when the game system affords and promotes some choices, the game system can fix the personality traits of the character. These techniques support certain kind of interpretation of the player character.

When one designs character-based games, the relation between game system and representation of characters should be taken into account, and the method should address this. I am proposing that the designers can design the gameplay and representations of the character using the core design; for example, using character and conflict design parts of Lajos Egri's (1960) method.

However, how gameplay and character recognition are connected is not adequately understood. For developing this understanding, I have chosen to use formal analysis of game in conjunction with cognitive sciences, especially emotions theories (e.g., Power, Dalglish, 1997), neuroscience (e.g., Gallese, 2005), and simulation theory (e.g., Currie, 1995; Smith, 1995). With this approach is possible to isolate designable features and make predictions about how those features guide playing experience. An important implication of emotion theories and neurology is that people react automatically and with limited voluntary control (emotional) expressions (e.g., Eimer et al., 2003). While working with the design method, I have been using the draft of the method in designing the game *Lies and Seductions* (Lankoski et al., 2009).

My approach, while it is grounded on formal analysis and theories of cognitive science, is open criticisms relating to validating a research method. How one can judge the utility of a design method? I can argue that the game *Lies and Seductions* provides some supporting evidence on the utility of my method, but what is the relation between the design method and designed artifact? I can argue that my design method exposes certain formal features and the implications of those features to designers, but is this enough?

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