

# Characters in Games



Topics in Game Development

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UNM

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# Why are characters important?

- Bring game to life; otherwise abstract
- Provide vehicles for gameplay (goals, obstacles, conflict, etc.)
- Pull us into the game
- Provide emotional context (we care/we fear)
- Provide entertainment:
  - Compelling personalities
  - Add conflict or humor
  - Add color

# Characters in linear stories



- Are created entirely by writers and actors
- Audience interaction or control not possible

# Characters in Games

- Allow for player interaction
- Allow for player control (“**agency**”)
- May allow for partial creation by player





# Two major types of characters:

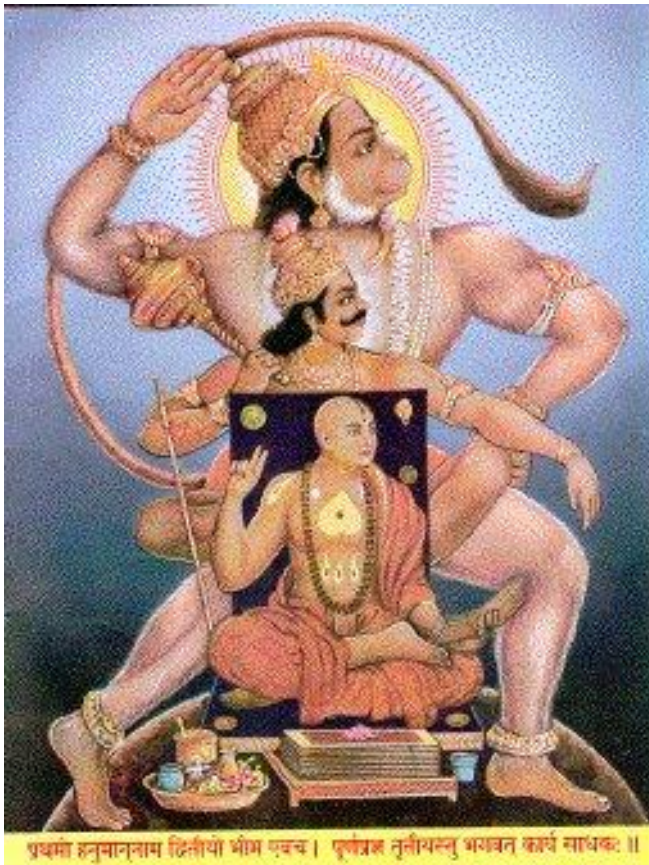
- Those that player controls (***player characters***)
  - Usually the protagonist – the main character
  - May or may not be represented on screen
  - May be more than one per game
  - May communicate in various ways
- Those that the computer controls (***Non-player characters*** or ***NPCs***)
  - Wide variety of roles
  - Wide variety of AI



## As a player you can...

- Be the hero – protagonist
- Be sidekick of hero – assistant
- Be an unseen voyeur
- Play as yourself
- Control whole group of characters  
(team, military unit)
- Have a God-like role, control a society

# Avatars



- From Hindu religion: an incarnation of a deity, a physical representation
- In games: player controlled characters who are represented graphically on screen
- Graphic avatars include :
  - A character
  - An icon
  - A weapon
- Note: in some games player not represented by avatar



# With avatars, player may...

- Select character's body parts, clothing
- Give name to character
- Select special skills or profession
- But some avatars are pre-rendered, unchangeable





# First person POV



- As if seeing action through own eyes; you “become” character
- Don’t see body or face, but may see hand or weapon
- The “I” experience
- Highly immersive
- Player fills in own personality
- But visual limitations: no way to have character hug, kiss, etc.

# Third person POV

- You observe your character – like watching movie
- Less immersive than 1<sup>st</sup> person POV
- But good for games where need to see whole body (running, jumping)
- Gives character strong identity
- But limits ability of player to invest in character





# Player POV

- Advantages and disadvantages to both 1<sup>st</sup> person POV and 3<sup>rd</sup> person POV
- Some games jump between POVs -- mixed
- POV greatly impacts way of experiencing game
- Needs to be decided early on: impacts on basic design, graphics, gameplay



# Many types of NPCs

- Allies of protagonist (friends, fellow warriors)
- Neutral characters (shopkeepers, drinkers in bar)
- The antagonist
- Henchmen of antagonist
- Red herrings (seem villainous but innocent)
- A helper you can summon (gives hints, assistance)
- NPCs may provide clues, or color, or humor

# To develop a character, work out:



- Gender, age
- Its personality... strengths, weak points, goals, fears
- Backstory, occupation
- Role in the game
- Appearance (should reflect personality):
  - Face, body, hair
  - Costume
  - Props (weapons, cane, etc.)
- Movement, posture, expressions
- If possible, give distinctive name

# Character development:

- Important for the protagonist, antagonist, even minor characters
- Rich characters have:
  - Backstory (personal history)
  - Psychological makeup
  - Fears, hopes
  - Goals
- Good characters are **vivid** (in personality, appearance, motivation)





# Overall look of characters: cuteness vs. coolness, realism

- Depends in part on target audience
- Also on type of project; some types call for realism
- Cuteness an advantage in international markets (Mario, Sonic the Hedgehog)
- Players more forgiving of cute characters -- less picky
- But cuteness can be turn off to teens, young adults





# Ways of revealing character

- How do players know who characters are?
- Ways to reveal their “insides” include:
  - their physical appearance
  - what they say
  - what they do
  - their interactions with other characters
  - what other characters say about them, or how they react to them



# Ways to show character change

- As with linear stories, can have ***character arc*** (protagonist can change, grow -- cowardly to brave; self-absorbed to caring for others)
- But challenging in games (non-linear, short scenes, emphasis on action)
- An approach: can have character grow level by level with new challenges (acquiring courage, empathy)
- In some genres, characters can gain increased powers, skills, experience (***character advancement***)

# Dialogue in Games Can Be Highly Useful ...



- Can reveal plot, character or clues
- Giving dialogue choices to player involves him/her with story, NPCs
- Dialogue choices can lead to various outcomes, consequences



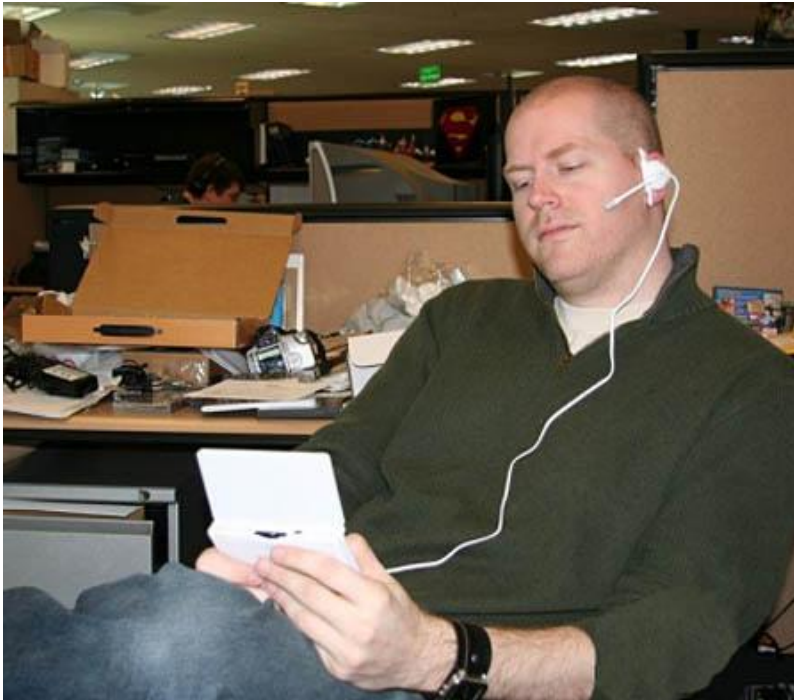
# Dialogue in games

- Should reflect personality, background of character speaking
- Is generally short, focused
- Can be in both cut scenes and interactive sequences



# Several Ways to Handle Dialogue....

# Exchanges between Players...



- Can be created by players...
- Players can speak “in character” to each other
- Communicate via text or oral speech

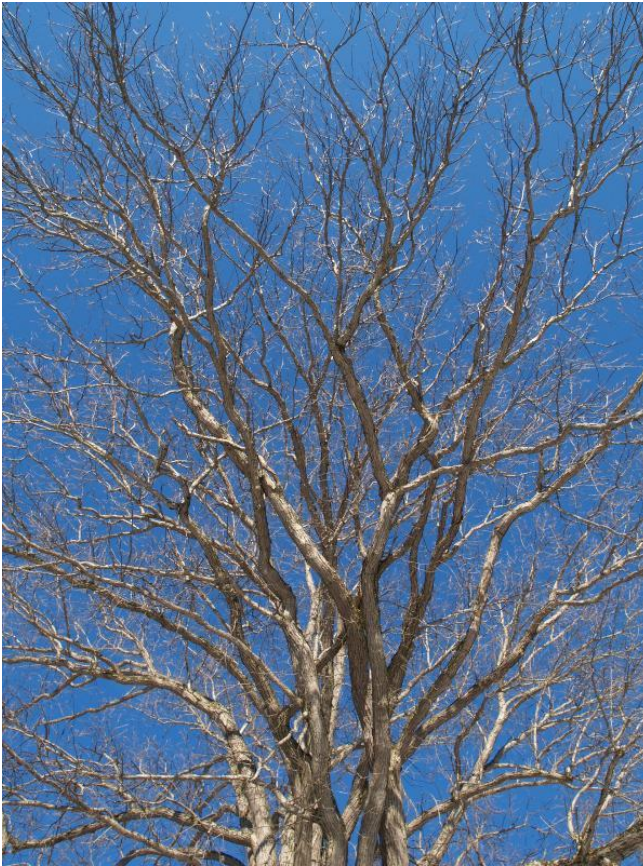
# Exchanges Between Player and NPCs...

- Can utilize “natural language interface”
- Highly sophisticated technique
- Player speaks directly to NPC (via typing or own voice)
- NPC understands, responds appropriately
- Example: *Facade*





# More Common: the Dialogue Tree



- Player given multiple choices of lines (each like branch of tree)
- Player picks one
- Other character responds (different response for each line)
- Requires dialogue & story path for each choice
- Branching dialogue can expand rapidly – but can rein in by fold backs



# Similar to Dialogue Tree: The “Attitude Tree”

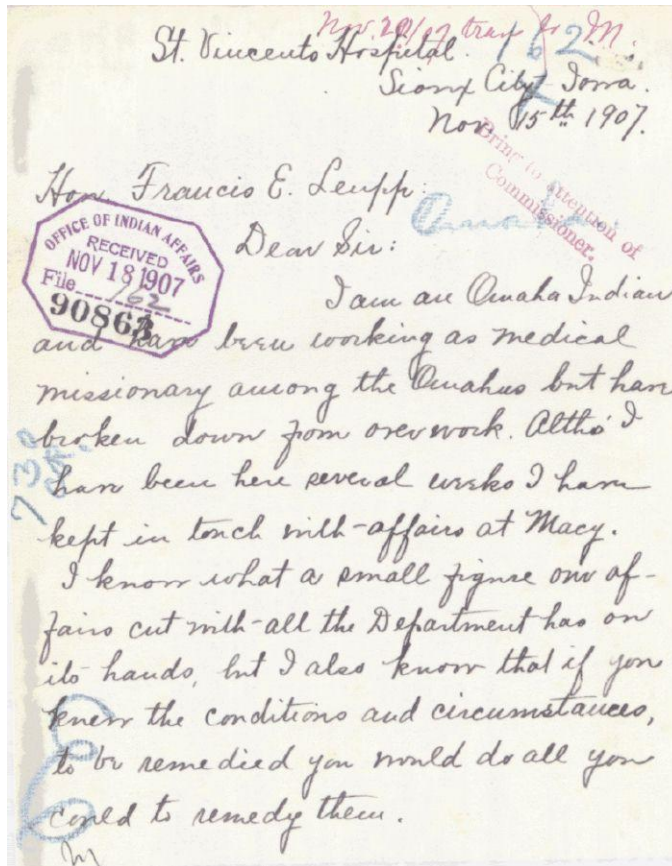
- Instead of words, player can select from list of attitudes, intentions, or actions (angry, hostile, charming; or slaps, ignores, or smiles)
- NPC responds appropriately

# Information can also be conveyed orally via:

- Telephone call
- Voice mail message
- TV or radio broadcast
- Overheard conversation



# Communication via text

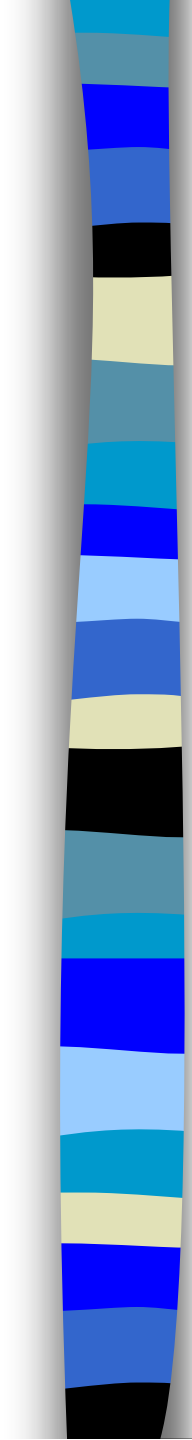


## ■ Various forms of text can be useful to:

- advance plot
- reveal character

## ■ Possibilities:

- Letters
- Journals & diaries
- Newspapers
- Emails
- Computer files



# To recap: when developing a character, give him/her:

- A name
- A gender, an approximate age
- Physical description
- Role in game (protagonist, antagonist, other)
- Ultimate goal in terms of game's story
- Profession, special skills at start; potential by game's end
- Enough backstory to explain personality
- Strengths and weaknesses



## Also be sure to include:

- What role the player plays in game
- What the player POV will be
- What forms of communication the game will include