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GUIDE TO CHARACTER WRITING IN VIDEO GAMES

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this thesis was to research different character writing techniques and methods used in game design to create a handbook suitable for game design. The thesis was created for a client, although the resulting work is useful for other projects as well.

Research was conducted using qualitative methods. Case studies were performed for existing video games.

The end result of the thesis was a comprehensive guide to not only character writing, but on how to also place the characters into a story. Overall this work can be used as a general writing guide for a wide variety of different games.

Keywords: narrative design, character writing, story, design

CONTENTS

1   INTRODUCTION

This project is undertaken for Dark Amber Studios. The purpose of this project is to create a general character writing guide for video games and to research the subject from game design standpoint. For the practical part of this thesis, two characters will be created for Dark Amber Studios upcoming IP Book of Adventum.

The primary research methods employed will be qualitative methods. Existing literature will be utilized, as well as recorded speeches of game industry professionals. Case studies will be conducted for three existing games using the theoretical material. The characters created for this project will be evaluated by the company and feedback will be taken into account.

2   WRITING AND VIDEO GAMES

Video game or vid·e·o·game [vid-ee-oh-geym]:
1. Any of various interactive games played using a specialized electronic gaming device or a computer or mobile device and a television or other display screen, along with a means to control graphic images.
2. Any of various games played using a microchip-controlled device, as an arcade machine or handheld toy.

Game [geym]:
1. An amusement or pastime: children's games.
2. The material or equipment used in playing certain games: a store selling toys and games.

In this paper the term game will be used to refer to video games and computer games.

But why games? Activision-Blizzard, a game company, made $8.09 billion in 2020. A Finnish game company Rovio is reported to have made 272,3 million euros in 2020. Steam, a popular digital distribution system on PC, generated $4,3 billion in 2017 and released 10 263 games in 2020 alone. It is clear, that video games are a popular pastime for people. (Activision Blizzard Inc. 2021; Statista.com 2021.)

Games themselves are a relatively new invention. They are mostly created to entertain but they can also be used for teaching and training purposes. And what better way to entertain than tell stories? Humans have been telling stories to each other for millennia (Aristoteles 340 BCE). Stories have been told in many ways; orally, through theatre plays, through books and novels, through paintings and statues, through television and film, and finally, through video games.

Humanity has an intrinsic need to tell and experience stories. And the most successful stories are those, that have memorable characters. In fact, according to Deborah Hendersen, a Microsoft researcher, characters are so important, that in video games they are the main thing people remember. In contrast, people only develop an episodic memory of the plots in games. (Bernstein 2014.)

2.1 Differences between linear media and video games

Video games are primarily a visual medium. They share many similarities to plays, films, and television series. Therefore, many lessons already learned from other mediums can be applied to games. There is, however, one very notable difference and that is the existence of a player. This turns games from just being a visual media to an interactive media. In most games, the player's actions have consequences. (Sheldon 2014, 22.)

The degree to which the player is involved can vary. The player can control just one character or many. The player's viewpoint might be through the eyes of their character, like in Doom (id Software 1993) or over the shoulder like in Uncharted (Naughty Dog 2007). The viewpoint might even be through several characters and in some cases, it might be controlled from high up in the sky, as is with strategy games like Command & Conquer (Westwood Studios 1995) and Starcraft (Blizzard Entertainment 1998).

Some games have multiple playstyles or endings, such as Cyberpunk 2077 (CD Projekt Red 2020). This means that subsequent playthroughs might become drastically different from one another. Watching Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring (2001) five times will not change what happens to Boromir,

but in video games the player might be able to save a character they previously failed to save.

2.2   Games and stories

As video games have advanced in graphical fidelity and technology, stories have started to become more important. That is not to say old games didn't have stories. In Donkey Kong Country (Rare 1994) the player was fighting to retrieve Donkey's banana collection. In Super Mario Bros. (Nintendo 1985) the player must save the princess. In Final Fantasy (Square 1987) the player saves the earth by killing a chaos fiend and ending a time loop. (Sheldon 2014, 18-20.)

Games don't necessarily have to have characters, or even stories. Myst (Cyan 1993) features a deserted island, that the player explores, gradually uncovering the disaster that took place on the island. Another game that features neither characters nor story is Tetris (Pajitnov 1984), a tile-matching puzzle game, where the player's objective is to complete a line by moving falling pieces. Neither of these games have stories in a traditional sense, but they are still wildly popular. (Sheldon 2014, 24-25.)

But people like stories. Stories with interesting characters are more likely to be successful and memorable, even if other aspects of the game are lacklustre. And as has been previously mentioned, players tend to remember characters, rather than plots. Therefore, it is in the game developers' interest to try and make their characters the best they possibly can. (Bernstein 2014; Hendersen 2014; Krawczyk & Novak 2006, 14-15.)

In linear media a character is defined as being a person in a novel, play, or film. A story on the other hand is defined as the plot or succession of incidents of a novel, poem, drama, etc. Games are not linear media, however. In gaming, it is more fitting to define story as: someone who wants something badly but is having a hard time getting it. And character as: someone who wants something badly. (Bernstein 2014; Sheldon 2014.)

The aforementioned definition is extremely suitable for games because it splits them in to two fundamental elements: objectives and obstacles. In gaming, obstacles are gameplay. Answering these two questions already answers a good number of questions a story or character writer has. It also marries story-telling and character writing to game design. (Bernstein 2014.)

2.3 Game genres and the main character

In gaming, genre most often describes the game's mechanics, and the game-play challenges the player is expected to face. This differs from film and liter-ary genres, where genre is a thematic or stylistic description. One game may belong to several genres at once. (Bernstein 2014; Sheldon 2014, 37-39.)

Since genre is directly tied to the gameplay mechanics of the game that is be-ing created, it is an especially integral part of the writing process. While there are many genres available to choose from, for a writer it might be easiest to first categorize games as either linear, or sandbox. In video games, linear games tend to follow a set path, along which the story is revealed. Examples of these would be Bioshock Infinite (Irrational Games 2013) and Doom (id Software 2016). In sandbox games the player is given either a few different goals to pursue, like in Ghost of Tsushima (Sucker Punch Studios 2020), or none at all, such as Minecraft (Mojang 2011). (Bernstein 2014; Krawczyk & Novak 2006, 20-40; Sheldon 2014, 367-392.)

After choosing the game's genre, another choice to make is the type of main character in a game. This affects the narrative possibilities of the game. The character could be either silent, cinematic, or open. Silent characters are neg-ative space and are meant to allow the player to use their imagination to fill that space. Silent characters allow, in some cases, for the player to feel like they are the character. Examples of silent characters are Gordon Freeman in Half-Life (Valve 1998) and the Doom Slayer in Doom (id Software 2016). When creating silent characters, care should be taken to observe unity of ac-tion. In some cases, the player might feel put-off by a character who never says anything. (Bernstein 2014; Krawczyk & Novak 2006, 20-40; Sheldon 2014, 37-92.)

The second choice of main character is cinematic. Cinematic characters are characters of their own, with their own personalities, traits and wants. A player does not necessarily want to be a cinematic character but would rather work together with them. Examples of cinematic characters are Jin Sakai from Ghost of Tsushima (Sucker Punch Studios 2020) and Arthur Morgan from Red Dead Redemption 2 (Rockstar Studios 2018). Once a cinematic character has been established, it becomes important to write the actions of the character as believable. Batman does not kill, so his character in a video game shouldn't either. (Bernstein 2014.)

The third option is to create an open character. Open characters are player defined. This option lets the player be their character through customization options, playstyle, and dialogue options. Open characters require more work, as the developers are required to prepare many different customization options, side activities, quests, and dialogue choices to ensure the player feels like they are roleplaying themselves in the situation. Examples of open main characters can be found in most roleplaying games, such as The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim (Bethesda Game Studios 2012) and Cyberpunk 2077 (CD Projekt Red 2020). (Bernstein 2014.)

After choosing the genre and the type of a main character, the story can then be established. By sticking to an elemental need, such as surviving, escaping, avenging, or acquiring, and by choosing the type of main character the game features, it becomes easier to define the ultimate objective of the game, and thus the gameplay itself. Once the story and objectives have been chosen, it needs to be reviewed by other team members. Programmers and game designers understand what can and cannot be done in-game. The story needs to be reworked until the team working on it can feel comfortable realizing the vision. (Ballon 2004, 49-50; Bernstein 2014; Kristjan 2020, 44-45; Sheldon 2014, 65-66).

3   PROCESS OF CHARACTER CREATION

The one thing that makes a character great, is the one that the audience recognizes as flesh-and-blood. For linear media, all a character needs to do to become successful is garner sympathy from the audience. The audience must

be on the side of the character. This is not enough for games, because the audience must enjoy playing the game as well. To do so the story must evoke emotional responses from the player. (Bernstein 2014; Egri 1965, 18; Sheldon 2014, 41-42; Krawczyk & Novak 2006, 128).

The factor that both Egri and Sheldon find most important is a character's three-dimensionality. Characters must have depth, they must have doubts, fears, goals, and ambitions. These aspects must be revealed through the actions of the character, be it speech, mannerisms, or actions. (Egri 1965, 19-22; Sheldon 2014, 42.)

There is no ultimate checklist to character making, nor silver bullet to make all characters succeed and become memorable. This is especially true for a video game developer or writer, as there are many more aspects to video games than just the character writing. There exist a few good starting points, that might make the process of character creation easier. We will begin by having a look at character archetypes, character development and finally, conflict. A character with these factors defined is already well on their way to becoming three-dimensional. (Egri 1965, 4-5; Krawczyk & Novak 2006, 58-120; Sheldon 2014, 37-92.)

When it comes to creating characters for video games, be they main characters or side characters, cues can be taken from a wide variety of sources, including Jung's theory of Archetypes, as well as contemporary television, film, theatre, and literature. In order to stay loyal to the game's story and technical limitations, it might be best to approach the process like Jeremy Bernstein does. (Bernstein 2014; Krawczyk & Novak 2006, 58-120; Sheldon 2014; 37-92.)

Bernstein's model creates characters by defining three different aspects of the character: what does the character want, what is the character willing to do to get what they want, and what the character seems like on the outside – also known as characterization. The want of a character is internal. The want leads to action, which is external. The action then gives the player a window to the

want, past what the character seems to be, and reveals who the character really is. This results in a complete character, while still retaining simplicity in design. (Bernstein 2014.)

Another formidable character creation model comes from Lajos Egri, the author of The Art of Dramatic Writing (1946) and The Art of Creative Writing (1965). Egri uses a comprehensive model, where all actions and characterization derive from the character's history, psychology, physiology, and sociology (Egri 1965, 37-40). This can be an extremely useful tool for more in-depth characterization, but it is also complex, and requires a significant amount of time to perform. Egri's model will be discussed later in more detail.

Characters need not necessarily be complex affairs. Complexity should depend on the game's genre and the character's intended purpose. But all characters should still want something in the game's story, even if it is only money or the desire to kill the player character. This is especially important for the adversaries. Characters who want the same, mutually exclusive objective, create conflict. Conflict not only creates drama within a story but is also gameplay within a video game. (Bernstein 2014; Krawczyk & Novak 2006, 58-120; Sheldon 2014, 40-50.)

3.1 Unity

According to Jeremy Bernstein, in order to make a game successful, the player should feel unified with the main character. This unity differs from Aristotle's classical three unities, because it is built primarily to unify the player with the character they are playing as. Bernstein then proposes three different types of unities, that can be applied to the characters in a game. They are unity of purpose, unity of action, and unity of trait. Applying this approach to design keeps the story, the mechanics, and the characters in focus. (Bernstein 2014.)

The classical unities from Aristotle are unity of time, unity of place, and unity of action. Aristotle's unities are more applicable to entire stories, rather than tying characters to players. He based these concepts on popular forms of drama and poetry that existed during his time, but they can still be applied to today's

games. Overall, stories should take place in a limited and sequential time frame, happen in a place with logical physical barriers, and not include any activity or action that is not crucial to the plot. (Aristotle 363 BCE; Sheldon 2014, 20-22).

3.1.1 Unity of purpose

Unity of purpose is the underlying cause for someone to play a game. The player is intrigued by the story and wants the same thing as the main character. The more invested the player is in the story, the more likely they are to continue playing. To this end, the player must be made to care. (Bernstein 2014).

The player needs to have empathy towards the main character. This can be achieved by making the player and the character share feelings. Sharing can happen through thoughts, secrets and mysteries, emotions, choices, and experiences. Gameplay itself can be used to create empathy. Examples would include Heavy Rain (Quantic Dream 2010), where the player is made to care by having to play with the children of the main character. Another example would be Ghost of Tsushima (Sucker Punch Studios 2020), where the main character is constantly taught and guided by their uncle. (Bernstein 2014).

Unity of purpose is paramount. The player needs to get behind their characters want. Without succeeding in this, the player won't care about the character or the story. If there is no emotional contact, there won't be any interest towards seeing the story finished either and the player might quit the game. (Bernstein 2014).

Sometimes stories must change the main objective. Doing so changes the purpose of the character. Changing the unity of purpose to something else is perfectly acceptable, but the player must be able to agree with the new purpose. If changing the purpose through story telling is difficult, it can also be handled by giving the player a choice on what to do. (Bernstein 2014).

3.1.2 Unity of action

In an effort to make the player feel unified and immersed with their character, unity of action must be observed. The character must do what the player wants. Once the player starts taking action in game, that they feel is foolish, they start breaking unity of action. Any action that the player questions, whether a story choice or a mechanic, can create a break in immersion. Unity of action is intrinsically tied to the unity of purpose. Additionally, unity of action cannot be fulfilled, should the game have no unity of purpose. (Bernstein 2014).

In some cases, the unity of action should be broken deliberately. The player doesn't need to *be* the character they play, if they can be their partner. In these cases, the unity of action can be observed by making the character act in a manner that is believable for their character. A normal person might not feel very inclined to go fight criminals in an insane asylum dressed as a giant bat, but when it is Batman in Batman: Arkham Asylum (Rocksteady Studios 2009), it becomes perfectly acceptable. Only if Batman were to suddenly start killing people, an act that is against Batman's code, would the unity of action break. (Bernstein 2014).

3.1.3 Unity of trait

Unity of trait, or characterization, is what most people generally think when they're thinking of character writing. Characterization is external and consists of what the character *seems* to be. Physical aspects, such as height, weight, appearance, clothes, occupation, speech patterns, and the like are characterization. It Is also the least important of the unities and can even be discarded completely, as evidenced by games such as Half-Life (Valve 1998) or Zelda: Breath of the Wild (Nintendo EPD 2017). (Bernstein 2014).

Unity of trait becomes attainable when the character type is open. Customization options and extensive dialogue choices allow the player to become the character that they are playing. In the event the game has a cinematic or silent character, unity of trait cannot be observed. Luckily for game writers, unity of

trait is the least important of these unities, and therefore, optional. (Bernstein 2014).

3.2 Archetypes and character roles

For a game writer there are two distinct sources a writer can pull from. Classical archetypes defined by Carl G. Jung in his book Archetypes and Collective Unconscious (1959) and the more contemporary roles derived from theatre, movies, and television. There is some overlap between the Jungian archetypes and the contemporary roles, but also enough differences that they should both be examined. The Jungian archetypes tend to be more straightforward, which means they suit especially well against grander themes, such as the fight between good and evil. The contemporary archetypes allow for a more nuanced approach with plenty of moral ambiguity. (Egri 1965; Krawczyk & Novak 2006, 108-124; Sheldon 2014, 37-92.)

Characters that are used in video games can be categorized into a few different types: main characters or player characters, villains or antagonists, sidekicks, allies, and henchmen. Most of these types have subcategories, either in Jungian archetypes or in contemporary roles. (Krawczyk & Novak 2006, 58; Sheldon 2014, 65.)

3.2.1 The hero

The main character in a game can be a protagonist, a hero or an anti-hero. Examples of heroes are William in Nioh (Team Ninja 2017) or Link in The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild (Nintendo EPD 2017). Sam Bridges in Death Stranding (Kojima Production 2019) and Arthur Morgan in Red Dead Redemption 2 (Rockstar Games 2018) are protagonists. The differences are subtle, but noteworthy. Heroes are usually characters the player identifies with and bonds with. Heroes face a problem and set out to solve it. Protagonists on the other hand are tasked with additional emotional goals, wants or needs. The player rarely identifies themselves with protagonists. In Red Dead Redemption 2, Arthur Morgan wrestles with his conscience. In Death Stranding Sam Bridges struggles with his desire to be left alone. In some games the player might be in control of several heroes or protagonists, as is the case in

Starcraft 2: Wings of Liberty (Blizzard Entertainment 2010). (Krawczyk & Novak 2006, 108-112; Sheldon 2014, 47.)

Antiheros are protagonists who lead a morally ambiguous life and who makes poor choices. Famous examples of antiheroes are William Shakespeare's Macbeth, Grand Theft Auto 5's three main characters Michael De Santa, Franklin Clinton and Trevor Philips (Rockstar North 2013). In later years antiheroes have become more popular, more human, and therefore more likeable. (Krawczyk & Novak 2006, 113-114.)

3.2.2 The villain

As has already been discussed, at the heart of any successful character or story is conflict. It provides the drive, the desire, and the desperation for the story to be successful. To achieve this end there will most often be a need for the main character to have an enemy. In this case it is either a Jungian shadow or a contemporary antagonist. While both, antagonists and shadows, are there to cause problems for the player, there are differences once again. Shadows are total opposites of heroes, such as Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader in Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope (1977). Antagonists on the other hand want the same thing as the protagonist, but they have different methods and moralities. An example of protagonist and antagonist are Black Panther and his enemy, Killmonger in Marvel's Black Panther (2018). (Ballon 2004, 49; Egri 1946, 113; Krawczyk & Novak 2006, 109-116; Sheldon 2014, 80-81.)

For shadows and antagonists to be successful they must be every bit as able and intelligent as their counterparts. There should be no obvious weaknesses, as these will weaken the main character as well as the villain. In reality, fights are only interesting if the combatants are evenly matched. To ensure the player meets resistance the villain most often has henchmen or minions. These disposable enemies can be seen in a variety of different medias, be they books, movies or video games. (Ballon 2004, 50-51; Egri 1946, 113; Krawczyk & Novak 2006, 109-116; Sheldon 2014, 80-81.)

3.2.3 The sidekick

In contemporary roles, one of the most common roles is that of a sidekick. A sidekick can be many things, including a companion to the main character, a pivotal character, a comic relief and sometimes even a hidden villain. In terms of game mechanics, the sidekicks can provide hints, tutorials or deliver exposition. Sidekicks should have their own stories and histories as vivid as the main character and the best sidekicks are those that can be interacted with at any time. Sidekicks could become side-tracked by their own missions and agendas, sometimes even kidnapped or lost, but most of the game they should be together with the main character. In Jungian terms a sidekick could be classified as a helper, as their main duty is to assist the player in achieving their goals. Examples of sidekicks are Elizabeth from BioShock Infinite (Irrational Games 2013) and Ellie from The Last of Us (Naughty Dog 2013). (Krawczyk & Novak 2006, 110-118; Sheldon 2014, 86-88.)

3.2.4 The allies

Mentors are yet another useful archetype. The purpose of the mentor is to guide the young hero in their journey, aid them, train them and provide exposition and backstory. They are usually older, more experienced characters who will stay with the hero until a point where they either sacrifice themselves – like Gandalf in Lord of the Rings (Tolkien, 1954) or Obi Wan Kenobi in Star Wars (1977). For a more dramatic turn they might even betray the player, like Owl in Sekiro (From Software 2019) or Lord Shimura in Ghost of Tsushima (Sucker Punch Productions 2020). A good mentor is able to keep the player reassured of their mission and in some cases even become a surrogate parent for the player. (Krawczyk & Novak 2006, 109; Sheldon 2014, 83-86.)

Other types of allies that are common in games are helpers, merchants, quest givers and trainers. They are usually side characters that are there to provide the player with items, equipment, quests or skills. These side characters can be many different things, but they are all fundamentally on the player's side. Sidekicks and mentors are also allies. (Krawczyk & Novak 2006, 110-118; Sheldon 2014, 86-88.)

3.2.5 The pivotal character

This is the character who kickstarts the story. Pivotal characters can be almost anyone, be they the villain, the sidekick or the mentor. In Lord of the Rings (Tolkien 1956) it is Gandalf, the mentor, who is the pivotal character, as he is the one giving out the duty to Frodo.

3.3 Traits and characterization

The preferred method for revealing a character's traits depends on several factors. For characters that are going to be around for a short while only, the reveal of their traits must be rapid, whereas characters who will be around for longer can also afford to take their time in this process. The medium in which the characters are present will also have an effect. Characters in novels can reveal their character with inner monologues or thoughts through the narrator, whereas characters in movies and television series must rely more on dialogue and actions. As video games continue to advance in graphical fidelity and animation quality, more ways will also become available for video game developers. (Egri 1965, 4-5; Krawczyk & Novak 2006, 108-112; Sheldon 2014, 44.)

The key to successful characters is their tridimensionality. All aspects of a character contribute to their personalities, shaping them in different ways. Egri breaks down these traits into three categories: physiology, sociology and psychology. Sheldon, Ballon, Krawczyk and Novak all use similar structure in their character creation. In this instance we will be using Egri's skeleton model, as it provides a writer the most flexible toolset for character creation. The model can then be simplified depending on what characters are being written. A guard who never speaks to the main character need not have their past explained, unlike the sidekick. (Ballon 2004, 39-44; Egri 1946, 35-43; Krawczyk & Novak 2006, 109; Sheldon 2014, 83-86.)

Physiological aspects of a character are sex, age, height, weight, posture, and appearance. Additionally, defects, such as crooked noses, missing limbs, birthmarks and diseases leave their marks as well. A character with facial scarring might not be very pleasant to look at. This will be reflected in their environment, which will in turn change the way the character will feel about their

facial features. A character often ridiculed and insulted will harbour completely different feelings towards people than someone who's facial scar is defined by others to be sexy and cool. (Egri 1946, 35-43.)

Sociology is the second category in Egri's skeleton structure and mirrors how a character's environment affects their personality. Sociological aspects, such as occupation, education, home life, religion, and ethnicity are some of such factors. The character's position in their community, their political affiliations and even amusement and hobbies will contribute towards a character's personality. Poor people who grew up on the streets with no schooling will have different attitudes towards life than someone who has grown in the safety of their mansion and educated in the most illustrious universities of their country. (Egri 1946, 32-42.)

Psychology, the third aspect of a character's skeleton consists of things such as moral standards, personal premise, ambition and even sex life. Frustrations, disappointments, temperament, and complexes, along with intelligence, qualities and other abilities will round out this category. A person with rigid beliefs and morals towards sexuality will be wildly different to a person who hops from one bed to the next, even if they have a similar societal and physiological situation. (Egri 1946, 32-42.)

Once the skeleton has been created, it then becomes possible to know how they fit into a game's story and what their roles are. Note, that depending on the character's role, they might not need this skeleton at all.

3.4 Conflict

Conflict is the driving force behind all stories. Conflict is action, and action allows the player or the audience to discover characters, their personalities, flaws and ambitions. Conflict compels character growth, and it entertains the audience. There are many different types of conflicts, such as person against themselves, nature, society, technology, gods, or even other people. A good story has several different conflicts. An example of this would be Ghost of Tsushima (Sucker Punch Studios 2020), where the main character is in conflict with himself, with the Mongol invaders, as well as his uncle, who insists on

obeying the customs of the society. (Ballon 2004, 50-51; Bernstein 2014; Egri 1946, 118-124; Krawczyk & Novak 2006, 68; Sheldon 2014, 109-110).

In person versus themselves conflict we see the main character trying to overcome themselves. They might be trying to overcome a character flaw, addiction or their own feelings. In Ghost of Tsushima Jin Sakai, the protagonist, has been brought up to honour the customs and traditions of samurai. His opponent is a Mongol general, and to defeat him Sakai needs to overcome his reliance on the samurai ways. Doing this allows Sakai to overcome his foes, but it sows the seeds of another conflict, one against his uncle and his traditional beliefs. (Ballon 2004, 51; Egri 1946, 125; Krawczyk & Novak 2006, 68; Sheldon 2014, 109-110.)

Person versus nature uses natural – or unnatural – forces as the source of the conflict. Games with heavy survival elements often revolve around this conflict. Examples are The Long Dark (Hinterland Studio Inc. 2017), where the player must navigate the world while scrounging for food, water and equipment while surviving biting cold and hungry animals. Alien: Isolation (Creative Assembly 2014) pits the player against the blood thirsty xenomorph. In these instances, the conflict and suspension come from whether or not the player is capable of surviving against these increasingly hostile environments. In games such as these the main character usually undergoes a conflict against themselves as well. To survive these harrowing situations the main character must inevitably overcome themselves. (Ballon 2004, 51; Egri 1946, 125; Krawczyk & Novak 2006, 68; Sheldon 2014, 109-110.)

Person versus person is perhaps the most common conflict in media. In this conflict type the main character has a goal and another character is standing in the way of success. This type of conflict can often be seen in spy, war, and mystery stories, such as Ghost of Tsushima (Sucker Punch Studios 2020). Dramatic stories with emphasis on emotional relationships are suitable for this conflict type as well, such as Firewatch (Campo Santo 2016) and Gone Home (Fullbright 2013). (Ballon 2004, 51; Egri 1946, 125; Krawczyk & Novak 2006, 68; Sheldon 2014, 109-110.)

Characters in linear media often have fatal flaws. These are part of the character's inner conflict. The primary conflict then turns into a question, of whether or not the character overcomes this flaw. Fatal flaws are difficult to work into games, unless the character is scripted, like Jin Sakai and Arthur Morgan. In these situations, the choices should be dealt with explicitly by player choice. Implicit choices are more invisible and might slip by, unnoticed, and thus ruin the effect of this type of conflict. (Ballon 2004, 51; Bernstein 2014; Egri 1946, 125; Krawczyk & Novak 2006, 68; Sheldon 2014, 109-110.)

4 CASE STUDIES

As has been previously established, it is always a good idea to learn from others. In this section we will be examining four different games and briefly analyzing some of the characters found there. Particular attention will be paid to characterization and how the characters function in unity. While there is no lack of excellent characters found in video games, we will be keeping the list short for the sake of brevity.

The following games have been chosen by the author due to their excellent writing and the impact they all left.

4.1 Red Dead Redemption 2

Red Dead Redemption 2 is an action game that features a group of outlaws at the precipice of a quickly modernizing world. The game takes place in 1899 in a fictional part of United States. The story itself centers around the player character, Arthur Morgan, and the gang leader Dutch Van der Linde. On the run from the law, the gang must make ends meet, forge new alliances, and commit more crimes. Occasional helpers and allies take the form of other gang members, civilians, Native Americans, and other people the player encounters.

The primary conflict in Red Dead Redemption 2 is person versus person. Many different conflicts allow the player to always have an enemy and a goal. As the game progresses the gang leader Dutch becomes increasingly paranoid and aggressive, eventually drifting away from some of the gangsters. The

story – and the conflict – is deeply tied to the personalities of the gang members.

Arthur Morgan is the player character. As the player is in control, Arthur's behavior is largely under their control, save for cutscenes and dialogue. Arthur's personality is established early in the game as someone who's tough and not always lawful, but ultimately wants to do the right thing. Arthur's personality doesn't change during the game, which provides framework for one of the primary conflicts in the game.

Dutch Van der Linde is the gang leader. He initially acts as the player's guide, mentor, and ally. He is egotistical and narcissistic but cares deeply about his gang members. However, as the story progresses, another character is introduced who consistently plays to Dutch's negative qualities, amplifying them and driving him further from his gang members. As the conflict escalates and more bodies pile up, the game slowly but surely winds to its conclusion.

All the characters that the player interacts with are believable and leave the player with a sense of realness. Each character, including Arthur, follows Egri's skeletal structure to a point where it is applicable. Named characters, depending on their role, become more real as time passes. Henchmen and bystanders are treated briefly, but even they have one or two qualities that stand out, such as apparel or weapons.

The primary gang members all have their characterizations done thoroughly. Each of them harbors their own pasts, fears, hopes and aspirations. These traits are revealed through dialogue, body language, and physical attributes. Optional minigames and side activities offer further chances for the player to get to know these characters.

The way the game handles all three unities is superb. The player sympathizes with Arthur Morgan, and while not necessarily wanting to be them, is ready to support them in their adventure. The actions undertaken by Arthur all feel natural, logical, and believable. The main conflict ensures the player remains onboard for the eventual shift in unity of purpose. Even though there are some breaks in unity of action, where the author of this paper felt he would have

done things differently, they are believable from the character's standpoint. This heightens the drama around the characters.

4.2 Ghost of Tsushima

Ghost of Tsushima is a third person action game where the player controls Jin Sakai, a samurai, who fights against a Mongol invasion of Tsushima. The game's main antagonist is the leader of the Mongols, Khotun Khan. To defeat the Mongols Jin must build a resistance, free his uncle and kill Khotun Khan.

Ghost of Tsushima offers less named characters than Red Dead Redemption 2. Jin Sakai has only a small assembly of named characters helping him and most of the Mongols are never named. The only Mongol who the player will even recognize is Khotun Khan, as he is the only notable Mongol to show his face. All of Khotun's lieutenants are masked and even when some are named, details about them remain scarce.

Ghost of Tsushima's main conflict is Jin Sakai's struggle to do what is necessary to survive, even if it doesn't follow the traditions of the samurai. In fact, when the game begins, Lord Shimura begins his address towards his men by telling them: "Tradition. Courage. Honor. They are what makes us". But as the Mongol invasion succeeds, Jin must discard these values in order to free his people. He must sacrifice the samurai traditions and fight unconventionally; he must run away from unfavorable odds and he must level the playing field with poisons and assassinations.

The player is eased into Jin's past incrementally. As each new underhanded fighting method is acquired, so too is a lesson from the past, contradicting the method. These flashbacks also provide insight into Lord Shimura and to his relationship with Jin. As the game progresses Jin must lean into ever more brutal methods of fighting, something his uncle deeply resents. Familial love and loyalty are tested against tradition, courage, and honor.

Lord Shimura's arc resembles that of another mentor and father figure: Dutch Van der Linde from Red Dead Redemption 2. But in Ghost of Tsushima, it is the protagonist, Jin Sakai, who changes and incites the conflict. The results

are still similar. Lord Shimura, a rigid father-figure who values the samurai tradition above all else, abandons Jin.

The characterizations in the game are done in an excellent way. The characters all feel real. This is due to how all the characters clearly want something. The things they are willing to do reflect and reveal their characters very well. This ensures all three unities are observed for all characters.

The game has very few problems, but one of the biggest ones are breaks in action. While the game itself gives free reign for the player to play as they like, the story itself advances without giving the player any real choice. In the end, Jin Sakai must embrace his role as the Ghost of Tsushima, who uses underhanded methods, such as sneak attacks and poisons to kill his enemies. Should the player master the game's fighting system and desire to destroy the Mongols in glorious open combat, such as the author did, then the unity of purpose breaks. Had the author of this paper had a say in the matter, Jin Sakai would have fought the Mongols much more like a samurai. In the end, this break in unity of action did not stop the author from finishing – and enjoying – the game.

4.3 Cyberpunk 2077

Cyberpunk 2077 is a first person action game for PC, Xbox and PlayStation. It is an open world sci-fi adventure featuring a wide array of different characters, and ways to play. Unfortunately for the studio releasing it, the game opened to very poor reviews. Out of all of the case studies, Cyberpunk 2077 fares the worst.

Unlike Ghost of Tsushima and Red Dead Redemption 2, Cyberpunk 2077 features an open main character. The player gets to choose, for the most part, how their character looks, dresses and acts. The player's past can also be chosen from three different ones, which unlocks new dialogue options when talking with the game's characters.

In the beginning the player is given a goal to become a legend of Night City. However, once the game's main plot advances, the player finds out that they

are dying, due to having another personality inserted in their heads. At this point, the player now has a new goal: survive. As far as unities go, it's a good, elemental purpose, that most players would feel like they can get behind.

The problems in unity start from this very purpose. The player is told, explicitly, that they are dying. But they also still have their old purpose available to them. Outside the main missions their deadly countdown seems all but non-existent. There are dozens of side missions for the player to undertake, from racing to assassinations. During these missions the primary purpose is put on a backburner. In fact, it is rarely even mentioned. This creates a glaring rupture in unity of action, where the player is expected to hurry and find a way to survive, but the game itself tells the player to slow down and become a legend in Night City.

Other problems in the game stem from the fact, that the player character is unable to interact with most things. For example, a barkeep tells the player to order a drink, but the player can only interact with drinks in a user interface panel. The player is unable to do actions that they expect to be able to do, hence resulting in further breaks in unity of action.

Aside from these problems, the characterizations are done extremely well. All side and main characters have their needs, fears, ambitions, and other feelings available for the player to discover. The actions these characters are willing to take to reach their goals are in harmony with their external characterizations.

Of the interesting characterizations should be mentioned Jackie Welles, the player's best friend for the beginning of the game. Jackie dies during the main questline early on, so the game wastes no time in creating the external traits for Jackie. However, since the player is joined by Jackie in almost all of the missions they do while he still lives, the player is given a surprising amount of nuance. This is done subtly, with body language, appearance, and off-hand comments. Once Jackie dies, more characterization is available by visiting his garage, where he lived, and by talking to his girlfriend or even going to his funeral. The end result is an excellent example of how characterization can be done, despite the character not being present for long.

Cyberpunk 2077 has its main conflict centered around trying to survive Johnny Silverhand, an artificial construct of a long-deceased rock star and terrorist, that the player gets stuck in their heads. This leads to other conflicts with mega corporations, gangsters, police, and other factions. Should the player choose to, they can also be in conflict with Silverhand.

Overall Cyberpunk 2077 has excellent characterization but suffers greatly from problems resulting from poor unity of purpose and unity of action. While the elemental purpose of survival is a good purpose, the integration of it to a sandbox type game with conflicting goals brings it down and makes it ineffective as a purpose.

4.4   Of Bird and Cage

The final case study examines a third person musical action game developed by Capricia Productions in 2021. The game revolves around the life of a young would-be musician Gitta. Drug addiction, domestic violence, and abuse combine with melodic metal music to create some kind of a game version of Beaty and the Beast that is quite unlike any other on the market.

Unfortunately, the game fails spectacularly in all aspects of storytelling. Unity of purpose is instantly shattered as the player is simply told in the beginning of the game that they are addicted to drugs. Unity of action is impossible to achieve, as the player is forced to pick actions that actively hurt the protagonist, with no discernable reason.

Narratively the player will feel hard pressed to have any sympathy for Gitta, as the game's tutorial simply skips through her childhood and any other period of characterization. Because of the lack of characterization, Gitta's interest to music seems almost like an afterthought. Even the world building seems to contradict the main character's interests, since apparently no-one in town's only bar with an open mic night has ever heard of Gitta, even though the game tries to portray her as being almost obsessed with singing.

Plot holes and unlikable characters round out the experience. In fact, the player is forced to either act like a sociopath or endure abuse. And since the player feels no connection to the main character, it becomes easy to feel that the game is actively insulting the player instead of the main character. In fact, the author quit the game in rage twice during the first 15 minutes of the game.

If the player had been eased into the life of Gitta in the first minutes of the game, the author is sure the game would have succeeded much better than it did. By allowing the player to grow up and see the external characterization of Gitta, and by allowing the player less destructive choices, Gitta's eventual downward spiral would have been much more impactful.

5 CLIENT CONTRACTS

The purpose of the thesis was to study character design and then apply these lessons to create well-rounded, three-dimensional characters with distinct and memorable personalities. Two characters were created to serve as the primary quest givers for an upcoming dlc in the game Book of Adventum. The profiles are as follows:

> **Max Careful Axeman**
> Character type: NPC – quest giver, ally, mentor, antagonist
> Affiliation: NC military, Tyr
> Want: Protect Tyr
>
> **Internal characterization:**
> **Want**: Axeman wants to serve his lord, Tyr, and to defeat the Qing Ting forces on the island. He is loyal to Tyr, knows the truth about the God's existence and is willing to kill and betray even his closest comrades to protect this secret.
>
> **Personality**: Axeman is for the most part a jovial man with a big sense of humor, although it is considered quite crass by many. He remains calm under fire, but can become quite excited when talking about Tyr. He appreciates bravery and straight talk, although

he can be quite manipulative when he so chooses. Like many military men, Axeman is quite foul-mouthed and swears quite a bit.

Past: Axeman was abandoned as a baby on the steps of a monastery. The monastery belonged to the cult of warlike Tyr and it was no coincidence that Axeman eventually joined the military. Axeman quickly proved himself a capable team leader. His fierce loyalty to Tyr, his unswerving loyalty and fanaticism ensured he was made a paladin of Tyr. This new position held more responsibilities as well as opportunities for the once orphaned Axeman. He slowly but surely built himself a family in the military, considering the soldiers his siblings and children.

Axeman changed his middle name to Careful after being repeatedly told that it wasn't in fact his middle name.

Fears: Axeman's primary fear is losing his status as a paladin, although he doesn't know that himself. He is eager to receive praise and attention. Criticizing or berating Axeman makes him seem amused outside, but his humorous response is usually quite venomous. He worries and dotes over his soldiers.

External characterization:
Age: 38
Appearance: Axeman prefers military garb that shows his rank, as well as his dedication to Tyr. Military doctrine dictates he keep himself fighting fit, so he has a thin mustache and no beard. He likes the NC-style round sunglasses. See figure X for a picture supplied by the client.

Carmilla Jörgensen
Character type: NPC – quest giver, ally

Affiliation: NC engineering corps, rebellion
Want: Destroy Tyr

Internal characterization:
Want: Jörgensen's goal is to bring down the Gods. The reason is purely selfish – she wants revenge. Taking down anyone who's slighted her is a bonus that she considers tasty but isn't necessary. While vengeful, she does harbor some morals, and is unwilling to let those she trusts get hurt.

Personality: Jörgensen is equipped with a keen intellect capable of slicing through even the most complicated puzzles. This ability has made her somewhat arrogant and self-centered, especially when she feels the present company isn't at her level. She has a tendency of fixating on things to an unhealthy degree, which is also why she discovered the truth.

In conversations Jörgensen tends to get straight to the point and doesn't tolerate idleness. Being rude to her is a great way to get chewed off.

Past: Jörgensen grew up in a middle-class family, the daughter of two engineers. As she grew up, she quickly proved to everyone that not only was she better with machines than her parents, but she was also a genius. This genius ensured Jörgensen received the best education NC had to offer.

Ranking among the highest of the engineering corps, Jörgensen had a bright future ahead of her. The only problem was her personality and tendency to pursue the truth no matter the cost. It didn't take long until she found out the truth about the Gods. As punishment for sticking her nose where it didn't belong, she was demoted to Ulvheim's engineering department.

Fears: Jörgensen's biggest fear is failing to become great and being ridiculed. Dying becomes next, after all, you can't be great if

you're dead. She's willing to go to great lengths to ensure her survival and the destruction of her enemies.

External characterization:
Age: 29
Appearance: Jörgensen is a short-haired woman and engineering outfit. She carries a variety of different tools about her. Her clothes are rumpled and smeared with oil and pocked by small burns and cuts.

6   CONCLUSIONS

Writing for video games comes with unique challenges that need to be taken into consideration carefully, else the game might suffer greatly. Cues can be taken from linear media, and there exists many good tools for aspiring game writers to create their characters and stories, but adaptation will be necessary. A game with a memorable story and characters can become successful despite being lackluster in other areas.

In order to write great games, it is important to keep the player in mind. By following Bernstein's theory of unities, any designer can quickly home in on what needs to be written and how. Other systems, like Egri's skeleton structure can be further used to create characters that truly feel like flesh and blood. Even a simple story can be made great by introducing well written characters.

In the process of working on this thesis, the author learned many new and useful techniques for story writing. Adapting previously learned techniques to serve game design was an interesting challenge. The author believes he has become a far better writer and game designer, thanks to the creation of this thesis.

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