

Gameplay Style Guidelines: Character Class Systems

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I. DEFINITION

Character class systems are a framework that classifies and defines the different roles and abilities that player characters can have in a game, where each class usually has a unique set of play styles, strengths, weaknesses, and skills, enabling players to select a character that best suits their tastes and preferred gameplay strategy.

II. INTRODUCTION

Eddy Webb, an industry veteran designing ROLEPLAYING [1] games for more than 20 years, defines a character class as a "pre-packaged character concept or archetype" [2]. Most commonly found in ROLEPLAYING games (RPGs), class character systems are the most fundamental gameplay pillar that the games utilizing them depend upon. The design of this system and its intricacies creates the way the players uniquely interact with the game and creates the "hook" that keeps them engaged through its depth and distinct flavor [3]. The classes in these games reflect not only specific possible play styles but also dictate the theme of the game [2]. Ideally, they should be able to provide the player with meaningful choices, giving them a feeling that the character they are playing is truly unique to them and that the different customization possibilities are infinite, as well as incentivizing them to interact with the game differently each time they start a new playthrough [3].

There are a plethora of examples that illustrate what a character class system looks like. One of the most classic possible examples is utilized in the fantasy tabletop ROLEPLAYING game Dungeons and Dragons [3], where each player chooses a specific class, designed around typical fantasy archetypes such as wizards, warriors, and druids, among a dozen other possibilities. This permanent class choice made during character creation dictates the ways the players interact with the game, especially the COMBAT^M [?] but also the social and environmental problem-solving challenges the game throws at the players. The game is balanced in such a way that the players are incentivised to create^D an ideal class composition in their party without being overtly restrictive, so they can handle most situations since every class has its strengths and weaknesses that can be complemented by each other [3], [4]. Sorcerers are offensive spellcasters capable of casting^M spells to destroy foes from afar, whereas clerics are

also capable of dealing DAMAGE^M [5] but exist mainly to support^D and restore^M the HEALTH^M [6] of other allies with beneficial spells. Barbarians charge to physical melee battle headfirst, being rewarded for raw aggression, while Rogues get major bonuses by attacking^M silently from the shadows. All of these classes are further customized by leveling^M said CHARACTERS [7], where choices are made at each level of spells, specializations, feats, and subclasses, making it possible that two Druid CHARACTERS have completely different experiences and ABILITIES^M [8] just a few levels^M into the game. The possibility of players choosing to take levels^M in multiple classes over the evolution of their CHARACTERS gives even more depth to the system.

World of Warcraft is another typical example that comes to mind easily. This massively online ROLEPLAYING game employs a character-class system that could be considered an overhauled and digitized system heavily inspired by dungeons and dragons that was allowed to grow and develop over the course of nearly two decades since its release in 2004. Here the typical fantasy archetypes are also present: wizards are called mages, rangers are hunters, but essentially, each class attracts the same audience of players and does what the players expect. Their subclasses are also very clearly thematically defined (i.e., mages can be specialized in either fire, frost, or arcane), with their own expansive skill trees allowing even more customization [9]. The mere fact that World of Warcraft is a video game allowed its class system to be more technical and deeper while creating more opportunities for classes to differentiate themselves even more, not only by gameplay flavor but also visually and, most importantly, by "gameplay feel." Playing a bursty and methodical arcane mage is a completely different experience from casting^M DAMAGE^M over time curses on an affliction warlock; it "feels" different [9]. This feel can be attributed to the physical responsiveness and visual flair of the available skills to the class when casting^M them, but it is mainly due to the interaction between these skills and ABILITIES^M along with the mechanics present in their design that create^D strategies on how to ideally chain^D these skills in specific orders and timings to maximize effectiveness when playing [10].

Designing character class systems is a complex and creative process that requires careful consideration of gameplay me-

chanics, narrative and thematic implications, as well as player experience [2]. Just by showing these few examples, it has now become clearer what possible aspects are crucial when creating class systems for any game, tabletop or otherwise. Each of these important elements will be exhaustively addressed in the next section of this paper and the section after that will serve as a guideline on how to properly define such a system for any game that aims to utilize this design pattern.

III. KEY ELEMENTS

It is now paramount to define just what essential elements are part of a functioning character class system. This list has been created by comparing and analysing successful games utilizing this pattern and drawing parallels between them and seeing what makes them function well. The list of games and franchises this analysis is based upon contain World of Warcraft, Final Fantasy 14, Guild Wars 2, Diablo, Last Epoch, Baldur's Gate 3 and Monster Hunter. World of Warcraft, Final Fantasy 14 and Guild Wars 2 are common examples of the massively online MULTIPLAYER^M [11] ROLEPLAYING game genre (MMO RPG). Diablo 4 and Last Epoch both are part of a genre commonly referred to as top-down asymmetric action ROLEPLAYING games. Baldur's Gate 3 is a CRPG (computer ROLEPLAYING game), a genre that most fatefully recreates tabletop RPGs like Dungeons and Dragons. Lastly, the Monster Hunter franchise is comprised of games that are third person action ROLEPLAYING games.

A. Specialization

Character classes are most commonly designed around a specific archetype or role in the gameplay, often defined by the way they approach COMBAT^M encounters [4]. In a fantasy setting, these archetypes can typically include mages, warriors and clerics. In a more futuristic setting, classes like engineers become a common archetype as well, just to illustrate that the typical fantasy class roster is not the only option available [2]. Each of these class choices serves as a paragon for a specific play style, like melee COMBAT^M, magic, support, and STEALTH^M [12]. The class decision tree also has the ability to branch out each play style niche with its own flavor, such as elemental and necrotic magic, a contrast between mages and warlocks, so that the player can hopefully always find a gameplay and thematic option that they resonate with [13].

The key aspect here is that each class should fulfill a specific fantasy and gameplay niche without having redundancy with respect to other class choices in terms of gameplay and theme [2]. For example, in Diablo 4, there are 5 possible class choices at the time of writing: barbarian, wizard, rogue, necromancer, and druid [14]. Let's say a player is inclined towards the fantasy of spell casting^M but would also like to dip their toes into melee COMBAT^M and have the ability to withstand a substantial amount of DAMAGE^M. Instead of being restricted to one play style or the other, an ideal class system should be able to provide a choice that is a compromise between the two. For this specific player, the specialization they are looking for can be found at the intersection between Wizard

and Barbarian, being the Druid. Half the druid's toolkit is magic spells like those of a wizard, having nature-themed spells instead of elemental ones, but the other half is comprised of physical skills, borrowing aspects from the Barbarian, who himself does not possess magical ABILITIES^M.

B. Unique abilities and Skills

Each class should possess a unique set of skills, spells, and ABILITIES^M that define its gameplay mechanics and strategies, irrespective of only thematic changes, even within the subclasses of the class itself [3]. In other words each class, and subclass for that matter, possesses unique CHARACTER DEFINING ACTIONS [15]. In a game like World of Warcraft, a fire mage casting^M a fireball spell should be clearly differentiated from a frost mage casting^M a frostbolt, not only by the visual aspect of launching a red or blue projectile, respectively, but most importantly by the gameplay implications of casting^M that spell as opposed to another when it comes to the ideal spell combinations (COMBOS^M [16]) and rotations the class is trying to accomplish [9]. This difference should be even more pronounced when it comes to how spells compare the ABILITIES^M of different classes. Shooting^M an arrow as a hunter might be technically adjacent to casting^M curses as a warlock, but the arrow might be used as a spell combination (COMBO) payoff spell used as a finisher, while the curse serves as a combo enabler, making the target vulnerable^M to other spells, giving the spells mechanical distinction as well as a different flavor and feel.

These class-specific mechanics should also ideally evolve over the course of the player's journey and time spent playing the character, creating an on-boarding experience that starts simple and adds more and more mechanics as their level progresses, in turn giving the players a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction [3], [4], resulting in engaging ATTENTION DEMANDING GAMEPLAY [17].

C. Play style Diversity

An ideal system should also encourage REPLAYABILITY^A [18] by having a diverse palette of possible class choices with differing play styles, allowing the player to experience the game differently each time depending on their choice [2], [3], [13]. To illustrate, in a game like Baldur's Gate 3, a fateful digital adaptation of fifth edition Dungeons and Dragon rules, playing a game as a warrior charging^D headfirst into melee COMBAT^M should be a completely different experience than methodically strategising attacks from STEALTH^M as a rogue, giving the game an earned sense of REPLAYABILITY^A. If the player feels that there is an infinite amount of possibilities on how to resolve every encounter in a game, the system succeeded, even more so if the class choice has consequences not only in COMBAT^M, but also in the narrative and environmental puzzle solving^M in the games world, just like in Baldur's Gate 3 [2]. In other words, play style diversity equals REPLAYABILITY^A and longevity for the game along with an aesthetic sense of scale for the players.

D. Progression and Development

Character classes usually have progression systems, where **PLAYER-CREATED CHARACTERS** [19] acquire more **ABILITIES**^M and mechanics by interacting with them as well as enhancing their current ones as they progress in the game and "level up" through **CHARACTER LEVELS**^M [20] by collecting experience^M or achieving certain milestones^M [9], [14], [21]. To achieve a meaningful sense of choice and identity in a character class progression system, especially in **ROLEPLAYING** games, it is essential that it be non-linear, employing a decision tree-like structure that makes two different **CHARACTERS** of the same class have different gameplay and capabilities the deeper into the game they are. This can be typically achieved through "skill trees" or "subclass" specializations for each class, adding **REPLAYABILITY**^A to the game not only through the choice of different classes but also the choices made within the class itself. The task of designing such a system is also challenging due to the fact that a class should fulfill the fantasy it is trying to present to the player, keeping the possible intra-class choices varied, meaningful, and flavorful while still not trying to stray too far away from the main class themes and what makes it unique.

One example that perfectly illustrates this is the different subclasses of the Mage class in the action **ROLEPLAYING** game Last Epoch. In this game, players who chose a mage as their starting class have the possibility of three different masteries, specifying their play style even further; these include the sorcerer, Runemaster, and Spellblade [21]. The Sorcerer further enhances the mage's elemental capabilities, giving the players even more classic magical spells and deepening the elemental wizard fantasy even further. The Runemaster allows it to store^M three successive casts of elemental skills as a rune (Fire, Ice, or Lightning) and then use the skill^M Runic Invocation to cast^M a unique effect for each of the 40 unique permutations of these runes, giving the class unprecedented complexity and a higher skill ceiling. Lastly, the Spellblade dips into the fantasy of mixing martial prowess with spell-infused melee attacks with bladed **WEAPONS**^M in addition to their existing repertoire of ranged magic spells. It is important to note that Last Epoch uses an active skill system where every skill in the game has its own skill tree, allowing you to invest^M points into customizing^M your skills however you want, in addition to a passive skill tree system for every character independent of the skills chosen. This means that the 15 masteries present in LE provide unprecedented unique build options in the genre as a whole by giving players the possibility of creating nearly infinite builds using these systems, making it one of the best examples of a class progression system on the market [21].

Another important aspect of progression systems is not only class-specific choices dependent on character level but also itemization. This can be described as curated equipable items randomly given to the player as rewards for their success in the game [10]. Their influence can range from mere numerical statistic boosts that minimally influence gameplay, like in

World of Warcraft, to the legendary items in the Diablo franchise, which have the power to completely alter the play style of specific classes by meaningfully altering their **ABILITIES**^M and thus influencing character build choices [14]. In short, a carefully designed progression system for each class is key to ensuring that player investment in specific classes is rewarding, meaningful, and lasting.

E. Choice Permanence

One key aspect of class systems that is tightly coupled with their progression systems in games is the permanence of choices when progressing with a class. Historically, most **ROLEPLAYING** games have typically been strict about class choices, meaning the choice of class for a character is permanent [9], [14], [21]. In this case, this makes the choice of what class to play and, in turn, how to interact with the game a meaningful one and requires some prerequisite knowledge of the classes in order to make a choice that the player will be satisfied with. This creates engagement with game systems and the world even before starting to play, but it can also increase the barrier to entry for playing the game and can seem quite punishing, especially when coming over from other genres that are more forgiving with player choices and their consequences. Instead of relying on the ability to freely swap^M between classes to achieve mechanical depth and interaction with the class system, traditional class systems rely on deep progression systems and customization within classes themselves that are then more or less lenient with choices and their consequences depending on design intent [2], [3].

For example, in World of Warcraft, the player has to choose^M a permanent class when creating a character. If the player wants to try out a new class, they need to create^M a new character [9]. However, within the class itself, the player can change talents and subclass specializations whenever outside of **COMBAT**^M encounters; the game even provides multiple load-outs for easy swapping of builds. In the past, there were resource costs associated with changing talents, so the player was disincentivized to always change talents. Because of the **MULTIPLAYER**^M and cooperative nature of the game, the system became more lenient because the players felt the game didn't respect their time and forced them to grind unnecessarily. In contrast with this, in Last Epoch, the choice of subclass mastery is permanent and cannot be changed at all, making the class system actually more of a choice between 15 classes instead of 5 (5 classes with 3 masteries each are present in the game) [21]. Last Epoch still employs resource costs for resetting talent points and experience but offers catch-up mechanics so it remains easy to change builds^M, but still restrictive enough to force players to think about their choices thoroughly.

On the complete opposite side of the argument is Final Fantasy 14, another popular massively **MULTIPLAYER**^M online **ROLEPLAYING** game. Here, each character's class, referred to as jobs, is determined by their **WEAPON**^M [22] and is not permanent, so every character can freely change between them, the only drawback being that their level is tied to

their job, so the character has to re-level^D them independently [23]. An interesting parallel can be made with a completely different franchise and genre, Monster Hunter. Monster Hunter is an action **ROLEPLAYING** game where players embody hunters that hunt monsters with a wide variety of different **WEAPONS**^M. Here, every character is a hunter, not having the choice between archetypal classes but instead distinguished by their choice of **WEAPON**, which offers widely different **COMBAT**^M move sets and mechanics from one another [24]. This **WEAPON** can be freely swapped^M when resting^M at specified camps and completely changes how the player engages with the **COMBAT**^M system. I would argue this system can also be considered a "class system." Even though it might not be apparent on the surface, mechanically speaking, it fits all the criteria. The **WEAPONS**^M present in these games are traditionally not deeply customizable like classes in other games; this system therefore offers complexity through the sheer breadth of **WEAPON** choices available that are relatively easy to swap^M.

Through these multiple examples, it is possible to observe that the depth of progression systems is directly correlated with how forgiving the system is towards players wanting to alter their prior customization decisions. There is no right answer; it is based on design intent and the balancing act of multiple factors. If a game is very strict with class choice, it generally has more expansive customization options inside the class itself (WoW, LE) [4], whereas games that allow lenient swapping between classes can get away with less choice variety inside the classes since the player can relatively easily change class when they want a fresh experience (FF14, MH) [3].

F. Balancing

It goes without saying that in an ideal class system, all class choices perform the same compared to each other, meaning they are "balanced" and that no player is penalized for choosing a class that appeals to them the most. Of course, this is virtually impossible since there are too many factors when designing distinct classes and the progression systems within them. A few strategies will always come out on top, depending on the current tasks the game asks players to complete, and every class is not judged based on the same criteria [4]. Even though the task of balancing classes is difficult, it remains essential to concentrate on it while designing the system so that each class has its strengths and weaknesses, making none overwhelmingly superior or inferior. Every player should be able to enjoy the archetype they are interested in without being punished for it.

G. Role in Party Dynamics

In most **MULTIPLAYER**^M or party-based cooperative games employing class systems, classes tend to align themselves with specific roles for the team, contributing to a balanced group strategy and fun **TEAM COMBOS**^M [25]. These tend to be assigned to a spectrum of the typical trifecta of **DAMAGE-dealer** that takes care of getting rid of

enemies, support that heals^M the **HEALTH**^M of allies and makes them perform better, and the tank that protects the party by absorbing the attacks of enemies [4]. Every role is essential for the proper functioning of a party. This typical role distinction is, however, not a necessity when designing a class system and is therefore a design choice when considering how players interact with each other. For example, Guild Wars 2 is another massively **MULTIPLAYER**^M online **ROLEPLAYING** game that doesn't adhere to this system, where every class is capable of doing a bit of everything, and where the **COMBAT**^M encounters are balanced around that fact [4], [26]. Of course, if a game is meant to be played by a single player, the classes present differentiate themselves not by role but by their mechanics and fantasy.

H. Narrative and Lore Integration

One the most important key aspects of creating a class system is that the **PLAYER-CREATED CHARACTERS** and their fantasy should fit into the narrative and lore of the game they are in, contributing to the world-building and storytelling aspects of the game [2]. If my character is fighting^M dragons and goblins, it typically is with swords and magical spells instead of rocket launchers, which keeps cohesion and consistency with the game world. Of course this is subjective, and subversion of expectations can be interesting, but in any case, character classes generally reflect the game world they are in a serve as pillars in its world-building and lore.

IV. GUIDELINES

This section will discuss in more concrete detail the guidelines that one should follow when designing a character-class system.

A. Define the Game's Core Mechanics and Theme

- Determine how the classes will engage with the **COMBAT**^M, exploration, and puzzle-solving aspects of the game.
- Let the game's theme and setting significantly influence what direction the class design should take and what archetypes they adhere to.

B. Establish a Variety of Classes

- Make sure every class has distinctive **ABILITIES**^M and skills that clearly distinguish them from others. The player should feel compelled to try different play styles and classes, giving **REPLAYABILITY**^A and therefore longevity to the game.
- Always aim for balance, meaning that no class should be significantly stronger or weaker than any other.

C. Consider Class Roles and Interactions

- When designing classes, it is important to not consider each of them in a vacuum.
- Design classes to fill specific roles (like tank, support, **DAMAGE**^M dealer) in a team setting. When designing a single player experience, all classes should be able to perform similarly in the same content present in the game.

- Encourage teamwork by designing ABILITIES^M that can synergize well with other classes and create the possibility for a myriad of viable TEAM COMBOS^M.

D. Incorporate Progression and Customization

- Decide how classes progress throughout the game. How will their ABILITIES^M improve, and how will their existing ones evolve?
- Give players customization options within their class choice through skill trees, equipment, or subclasses.

E. Integration with Game World, Story and Lore

- Think about the potential effects of class selection on interactions with the game world and non-playable CHARACTERS. The designer should strive to make every character's journey different, not only through COMBAT^M ABILITIES^M but through social encounters as well. Classes should interact differently with the game environment and puzzles.
- Each class should have a sort of backstory that defines what purpose it serves in the game's world and how it fits into the greater context of the lore. This enhances immersion for players and gives them a sense of identity.

F. Testing and Balancing

- Classes should regularly be tested to see how balanced they are compared to each other, but most importantly, to see if they are fun to play.
- Gather feedback from players and be ready to adjust the classes based on the feedback. It is often hard to see problems within design when you are the one designing; an outsider's perspective is beneficial.

G. Accessibility and Inclusivity

- Strive to make the classes accessible to new players while also having engaging depth for experienced players. A low-skill floor and a high-skill ceiling are ideal.
- Ensure a diverse representation of class narratives, character designs, and themes so that everyone can find something in the game that appeals to them.

H. Visual and Audio Design

- Each class should be easily distinguishable and have a unique visual design.
- Use different sound effects for every ability and class so that it empowers its distinct fantasy.

I. Future Expansion

- Make the class system modular by design so that it is easily expandable in the future. This can include additions such as completely new classes, ABILITIES^M for existing ones, and evolving the progression systems further in future EXPANSIONS [27] for the game.

J. Game Design Workshop

In the book *Game Design Workshop* [28], a specific design process is outlined. To design a character-class system gameplay style, I would advise the following alteration to that process: Skip the Physical Prototype stage; I do not find it useful or applicable since the classes are being designed for a digital game and cannot conceivably work physically without the underlying digital systems. There are simply too many moving parts and mechanics in a class in order to create a useful physical prototype. Otherwise, all the other steps are very beneficial to the design process of creating character-class systems.

V. PROCESS

After deciding on this specific subject, I asked the supervisors of the course about it, and they gave me helpful tips on what to focus on. At first, I wanted to also include games utilizing not only character classes but also a "hero choice" gameplay style, games where player choose specific characters with unique abilities that fulfill specific gameplay niches in more genres, with the distinction of having a short-term commitment to these player-created characters. These would allow this assignment to talk about even more genres, like shooters, mobas and card games, but it would be too challenging to tackle so much at once, so thanks to their advice, I was able to specify the research in a more focused direction.

My idea for this subject was first conceived from my interest in specific types of games that employ the gameplay style of character classes; therefore, my example games came naturally while writing, thanks to my experience and being invested in these games for so long. My research therefore consisted of searching for essays, videos, and websites that would talk about these subjects and support my intuitions about this game design pattern born from years of experience around this subject, inspiring me further into the process.

The relevant gameplay design patterns used in this assignment were found through extensive keyword searching through the game design pattern wiki [29] with the use of specific keywords that I found to be helpful and most apt descriptions of the patterns I was trying to identify. The ones I felt were missing, I tried to define in this assignment.

In many parts of this paper, I talk about how the player feels when interacting with class systems. These were the perfect spots to utilize the MDA model, parts where the positive aesthetic experience of the player created through the dynamics of the designed mechanics of the system is most easily achievable through design choices. Thus most Sicartian Mechanics and Game Design Patterns have associated MDA characterization.

The guidelines were conceived based on the most critical observations I made from analyzing the key elements of games that successfully implement a character class system and the common factors existing between them. The references were also good sources for tips for designing class systems.

I used Latex to create this document as well as the tool Grammarly to correct my grammar mistakes to save time and be efficient. I have also utilized the tool ChatGPT to aid me in brainstorming possible directions to take this assignment as well as finding an ideal structure for ideas I wanted to discuss and to find proper sources for such a subject.

All of the text present in this paper was made by me and wasn't seen by anybody except me. None of the text was generated by AI, and even if I used AI to help me get inspired on certain topics, I always used my own words to describe answers. None of the text present in this document was plagiarized either.

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