From Pixels to Personalities: The Role of Characters in Video Game Development

Characters are central to a player's experience, shaping the narrative, gameplay, and emotional connection to the game.

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ABSTRACT

This paper will indulge into the crucial roles of character development in video game design and how the characters contribute to creating a successful and emotional experience when playing a video game. This paper will explore how strong narrative arcs and emotional investments are central to player engagement, we will be analysing iconic characters such as Arthur morgan from Red dead Redemption 2 and why the game was so successful and memorable due to the excellent character story telling. The findings suggest that a well-crafted character can significantly enhance the games atmosphere and emotional connection, offering developers insights on how to create a memorable experience for players.

Keywords

Video Game Storytelling, Narrative Design, Character Development, Interactive Storytelling, Character Arcs, Game atmosphere, Emotional investments

1. INTRODUCTION

In the world of video game development, characters play a crucial role in shaping the overall success of a game. Even when a game features excellent level design, appealing aesthetics, and high-quality visuals, it can still fail if its character development is lacking. Players are naturally drawn to well-written characters, becoming emotionally invested in their journeys and caring about their outcomes. This emotional engagement often drives players to complete the game to see how the story unfolds for the character. Whether navigating the moral complexities of Arthur Morgan in red dead redemption 2 or guiding Mario through the Mushroom Kingdom, characters are crucial to the gaming experience.

2. THE ROLE OF CHARACTERS IN INTERACTIVE STORYTELLING

Characters heavily influence games design; in most cases they are the object that tells a story and gets players invested in the game. In game development, the creation of characters and their character arcs typically begins during the pre-production phase[1], but they evolve and are refined throughout the entire development process. This allows the developers to make changes they see necessary throughout the development of the game without having to completely alter the story arcs.

It is crucial to have an engaging set of main characters that will engage the players and allow for an emotional attachment to develop. This will drive the players to wanting to keep coming back to complete the game to see how the story unfolds due to their attachment to the characters.

In addition to storytelling, characters often help express the themes and values of the game world, making the experience more immersive for the players. Across different genres, character design approaches can vary significantly. For example, in open world games like Fallout 4, character backstories and moral complexities are pivotal, allowing players to influence the story through their choices. Whereas in comparison, game such as Super Mario Odyssey empathise simplicity in character design, spending more attention on creating gameplay mechanics and visual appeal than on complex character arcs.

Figure 1. Super Mario Odyssey (stuff.tv)

Character driven game design has the advantage of creating a deep emotional connection with players, allowing games to be more memorable and immersive. When players can relate to a character's story and development, they become invested in seeing how the journey unfolds, this tends to enhance the games appeal and increases player loyalty. This approach can also improve the replay function as players can return to experience alternative story paths or character interactions.

However, character-focused design also presents challenges. Developing complex characters and narratives require a significant number of resources, which will ultimately increase production time and costs[2]. Additionally, some players prioritise gameplay mechanics over a story, so a strong character focus will not appeal to all audiences, particularly in genres where action or strategy is present. That is why it is crucial to conduct research before starting to develop a game, to ensure that developers are appealing to the correct audience.

3. KEYPLAYERS

There is a vast range of different game studios and indie teams that would contribute towards being "key players". However, some popular and more recognisable ones would be:
Rockstar Studios – Known for creating titles such as the Red Dead Redemption Series and the Grand Theft Auto Series. Rockstar Games excels in creating strong story narratives and impressive open worlds.

Activision – Known for the Call of Duty series, Activision has successfully integrated character driven storytelling within a predominantly action focused genre.

Three good examples of how successful video game characters are crafted will be outlined below.

3.1 Red Dead Redemption 2

Rockstar Games skilfully uses character development to create an immersive and emotional experience that stands out in the world of video games. Arthur Morgan, the games protagonist, is portrayed as a complex character with a morally ambiguous past; with a personality that is altered by the players choices. This depth of character immerses players in Arthur's struggles, whilst allowing them to feel a substantial connection to his journey; making his redemption arc all the more impactful.

'Red Dead Redemption 2' involved a remarkable level of research and attention to detail when it came to developing the characters, particularly in recreating the historical authenticity of the late 19th century American West. Rockstar Games dedicated years to studying the cultural, social, and economic aspects of the time period to accurately portray the characters, whose personalities and journeys are heavily influenced by the eras values and struggles.

The team consulted historians, reviewed photographs, and studied western literature and films to recreate a realistic portrayal of outlaw life, ensuring that each character reflected the ruggedness and moral vagueness of the setting.

Additionally, Rockstar used 'advanced performance capture technology' to bring the characters to life. The actors worked extensively with the developers: recording the actors facial expressions, movements, and voices. This process allowed for personal performances that emphasised each characters emotions and reactions, allowing for the interactions to feel authentic and truly immersive. As noted in ProQuest's coverage, Rockstars commitment to "immersive authenticity" and historical accuracy helped set a new standard for storytelling in the gaming industry (*Variety, 2018* [3]).

Figure 2. Arthur morgan riding his horse(gamerant.com)

The developers approach to character development in RDR2 demonstrates the importance of how well-crafted characters enhance storytelling and emotional engagement. According to Fillery in his GameRant article , Arthurs journey is marked by powerful quotes and moral dilemmas that contribute to the games narrative depth and player attachment (*Fillery, 2019* [4]). Rockstar shows how character driven design can take a game above and beyond its mechanics by crafting characters with complex personalities and constantly developing storylines. This results in a memorable, narratively rich experience that resonates with players long after completing the game.

3.2 The Last of Us

The Last of Us stands as a landmark in video game history, the success of the game lead to a critically acclaimed TV series that landed 131 nominations and 91 wins (*IMDb, 2024* [5]). The game revolves around the characters Joel and Ellie, whose complex relationship forms the emotional core of the story. Players engage with their journey, experiencing their losses and victories firsthand. Through: dialogue, cutscenes, encounters and pivotal story points; character development is expertly designed, allowing gamers to create strong emotional bonds. Players directly observe Joel evolving from a hardened survivor to a caring father figure for Ellie; they feel the consequences of his decisions, which makes every choice significant.

The success of The Last of Us is largely credited to its rich narrative detail, which set a new standard for storytelling in the gaming industry. Game director Neil Druckman has frequently highlighted that the central focus on the character allowed players to experience a uniquely intimate journey, one that distinguished The Last of Us from other games in the action-adventure genre (*Druckmann, 2013* [6]). By crafting a story driven by complex and well-rounded characters, Naughty Dog created a game where players were not only invested in the outcome, but were deeply connected to the personal growth and struggles of Joel and Ellie. As quoted by (*Waggoner 2014 [7]*), "The emotional connection to the characters provide a more immersive and impactful experience", which was essential to the games wide-reaching success.

Figure 3. Joel & Ellie giraffe moment(phonandroid.com)

Ultimately, The Last of Us is an excellent illustration of how characters in video games can influence the plot and emotional engagement. The games focus on the ever-unfolding relationship between Joel and Ellie, illustrates the power of character development in creating immersive experiences. By placing players at the centre of these characters lives, The Last of Us not only redefines narrative possibilities in gaming, but also establishes a benchmark for storytelling in the industry, proved by its adaptation into a successful TV series.

3.3 The Telltale Walking Dead

Just like the previous Key players in this document, Skybound is no stranger to creating immersive, story driven protagonists in their video games. Skybound, the mastermind behind Telltale's 'The Walking Dead series', created an overwhelmingly successful game by adapting the popular TV and comic series of 'The Walking Dead' into a video game in 2012. The studio decided to release this game in "episodes", meaning that the gameplay unfolded like chapters of a book, or episodes of a show. At the time the game was revolutionary for its use of choice-driven storytelling, where players' decisions significantly impacted the story's outcome and the characters' relationships. The reason this game was so impactful and successful was due to the initiative of creating a game that heavily revolved around user choices. It was uniquely one of the first games like this on market when it was released (2012).

One of the key elements of 'The Walking Dead', is the emotional bond players form with the main characters, particularly Lee (the initial protagonist), and clementine, a young girl Lee protects throughout the first season. This

relationship evolves based on the players choices, which shape not only how Lee guides and influences clementine but also how she grows as a character across the series. This dynamic made players feel accountable for Clementines well-being and moral development, transforming each decision into a meaningful choice that impacted the characters journey.

'The Walking Dead' also introduced a mechanic where the game can remember choices, carrying them forward into future episodes and even across the games seasons. Players were constantly reminded that their decisions could lead to life-or death outcomes for Lee, Clementine, and other characters, adding tension and emotional weight. This decision-tracking feature was groundbreaking in 2012, as it made players really care about the characters they were interacting with.

Figure 4. Lee & Clementine (gamerant.com)

To demonstrate the lasting influence of 'The Walking Dead's approach to storytelling, numerous games have since adopted similar mechanics and narrative-driven frameworks. A key example is 'Detroit: Become Human', a 2018 interactive drama developed by Quantic Dream. Set in a futuristic Detroit, the game follows three robot protagonists, whose unique narratives explore the theme of artificial intelligence, human rights and moral choice. The choices players make impact not only on the characters fates but also the storyline itself, following from Telltales approach of using player decisions to shape complex and branching narratives.

3.4 Summary
All the above-mentioned games have demonstrated how the developers have used characters to help narrate the games story. The examples of the key players show how character development can significantly impact the success of video games by shaping player engagement, emotional connections, and narrative depth. 'Red Dead Redemption 2' offers a historically authentic and morally complex protagonist; 'The Last of Us' centres on an evolving relationship with emotional stakes, and 'The Walking Dead' uses choice driven storytelling to create a personalised experience for players. Each of these games proves that regardless of genre, character driven games can elevate games beyond their mechanics, building immersive worlds that can resonate with players long after they complete it. This understanding of character impact is vital for developers working on projects and aiming to create their own game where character development/storytelling is a key factor.

While 'Guard Duty' isn't a story-driven game, I will apply lessons learned from 'Red Dead Redemption 2', 'The Last of Us', and 'The Walking Dead' to enhance player engagement through character presence and personality. By focusing on strong, memorable character designs, 'Guard Duty' will create an immersive atmosphere where characters feel dynamic and relatable, adding depth to the gameplay experience even without a complex storyline. Key character traits, like specific animations or quotes will help players feel a connection to the

games world and their role within it. Inspired by these games' attention to player choice, 'Guard Duty' will also incorporate elements where players actions impact gameplay outcomes.

Inspired by these games' attention to player choice, 'Guard Duty' will also incorporate elements where players' actions impact gameplay outcomes in subtle ways, adding a layer of investment and replay-ability. This approach allows 'Guard Duty' to draw players in with personality-rich characters and responsive gameplay, ensuring that each session feels meaningful and immersive, even in a gameplay-focused environment.

Figure 5. Summary of the Key players Games information

Game	Units sold	Genre
Red Dead Redemption 2	65 Million [8]	Action/Adventure
The Last Of Us	30 Million [9]	Survival/Horror
The Walking Dead	8.5 Million[10]	Graphic Adventure/ Interactive Movie

3.4.1 Red dead redemption 2
3.4.2 The last of us
3.4.3 The Walking dead

3.5 USP
A game's unique selling point is often found in how its characters and narrative creates a distinct experience, setting it apart from competitors and establishing a lasting impact on players.

While 'Guard Duty' may not follow a story driven structure, it can still incorporate aspects of these unique selling points to enhance player engagement. For instance, creating characters with strong, memorable traits, such as idiotic, funny thieves, and strong serious guards will give players a sense of purpose and personality within the games world. As discussed previously, choices that subtly impact the gameplay can increase the reliability and engagement, as players get to experience different interactions with the games characters. For instance, playing the game as a guard and playing the game as a thief will have completely different outcomes and experiences for the player.

In 'Guard Duty', character development is portrayed through visual design; with characters crafted to represent their social roles and personal backgrounds. The thieves and guards are distinct in how they look, and these design choices help narrate the games' central themes of loyalty, poverty and protection. The thieves dressed in ripped, rugged-worn clothing, help reflect the desperation of their lives, showing players their unfortunate position within society. Their appearance tells a story of hardship and makes players feel remorse for them. On the other hand, the guards are equipped with heavy, structured armour, emphasising their dedication and loyalty to safeguarding the goods and displaying their position of power. By visually distinguishing these two classes of characters, 'Guard Duty' uses character design as a story telling tool, where players can immediately interpret each groups values and motivations based upon their appearance alone.

3.6 Technologies/Approach

In order to create 'Guard Duty', a combination of game development technologies, design methods, and creative strategies are recommended to ensure an engaging and fun experience for players.

Red Dead Redemption 2

Rockstar Games takes a research-intensive, iterative approach to game development, emphasising realism and open-world design. The studio meticulously creates worlds and characters that feel authentic, ensuring that each interaction adds narrative depth. Rockstar's Red Dead Redemption is a prime example of this, featuring an environment where character interactions are seamlessly embedded into the world. To power its large-scale games, Rockstar utilises the RAGE (Rockstar Advanced Game Engine), which supports expansive open-world environments, realistic weather effects, and highly detailed character models. The Euphoria Physics Engine [11] adds a layer of realism by allowing characters to react naturally and unscripted to in-game events. Complex AI systems further enhance gameplay by enabling dynamic interactions between NPCs and players, adding to the world's believability.

The Last of US

Naughty Dog focuses heavily on creating emotionally resonant characters and stories. They employ a collaborative process where writers, designers, and animators work together to align gameplay mechanics with storytelling. Some technologies that were used are the proprietary [12] game engine, an in house engine created to support cinematic storytelling, real time lighting, and complex AI behaviours. Performance capture technology integrates full-body and facial motion capture to ensure realistic and emotive character animations. Dialogue and cutscene tools were also used; this technique uses advanced scripting tools to seamlessly blend dialogue and gameplay.

The Walking Dead

Telltale Games is renowned for its own style of narrative-driven gaming, which mostly focusses on episodic material in which the decisions made by the player have a big influence on the plot. The studio's development process places a strong emphasis on making decisions and how those decisions affect how the plot and character interactions develop. Telltale's unique Telltale Tool Engine, which is made especially for branching narratives and seamless transitions between several story pathways, was created to accommodate this. The studio creates highly interactive games with sophisticated dialogue systems that let players make decisions that affect relationships and plot points. Telltale games also highlight the emotions and facial expressions of their characters through stylised animation techniques, which helps players relate to and interact with them more.

For 'Guard Duty', adopting a hybrid development strategy that combine's adaptive AI systems with narrative-driven design would be beneficial. By taking inspiration from Rockstars dedication to environmental storytelling and Telltales focus on player choice and consequence, 'Guard Duty's development can create a unique and engaging experience. By utilising an engine such as unity, this will provide the flexibility necessary for character animation, AI development, and narrative integration. Advanced AI systems, inspired by Rockstar's implementation, can be used to create guards and thieves with dynamic behaviours that adapt to player strategies, adding a layer of unpredictability to gameplay. Pre-made animation libraries can be used to enhance character expressiveness, allowing for realism in interactions. Additionally, incorporating tools like Yarn Spinner for narrative branching will enable rich dialogue systems, where player decisions can alter the story and impact character relationships.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In exploring how character design and narratives tell stories within video games, this report discussed the significant impact that well-crafted characters have on player engagement and emotional investment. The conclusion of this paper's findings demonstrates that characters are not just models for gameplay, but vital components that contribute to shaping the players' experience, creating a deeper understanding of the games themes and narrative arcs.

This approach works well because it can create immersive and relatable experiences, which strengthens the bond between the player and the game. Games that utilise rich character backstories and branching narratives not only enhance the storytelling, but also give players more independence by letting them make important decisions.

However, there is always room for improvement. Future projects could benefit from a more diverse range of case studies, exploring smaller indie games alongside major titles to examine how different developers approach character storytelling. Additionally, integrating player feedback on character driven narratives could provide valuable insights into what arcs resonate most with audiences.

As the development of 'Guard Duty' progresses, the team recognises the need to focus on creating diverse characteristics that players can relate to and root for. One area identified for improvement is the incorporation of more player involvement into character interactions, e.g. an emote bar with quotes the players can select from, similar to the choices presented in The walking dead.

Based on the research conducted in this paper, it is recommended that developers prioritise character depth and narrative integration in their design process if the game they are developing is heavily story oriented. By ensuring that characters are interesting the developers can create more engaging and memorable experiences.

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