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# Character Design Fundamentals for Role-Playing Games

*Careful character design is a way to strengthen a role-playing game experience. Well-defined characters that are consistently communicated to players are an important ingredient in a potentially successful game. In this paper I will explore the important aspects in a character, those that support and make character immersion possible. My starting point is that in a role-playing game posing as somebody else is elementary to the game. This is close to arguments that character immersion is a key element of a role-playing. The pleasurable role-playing experience thus requires a player to be able to present a character and (to some extent) experience what the character is experiencing.*

Pleasure in role-playing games, however, has double logic. On the one hand, it requires character immersion but on the other hand it always requires simultaneous knowledge that one is playing a game.[1] Control of the situations (as a player of a game) and knowledge that events in a game have no real consequences can make even unpleasant events and failures of a character pleasurable for a player. The player's actions, nevertheless, make it possible to break a game and ruin the illusion for both oneself and other players; a player can play a game as they like or even choose not to play. So, it is evident that immersion is at risk when players act. How then, should games be designed, in order to support acting as a character, or character immersion?

In this paper I discuss the importance of character-based writing in role-playing game design and highlight some theories behind my approach. I ground my design methods in psychology (especially emotion theory), sociology, game design, and drama writing methods. My aim is to provide conceptual tools that could be used in role-playing game (including both tabletop and live-action role-playing games) design and to analyse and evaluate design. These are not to be seen as the rules of game writing, but they can be useful tools for (thinking) design. Every aspect covered in my approach is not necessarily present in every situation; sometimes breaking design rules can be beneficial. I also want to point out that even if I use concepts from dramatic writing in this paper, I do not believe that role-playing games are drama. I do, however, believe that the concepts brought out in this paper, when combined with game design methods, are usable in the context of games. In many situations they can help making the writing process more controlled and, perhaps, easy.

[1] Game critic Steven Poole has presented similar arguments in the context of video games in his book *Trigger Happy* (Poole 2000).

## Goals, Habitus, and Emotions

For understanding a gaming experience it is important to understand how player experiences a game and interprets events in it. One important part of an experience is emotion, which many models consider intertwined with having goals. If (and only if) an event is relevant in relation to the goals, emotions occur (Oatley & Jenkins 1996, 95–106). In more general terms Oatley and Jenkins conclude that:

> Emotions, then, mark the junctures in our actions. Something has happened that is important to us. Emotions then are the processes that allow us to focus on any problem that has arisen, and to change course if necessary. And if we ask what the readiness is about, or what the plans are about, for most part they concern other people. (ibid, 106)

To conclude, goals and plans are very important for the emotional processes. Hence, I would argue that goals or plans by necessity are part of a good role-playing game character. Goals are the very basis of character immersion and emotional experience. As a player evaluates the character's goals meaningfully and takes them as hers in the game, she is able to experience "shared emotions" – to feel what the character would feel in the situation.

How willing the players are to adopt the character's goals depends on how reasonable they seem in light of the character. Basically, accepting the character's goals is one of the failsafe ways for the player to achieve meaningful action in a game. Similarly, I have earlier pointed out the significance of action and challenges in (computer) games and highlighted the importance of clearly defined goals in that context (Lankoski & Heliö 2002).[2] So, even if people are not necessarily aware of their goals in a given situation, goals are still a functional way to sketch a character to a player within a game.

Goals, even if important, are not the only way to describe a character. Bourdieu (1991) argues that human beings interpret their surroundings and act from basis of their habitus, which is basically a framework for understanding events and decision-making:

> [H]abitus which have been constructed by different modes of generation, that is, by conditions of existence, which, in imposing different definitions of impossible, and the probable, cause one group to experience as natural or reasonable practices or aspirations which another group finds unthinkable or scandalous, and vice versa. (Bourdieu 1991, 78)

Habitus, then, affects how people go about achieving their goals and how they define their purposes. Every character has an individual behaviour and way of coping with the situation he gets into that are based on his habitus. Thus, a goal is a plan to cope with or exploit a situation. When a goal can be defined in a straightforward way, and thus should be easy to adopt, a character's habitus is more complex to construct. Therefore it is also

[2] When one starts to play a (role-playing) game "it is reasonable to expect that there will be action and the player can make decisions, or in another words: play it" (Lankoski & Heliö 2002).

more challenging to adopt than goals. Adopting character's habitus requires a player to take into account very different aspects of the character, even something that might be totally alien to their own habitus. Sometimes this can be problematic. Past player experiences heavily affect the interpretation of events in a game and it's characters. Information about a character and game world only work as a loose framework for understanding events and formulations of emotions in a game.[3]

To mention an example: I once organized a larp campaign that took place in a *Dune*-like game world where etiquette is very important in the spins of society. The importance of etiquette was pointed out in the material and the rules of good behaviour (the use of correct titles when addressing someone) were simple and described in the game material. However, most players didn't use titles – or if they did, did not pay attention to people not doing so. This made the whole etiquette-structure meaningless to the game as one could not e.g. insult anyone by leaving out the usage of titles as would have happened in a real situation. It is reasonable to believe that this happened because the introduced etiquette and the definitions of impossible and possible behaviour weren't personal enough and were thus ignored or forgotten. Past experiences, in this example those of living in a society without strict use of titles, affected the players' behaviour and their ability to behave according to unfamiliar and strange social rules. The character's habitus was simply run over by the player's habitus.

To conclude, well-designed goals should be derived from the nature of the character and be reactions to situations. Vice versa, goals can be used to describe a character to a player. Without goals or ambitions the player will have no means to interpret and evaluate situations as seen by the eyes of the character. The situation can only be meaningful if the player is able to evaluate their character's attitude towards the situation: is this a situation where I am (as a player) good or bad and what could I achieve in this situation? If the goals of a character are not presented clearly to a player it is possible that a player will come up with their own goals or agendas that are not derived from the nature of a character. Or alternatively the game design goes wasted as the most intricately planned situations are judged as irrelevant by the players as they don't know what the character is supposed to strive for. This does not mean that goals should always be explicit: goals can also be interpreted from game material – if there is enough information about character and his ambitions.

## Character Design

Meaningful action requires understanding of the character a person is playing. The character has to be presented to the player so that they can understand the needs and ambitions lying behind the action. How then, can a habitus be designed?

[3] For a framework of understanding refer to *Outline of a Theory of Practice* by Bourdieu (1991) and regarding affects of interpretation to emotions *Understanding Emotions* by Oatley & Jenkins (1995).

### The Dramatic Personae

Scriptwriter Robert Berman lists six important aspects of dramatic personae, which can be applied to the design of game characters, as well:

- Dramatic need provides a purpose, focus and direction of story; it is the reason why the protagonist is in the story
- Point of view explains how the character sees the situation(s)
- Attitude explains the stance the character takes to the situation(s)
- Change makes the character intriguing and realistic
- Weakness/negative trait makes the character realistic and is also a convenient way of building obstacles. This is also perhaps the aspect that the character will be able to change in her/himself.
- Mannerism/habits Identifiable parts of the character that differentiate it from other (Berman 1997, 51–53)

These aspects are important parts of game design, but they work differently in games as in drama. Dramatic need, in a game, is crucial in order to give the character a good reason to be involved. Unless there is dramatic need, the most logical choice for the player/character would in many situations be to leave the situation or the place to avoid conflict between other characters or just go and do something more relevant. This is in line with the previous chapter on goals.

Every character needs a point of view and attitude. These are the ones that make people act. When writing a game, outlining these can be useful for the writer to sketch out the nature of a character. Similarly the character's weakness or negative trait is a usable way of guiding the player towards a certain type of action. If something is clearly lethal or impossible to achieve, a player will most probably try other options to solve the problem. Disadvantages are also useful for making actions sufficiently difficult. They can also make characters more interesting than characters without flaws (Superman would be incredibly boring without his weakness, kryptonite).

Mannerisms and habits are good ways of giving a player concrete tools to express some aspects of the character. They are also a good means of differentiating the character's behaviour from the other characters and the players' own mannerisms. One has to be careful, though; if overused, playing out mannerisms can be overwhelming, requiring too much attention from the player.

Deliberate dramatic change can be difficult to implement in a game, especially in a larp. But introducing a need for change can give interesting input for playing. This can be done e.g. by contesting the goals or beliefs of a character during the progression of a game. To give an example stolen from the TV: a character might start out as a secret agent for the government. In the beginning the character will believe that the organisation is on the side of good guys but at some points of the game or campaign some information will compromise this belief. The new point of view will then raise

problems for the character (and the player) and they will have to decide what to believe and how to cope the new situation.

### Writing Functional Characters

I will now present a method of writing characters making use of the views I have expressed in earlier chapters. The method is adapted from playwright and director Lajos Egri's methodology for writing dramatic personae. Egri (1960) describes the character as the sum of physical, psychological and sociological qualities. I believe that this division of qualities is usable in the context of role-playing games as well. It brings the focus on the conflict that rises from the personality and the goals of the characters in the story. This approach is analogous to building conflict between the characters in the game.

Egri has presented an outline, a "bone structure", for building what he calls a three-dimensional character. These dimensions are presented in table 1, with additions and modifications made by Lankoski, Heliö and Ekman (2003). By defining the aspects of this bone structure, one should be able to build well-defined and believable characters.

Table 1: Bone structure
(Lankoski, Heliö & Ekman 2003, based on Egri 1960, 32–43).

| *Physiology* | *Sociology* | *Psychology* |
|---|---|---|
| • Sex | • Class | • Moral standars, sex life |
| • Age | • Occupation | • Goals, ambitions |
| • Height and weight | • Education | • Frustrations, disappointments |
| • Colour of hair, eyes, skin | • Family life | • Temperament |
| • Posture | • Religion | • Attitude toward life |
| • Appearance and distinct features (tattoos, birth marks, etc.) | • Race, nationality | • Complexes, obsessions |
| • Defects (deformities, abnormalities, diseases) | • Place/standing in community (i.e. social status among friends, clubs, sports) | • Imagination, judgement, wisdom, taste, poise |
| • Heredity features | • Political affiliations | • Extrovert, introvert, ambivert |
| • Physique | • Amusements, hobbies | • Intelligence |

Every item listed in the table is not needed for a character. For example, a small child would have very little formal education. Also, the list is not even meant to be exhaustive; its function is only to be a checklist containing things that the writer of a character should consider. The checklist also presents important points to consider when designing non-human character like elves or aliens, even though their dimensions might differ from human characters. But when a designer knows the differences, it is easier to create believable non-human characters, avoiding the writing of races that are just humans with strange ears.

It is important to note that every aspect of a character should be dealt with in the light of the rest of the character and that the aspects are in line with each other. This way, one aspect of a character, like skills or abilities, should reflect the bone structure and affect other aspects as well.[4] A gang member is likely to have different skills and abilities than a rich playboy, even if their physiological and psychological and profiles were identical.

## From Character to Game

As argued earlier, the goals are a functional way to bring structures to the game that relates to emotional process. In game design studies it is often stated that achieving a goal too easily will render it uninteresting and that struggling toward a goal actually is what makes a game interesting (e.g. Costikyan 2002; Crawford 1982). Conflict is also an important concept for methods of dramatic writing, where it means creating an interesting situation for a story by using conflicting goals or natures between protagonist and antagonist (see e.g. Berman 1997 or Egri 1960). Likewise, characters and their goals can be used to create struggle in role-playing games.[5]

The starting point in the design is that every character should behave in an individual way; a way, which is defined by the character's three dimensions. By selecting these dimensions according to the desired goal of a game (or goal of the actions of a single character) it is possible to create characters that work according to the main goal of the game. Conflict and action in the game then arouse from the qualities of the characters it is made up of.[6] For some games, including many tabletop role-playing games, it is usually enough to create a character and specify that they are part of a certain social environment. A game master can then introduce goals, e.g. by letting a non-player character introduce them to the player in question, or by creating a situation that implies a certain goal (or task). The issue is now to create a suitable set of non-player characters and events that will cause conflict for the players as they act as a part of a social group.

Egri uses the word orchestration to define a process of selecting characters for a drama in order to create a starting point with dramatic potential. By this, he refers to a situation in which there is tension that will eventually lead to a full blown-out conflict.

[4] I have discussed the relations between game structures and interpretation of character in the paper *Characters in Computer Games* (Lankoski, Heliö, Ekman 2003). The methods for affecting a player's actions presented in the context of computer games are to some extent exploitable in role-playing games too. They are the following: building predefined functions (e.g. frenzy rules in *Vampire the Masquerade*), setting goals, choosing and implanting possible and impossible actions (e.g. with rules and skill system) and characterisation, which means designing observable parts of a character.

[5] I have earlier discussed the similarities between computer games and role-playing games in the paper *Approaches to Computer Game Design* (Lankoski & Heliö 2002).

[6] In my experience a conflict originated from opposing goals requires less from a player than a conflict based on the opposing natures of characters.

I like to use the same term of building a balanced situation for a game: in a game that means creating a starting point that will require the players to act. In role-playing games orchestration also includes timed events like new characters entering the game at a certain predefined moment.

For orchestration, two useful concepts of design are the point of attack and the unity of opposites (Egri 1960). The point of attack means that in the beginning, every character will have something important to gain or lose. The unity of opposites is a guarantee that no-one will give up: the things at stake are so important that there is no turning back (ibid, 118–124 & 182–191). Orchestrating with these things in mind will help to ensure that the conflict keeps escalating believably and consistently until the game reaches its climax. Like a play, a game should begin at a point in which every character has something important at the stake and they should not be given any back doors out of where the action is. With well-defined goals the conflict should continue to escalate towards its climax.[7]

An important aspect in orchestration is creating balance between different aspects of a game. Mostly this means balancing characters and their possibilities to act against each other. Just like in drama, unbalanced conflict doesn't usually create interesting action (Egri 1960, 126–136). If the outcome is obvious from the very beginning of a game or if a character has no possibilities to change the flow of events, the game tends to end very quickly (at least for that character). There is of course always the possibility that the game will be a very intense experience for players struggling in very disadvantageous positions. These kinds of situations tend to shorten the climax-phase of the conflict.

However, if one wants to play in disadvantageous position, a working solution is to create a point of attack that seems to be very uneven, but the disadvantageous side has ways to strengthen it's position, e.g. by recruiting allies. This approach will also require that one consider what reasons the character with the stronger position has not to act rapidly. An example of this would be a situation where the advantageous side is not aware of the conflict in the beginning of the game.

## Orchestration Illustrated

In this chapter I will go through some fundamental structures for orchestration. These are building blocks that I myself have found useful in game writing.[8] They are basic situations, which can be varied in a thousand ways to create conflicts for different kinds of games.

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[7] However, I do not believe that models for progression of drama, like Fraytag's model (cf. Laurel 1993, 82–83), are usable for role-playing games as player choices affects progression of a game and each player character can have different kind of progression with or without climaxes.

[8] This chapter is based on workshop *Hahmolähtöisen kirjoittamisen tekniikoista* [Methods for Character-Based Writing] I co-organized with Satu Heliö at Ropecon 2003. Material is available at www.uta.fi/~petri.lankoski/pelitutkimus/ropecon2003.pdf (December 2003).

To begin with, there are several different ways of creating conflict. One way is to create conflict between two characters with opposing goals. Alternatively, if a goal is such that only one can achieve it (e.g. a nomination to a post or getting the girl), there can be two or more characters having the same goal. It is also possible for the character to have an inner conflict, which is a conflict between goals, beliefs or ethics of a character. With an inner conflict there should always be something at stake: a character will have to make sacrifices and the outcome of the conflict must have consequences. Otherwise it will hardly affect the game.

By linking conflicts to each other one can make an intriguing mess for the characters of a game. For example, a triangular drama is a good structure for creating basis for conflict that has no easy way out. In its classical form it will include three characters, whose goals that are positioned so that no-one's goal is directly against another one's. However, there is no way that all goals can be realised. Basically the idea is to build a chain of conflict. So person A's goal is conflicted by the goals of person B, whose goals are conflicted by the goals of C, whose goals, again, are conflicted by the goals of A. The simplest example is that of A loving B loving C loving A and A hating C hating B hating A.

Finally, with conflict built, one can manipulate the way characters relate to each other in a game. Introducing a threat from outside can be used to unify a group of characters that would normally have nothing to do with each other. A powerful enough threat can help bringing characters together even if they otherwise have conflicting interests and unison would be unthinkable in a normal situation. A threat from outside can be efficient way to slow down progress of conflict between two characters of groups. Another way of create co-operation in a game is to introduce a common goal, in some cases this is the same as the previous, i.e. beating as a common nemesis.

The final situation can then be a combination of all the above-mentioned types. Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet is a good example, where there are two kids who love each other, wanting to get married. Alas, there is a lot of bad blood between their families. This is the basis of the conflicts in the story. Fundamentally the situation is a sum of the following: there is a threat from outside (the couple's love is at risk because of the hatred between families), a common goal (Romeo and Juliet want to get married) and an inner conflict (Juliet's obedience to his father and love for Romeo).

## Conclusion

Characters are important when designing emotionally rich role-playing experiences. In order to create a functioning game, one has to take into account that there are several aspects affecting character interpretation. Most importantly, character interpretation requires character understanding, thus careful design of characters is important in order to provide a rich gaming experience. It is especially important that the goal of the

character be well-defined and motivated as the goal is what provides the player with a link to his character and the game itself.

Dramatic writing can be applied in order to write functioning characters with well-defined goals and clear agendas – the cornerstones of emotional immersion in a role-playing game. This paper demonstrates the use of one method, that of Egri's three-dimensional character, which I have applied successfully in many games. Just writing a lot of interesting characters will not do, however. It is also important to understand the balancing of powers, playing the opposite forces against each other, giving the players something to do throughout the game.

The design guidelines presented are meant to be generic ideas, usable in both tabletop and live-action role-playing games. The game style, however, will put its limitations on what means the game master has to realise these ideas and describe the character to the players. For instance, characters can usually be guided more easily with tabletops than is the case in live-action role-playing games. The type of game and the purpose of characters also affect the way characters should be written. In a larp it is usually valuable to make a character involved in more than one conflict to reduce the damage if some players don't appear to the event or if somebody plays rogue. Nonetheless, the main aspects of a character stay the same throughout the different forms of role-playing games.

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