

Cyclical design and its application: A theory breakdown

(Excerpt from coursework - Ronald Burgess, MA games design)

Cyclical design and its application – Applying my project

In order to come to a specific conclusion on the work I've done so far, I plan to bring this area of my research to a close, attempting to prove that cyclical design exists within character design and exploring its application. Covering previous analysis of my work I'll be dissecting the various sketches and silhouettes I've created in order to pin down the origins of their appeal or levels of nostalgia associated with them. This could be as simple as the silhouette being reminiscent of another game character, or a specific meaning to the design decision. I shall begin this by picking apart an existing character from a game, briefly exploring their design and pinning a meaning to those decisions; followed up by exploring my own ideas linked to 'Smugglers, Han Solo, Cowboys.'

Brief Initial Practice Example : Tracer Overwatch (Blizzard Entertainment - 2016).



OVERWATCH™

Figure 1 - Tracer Concept Art - Blizzard, Overwatch

I felt that analysing one of the 'Poster Characters' of a modern game would allow for more context as well as a quick practice exercise to refresh my analytical skills.

As a character 'Tracer' is portrayed as a young, energetic woman of English decent with a strong, almost stereotypical British accent. Though sounding like she just stepped out of a Charles Dickens novel, Tracer's aesthetics perfectly reflect and match her play style and abilities - acting as a positive example of a 'well designed playable character'.

Aesthetically, she was created through a fusion of 'Classic British bomber' as well as a modern athletic practicality reflecting her skills : primarily described as an extremely fast character, able to reverse or skip forward in time, 'blinking' to her advantage.

Her main design element is the large device strapped to her chest, described as a 'temporal anchor' allowing her to control her powers rather than being stuck in a constant flux, jumping uncontrollably through time. Though adhering to the 'sleek and layered' technological appearance of Overwatch, the device instantly appears as an inter-textual reference to the 'Flux-Capacitor' from the Back to the Future (1985-1990) series. A small, device which flashes and glows allowing the DeLorean to travel through time, similar in size and function to Tracer's time skipper. The inclusion of a similar device firmly plants Tracer within the same science-fiction adventure style as Back to the Future, her young aesthetic possibly playing off the franchises protagonist 'Marty Mcfly' - a young, upbeat and active character.

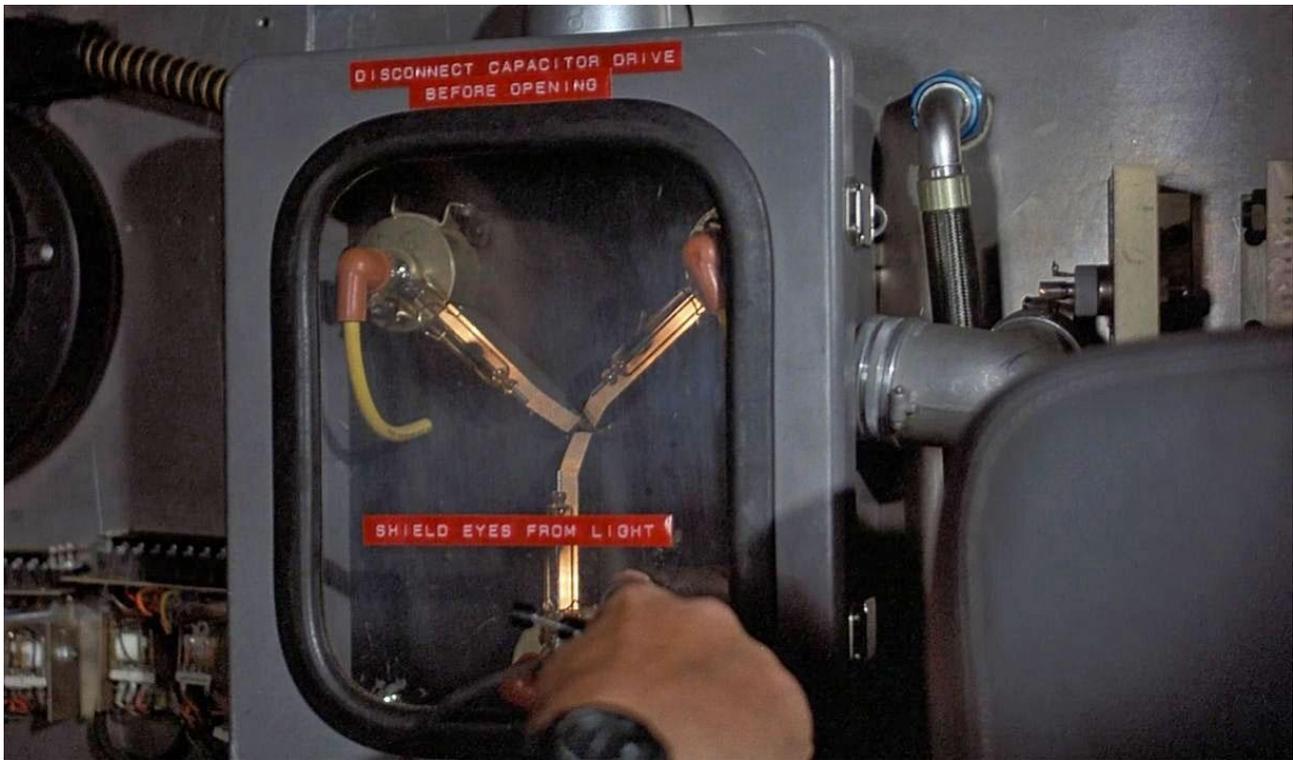


Figure 2 - Image of a 'Flux Capacitor' - Back to the Future 1985-1990

This device is worn over a classically designed 'Bomber Jacket' - a standard issue form of functional fashion during the second world war. These coats were used to keep pilots warm while flying, as tactical and combat based aircraft of the time was often practical, lacking luxury and built in extremely short periods of time. This allows for the player to interpret that Tracer would be exposed to the same conditions, or allow the player to instantly associate the character with qualities particular to fighter pilots, namely : Fast reflexes, determination, resourcefulness and bravery. The small size of the jacket also helps to cement Tracer as a compact and fast character, possibly built to attack quickly but not take much damage - due to lack of visible armour outside of her temporal device.

Lastly, the focus on 'athletic' accessories and practical clothing work to exaggerate the perception that she is a quick and active character for players to pick. Giving the character tightly fitting leggings as well as distinctly science-fiction based foot ware, inspired by modern running shoes, makes her aerodynamic, as well as focusing in on the sexuality of the character and adding a more feminine element to counteract the armour like teleporter and the stereotypical masculine bomber Jacket. The incorporation of sexuality with Tracer has been a topic often covered in the media surrounding Overwatch, namely the introduction of her as an LGBT character, as well as public backlash to one of her poses that exaggerated and emphasised her figure - something that some fans thought was not only against her shown character but also against the inclusive ideals of the game. The public responded positively not just to the inclusion of her as a LGBT-representative character, but also the changes that Blizzard Entertainment showed when changing her victory pose, reflecting her cocky personality more than focusing on sex appeal.

In conclusion, I believe that Tracer is a positive example of character design, taking not just her personality and play-style into account but also using cyclical design and inter-textual referencing to 'hint' traits to players, from her sleek athletic accessories promoting an 'aerodynamic' aesthetic, to the use of a bomber jacket to embody the characters 'plucky, war-time fighter' mentality, right down to the aerial fighter arm patch on her shoulder.