Literature Review: Exploring Nostalgia and the key to effective Character Design within film and games.

By Ronald Burgess

Literature Review Essay: Masters Course : Games Design

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The purpose of this initial literature review is to summarise my research into a specific direction – aspiring to pursue 'Character Design' and 'Concept Art' for games. Within this review, I shall be referencing the following material –'*Digital Arts Journal (Feb 2010) - Brand New Retro*', '*The Computer Game Design Course: Principles, Practices and Techniques for the aspiring game designer*', '*Video Game Design: Principles and Practices from the Ground up*', '*Character Development* and *Storytelling for Games*' and '*Imagine FX: Blog - 10 best character designs*'. Exploring what Character design is, how inter-textual referencing and nostalgia effect design? finally how this research can benefit my practice.

A character designer by definition is an artist that creates original characters with the intention of incorporation into a wider story, such as in cinema, gaming and comic books – often following a script or briefing. Many video games are synonymous for their protagonists, sometimes their enemies with '*The Computer Game Design Course (J.Thompson)*' outlining, *"The development of a character is both visual and conceptual. As well as the many sketches that define the appearance of the character, the character's personality must also be considered."* This quote proves that the character design process reaches completion when a fleshed out and defined character is presented, covering not just their physical appearance but also their demeanour and morals. Asking developing questions can aid in this process such as "What is the character's job or role in life?" This questioning can generate concepts quickly, but a powerful method of adding substance is the incorporation of inter-textual referencing and exploring previous characters – leading to inspiration. Many characters dictated by the inspirations of the creator, such as Han Solo (Star Wars: A New Hope 1977- Fig 1.) a scoundrel inspired chiefly by classical adventure films such as 'Robin Hood (1938), Errol Flynn'. Shown through Solo's flippant, sarcastic attitude as well as his pirate like asymmetrical belt and aesthetic – resulting in a cocky, cinematically cool character despite his habit of constantly running away.

Figure 1: Star Wars: A New Hope (1977), George Lucas

This time-line of inspirations for each character cements their design, multiple sources inspiring an artist,building a lattice of personality traits, physical qualities and motivations. Within '*Video Game Design: Principles and Practices from the Ground up(Salmond, M)*', Games Developer Tim Schafer – twenty year industry professional, creator of 'Psychonauts (2006)' and 'Brutal Legend (2009)' outlines his keys to successful characters. Defining the tenets of 'Good character design as' – "*Wish Fulfilment, Ego Investment, Uniqueness, Coolness, Active Roles, Motivations, Being Responsive, Back-Story and Supporting Characters."* Schafer summarises his dogma into these categories

emphasising that video game characters are used to achieve as strong levels of escapism, with emphasis on wish fulfilment, player to invest into a story driven and unique character – one supported by the setting and its NPCs(*non-player characters*). With these traits augmented with a realistic set of responses, such as character reaction to ingame stimulus; staggering back from a ledge should they nearly fall. This creates a believable projection of self onto a character, regardless of how fantastical the setting.

"Designers are always dipping into the past, looking for tried and tested forms to combine with cutting-edge techiques." This quote by Graeme Aymer refers to graphic designs resurgence of 1950's Swiss school of design, while easily applicable to fashion, films and even games design. Aymer's use of the imperative word '*Dipping*' - perfectly describes the manner in which pastiche design in incorporated into design revival, whether through pop-culture,

such as the recent surge of 1980's inspired media – 'Stranger Things(2016-2017, Fig2)', 'IT(2017)' etc,or through re-inventing the past with the intention of utilising new technology. This quote strengthens my point above, outlining that successful design rarely remains dormant in the past and through re-incorporation and improvement, we can explore new options, interpretations and context.

Figure 2: Stranger Things Logo : Netflix 2017

Though physical appearance and subliminal referencing within a character's design is important, story and narrative are just as critical when creating believable and grounded characters within a universe. *"There is a definite benefit to both writers and their stories when we give NPC's multiple reasons for being in the game. It gives us multiple facets to their characters. Before we know it, even the lowliest minor character can blossom without much effort on our part."*(Sheldon,20) This quote by Lee Sheldon from *'Character Development and Storytelling for Games*' expresses the positive effects of a writer and designer's co-operation when creating an effective character. Instructing that exploring exposition beyond a pragmatic 'use' for the character allows for developer-based story implications, as well as fans crafting lore and their own projections onto an otherwise purely practical mechanic.

Games such as *Bloodborne*(*2016, Fromsoftware*) thrive on this ambition for discovery that its fans demonstrate, with whole communities dedicating themselves to minor characters or item descriptions, in an effort to unravel a deliberately vague storyline. This method of indirect story telling in addition to lateral thinking when approaching an NPC's use within a world could lead to some interesting projects or design explorations.

Finally, exploring pre-existing - widely regarded 'Well designed characters' allows for a summarisation of my argument. "*10 Best Video-Game Character Designs*" by *'Creative Bloq (Online companion of ImagineFX)*'presents a categorised list of the ten most effectively designed characters within gaming, accompanied by a small nostalgic sub-heading. The list seems grounded and well researched, pointing out various elements that help to make characters memorable, however with the previously presented argument, the specific inter-textual references or narrative components that make these characters strong can be analysed.

'Portal 2's(2011)' antagonistic AI (*Artificial Intelligence*) 'GLaDOS (*Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System*)' the central core processor of '*Aperture Science computer-aided Enrichment Center'*. A large robotic character, that initially appears as a simple guiding voice through the players 'test environments' however as the game progresses we quickly become aware of her malicious intent and witty comments "*Most people emerge from suspension terribly undernourished. I want to congratulate you on beating the odds and somehow managing to pack on a few pounds.*" This character's beginning as a helpful Artificial Intelligence and slow decent into madness or malicious intent is

clearly a reference to Stanley Kubrick's cinematic masterpiece *'2001: A space odyssey (Kubrick)'* in which a space mission is threatened by '*Hal9000*', a hyper-intelligent Ai designed to be "*Foolproof and incapable of error*". Although, GLaDos takes an often more comical approach than Hal9000 - the blatant connection through their origin, character development and menacing singular optical receptor is clear. This character is an example of successful character design, demonstrated through the argument above - Showing a reactive, strong and adaptable personality with the character role strongly considered - Uses well-built intersexual referencing to hark back to a classical science-fiction film, and finally demonstrates all aspects of Tim Schafer's tenets of character design.

In conclusion, Within my own work I will be looking to explore how characters are given context through their design history, whether through popular culture a character can be given more grounding and finally how following the design dogma of previously successful character and game designers I can start to strengthen my own theory and artistic aptitude.

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