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## CMSC 498M: Chapter 12b Storytelling in Games

### Source:

- Andrew Glassner's "Interactive Storytelling".
- Lecture notes by Michael J. Katchabaw of U. of Western Ontario.

### Overview:

- Plot
- Setting
- Characters

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## Plot

### Plot:

- The rendering and ordering of the events and actions of a story, particularly towards the achievement of some particular artistic or emotional effect.
- Involves more about how the story unfolds rather than what the story is about. It is more than mere facts and events, but also how these elements are connected, related, and flow into one another.

### Gameplay and Plot:

- Are inherently interconnected within games that heavily depend upon story elements.
- Obstacles and challenges presented to the player are made interesting to the player by linking them to the plot of the story.
- The story is advanced through the completion of challenges, removal of obstacles, and by dealing with other gameplay elements in the game.

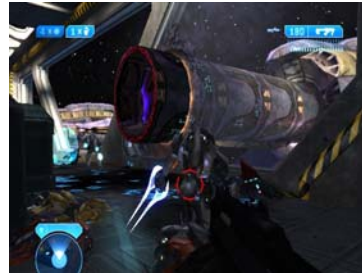
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## Plot: Balancing Conflict

### Balancing Conflict:

- Dramatic tension in a story is greatest when the player teeters on the brink of disaster only to escape by the narrowest of margins.
- This often entails a careful balancing act in designing the story and gameplay, but can produce a very rewarding effect.
- This requires careful consideration in multiplayer games where there must be a good balance between players as well.

Screen shot from Halo 2. The player is constantly teetering near annihilation, which provides a good level of dramatic tension in the game.



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## Plot: Shifting Focus

### Shifting Focus:

- At many points in the story of a game, it might be important to shift the focus of the player.
  - To give the player some freedom and choice to deviate from the main storyline.
  - To bring the player back to the main storyline after such explorations.
- This can be done by adjusting the set of quests, missions, or tasks available to the player, introducing new characters or objects, and so on.

Screen shot from Destroy all Humans. By adding new objectives, opening new areas, and introducing new powers or weapons, this game can shift the focus of the player back towards the main storyline of the game.



Source: M. J. Katchabaw

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## Plot: Foreshadowing Events

### Foreshadowing:

- A standard plot device that provides a hint to some event or change that will happen in the future.
- It can serve many purposes:
  - Set the tone or mood in the game.
  - Provide a warning or lesson about how to handle gameplay in the future.
  - Build anticipation of what is to come.

Screen shot from Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time. This game provided plenty of fore-shadowing. The visions experienced by the prince give vital clues as to how to proceed through certain areas of the game world.



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## Plot: Suspension of Disbelief

### Suspension of Disbelief:

- Involves the player's acceptance of the artificial reality that is created within the game.
- The player accepts the rules and experiences of the game even if they do not make sense in the real world.

Screen shot of Shadow of the Colossus. This game perfectly allows for the suspension of disbelief, allowing the player to accept this world as their own.



Source: M. J. Katchabaw

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## Plot: Realism and Consistency

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### Realism and Consistency:

- Realism can be used in games to closely mimic the real world.
- In other games, fantasy might play a stronger role than realism.
- Either way, consistency is a must, with nothing seeming out of place to jar the player from the experience.
- Whether realistic or fantastic, the story must make sense and be consistent.

Screen shot from Call of Duty 2.  
This game attempts to create an authentic and realistic war experience which forms an integral part of the game.



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## Plot: Interactivity

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### Interactivity:

- Because of interactivity with the player, the storyteller of a game does not have sole control over the flow of the story.
- In effect, the player can be a co-storyteller, or even the only storyteller, depending on the game.
- While this can create interesting issues, a game that allows the player to take on a key story formation role can be very rewarding.

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## Plot: Linearity and Nonlinearity

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### Linear stories:

- Follow a straight physical and temporal progression.
- Tend to require less content than nonlinear ones.
- The storytelling engine is simpler.
- They are less prone to bugs and absurdities (like continuity errors).
- They are capable of greater emotional power.
- But, they deny the player freedom, and this can be very important in games.

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## Plot: Linearity and Nonlinearity

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### Nonlinearity:

- Games do not have to follow a linear storyline; their interactivity can give the freedom of choice to the player to set their own path through the game.
- A tight balancing act: the nonlinear freedom given to a player, and the linearity needed to have a well-constructed story.

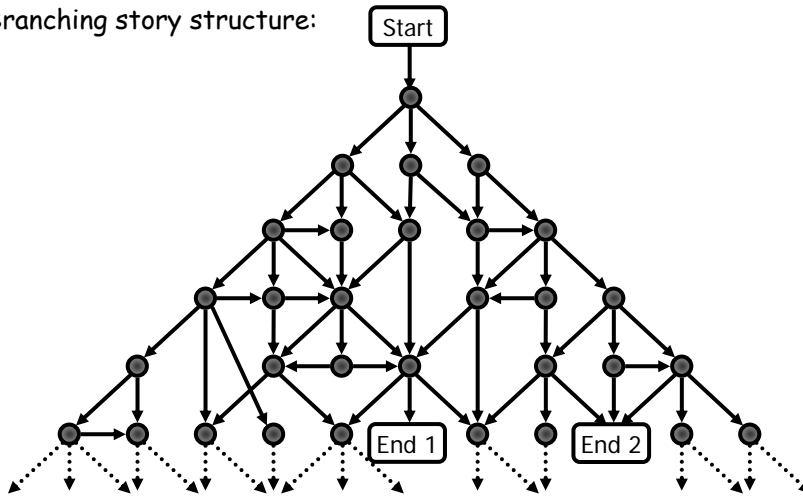
### Branching story structure:

- At critical points in the game, the player's actions determine the direction in which the plot unfolds.
- While conceptually simple, this approach is also expensive, as each branch path must have content, and each important decision entails a new branch point.
- Also, the player must play the game repeatedly to see all the content.

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## Plot: Linearity and Nonlinearity

Branching story structure:

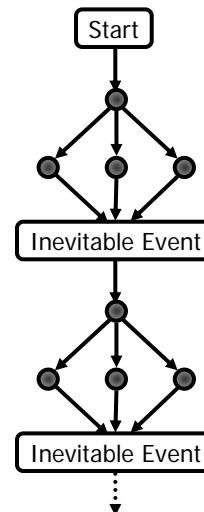


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## Plot: Linearity and Nonlinearity

Linear-Connected Subplots:

- Likely the best way to balance this is through a series of linearly connected open areas, each with multiple possible paths of plot points, folding back to a single inevitable event (a foldback story).
- Give the player freedom to meet challenges as they see fit, which can result to a variety of game experiences.
- These experiences are strung together in a linear fashion so that the storyteller still retains a good measure of control.



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## Plot: Linearity and Nonlinearity

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Screen shot from Halo. The player traverses several open areas strung together in a linear fashion. Very well done.

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## Plot: The Fourth Wall

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### The "Fourth Wall":

- A theatrical reference to the fact that traditional theatre sets have three walls, the back and the sides.
- The audience views the play through the invisible fourth wall while actors perform as if it is as solid as the other three.
- "Breaking the fourth wall" refers to breaking the illusion that the characters in the story are unaware that they are being observed.

### Breaking the Fourth Wall:

- In general, you should never break the fourth wall unless you really know what you are doing.
- Done improperly can break the immersion of the game as it is tantamount to the characters acknowledging they are in a game and not in some kind of alternate reality.
- In some cases, it can serve a purpose to make some form of commentary, but you must be careful with this.

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## Plot: Crisis, Climax, and Resolution

Crisis, climax, resolution: A classic approach used in storytelling.

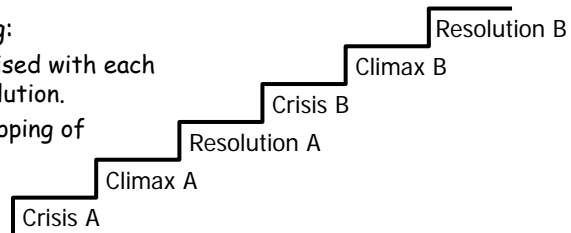
**Crisis:** Point at which a challenge is introduced and tension begins to build.

**Climax:** Not the overcoming of the challenge, but is rather where the crisis is stretched to its limits—the moment of confrontation, accusation, conflict, violence.

**Resolution:** Simply the outcome of the climax that is the result of the crisis.

Escalation/Overlapping:

- The stakes are raised with each crisis-climax-resolution.
- Can also be overlapping of multiple crises.

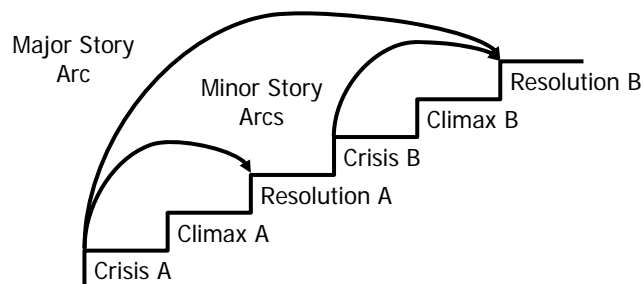


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## Plot: Crisis, Climax, and Resolution

Complex Structure:

- Minor story arcs are composed of a single crisis-climax-resolution sequence.
- Major story arcs can encompass multiple minor story arcs.



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## Setting

### Setting:

- Providing a sense of place.
- Usually done well in most high-end video games.
- Graphics and sound technologies have advanced to the point where good settings can be easily created.

### Not just a physical location:

- It is the whole world created to tell your story.
- It includes time period, weather, and other elements such as mood and atmosphere.
- All of these elements combine together to create the world in which the game and its story is set.

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## Setting

### Creating Setting:

- Requires careful thought and consideration.
- In creating the game world, you should invent only one "what if?" and everything else should flow from this.
- After this, everything should be as real as possible without any contradictions.
- Choose a setting that will engage the senses.
- By keeping the setting vivid and consistent, it is easier to achieve immersion.

Screen shot from Thief: Deadly Shadows. This level, the Cradle, has been described as "probably the scariest level ever made"



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## Characters

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### Characters:

- Can be the most fascinating and most integral part of a story.
- More often than not, characters can make or break a game.
- Consequently, it is very important to make sure that characters are well thought out and well developed throughout the story of the game.
- Characters are either controlled by the player (player characters) or by the game itself (non-player characters).

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## Player Characters

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### Player Characters (PCs):

- Are characters controlled by the player.
- If there is a single central character, it is commonly referred to as the player's avatar.
- It is also possible for there to be multiple characters controlled by the player, depending on the game.

### Flexible or Strong:

- Flexible: Avoid creating a strong central character; only provide a bare outline, and allow the player to fill in the rest with themselves.
- Strong: Create a character with a well defined personality, attitude, and background.
- Success can be had either way.

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## Player Characters



Duke Nukem



Doom's generic space marine

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## Non-Player Characters

### Non-Player Characters (NPCs):

- Characters that are not controlled by the player.
- Typically driven by an artificial intelligence of some kind within the game.
- Take on a variety of roles to deliver various elements of gameplay within the game.
- This includes combat, puzzle solving, etc.

### Other Roles:

- They can reveal emotions and reactions that the hero cannot show.
- They help establish mood and tone in very effective ways that are difficult to do otherwise.

### For example:

- Your hero should face down the ultimate villain without any fear.
- By having non-player characters cowering in the background at the same time, this emotion can still be instilled in the game player.

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## Non-Player Characters



Screen shot from *Golden Axe*. The villagers scream and flee at the villains' assault. One is being attacked to the right behind the dragon.

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## Non-Player Characters



Screen shot from *The Thing*. Computer controlled teammates experience and display fear. Earning and keep their trust is an important aspect of the game.

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## Character Types: Animal

### Animal:

- These are characters derived from animals of some kind.
- Often given human characteristics to allow for more identification between the player and the character.
- Common in games marketed towards families or children.



Sonic the Hedgehog.

Source: M. J. Katchabaw



Screen shot from Conker: Live and Reloaded. Definitely not for family consumption!

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## Character Types: Fantasy, Historical

### Fantasy:

- Characters that do not have counterparts in the real world and are created specifically for a game, without licensing from a pre-existing source.

### Historical:

- Characters that have distinct counterparts from the real world, often from past history.
- Political and military games focusing on real-world events often contain these.

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## Character Types : Fantasy, Historical



Mario, Lara Croft, and Gordon Freeman are all examples of fantasy characters.

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## Character Types : Fantasy, Historical



Screen shot from Rome: Total War. Games such as this one feature a great number of historical characters.

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## Character Types : Licensed, Mythic

### Licensed

- Already exists in the real world but in a pre-existing medium.
- When licensing characters, developers do not need to start from scratch in creating visuals, personalities, or verbal nuances.

### Mythic

- These characters have counterparts in mythologies, legends, and fairy tales from different cultures.



Screen shot from From Russia With Love. Characters like James Bond need to be licensed to appear in video games.



Screen shot from God of War. Many mythological characters.

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## Character Roles

### Character Roles:

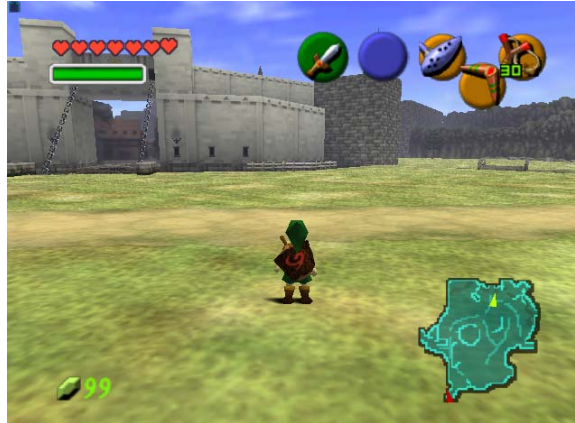
- There are many possible roles that characters can take in games.
- While it is not good to pigeon-hole characters into certain models of behavior, knowing some of the classic character types can be of great use in crafting a story for the first time.
- We will discuss some of the more common character roles here ...

### Hero:

- More often than not filled by the player.
- The role is to overcome the main problem faced in the story often at his or her own peril, requiring personal sacrifice along the way.
- The hero typically performs most of the action and assumes the majority of risk and responsibility.

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## Character Roles: Hero



Screen shot of the Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time. Link is definitely the hero in this story.

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## Character Roles: Shadow

Shadow:

- Represents the opposite of the hero, often the ultimate evil character in a story.
- Typically responsible for the character's problem, but not always.
- Sometimes remains hidden until the story's climax, which can help build the story's tension.
- Along the way, the player may have to deal with lesser shadows as well.

Screen shot of the Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time. Ganondorf is the shadow to counter Link's hero.



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## Character Roles: Shadow

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### Mentor:

- Character who often guides the hero towards some action.
- Often an older "advisor" character that can impart wisdom and lessons learned from experience.
- Typically on the hero's side, but sometimes they might intentionally guide the hero in the wrong direction.

Screen shot from Mortal Kombat: Shaolin Monks. In this action-adventure game in the Mortal Kombat universe, Raiden served as the mentor figure to Liu Kang and Kung Lao.



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## Character Roles: Allies

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### Allies:

- Allies are characters that help the hero progress on their adventure and assist the hero with tasks that might be difficult or impossible to accomplish alone.
- Allies can take many forms: Sidekicks, servants and pets, trainers, merchants, and so on.
- The form the allies take depends greatly on the game.

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## Character Roles: Allies

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Screen shot from Jak and Daxter. Daxter is a sidekick for Jak, not to mention comic relief ...

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## Character Roles: Allies

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Screen shot from Resident Evil 4. While the Merchant character is not exactly on your side, his special kind of "help" can be quite valuable!

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## Character Roles: Guardians

### Guardian:

- Blocks the progress of the hero by whatever means necessary until the hero has proven worthy.
- Guardians test the player.
- Sometimes guardians are henchmen of the shadow, but not always.
- In some cases, a guardian can be a block in the hero's mind (such as doubt, fear, and so on) that make the hero hesitate.

Screen shot from Quake II. The Tank character in this screen is a guardian character used to block the player. In this case, it is attempting to prevent access to the computer terminal behind it.



Source: M. J. Katchabaw

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## Character Roles: Trickster

### Trickster:

- A neutral character that tries to create mischief.
- Trickster characters can either cause damage or inconvenience through their actions, or they can simply be jesters who provide comic relief for the story.
- Tricksters can be the hero's sidekicks or even a shadow character, depending on the game.

Screen shot from Golden Axe. The thief character steals from you when you sleep ... a definite inconvenience from this trickster.



Source: M. J. Katchabaw

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## Character Roles: Herald

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### Herald:

- The herald character facilitates change in the story and provides the hero with direction.
- The herald could be the character that first introduced a problem to the player, or could provide quests, missions, or other objectives during the game.

Screen shot from Splinter Cell. Lambert provides Sam Fisher with mission briefings and provides direction throughout the game.



Source: M. J. Katchabaw

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## Character Roles

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### Character Roles:

- In addition to these character roles, there are also classic character types that can be associated with any story.
- These include:
  - Protagonists
  - Antagonists
  - Co-protagonist
  - Supporting characters

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## Character Roles: Protagonists

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### Protagonist:

- The protagonist is the main character of the game.
- In a single player game, the game's story centers around this character.
- The protagonist drives the story forward.
- Acts instead of just reacts.
- Makes things happen instead of waiting for things to happen.

### Anti-Hero:

- The protagonist is not always good, a so-called anti-hero.
- In the context of the story, the character appears as a hero, but out of context could be seen as a criminal, an outlaw, or simply unlikable.
- Classic types of anti-heroes include the vigilante, the developing hero, the drifter, the failure, the flawed everyman, the villain (in rare cases), and the noble criminal.

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## Character Roles: Protagonists

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Screen shot from Batman Begins. Batman is a classic vigilante character.

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## Character Roles: Protagonists

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Screen shot from *God of War*. Kratos is the protagonist, but his heroic qualities are somewhat questionable.

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## Character Roles: Antagonists

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### Antagonist:

- Opposes the protagonist.
- Like the protagonist need not be good, and need not be evil.
- There are many types of antagonists, such as:
  - Exaggerated: Larger than life, bizarre at times, and dominate the story; sometimes more interesting than the protagonist.
  - Realistic: Mild mannered and fairly normal characters (which can have interesting effects).
  - Mistaken: It appears they are villains but turn out to be innocent.

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## Character Roles: Antagonists



Screen shot from Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories. The police are just doing their job, but considering the role of the protagonist in this story, they turn out to be the antagonists.

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## Character Roles: Co-Protagonists

### Co-protagonists:

- Two characters join forces with the protagonist in the story.
- Could be other player or non player characters, depending on the game.
- Sometimes these characters start as antagonists, that unite with the protagonist against a greater, common foe.
- Sometimes these characters will cooperate with the protagonist, and sometimes they will compete instead (but not oppose them).



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## Character Roles: Supporting Characters

### Supporting characters:

- Ensure that the protagonist does not walk away from the problem faced in the story.
- That would put a premature and unwelcome end to the story!
- Supporting characters can lend support to either the protagonist or antagonist in the story.

Screen shot from Trauma Center Under the Knife. This innovative title for the Nintendo DS has a variety of nursing and medical personnel as support characters ... although this one yelling isn't being helpful!



Source: M. J. Katchabaw

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## Character Development

### Character Development:

- Creating a memorable character is hard, but the rewards can be great.
- Both artistically and commercially.
- Characters must be both properly designed initially and should experience some form of growth or development throughout the game.

### Character design: Create characters that people:

Find appealing: Must be well constructed with their various elements working together appropriately.

Believe in: Must be credible and act according to their personae.

Identify with: Player characters must be characters that the player wants to play as.

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## Character Development: Backgrounders

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### Backgrounders:

- Designer Steve Meretzky recommends the creation of a background paper, or backgrounder, for each major character.
- This should address the following:
  - Where was the character born?
  - What was their family life like as a kid?
  - What was their education?
  - Where do they live now?
  - Describe their job.
  - Describe their finances.
  - Describe their taste in clothes, books, etc.
  - What are their favourite foods?
  - What are their favourite activities?
  - What are their hobbies?
  - Describe any particular personality traits and how they manifest themselves.
  - Are they shy or outgoing? Greedy or giving?

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## Character Development: Backgrounders

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### And also the following:

- Do they have any quirks? Unusual talents?
- Do they have superstitions? Phobias?
- What were their traumatic moments in life?
- What were their biggest triumphs?
- Describe their important past romances.
- Describe their current romantic involvement (or involvements).
- How do they treat friends? Others?

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## Character Development: Backgrounders

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And also the following:

- Describe their political beliefs, past and present.
- Describe their religious beliefs, past and present.
- What are their interesting or important possessions?
- Do they have any pets?
- What's the best thing that could happen to them? What's the worst thing?

In summary:

- To create depth to your characters, visualize all aspects of their lives.

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## Character Development: Dimensionality

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Dimensionality:

- We can categorize characters according to their emotional sophistication and emotional response and change.
- This is referred to as their dimensionality.

Zero-dimensional:

- Characters exhibit one or more discrete emotional states, with no continuum between them.
- They are simple, without conflict or mixed feelings one a subject.

One-dimensional:

- Have only a single variable to characterize changing emotions or attitudes.
- Otherwise, their character is largely fixed.

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## Character Development: Dimensionality

### Two-dimensional

- Can be described by multiple variables that express their impulses, and these variables do not conflict (and so are orthogonal).
- As a result there is no emotional ambiguity.

### Three dimensional

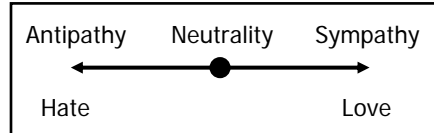
- Have multiple emotional states that can produce conflicting impulses.
- This can cause distress and confusion, and can lead them to behave in inconsistent ways.
- These mixed feelings must be considered carefully; in particular, how these mixed feelings manifest themselves to the player.

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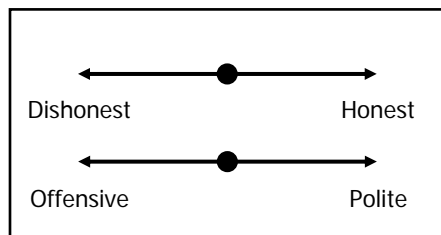
## Character Development: Dimensionality



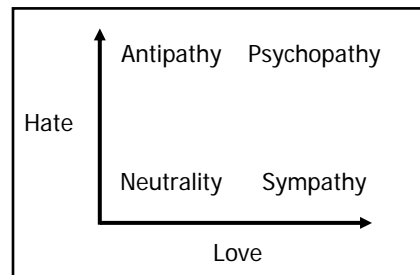
Zero-dimensional



One-dimensional



Two-dimensional



Three-dimensional

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## Character Development: Growth

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### Character Growth: Questions to consider:

- Which characters will grow?
- How will they grow?
  - Physically, intellectually, emotionally, morally?
- How will this growth be implemented?
  - Through changes to character attributes?
  - Through granting additional abilities?
  - Through changes to plot in the story?
- Does growth affect gameplay?
- How is this growth represented to the player?

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## Character Development: Growth

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### Character Growth: Challenges:

- Player Character growth in video games can be difficult to accomplish.
- The simple physical or "statistical" growth common in games is not the same kind of "growth" found in traditional storytelling.
- The difficulty comes from the fact that the character is controlled by the player.
- Ultimately, the growth that occurs is at least in part determined by the experiences had by the player in playing the game.

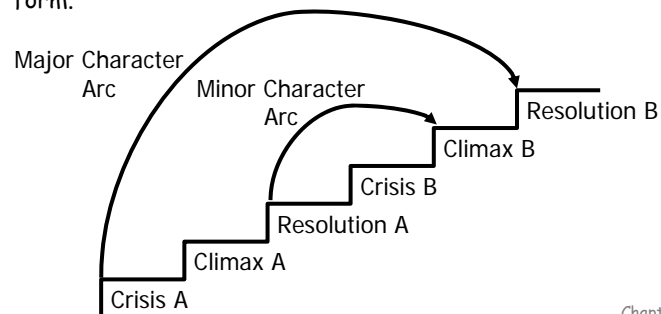
Common approaches...

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## Character Development: Character Arcs

### Character Arcs:

- One process of character development is called the character arc.
- Based on the events in the story, the character will develop accordingly.
- Like a story arc, a character arc will span over crisis, climax, and resolution plot elements, but not necessarily in the same form.



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## Character Development: Character Arcs

### Character Arcs:

- One can also look at character arcs in terms of the level of development that occurs within the character.

**Intrapersonal:** Only concerned with own needs and thoughts.

**Interpersonal:** Bonds with another character in a one-on-one basis.

**Team:** Bonds with and belongs to a small group of characters with common goals and interests.

**Community:** The smaller team becomes part of a larger organized network.

**Humanity:** Concerned with the well being of everyone and everything.

### Direction:

- Most work bottom to top.
- Anti-heroes may work top to bottom.

### Character Development Levels



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## Character Development: Character Triangles

### Character Triangles:

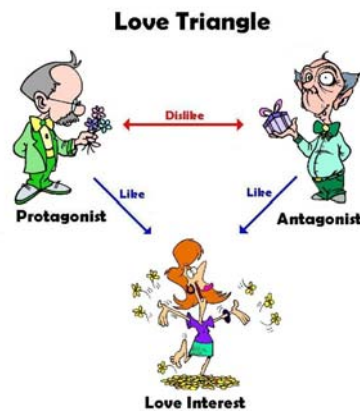
- A character triangle is a powerful three way relationship between contrasting characters in a story.
- Usually the protagonist, antagonist and a supporting character.
- A story can contain multiple triangles, each representing its own sub-plot.
- Characters can take part in several triangles at once. For example, the protagonist can be in two triangles where they are competing with two different antagonists.

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## Character Development: Character Triangles

### Triangles:

- The most common triangle is the love triangle.
- There are many others, however. For example, a career triangle focusing on the competition for the same job.



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## Character Development: Visual Development

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### Visual Development:

- Have the visuals tied to the character's persona and role in the story.
- Includes:
  - Size, build, body type, and stature.
  - Physical appearance and characteristics.
  - Costume, including clothing, props, and so on.
  - Animation and motion style.
  - Idle behaviors and characteristics.
  - And so on.

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## Character Development: Verbal Development

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### Verbal Development:

- Through their monologues and dialogues, characters will have a chance to both expose their inner state and have an opportunity to develop.
- Be sure to take advantage of these opportunities when they are presented!
- If you find that characters involved in verbal discourse do not develop as a result, then this discourse might not really have been necessary.

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## Summary

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### Summary:

- Plot
- Setting
- Characters