



EXCEPTIONAL



GREAT



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UNFORTUNATE

BETTER GAME CHARACTERS BY DESIGN

BY KATHERINE ISBISTER

MOST GAME DEVELOPMENT TEAMS

have a common goal of creating a blockbuster game. Yet very few have a detailed creative design process—only the vague goal of “making cool characters and a fun game.”

Don't believe me? If you work for a game development company, try this experiment: Walk up to the lead game designer, art director, or producer and ask, “Are we using a psychological approach to our game's character design?” It's very likely you will receive a blank stare and be asked whether you'd like to take a psychological approach to getting back to work.

Game designer extraordinaire Tim Schafer laments in the foreword to *Better Game Characters By Design: A Psychological Approach*, “When I was in college we didn't have courses in game design.” He goes on to humorously express the same initial reservations that I had upon encountering this book—that an academic researcher in psychology may not be a source of relevant tips and advice on the day-to-day grind of how to make games.

But in fact, the author, Katherine Isbister, not only has developed and taught courses at Stanford University on game character design, but is an avid game player as well. Isbister is currently an associate professor in the department of Literature, Language, and Communication at the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, with a research focus in social psychological and affective approaches to human-computer interaction with special attention to games.

Most books on character design approach the topic from the animation,



Review by Bijan Forutanpour

advanced development process with a tight timeline. Still other chapters are targeted toward the preproduction and design phase. Finally, for novices, the appendix provides a good collection of game summaries, genres, and character design options.

Isbister strikes a perfect balance between theory and practice by not only describing concepts in abstract academic terms but also conducting interviews with industry veterans who describe their approaches to design. It becomes clear that the designers interviewed make conscious

decisions about the look, behavior, dialogue, culture, and relationships between the game characters, as well as the environment and the target audience.

The target audience, its age, gender, and ethnicity, is something the interviewees are very conscious of, and character design decisions are targeted accordingly. Everything the author describes in academic terms is applied by those interviewed, which gives the reader a better, more concrete understanding of how the concepts might manifest in practice.

The application of theory into practice is made even clearer by frequent summaries of bullet point lists in sections called “Design Pointers.” These make great checklists for designers during the concept development phase of a game. Another unique aspect about the information presented is that every chapter begins with a subsection titled,

filmmaking, or fiction discipline. Yet, the emotional engagement, fun factor, and believability develop from the interaction between the audience (player) and game character—and this is where psychology plays a large role. To this end, *Better Game Characters by Design* provides both compelling evidence for using and an excellent roadmap for implementing a psychological approach.

One of the book's main themes is knowing your target audience demographic in order to relate to them most effectively. The author follows this approach and guides the reader based on his or her background and game development needs. The book may be used in its entirety (as a college textbook, for example) or in part, as specific chapters are presented in a way that allows the reader to start integrating ideas into an existing and

BOOK REVIEW

STATS

TITLE
Better Game Characters By Design: A Psychological Approach

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PRICE
\$49.95 (paperback)

PUBLISHER INFORMATION
Morgan Kaufmann
(Elsevier Inc.)
500 Sansome St.
San Francisco, CA 94111
415.392.2665
www.elsevier.com

Published: June 2006
364 pp.
ISBN: 1-55860-921-0

"What is covered and why," material I found enormously useful because it showed the logical flow of different aspects of character design and motivated me to continue reading.

Thematically, the book is separated into five parts of two chapters each. The first section focuses on the visual aspect of a character, mainly facial features and body language, although Isbister also delves into the issue of stereotyping. While she recommends using stereotypes to quickly convey a character, she also advises breaking them to add depth and a richer, more memorable character.

Part two focuses on the player character and the importance of gender and culture as presented in the game versus the culture of the target audience. Particularly fascinating is an interview with Ryoichi Hasegawa and Ropyaku Tsurumi of Sony Computer Entertainment Japan, who discuss the differences between video games in Japan and the U.S., and the acceptance of foreign games in the respective countries. For example, facial characteristics are very important to an American game being accepted in Japan, and as it stands, typically they are not widely embraced, or at least not until certain modifications are made.

Part three focuses on the importance of facial expression, body language and tone of voice. Facial expressions can telegraph intention as well as create emotion for the players themselves. Physical contact between player characters, such as a pat on the back, can communicate encouragement. Tone of voice can be an important tool in expressing emotion, too.

Part four focuses on player characters (PC), and non-player characters (NPC). The experience of a player's psychological experience of a PC is broken down into four layers: visceral, cognitive, social, and fantasy. Each layer is explained in detail, and MAX PAYNE and HALF-LIFE are cited as successful implementations. Social roles in games are also discussed, such as sidekick, ally, guide, mentor, boss monster, competitor, archenemy, and many more. The section provides a good summary of the typical roles game characters can play.

Part five focuses on the overall game development process and the importance of usability tests and marketing tests. An interview with Tim Schafer, creator of FULL THROTTLE and GRIM FANDANGO, and currently head of Double Fine Productions (PSYCHONAUTS) appears in this section, in which he shares his approach to character design, communicating designs to team members, and the evolution of character

design during the development process.

What I found particularly clever and innovative was his innovative use of Friendster.com to create homepages for his virtual characters, as if the characters themselves had created them, and linked to one another, and established relationships, likes and dislikes, and personalities.

Other interviews contained in the book include a chat with Chuck Clanton, who was involved with the making of There.com (an interactive online community that arguably does or does not constitute a "game") on several levels, as well as Marc Laidlaw, who's best known in game circles for writing HALF-LIFE and HALF-LIFE 2. Additionally, Nicole Lazzaro of XEODesign is interviewed about play testing.

The book includes a DVD, which contains screen shots from a number of video games and a few movie files. The movies (which are referenced in the text) illustrate certain aspects of character design and gameplay. The DVD could have benefited from brief description files, reiterating points made in the book, as a convenience. But these shortcomings are minor, and in the context of each other, it was interesting to see the different approaches taken by different developers to create visuals and gameplay.

I would say without hesitation that this book is one of the best game and character design books available, and should be required reading for all game designers, artists, and producers. Programmers, too, stand to gain a lot from it, as the book offers them a new perspective on the art and science of game development. ❖

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