

CHARACTER STUDY



So, you think that conflict resolution can only be effective with a Glock 8mm Mauser? UCLA's **Laurie H. Hutzler** looks toward games featuring more complex characters and multi-levels of conflict. Let her take up the story...

MINIBIO

Laurie H. Hutzler expounds on character development and story structure in the Master of Fine Arts program in the Department of Film, Television and Digital Media at UCLA. She can further yak your ear off at two character workshops in London on June 22 and June 29 at the Screenwriters Workshop on Whitefield Street (www.lsw.org.uk). And as if that isn't enough, she is also developing a character design utility called the Emotional Toolbox(tm) For Game Designers.

Why don't game characters reflect the amazing diversity and variety of characters in other entertainment media? After all, wouldn't we be broadening the market for games if we developed more complex and interesting characters?

Technology marches on – games become more visually exciting and more visually realistic every day. But games aren't just about graphics. There's much more to life than the limited character archetypes that now exist in games. It's time for game characters to catch up.

Okay, in the beginning pretty much the only thing game characters could do was run, jump, hit, kick, and shoot. When *Pitfall's* Harry debuted he was totally amazing. Technology was limited, and game designers maximised what they had to work with to give characters a rudimentary personality. A quirky appearance and fun physical movement set to a bouncy soundtrack had to suffice. But that was then. This is now.

"Are game characters up to par with the fabulous locales in which they find themselves?"

The wonderful world of games has grown into sophisticated 3D productions complete with rivetting camera angles, realistic motion, detailed vivid settings and astonishing special effects. But are game characters up to par with the fabulous locales in which they find themselves? I believe the answer is a resounding no. It's time to put more time, thought, resources and skill into creating characters truly worthy of the physical worlds they now inhabit.

How do we bring the next generation of these game characters to life? Character is always best revealed through action and conflict – two tried and true staples in any game designer's tool kit. The question is: What kind of action and what kind of conflict? Here's where we need to broaden our horizons.

There are nine basic kinds of characters in any storytelling format. Each of these possesses a distinct power, has a distinct gift and serves a distinct function. This is true whether the story has a linear narrative structure or a non-linear interactive structure.

The nine characters, powers and conflicts map the whole human psyche. Use them all. Expand your creative pallet. Explore new emotional territory. Or not; think of a recent flop. No, I'm not going to name names. You know who you are. How

many of these failures or severe under-performers resulted from uninteresting and underdeveloped characters? I'd argue that the game character is the player's way into the game playing experience. Gamers don't play settings or graphics. They play interaction. The only way to get interaction is through characters.

Uninspired characters result in mediocre interactions, which ultimately result in game player dissatisfaction. How does this dissatisfaction happen?

Basically, we all know when a character is 'off' in the same way we know when a tin of food or carton of milk is 'off'. We can smell it. We wrinkle our noses and turn away. Our mental bogu-meter kicks in just like those olfactory nerves do. I mean, we've all seen a movie and said "No way". We know when a movie character doesn't ring true. And it aggravates us.

Game characters that are too narrow, too flat or simply ill-conceived turn game players off in just the same way. Don't be boring and derivative.

Most game characters are currently developed using just two basic powers – the power of excitement and the power of will. Characters like Mario and Sonic are classics because they embody the power of excitement. (Life is an adventure. How do I break free of limitations or traps?). Protagonist *Duke Nukem* and antagonist *Quake* are icons of the power of will (Life is a battle for survival. How do I seize control and blast my enemies into oblivion before they do the same to me?)

These characters are very cool, but there are seven other characters, powers and kinds of conflict that, for the most part, have gone unused in games. These offer a tremendous untapped resource for game designers.

Exploring the power of conscience, the power of love, the power of ambition, the power of authenticity, the power of reason, the power of fear or the power of imagination will spark a whole new generation of games and game characters. These innovations will give gaming a fresh new spark.

This brings me to my last point. More and different types of characters and character interactions equal more and different types of players (and wider commercial appeal). Worldwide mega hits like the movies *Titanic* and, more recently, *Spiderman* became commercial behemoths because they appealed to multiple audiences. (*Titanic* featured the power of love and *Spiderman* the power of conscience.)

Increasing the variety and complexity of characters in games will attract new and different players to the gaming community. Let's expand our imaginative and our commercial reach. Isn't it about time game designers expanded the power of their character repertoire?

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