CHAPTER 5

Character Traits

T he player-character and the NPCs who inhabit the game world have common traits as well as qualities that are distinct. When we discuss mobility in this chapter we will be primarily talking about the mobility of non-player-characters. When we discuss character emotion and memory, only NPCs are covered. Player emotions will be examined in Chapter 11, "Story Chiropractics." The remaining topics are shared equally. Skills and professions can be available to both, and both are revealed through action. In the section called "Characters in Opposition," we begin to explore relationships between characters: relationships NPCs have with each other, and between player-characters and NPCs. Here we'll confine ourselves to the reasons behind establishing relationships for dramatic purposes. In Chapter 6, "Character Encounters," we'll look at ways to bring these relationships to life within the game.

Mobility

Static NPCs, those that stand in one place throughout the entire game, are convenient for both players and programmers. Players like to know that their favorite auto mechanic or weaponsmith will always be available when they're needed. Some NPCs may not even inhabit the interactive space of the game's world, appearing only as images on communication devices within the world, or on the game's interface, although even then some contextual explanation for their presence on the interface is usually desirable. For example, if the part of the interface where the character appears represents a communication device.

Hybrid NPCs might also show up as static characters in the game world, and only become truly mobile in cut scenes. While this helps bring motion (and possibly emotion) into the world, it does so at the expense of making the player even more aware of how different cut scenes are from the rest of the game, a problem we will tackle later on.

As we saw in Chapter 4, "Character Roles," populating the world brings it alive, and while static NPCs—particularly articulate ones—can help, even those whose rightful place may be behind a store counter can feel mechanical to the player, and detrimental to immersion. Part of the solution to this is to write them as distinct characters. Another part of the solution is to also add NPCs who can move about, whether in a localized space, or throughout the world of the game.

Controlling the Space

On the surface, the two-character play *Oleanna* by David Mamet is about a charge of sexual harassment against a college professor by a female student. Actually, it is about a struggle for power. The play is set in the professor's office. As directed in the beginning, he is seated behind his desk, and the student is perched uncomfortably on a utilitarian chair. As the play progresses, the ebb and flow of the power struggle finally begins to tip decisively toward the student until at the end she is comfortably ensconced in his chair, and he is shifting uneasily in the other chair.

Figure 5.1 *Oleanna,* a struggle for control of turf.

Direction in theatre is all about positioning the characters within the space bounded by the set. The most rudimentary task facing the director is establishing sightlines so the entire audience can follow the action.

Allowing the audience to follow the natural course of the action is important in film as well. Orson Welles, concerned about producer Al Zugsmith's penchant for re-editing his directors' work, staged many scenes in *Touch of Evil*, all in single master shots or establishing shots that showed the entire scene at once. He supplied virtually no *coverage*, that is, additional shots like close-ups, or two-shots; instead, he orchestrated his actors to step in close to the camera for those angles. If the producer had tried to cut out pieces of these scenes, the result would be jarring *jump* cuts that disrupted the continuity of the scene.

Next the director must be aware of the aesthetics of composition to add visual interest to what the audience is watching. There are a lot of characters onstage when Brutus and his fellow conspirators assassinate *Julius Caesar* in Shakespeare's play, and when Marc Antony delivers his famous funeral speech:

> Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears;
> I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.
> The evil that men do lives after them;
> The good is oft interred with their bones.

Universal

Figure 5.2 Orson Welles arranges his actors with far more
precision than his tie.

The director must carefully arrange a composition that, unlike a painting, is fluid, chang-
ing from one moment to the next. Without this care, the crowd becomes a featureless rab-
ble, and detracts rather than adds to the drama. Notice how in Figure 5.3 director Joseph
Mankewicz uses the height of his set as well as depth to compose the scene in his film ver-
sion of *Julius Caesar*.

Warner Home Video

Figure 5.3 Marlon Brando as Marc Antony in the film
version of Julius Caesar.

We don't like stairs very much in video games. They can either add the necessity for additional character animation, or make our characters look funky going up and down if we avoid extra animations. Ramps are a slight improvement, and the opportunities for more interesting compositions make the effort to include height as well as depth of scene worthwhile. The balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet* would be drastically changed if Juliet happened to live on the ground floor, not to mention that the physical side of their relationship might have progressed much faster!

And, as in the example from *Oleanna*, directors must also be aware of the shifting balances of emotion, and relationships between characters that can be expressed through staging. A character who stands when another sits is in a dominant position. A character who moves uncomfortably close to another is being aggressive. A character who doesn't look at those sharing the same stage is considered aloof (or may just be preparing for a soliloquy, of course!). We recognize these actions on an instinctive level. We see them often enough in real life. And there is a more primitive instinct at work buried in our unconscious. We know what it means when the defeated wolf exposes its neck for the killing bite.

We can use this instinctive awareness of the significance of certain spatial relationships between characters in games to add emotion and dramatic tension to our scenes. It is particularly important because our characters are not always as expressive as live human beings. And resorting to cutting in for close-ups can disrupt the flow of the action. Instead of relying on cut scenes to establish relationships, we can use these techniques borrowed from theatre and film to suggest those relationships even as the player remains in control of the player-character.

For example, an NPC who cowers away from us, doesn't have to tell the player he's fearful. We can see that he is. (See "Exposition in Action" in Chapter 9 for other ways to show players things they need to know without burdening them with lengthy text passages.)

An irritating NPC can attach himself to us like the talkative bore, Noober, in the village of Nashkel in Baldur's Gate. Granting the name is an immersion-damaging play on the word *n00b,* the idea is still a good one.

n o t e

N00b: derived from the word newbie, meaning a newcomer in a multiplayer game. Newbie became noob, then evolved into n00b with the replacement of the o's with zeros in *d00dspeak*.

n o t e

D00dspeak: a pseudo-language that has developed in multiplayer gaming and elsewhere on the internet, originally intended to get around language filters. It is now in general usage among a certain segment of the internet population. It is characterized by deliberate misspellings like "teh" instead of "the" and the use of numbers in place of letters as in "phat l00t" which means "spoils of war that are of exceptional quality."

An aggressive NPC in a first-person shooter might step in close to the player-character—even try to back us into a corner, instead of simply opening fire when he spots us.

Imagine the player is Alice, and she desperately needs information from a white rabbit who is constantly disappearing around corners and down dark holes. Here the NPC's mobility becomes a puzzle.

Leaving the Space

> . . . before her was another long passage, and the White Rabbit was still in sight, hurrying down it. There was not a moment to be lost: away went Alice like the wind, and was just in time to hear it say, as it turned a corner, 'Oh my ears and whiskers, how late it's getting!' She was close behind it when she turned the corner, but the rabbit was no longer to be seen . . .
>
> —Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

The mobility of the player-character is taken for granted. This is the character we move through the game after all. We may give her all sorts of transportation options, which, if consistent with the game world, enforce the reality of that world, and the stories we mean to tell there. We can also alter her natural mobility in interesting ways.

In addition we can give insight into the character or increase suspense by removing that mobility to a greater or lesser degree. One of the most famous examples of this in films is LB Jeffries, James Stewart's character in Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, a globe-trotting photographer suddenly confined to a wheelchair by a broken leg. It is due to this temporary physical disability that his restlessness, his insatiable curiosity, and his high tech lenses turn him into a peeping tom, and witness to a possible murder. Another example is small, crippled ex-jockey, Sid Halley, in the best-selling mystery books by Dick Francis.

Figure 5.4 A cast on Jimmy Stewart's leg leads to the arrest of a killer.

Just as we saw *Ico*'s horns as a catalyst for the game's action, Princess Yorda's *lack* of mobility makes her dependent on the player-character and offers the player a unique set of challenges. In terms of story, it places her life in Ico's hand. In terms of gameplay, it offers a unique variation on physical puzzles. The player must ensure *both* Ico and Yorda surmount each hazard.

The player-character can have his mobility affected in any number of ways. It can slow him down or speed him up. He may be able to swim or not. He may be blind or corpulent or incredibly thin. Not only do these kinds of choices suggest gameplay, they obviously are a part of the physical dimension of a character.

In *Dark Age of Camelot*, Blanche, an NPC merchant of the city Tir na Nog, periodically deserts her post to go have a quick pint in a nearby pub. In that same game, NPCs called Filidhs (the name in ancient Irish law for the professional bardic class who were more schooled than ordinary bards) stroll from town to town in Hibernia, informing players who ask of various quests they have heard of in the vicinity. The game does a check on the player's list of completed quests, so that the Filidh only mentions quests new to the player. NPCs who do not remain stationary bring otherwise static areas to life; help characterize and separate game locales; and they are far easier on game engines than windblown trees and rippling water.

In the early days of *Everquest* one of the best items in the game was a pair of boots called Journeyman Boots that granted their wearer increased speed, very handy for getting across vast continents, or escaping from dangerous creatures, especially for characters who had no ability to cast speed spells. The key to the quest for obtaining the Journeyman Boots was to talk to a gnome NPC named Hasten Bootstrutter who was said to frequent the Rathe Mountains. Two problems made the quest difficult. The first was that Hasten, like many *Everquest* quest NPCs did not put in an appearance very often. And when he did, he did so swiftly, speeding from place to place, stopping only briefly, then speeding on.

This second problem was ingenious because it not only increased the difficulty of the quest, but it was in keeping with Hasten's character, as obviously was his name. So here an NPC's mobility becomes part of a puzzle. And this can be found in other puzzles and quests where an NPC will only appear at a designated place at a certain hour, or moves through the game world from location to location. We'll revisit Hasten in Chapter 19, "Enabling Story in Virtual Worlds," by the way.

Homer wrote epic poems, as we know, not sonnets or haiku. One of the important features of the epic style is the reappearance of characters throughout the telling of the story. And it suits games beautifully. As we move from level to level or location to location the reappearance of a character gives us:

- A sense of mobility even if the characters are essentially static. This character could still be, for the most part, static, moving only in the sense that she appears at different places in the game world at different times in the story. Here's an art-cheap solution to NPC mobility!
- An opportunity to advance the NPC's character. The more times a character appears, the more subtle can the growth or the development of the character be.

- An opportunity to advance or alter her relationship to the player-character. NPCs can show up from level to level, their relationship to the player-character altering as the player progresses. A lowly informer from level one may have his life saved by the player-character in level four, and then be driven to help the player-character for free in level seven.

- An opportunity for foreshadowing. The NPC can appear Cassandra-like to warn of dark perils ahead.

- An opportunity for recap as the NPC congratulates the player on past deeds.

- The comforting presence of a familiar face in alien surroundings. Game space can be extremely literal in small areas, but disorienting across levels or far-flung locations. The familiar NPC can help anchor or orient the player to a new setting.

- A feeling of fateful inevitability that can add to pace. In the odd pseudo-spaghetti western *Hannie Calder*, starring Raquel Welch, actor Stephen Boyd plays an enigmatic character known only as "The Man in Black" who appears at key dramatic moments. The audience knows he must be significant, but must wait until the very end of the movie to learn what that significance is. (No, he's not a film critic.) This takes us into Carl Jung symbolic territory, that shadowy realm we'll look at briefly in Chapter 8, "Respecting Story."

- A way to cut down on the number of characters in the game that must be drawn. A re-occurring character can provide the exposition and services that might have been rendered by several characters before the game started to strain the perimeter of the project budget.

In some games, NPCs can be truly mobile. This is unavoidable in the literal space of a virtual world. If an NPC needs to get somewhere, and the player-character is standing there watching, the NPC must make at least the pretext of a graceful exit before teleporting to his next appearance. In other games, NPCs can be just as literal as the world, and can be followed like Hasten in *Everquest*.

If we as designers don't want that character followed, yet still want to maintain the verisimilitude of our world, we have to find some obstacle to place in front of stalker player-characters: a door slammed in the player-character's face; NPC speed greater than the PC's, so she just out-distances him; or allowing the NPC to jump into the only cab in sight are examples of obstacles that help maintain the fiction of the game world.

So, we can use the mobility of characters in any numbers of ways. A static world is a dead world. Mobile characters bring it to life. The type of mobility can add to both character dimension and story. What other traits add to gameplay, contribute to story, and illuminate character?

Physical Skills

In simulations with story added, we get "you are a crack helicopter pilot" and then you must learn from scratch, crashing often. The same is true in many types of games, as we saw in the *Lunar Lander* example from *The Dig*. It is one of the most fiction-destroying conflicts between character and gameplay we come across. Players of simulations are much more forgiving of this paradox than players of action games who expect to be proficient with all sorts of exotic firepower as soon as they find a new weapon. We'll address the special case of simulations later, but in all other types of games we must make allowances for players' true skills, and simplify for them, or all those crashes will stop the story dead and could make them come to hate their avatar.

Once we make the choice to simplify real world mechanics in favor of gameplay mechanics we're faced with another challenge. The skills must be in character and in the context of the game world. Most games handle this well in terms of gameplay at the expense of character and immersion.

Skills are the bedrock of the development of the player-character in action games. The PC can learn special new moves as well as find new tools and weapons. Often these moves are generic, e.g. an elaborate circling kick common to martial arts. Hopefully they are in character for the PC such as Sly Cooper's special moves like sidling along a narrow ledge. They serve a double function: a reward for completing a level and almost certainly will be needed to overcome an obstacle later in the game.

In role-playing games, there are complicated trees of skills, often charted in the game or as a nicely printed insert in the box. These skills are, at first glance, vastly different from one another depending upon the type of character the player has chosen to play, his profession, and racial characteristics. We'll discuss race, as it is used in computer games in a moment.

Without doubt, some skills can be unique. A warrior in most RPGs lacks the ability to heal, and most clerics cannot wear the heavy armor of warriors. Still, many skills have counterparts in all characters. In virtual worlds, this is done for play balance reasons, so that while players can appear to select a vast array of races, professions, and skills, in fact they are often selecting little more than different names and character graphics.

One way to enhance character is often overlooked when special skills are applied in most games. Story and gameplay are very different. Game designers have a natural tendency (being gamers more often than they are writers) to introduce skills only as part of gameplay. The player is told at the end of a level—often in a line of text ending in an exclamation mark—that she has learned "Critical Strike III!" or "a new language: Grislik! Now you can speak to Grisls!" This is an easy (and cheap!) way of informing the player, and usually makes sense in terms of gameplay even as it destroys the illusion that the player-character is having adventures in a real world.

It's like one of those TV commercials where a disembodied announcer suddenly speaks to a character alone in his own home. This has been a convention of commercials since advertisements first started appearing in print, and the pictured character spoke directly to the reader. It works fine in commercials—although these days the convention is often mocked even as it's being used—but has no place when we're trying to preserve the fiction of the world, and it passes up a golden opportunity for character growth or development.

Without much additional effort, the special move or skill can be tied to the player-character more closely. It can be magically granted or taught by a mentor or other character who has a relationship with the player-character. It can be an undiscovered or even better an *under-developed* talent that the player-character becomes more proficient in as it is used.

Now couple this with a delivery system that doesn't harm the fiction of the game world. Many games use NPCs as trainers already. But who wants to stop their progress in the game and go off to train someplace for even a few minutes? They shouldn't have to. A simple change of the game text from "Congratulations! You've just learned a new skill: Crêpe Making!" to "A Cordon Bleu chef has consented to teach you how to properly prepare crêpes!" works fine. In Chapter 6, "Character Encounters," we'll see how to develop this specific relationship between player-characters and "trainer" NPCs, as well as other relationships.

Skills can be added to NPCs as well as player-characters. We see this all the time in games like *Dungeon Siege* and *X-Com: UFO Defense*, where NPCs who either join the player-character or are controlled by the player gain skills and power as long as they survive in the game.

In action games, mobs get increasingly more difficult. Why? Because the challenge must be increased. But why introduce bigger monsters every level? Why can't the surviving monsters from a previous level go running to *their* mentors and demand to be taught skills to counter the player's own?

Dungeon Keeper gave an entirely new perspective to action and strategy games. It was a wicked role-reversal game where players actually controlled all those mobs we are usually mowing down. We don't need to go that far every time. But giving mobs players who have already been defeated the opportunity
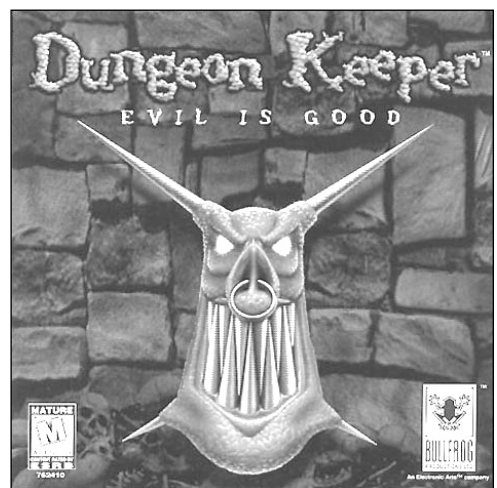
Figure 5.5 Monsters finally have their day in *Dungeon Keeper*.

for revenge is far more interesting respectful of world fiction than just re-spawning them. Allowing them to come back for more, armed with new skills, also gives us the chance to grow and develop them as characters. This personalizes the battle, and increases the tension in the same way the *Halloween* series' Jason had the ability to bounce back from axe blows, fire, hanging, and all sorts of other grisly attacks that would have finished many a good monster.

New skills can be applied to any NPC: sidekick, mentor, major or minor character; and is an easy way to add dimension to their characters.

Professions

For NPCs, roles, such as merchant that I talked about in the previous chapter, and professions are really one and the same. Quest Giver is a role, but not a profession. Trainers can be both. The teacher of a skill may do it for a living, having never actually been required to practice what he preaches. An interesting facet of LT Bonham, Tommy Lee Jones' character in *The Hunted*, is that while he was an exceptional trainer of killers, he had never killed anyone. We also have enough examples of people who weren't talented enough to be successful at a skill that they teach it instead to inspire the derogatory comment "Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach." This is attributed to that caustic observer of humankind, George Bernard Shaw, a friend of William Archer. The actual quote from *Man and Superman* reads "He who can, does. He who cannot, teaches."

Ironically, William Archer was himself a failed playwright. Archer puts it a bit more kindly: "Assuredly, if I had the power, I should write plays instead of writing about them; but one may have a great love for an art, and some insight into its principles and methods, without the innate faculty required for actual production."

Some trainers can be both teacher and practitioner. It is common to find a tennis coach or *agility* instructor who also competes. In agility, in fact, almost without exception, all trainers also run their dogs in competition.

n o t e

AGILITY TRAINING: the form of dog training that teaches dogs to run courses of obstacles like teeter-totters and weave poles. Scores are based on speed and how well the obstacles are handled.

Some NPCs have professions to serve their characters or the story, but have no specific role in gameplay terms. Traditionally, these characters are confined in cut scenes or are limited in their interaction with the player-character. A good example is Kane from *Command & Conquer* who remains removed from the gameplay, working his villainy in cut scenes.

Figure 5.6 Kane commands in *Command and Conquer,* but only in cut scenes.

However, to segregate characters in cut scenes, or other non-functional parts of the game, makes little sense. One of the things that sets our characters apart from those in other media is that ours can serve gameplay as well as story. Writing characters who only perform one function is to not respect them. They are being wasted.

As I said in the introduction, creating a game with story in it is an adventure in balance. Both gameplay and story deserve equal attention. If one doesn't get its due, that component will feel weak. It's a vicious circle. Create enough games with weak story and people will begin to think stories in games *must* be weak. Stories need the support of characters. And since those characters can be used to support gameplay it is a shame to squander them.

Race

Race in RPGs does not mean Asian, Black, Caucasian, or Hispanic, but is used to differentiate between human and non-human sentient beings such as elves, dwarves, lizards, ants, and so on. Each race is traditionally given certain unique characteristics: both strengths and weaknesses. Traditionally, some are better suited to certain professions; for instance, elves are presumed to be better archers, thanks to J.R.R. Tokien; and ant-like creatures can be super-productive like the Klackons in the *Master of Orion* series of strategy games.

That is not to say that players cannot choose to play humanoid characters with skin color and other features to duplicate the appearance of human races. This is often allowed in RPGs, especially their multiplayer versions, so that players can differentiate how they look from one another. Some players choose to mimic how they look in real life. Detailed character selection processes—*Star Wars Galaxies* has one of the most flexible—allow for a huge range of looks.

Figure 5.7 Races *Master of Orion III* style.

Relationships between races are most often carefully distanced from life here in our real world. Racial differences, even animosities, are easier to deal with when we're talking about lizards and cat people. One exception to this is *Earth & Beyond*'s racial animosities, which, even among aliens, bear more than a passing resemblance to our own troubled planet.

For most games, the argument goes that we're creating games here that are fun to play. And in virtual worlds, there are very real risks of tension between players. I remember when *World War II Online* was in beta that there was publicity and concern over the fact that some players wanted to know if they could play Nazis, and would there be concentration camps.

Pussy-footing around race in single-player games though is only to cut us writers and players off from the grand diversity that racial and cultural differences can provide us. Games often disguise the ethnic and cultural aspects of their characters, particularly when they are villains, much in the way we were censored in the 1970s in television when we attempted to portray organized crime. So we ended up with a lot of characters with New York and New Jersey accents with last names like Smith, Graham, or Robinson. I remember writing an episode of *Charlie's Angels*, and to satirize this censorship I made the criminal organization a men's club. It was changed by that episode's producer back to the typical white bread crime syndicate of the era. Of course, today we have the hit TV series *The Sopranos*, so times do change.

Grand Theft Auto: Vice City is a notable exception, but the game's developer, Rockstar, was the subject of protests from Haitian-American groups for their portrayal of Haitian gangsters. Rockstar responded that the protest was focusing on remarks made by fictional characters from a rival Cuban gang, and taken out of context. Both the protest and the defense are borderline for me. I'd like to see more genuine racial differences in games simply because of the opportunities for characterization and conflict they present. But I do think a major proviso is in order.

Avoid stereotypes! Here is another reason for taking the time to create fully rounded characters. I don't think we need to artificially balance characters, another restriction imposed on television in the past. If we have a Black villain, we don't necessarily need his exact counterpart on the side of law and order. But we need characters who live and breathe, not just function as villain or police officer.

We shouldn't make games to lecture to our audience. They are meant to entertain. But we have the ability to influence that audience in innumerable ways. I'm straying into territory covered in Chapter 20 here. I'll leave you with a last thought. Writers who think about these things must answer this question: "Do we portray society as it is, or as we might like it to be?" Each of us must answer that question in our own way. Whatever the answer, we do owe it to our characters, our audiences, and ourselves to approach the issue with the concern it deserves. And the same concern for race also occupies us when we discuss sex.

Sex

No, I'm not going to help you write better sex scenes here. Sorry. I'm talking about how games treat the sexes differently.

I'll mention stereotypes again. Don't write them! Even if they are drawn that way! A big step toward respecting characters is to respect the human beings they are modeled on.

Game publishers face a dilemma. While the demographic is changing, the primary market for video games in most game types remains young and male. Young heterosexual males like to look at sexy women. So whenever we see female characters, they are scantily clad and abundantly endowed in every ad, and on every box. Again *Star Wars Galaxies* deserves mention for allowing players to create female characters with far more diverse looks than usual. Too bad all the dancers were forced to dress like they belonged in topless bars.

Yet publishers want to grow their market. How do they do that without turning off their main constituency? Would Lara Croft have been as big a hit, if she'd looked more like Marian the Librarian? Probably not. Men and women both like to identify with preternaturally fit and attractive characters in movies, and in games they like to play them.

Figure 5.8a Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider II.*

Figure 5.8b *Lineage II.* No stereotypes here at all.

Figure 5.8c Female character in "full armor" from *Everquest II.*

Figure 5.8d Eowen's armor in *Return of the King* is a bit more practical.

It's easy to create NPCs who are not so blessed. After all "pleasantly plump" Bess was Nancy Drew's sidekick, not the lead sleuth. And we have plenty of examples of NPCs in computer games who are less than gorgeous, although they usually are mentors, sidekicks, villains, and the like. What do we do with the player-character?

We took some criticism in *Dark Side of the Moon* for our player-character Jake Wright even though it was a first person game and Jake was never seen. Some reviewers, and players too, thought he was voiced too wimpily. We wanted him to start out at least as an uncertain young man to give him room to grow, but never got him to the point where his voice matched his later heroic actions. This would not have been as much of a problem, I

think, but because you can't see the character in a first person game, you are forced to rely solely on voice performance.

Any game that gives players the choice to create a male or female gives us an additional thing to think about. The male and female characters are often graphically different. But they are always functionally identical. We'll see in Chapters 18 and 19 how virtual worlds have so many things to balance. This was an easy decision to make. It meant that there would be fewer protests from either sex that their characters are being discriminated against. But single-player games could be designed so that the differences between females and males could be used to differentiate how each sex attacks the obstacles in the game.

I'm not saying Lara would be a better character if we took her guns away from her. But if a player wants to play a female character who can overcome obstacles with skills that rely more on intellect or diplomacy, why not? (And the same holds true for male characters as well.)

Other media gives us a whole range of lead female characters who are strong. Let's stay away from art and literature and focus on genre fiction since that is what most popular entertainment is all about. Genre fiction requires strong heroes, even if their strength is at first hard to find.

Films have their swordwielders like Miranda Otto, Eowen in *Return of the King*; and their gun-toters like Jodie Foster's Clarice Starling in *Silence of the Lambs*; and all the martial arts women in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. But these women have a lot more going for them than their abilities with weapons. Many of them also manage time for the romance often required of them, although Clarice is really just in love with her job. In contrast, look at how superficially the romance in the second Lara Croft film is handled, and how little we care about the characters in general. The film is true to its computer game roots.

The *Alien* series features tough-as-nails Ripley. But the same actress, Sigourney Weaver, was also the agoraphobic psychologist in *Copycat*, Dian Fossey in *Gorillas in the Mist*, and a strong first lady in *Dave*. Look how Jamie Lee Curtis's spunky Laurie Strode, who is basically only fighting for her life in *Halloween*, becomes the tormented woman who finally takes the fight to Jason in *Halloween H20: 20 Years Later*.

All of these female characters could find a home in computer games. Games should be able to do the same: give us female player-characters who are skilled and fun to play even if they are not superwomen. And female characters in general deserve more care than deciding how much cleavage they show. We need to ask ourselves how to make them attractive *characters* even if they are not so stereotypically conceived. The physical dimension is the easy one. That also means it's easy to rely on it too heavily. Once we make the effort to reveal their psychological and sociological dimensions, the physical dimension regains its proper stature equal to the others.

Male characters suffer from a lack of respect, too. There are no shortage of male stereotypes in games from killing machine player-characters to one-note villains, and all deserve more thinking by their creators. But there are abundant numbers of male heroes, a few women. And the wide range possible in both sexes can pave the way to fuller, richer characters.

Eowen's stand against the nasgul is all the more thrilling because we've seen what she is capable of beyond swordplay in her helping the people she will one day lead; her unquestioning defense of her sometimes less than kingly father; and her obvious love for Aragorn. Because we have been allowed to see these other facets of her character there is more at stake, and the climactic battle becomes emotionally charged on all sorts of levels beyond the visceral.

New Line Cinema

Figure 5.9 Another side of Eowen.

Character Emotion

We writers deal with two types of emotions. There is the emotion we hopefully generate in our audience. We'll talk about what our audience, the player, is feeling in Chapter 11. Here we are going to look at the emotions of our characters.

In *Earth & Beyond* there is a Jenquai quest from an NPC you've previously gone on a quest for. This time you're informed that a Progen shipment of weapons needs to be intercepted. Jenquais and Progens have a long history of conflict, and there is little love lost on either side. You go to the coordinates given and sure enough there is a ship there, but its captain claims it is not carrying weapons but children. Is he telling the truth? If he is, then do you withdraw, or blow him out of the sky anyway? I chose to let him go and returned to the NPC who was furious with me, calling the children of our enemies "weapons." It is a beautiful example of an NPC revealing character through emotion in response to a player's actions.

As we saw in *Lara Croft II: The Cradle of Life*, just going through the motion of emotion is not enough. Emotion doesn't just happen in our characters. We can't pick and choose from a shopping list of emotions and expect them to feel real. This leads to stereotypes and clichés. Emotion must be prepared for in a character's creation, and invoke the actions that character takes.

Sometimes the lack of emotion can be equally compelling. We have the extreme of the heartless, soulless killer in dead teenager movies because relentless evil is, on the surface at least, more dramatic than the petty evil of an embezzler. Yet when such evil is combined with the mundane character, the result is even more gripping. In *Devil in the White City,*

Erik Larson's bestselling account of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, we meet H.H. Holmes, one of the most prolific serial killers of all time. Larson contrasts the remarkable architectural and construction effort that went into creating this wonder of the age with Holmes' methodical building of his hotel complete with private gas chamber and crematorium. Holmes was no flamboyant Hannibal the Cannibal. He was a pharmacist, fussy, quiet, and reserved; and he went about his business with a deliberate precision that matched the fair's builders.

When more emotion is called for, it cannot be dragged out of the bleachers just because the story demands it. The characters, if three-dimensional, have the seeds of emotion planted within them. The emotion is inevitable because of who they are. The film *Mystic River* proceeds with an inevitability that is overtly on display for most characters, and for the most part, they work beautifully, with the possible exception of Annabeth Marcus, played by Laura Linney. She has a chilling turn at the end of the film that while it may explain why she stays with her husband (Sean Penn), still feels like little more than a shocking surprise.

Emotion is prepared for not only with character growth, but with its development too. A character can hold the emotion inside longer and longer, letting it build until it must erupt like lava from a dormant volcano. I wrote earlier about a character on *Edge of Night* who I killed off. Her name was Nicole Cavanaugh. Her husband Miles did not allow himself to grieve for her, keeping his emotions locked inside for a week's worth of shows at least. He fends off his friends who offer various shoulders to cry upon. The audience was thrown by this usually compassionate doctor who could get very emotional about helping his patients, but who seemingly refused to mourn his dead wife. He remains as unmoved as a head on Mount Rushmore until one night, alone on his apartment's balcony, his emotion bursts forth as *anger* at Nicole's leaving him. Once he could deal with his anger, and all the conflicting emotions it produced in him, he could begin the process of mourning and healing.

With the proper background, growth, and development, a character is finally ready to experience the emotions that draw an audience, our players, into the story of our game. They can't then just occur. There is still another step, and that is we must choose the correct moment for their release. Mistimed emotion can be as ugly as unprepared–for emotion.

Characters in Opposition

Characters can experience a range of emotions in solitude. But drama is most often achieved when characters collide.

Conflict

Conflict has several definitions, all of them relevant.

n o t e

CONFLICT: Webster says conflict is 1) A state of open, prolonged fighting: warfare. 2) A state of disharmony: clash. 3) The opposition or simultaneous functioning of mutually exclusive impulses, desires or tendencies. 4) A collision.

That third definition is interesting. Conflict can occur *within* characters as well as *between* them. For the most part we'll be considering conflict between characters, but it is good to be aware of the potential for interior conflict, as *Hamlet* has shown us.

Lajos Egri states "Conflict is the heartbeat of all writing." And "Since most of us . . . hide our true selves from the world, we are interested in witnessing the things happening to those who are forced to reveal their true characters under the stress of conflict."

William Archer is blunter: ". . . we need go no further than the simple psychological observation that human nature loves a fight, whether it be with clubs or with swords, with tongues or with brains." (Games have the first one down anyway!)

It is not enough to set up a single conflict and let the player-character bang up against it over and over again. Conflict is seeded through the story in much the same way that clouds are seeded to provide rain. As the characters progress, the stakes of each conflict should rise. This can't be done artificially. "Oh! Almost at the end of the fourth level! Time for another conflict!" Egri calls unmotivated conflicts like these "jumps." Conflict jumps are as distracting to an audience as jump cuts are in a film. Rising conflict grows naturally as strong characters grow in the intensity of their opposition toward one another.

Warner Brothers

Figure 5.10 Characters at war in Edward Albee's
Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

Egri: "In a play, each conflict causes the one after it. Each is more intense than the one before. The play moves, propelled by the conflict created by the characters in their desire to reach their goal."

Here is another solid reason to develop characters and story along with the gameplay. Now narrative and gameplay are not at war with one another, but working in concert. If they are created together, puzzles don't appear out of thin air; NPCs won't arbitrarily show up as obstacles, and boss mobs won't just attack because it is the end of a level.

Again we see story and gameplay complementing each other. This is great for a game design, but we don't want all our characters getting along so well! How do we prevent that and ensure there will be plenty of opportunity for conflict?

Orchestration

Egri uses this term to describe the selection of characters writers make to ensure conflict in their story. He says, "When you are ready to select characters for your play, be careful to orchestrate them right. If all the characters are the same type—for instance, if all of them are bullies—it will be like an orchestra of nothing but drums."

That we should populate the world of a game with a range of characters is self-evident. Without diversity they would all get very monotonous. But simple diversity is not enough. The characters should not only be different, but orchestrated as well.

Characters can be of similar professions, religions, political persuasions, races, sexes, anything; but they shouldn't be the same *type* of people. One could be dedicated to her job, another indifferent. One could be a Mother Teresa, another a hate-filled fanatic. Both could be Republicans. One might be moderate, another a right wing ideologue. Both could be Asian. One teenager might be very traditional, another might be indistinguishable from teenagers of other races. One businesswoman might be Estée Lauder, another might be Martha Stewart.

Once we've established potential conflict, we should remember to keep the characters equally strong, as we've discussed. Strong in mind, strong in purpose. Worthy adversaries create drama in games as on the playing field. A soccer game with a winning score of 1 to 0 is much more exciting than a game with a score of 14 to 1. In the end, one side may win, or it may even be a draw. It is the getting to that inevitable conclusion that gives us our drama.

"Orchestration," Egri says, "demands well-defined and uncompromising characters in opposition, moving from one pole toward another through conflict."
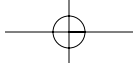
Those poles are character growth. As our player-character battles the villain, the player must adapt because the villain changes. I'm not talking about artificial intelligence, but scripted adjustments that alter the playing field as the game progresses. In such a dynamic environment the possibilities for tension and surprise are infinite. And these are qualities the best stories share with the best games.

Memory

"There's rosemary, that's for remembrance."

—William Shakespeare

"It doesn't matter who my father was; it matters who I remember he was."

—Anne Sexton

Each writer has his or her own favorite theme. We come back to it as inevitably as the tide returns to shore. "Favorite" may be the wrong word. We are compelled toward these themes by all that makes us who we are. We have no choice in the matter. My theme is memory. The past and my characters' recollections of it haunts them throughout my stories.

I call such moments of memory in my writing "echoes." They can be the verbal reminiscences of characters; flashbacks; symbols; flashes of déjà vu. When Tim Robbins climbs into the wrong car for the second time in his life in *Mystic River* and turns to look out the rear window, it is a powerful echo that the audience hears on a Jungian level.

It shouldn't be surprising that I'm most generally regarded as a mystery writer since mysteries often concern themselves with buried secrets, some literally. A play I wrote, *The Man Who Came to Murder*, concerns a 1950 Plymouth resurrected by workers digging a pool in the backyard of a modern Hollywood Hills home. There is a corpse inside. My personal favorite of the episodes I wrote for *Charlie's Angels* is called "Rosemary for Remembrance." It begins in a cemetery where the above Shakespearean quote is carved on a tombstone, and that story also features the literal unearthing of an important object from the past. Fifteen years later I wrote an episode of *Star Trek: Next Generation* called "Remember Me." An epidemic of disappearances strikes the Enterprise and only one character can remember those gone, including some characters' closest friends, and most of the regular cast members.

In the computer game *The Riddle of Master Lu*, the player-character Robert Ripley visits lost civilizations, and must solve their many secrets of the past in order to survive. I've already mentioned how the mystery of Jake's past in *Dark Side of the Moon* drives him. Even in media as collaborative as TV and computer games, writers and designers can explore those themes closest to our souls.
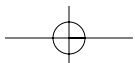
I don't mean to suggest that everybody — or anybody! — should adapt memory as their own. But memory is an excellent way to expose backstory, reveal character, and create emotion.

I was designing a new adventure game called *Sideshow* when we decided *The Riddle of Master Lu* deserved a sequel. *Sideshow* was set aside, and financial difficulties of the company resulted in neither game being completed.

The story of *Sideshow* concerned the player-character who suffers horrific nightmare flashbacks of a childhood friend who fell to his death from a roller coaster ride. After an opening nightmare, the player-character, now an adult, arrives back in his hometown, which he has not visited in many years, to try and come to terms with the original incident, and to figure out why the nightmares have returned after so long a time.

The amusement park that made the town a tourist attraction closed soon after that accident, and the town is now struggling to stay alive. So here I had an opportunity to contrast the town of the past with the town of the present. For this purpose, I designed a button on the interface that I called a Memory Key. At any location in the game that the player-character knew, the button would glow. When the player clicked on the button he heard a voice over memory of what the location used to look like.

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                         *  *  *

A1.  LOOK AT DOOR OR BUILDING

                         DAVID (v.o.)
Willow Falls Public Library. Growing up in a small town
like this, the only ticket we had to the rest of the
world was through that door.

                         *  *  *
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This device gave me several opportunities for character story and gameplay:

- The memories were useful in creating the contrast of the two towns, past and present.
- They provided needed exposition.
- They provoked an emotional response in both PC and player that grew over time as the player became more invested in the character.
- I could contrast the boy character with his dreams and the adult character with his nightmares, revealing character growth and development in the perspective he brought to these memories.

- Other characters would have a different recollection of past events. The player, armed with knowledge from the Memory Key, could recognize those differences.

- I was also able to include clues and items from the town's past to solve various present-day puzzles. For example, the hidden cache beneath the hideaway the boys used to play in (based on a similar hideaway I played in as a boy—write what you know!) provided the player-character with several useful tools.

One single-player design that I later adapted for a possible virtual world included generations. In essence, the player played not one, but multiple characters, three in the single-player version. In the multiplayer version, it allowed for true player death. The player really could live through his children.

This idea, of being able to play succeeding generations in the same family, fascinated me. The rites of passage . . . the memories. . . . In both designs the game engine took screenshots of the significant moments of a player-character's life such as the battle with a spectacular opponent or the completion of an epic quest. Then in the next generation, a family album could be accessed to relive those moments and, in the multiplayer version, share them with friends.

Memories evoke powerful emotions. Whether or not your theme has anything at all to do with memory or the past—though many do it seems—memory can be an invaluable tool for writers of games.

Revealing Character Through Action

As I said in the introduction, games are an action medium. Every time we stop to make players read text, or listen to long speeches, we are essentially hitting the pause button for them. Sometimes pauses are a good thing. We want to design natural breakpoints into the game in the same way chapters break up a book or commercials divide network television into acts. Breaks between levels or rewards like the cut scenes that appear when players complete special quests in *Final Fantasy XI*, even the pause key itself, can provide a needed break in the action for those other needs gamers occasionally have like food and rest and real life.

Mostly though, a gamer whose gameplay is interrupted is an impatient gamer, and impatient gamers are unhappy gamers. A lot of writers in all media wrestle with this issue. And it's important enough that I'm focusing on it twice: once here with characters, and again in Chapter 10, "Charting New Territory," when we're studying story. It may not be possible to reveal character solely in action, but every chance we can, we should take.

In his sidebar, Noah Falstein, producer and game designer for LucasArts, Dreamworks, and many others, takes a look at revealing characters through the action of gameplay.

Noah Falstein, Writer/Designer

Do, don't show.

Every freshman writing class reiterates the admonition, "Show, don't tell". This is solid advice; it is much more engrossing to read an account that shows a character doing something interesting than to have a character or narrator simply tell the reader what happened. This applies to stories in the interactive realm as well. Some early adventure games would simply tell you that you needed to kill the evil wizard because he was—well, evil! And plus, he will enslave the world if you don't stop him! And then probably destroy it, or other evil stuff. . . . Gradually this progressed to actually show the evil wizard in an evil act, usually kidnapping a princess who was betrothed to the character you control. But with interactive storytelling, there's a transcendent principle: *do, don't show*. Build the relationships into the actions the

Figure 5.11 Noah Falstein.

player takes and the direct relationships that the player experiences through the game, not in the backstory. If you're told that a princess is in love with a dashing young adventurer, it's weak. If you're shown that she loves him in a flashback of moonlit nights of romance, or a cut-scene with her silhouetted by flickering firelight, that's a little better. But if you have her demonstrate her love by sacrificing her own freedom to save you from capture and defeat in the game, then in the parlance of Hollywood, "now it's personal." By aligning the story with the gameplay, you evoke the emotions in the player directly, without having to appeal to a sometimes vain hope of sympathy.

Examples range from the classic "Death of Floyd" in *Planetfall*, where a selfless robot helps your character—you—directly, to more recent games like *Starcraft* or *Jak & Daxter*. One of my favorites is in the first segment of *Starcraft*'s single player campaign. The player controls a character who reports to a General. The General is clearly not to be trusted, but there's no choice as the player must follow his orders. Then he abandons you at a critical moment—not in a cut scene, but in the midst of a tough battle—and you are left to fend for yourself against what seems like impossible odds. The creators of *Starcraft* could simply have told you that the General was a bad guy, or shown him strangling underlings in classic Darth Vader fashion, but it was much more effective to have him betray your proxy in the midst of gameplay, and let you suffer the effects directly by having to fight your way out of the situation. Then later in the game when the General returns to the field of battle and you're given the chance to get your revenge it is a ruthlessly satisfying resolution. By building the story arc into the gameplay itself and having the repercussions of the General's actions affect the main character that you control, the Blizzard designers and writers achieve a powerful impact. Go thou and do likewise!

First let's make sure we understand what we mean when we say action. It is not synonymous with physical activity, its common definition. Physical activity, such as sports, fighting a fire, chases, combat and so on, are action, but they are not the only type of action. We also call making a decisive decision "taking action." A commentator can describe a chess match as filled with action: two minds battling it out with move and countermove. A sharp exchange of dialogue in a courtroom drama is action.

Any one of these is an opportunity to reveal character. Let's start with physical activity since that's what action consists most of in games. In sports, we see character, or the lack of it, in every contest: the gracious victor or the player who throws his racket against a wall; the linebacker who helps up the quarterback he's just sacked or the tackler who deliberately tries to injure an opponent to take him out of the game; the boxer who waits for his opponent to climb to his feet or the one who hits below the belt; the enforcer in hockey; the cheat; the team player; the braggart; the encouraging teammate; the taunter. The list is long.

How characters face danger reveals much about them. As I write this, a firefighter in Wyoming was sentenced to ten years in prison for setting fires to create work. Contrast this with the heroism of 9/11. Compare the dead serious faces of both the pursuer and the pursued in the classic car chase in *Bullitt* with the clownish expressions of Jackie Chan in any number of chases on foot, bicycle, or in cars. Every war movie ever made fills its squad of soldiers or sailors or pilots with characters who will approach combat in many diverse ways.

We don't need monologues, voice overs, or comments from other characters. "Hey, Jim Bob! Lookit that dude drive! He really knows what he's doin'!" We can *see* he knows what he's doing. Or not. Walter Hill, writer and/or director of action movies like *48 Hours*, *Streets of Fire*, and *The Warriors* is reputed to have answered a reporter's question on character like this: "How do I write character? I have somebody stick a gun in his face and see how long it takes him to blink." Whether you agree with him or not, that's revealing character in action!

There is no need to waste a physical action scene with just action. Look at *Die Hard*, then look at all the direct-to-video clones over the years. One of the differences is in how John McClane (Bruce Willis) reveals character in almost every scene whether he is crawling through one of those ubiquitous air ducts, or pounding a terrorist to a pulp.

What about the other cases? The Cuban missile crisis reveals character in *Thirteen Days* in scene after scene of anger, fear, conflict, and decisive decisions, many of which take place in rooms with paneled walls. We want to keep our character revelation short and sweet. Remember our impatient gamer? Remember too the moment at the very beginning of the

Figure 5.12 "Enough of this running s**t." *The Warriors*, directed by Walter Hill.

movie *Air Force One* when Harrison Ford gives his speech, and the reactions of his Chief of Staff and Secretary of Defense when he diverges from his prepared remarks. A startled look and two lines of dialogue establish something very important is happening, and these two characters don't like it very much.

The battling of two minds can be full of action, little of it physical. Long before *L.A. Confidential*, Curtis Hanson wrote *The Silent Partner*, a nifty little thriller set at Christmas time in a bank at the Eaton Centre in Toronto. It so captivated me I sat through it twice in a row. The story concerns a bank teller (Elliot Gould) who realizes that a Santa Claus (Christopher Plummer) ringing a bell for charitable donations is actually casing the bank. Gould decides to rob the bank *before* Plummer can, so that Plummer will get away with only a small portion of the swag, and Gould can pocket the rest.

This happens quite early on in the movie. The rest of the film is devoted to a battle of wits between the two with remarkably little physical action. Although there are a couple of shockingly violent scenes, most of the physical action deals with sticking fingers into marmalade jars and running after garbage trucks. The true action of the film concentrates on the increasingly ingenious mind games the two play on one another once Plummer realizes what has happened; and the character layers revealed, especially in Gould's bank teller.
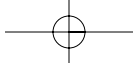
We don't need to eliminate physical action. Far from it. But we can certainly intersperse other types of action amidst the mayhem, and *all* action gives us a chance to reveal character.

I conclude this examination of character in the next chapter where we discuss ways to handle the encounters between player-characters and NPCs.