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Narrative & World Building

Believable Game Characters

Motivation, Player Agency and NPC Behaviour



Believable Game Characters

Lecture Contents

- ① Understanding Character Motivation**
- ② Motivation, Conflict and Player Agency**
- ③ Communicating Character Through Gameplay**
- ④ Case Studies and Discussion**



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Character Motivation



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Why Motivation Matters

Character motivation

The reason a character pursues a goal or makes a choice.

Player understanding

Clear motives help players understand allies, enemies and their own role.

Gameplay connection

Objectives, dialogue and NPC responses should express the character's priorities.



The Last of Us (2013) · Naughty Dog / SIE

What does the player learn about Joel through his actions?



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Goals, Needs and Fears

Goal

What does the character want to achieve in this quest or encounter?

Needs

What deeper emotional need influences their decisions?

Fear

What do they want to avoid, and what might they sacrifice?



Red Dead Redemption 2 (2018) · Rockstar Games

Can you identify a goal, need and fear for Arthur?



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Internal and external motivations

Internal

A belief, emotion or personal need drives the character.

External

A threat, obligation or quest gives them a reason to act.

Game Example:

In Papers, Please, the inspector faces border rules and the cost of supporting a family.



Papers, Please (2013) · Lucas Pope / 3909

How can rules and rewards make competing pressures meaningful to the player?



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Backstory, consistency and conflict

Backstory

Choose a past experience that explains present behaviour.

External

NPC responses should follow their priorities and circumstances.

Conflict

Competing motives can create difficult quests and dialogue choices.

Consistency

Show what causes a character to change their mind or trust the player.



Baldur's Gate 3 (2023) · Larian Studios

How could the same request receive different responses as trust changes?



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Player Agency and Character Goals



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Player agency and character goals

Player Agency

Players choose actions within the limits the game provides.

Character goals

The protagonist may have priorities the player does not share.

Meaningful Choice

Make options understandable and show how characters respond.

Design Challenge

Check whether objectives and rewards support the intended motivation.



Life is Strange (2015) · DONTNOD / Square Enix



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Character Through Gameplay



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Performance and NPC behaviour

Character performance

Posture, expression and timing can reveal an NPC's intention.

Dialogue and sound

Pauses, tone and reactions can suggest an unspoken motive.

Interactive behaviour

Design responses to player actions, reputation and changing circumstances.

Readability

Make important reactions clear through the game's camera, audio and feedback.



Baldur's Gate 3 (2023) · Larian Studios

**Does the performance
help the player interpret
the dialogue?**



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Character Case Studies



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Case study: Joel and Ellie

Initial Goal

Joel is hired to smuggle Ellie out of a military quarantine zone.

Developing Relationship

Their relationship gradually changes from reluctant cooperation into genuine trust and attachment.

Gameplay Connection

Combat, exploration and shared interactions allow the player to experience their growing dependence on one another.

Believability

Their changing dialogue, behaviour and reactions make the relationship feel earned rather than simply told to the player.



The Last of Us (2013) · Naughty Dog / SIE

Which parts of this relationship does the player control?



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Case study: Joel and Ellie

Initial Goal

Kratos and Atreus begin their journey to fulfil Faye's final wish by scattering her ashes.

Developing Relationship

Kratos struggles to connect with Atreus, while Atreus seeks his father's approval and guidance.

Gameplay Connection

Atreus supports Kratos during combat and exploration, making their relationship part of the player's moment-to-moment experience.

Believability

Their changing dialogue, behaviour and cooperation show their relationship developing gradually throughout the journey.



God of War (2018) · Santa Monica Studio / SIE

How does companion behaviour support the story during play?



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Motivation across game systems

Dialogue and quests

Check that dialogue and objectives reflect the character's priorities.

Repeatable behaviour

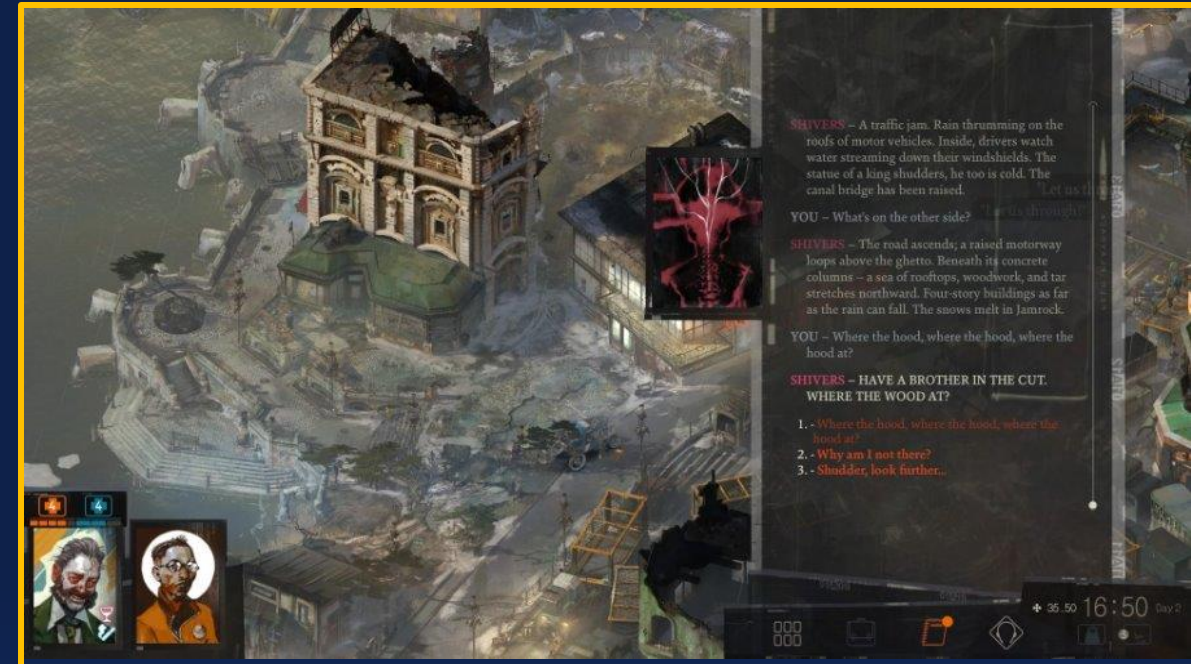
Consider whether routine NPC actions support or weaken their characterisation.

Player and character

The player may seek rewards that differ from the protagonist's motives.

Critical question:

What supports the intended motivation, and what contradicts it?



Disco Elysium (2019) · ZA/UM

How can dialogue choices
let players express
different motivations?



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Designing Believable Characters



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Game character design exercise

Starting point

Create an NPC with one goal, one deeper need and one fear.

Visual design

Sketch the NPC. Use clothing, posture or props to suggest their role and priorities.

Interaction design

Plan two player actions. Give the NPC a response and a consequence for each.

Peer feedback

Can a partner infer the motive? Revise one unclear visual cue or response.



Dishonored 2 (2016) · Arkane Studios / Bethesda

Your output: a character sketch and a short interaction plan.



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Review and independent study

Character performance

Give the character a reason to pursue their goal.

Dialogue and sound

Show the motive through visual design, choices and behaviour.

Interactive behaviour

Consider what the player can do and how the game responds.

Readability

Analyse a character from your chosen material using a story moment and/or a gameplay example.



Journey (2012) · thatgamecompany / SIE