RQ: How can player motivation and player character motivation be aligned to support emotionally impactful video game narratives?

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Introduction

Why do we play games? There are arguably two interpretations of this question: Firstly, in a practical sense, players play to win. Games are a goal-oriented medium, and it is therefore logical that engagement with the medium involves wanting to achieve, or at the very least attempting to achieve, said goals. Competition and a sense of accomplishment are powerful driving forces for which the numeric systems behind games channel perfectly.

But there is a second facet to player motivation. Games are more than numerical systems to beat, for they contain various degrees of fictional, interactive properties. At their worst, these properties become a laborious barrier between players and gameplay. Lengthy dialogues, boring cutscenes and tedious fetch-quests may prevent players from advancing, progressions, and interacting with the system they were promised access to.

However, at their most prominent and best, these properties take the shape of entire narratives with detailed worlds, characters, and themes that contextualize interaction. Players may perceive the meaning and impact of their virtual actions to transcend the game, develop their point-of-view and morality, and become emotionally engaged enough to feel deeply. Much like films and literature, such game narratives involve the audience emotionally and are concerned with moving a fundamentally human particularity, our "narrative organ" (Le Hunte and Golembiewski, 2014, p.2).

Video game narratives succeed in striking a player's narrative organ when they convince them to *want* to, or in other words motivate players solve their narrative's central conflicts.

Agents of Narrative Engagement

A story happens when someone does something, states designer Kaitlin Tremblay (GDC, 2020). That someone, whether human or other, is a character. As a fundamental part, if not the fundament of storytelling, characters embody all the beliefs, conflicts, and abilities needed to develop a plot.

Game designer and screenwriter Jeremy Bernstein's practical definition of stories cements the role of characters:

> "Someone who wants something badly and is having a hard time getting it."
>
> (GDC, 2018, 10:00)

Upon dissecting this statement (Figure 1), the components of stories can be discerned:

Figure 1 : Definition of "Story" by J. Bernstein (Annotated)

Characters, and most significantly, protagonists, must want something. Their goals and motivations establish the central conflict and themes. It could hence be speculated that the most suited tool for involving audiences in narratives emotionally are characters, and in the case of game narratives, the equivalent of player characters (Pchars). The following research question will therefore lead the analysis contained in this paper: How can player motivation and player character motivation be aligned to support emotionally impactful video game narratives?

Relevance

In his book Character Development and Storytelling for Games, game writer and designer Lee Sheldon highlights game designers' reluctance to elicit emotions in their audiences, attributing major criticism of the genre of video games to its highly limited range of emotions (2013, pp.249-255).

Few complex emotions can be generated through numeric feedback, and the pursuit of emotionally engaging players may therefore allow video games to, in the words of Sheldon, "endure as *Hamlet* endures" (p.255).

Scope

Before delving into research and analysis, several disclaimers must be made:

Firstly, not all games need to engage players emotionally. Some games are tactical and aim to challenge players mentally and physically without wanting or needing to convey narratives. These games are outside the scope of this paper.

Secondly, the scope of the research involves characters, not avatars. Only games with developed main protagonists and narratives will be considered. Silent or customizable protagonists as well as sandbox or simulation games are exempt.

Lastly, not all games tell "good stories" that are capable of eliciting emotional responses from players. While certain factors such as dramatic arcs have been scientifically proven to produce engagement (Future of StoryTelling, 2012, 4:12), the definition of what makes an engaging story is

outside the scope of this paper. Examinations of case studies and player behavior will therefore function under the assumption that the story itself is capable of engaging players.

Literature Review

The following literature will be divided into two parts, according to the research question's key concepts: motivation, and characters.

First, the various types of motivation and associated concepts will be distinguished and defined. Second, the role of characters in storytelling will be elicited. Both sections will draw from expert psychology research as well as apply information within the context of games and game design theories.

The outcome of the literature review will be a clear understanding of vocabulary terms and a focus for the ensuing case studies.

For a list of all vocabulary terms in this paper, view Appendix A.

Literature Review Part I: Motivation

Types of Goals

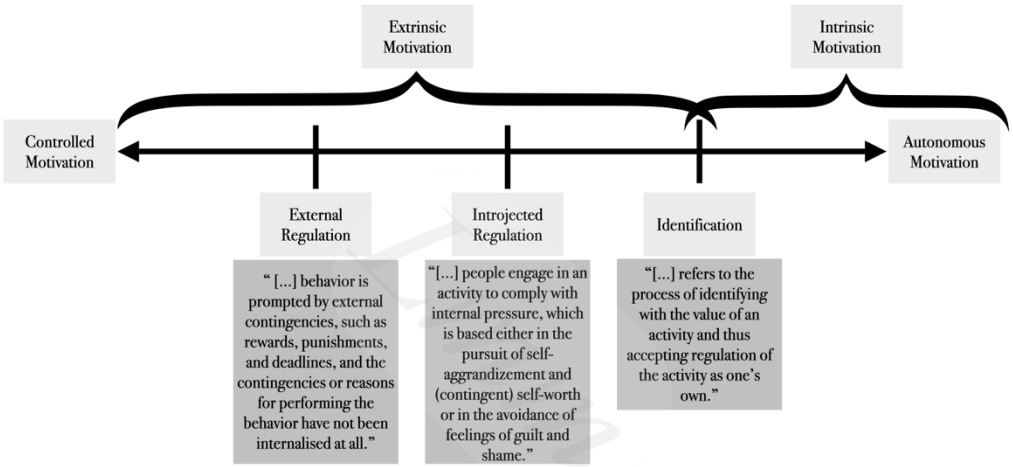
First and foremost, the difference between a goal and a motivation must be clarified. Though obvious at first, it is easy for the two terms to confound: While goals define the desired "end state" or "purpose of an activity or endeavor" (APA, n.d.), motivation is the "impetus that gives purpose or direction to behavior" (APA, n.d.). Goals are the *what*, and motivation is the *why*.

According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), goals can be extrinsic or intrinsic. Intrinsic goals are concerned with the satisfaction of basic psychological needs and contribute to or improve health, personal growth, affiliation, and community. Extrinsic goals are outwardly aimed and manipulate perceptions of one's wealth, fame, or image, suggesting low self-esteem and social discomfort (Vansteenkiste, Lens, and Deci, 2006, p.22).

Types of Motivation

Motivation can also be categorized into intrinsic and extrinsic, yet the two often overlap and become difficult to distinguish. Instead, the refined spectrum of *autonomous* and *controlled* motivation (Vansteenkiste, Lens, and Deci, p.19), depicted in figure 2 below, will be adopted in this paper.

Figure 2 : Types of Motivation after Vansteenkiste, Lens, and Deci (2006, p.21)



Identification

As shown in Figure 2, identification is the most autonomous form of extrinsic motivation and even borders on being intrinsic. "Although still extrinsic in nature, identified regulation is relatively volitional and in this sense approximates intrinsic motivation, so the two types of motivation are sometimes combined into a composite of autonomous motivation" (Vansteenkiste, Lens, and Deci, p.21).

Identification is most reminiscent of a player's motivation for engaging with a video game. While the decision to play a game is usually autonomous, a narrative game's goals are externally enforced on the player by the system. Hence, the most autonomous and arguably ideal form of motivation designers can conjure in players is identification, where they accept and adopt – a process referred to as internalization (Vansteenkiste, Lens, and Deci, p.21) – the value and reasons to pursue the predetermined.

Volition

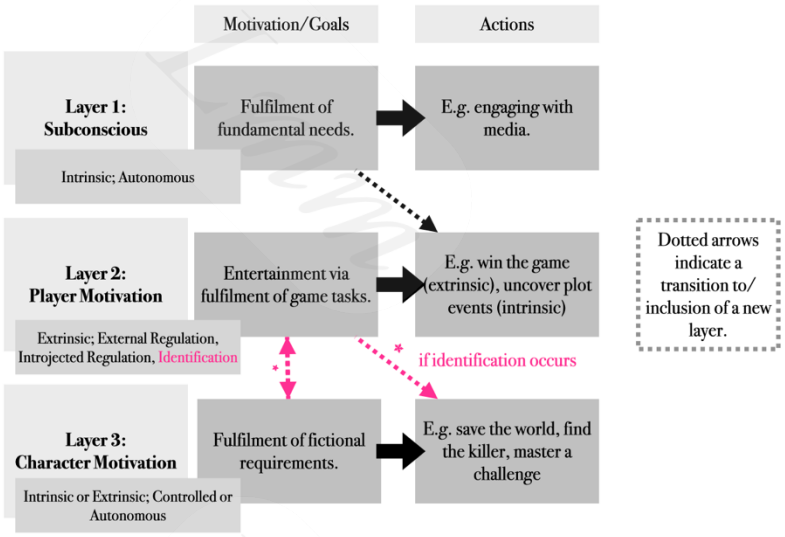
The definition of identification highlights the involvement of volition. Gaming psychology expert Scott Rigby describes volition as a player's desire to do what he is or is being asked to do, and defines it as the key to generating player engagement and associated feelings of autonomy over extended periods of time (GDC, 2018). His assertions draw from his and Richard Ryan's Player Experience of Need Satisfaction model (PENS) (2007), which applies Self-Determination Theory to video games.

Though volition will not be viewed as a key term in the case studies, its confirmed role in PENS supports the indispensability of motivational identification in video games.

Layers of Motivation

It must be noted at present that there are three different "layers" of motivation and goals in question, as detailed in Figure 3.

Figure 3 : Layers of Motivation



The first layer is the underlying subconscious of the audience when engaging with media. Intrinsic goals to have fundamental needs fulfilled are met with autonomous motivation and can be satisfied in part through storytelling.

The second layer is constituted by the player's goals and motivation within the game. Players likely engage consciously and purposefully with games on this layer for the sake of entertainment.

The last layer is composed of the goals and motivation contained within a game's fiction. These are typically channeled through the characters of the game and are initially meaningless to players in real life.

In the case of identification, the second and third layers become entwined, and the satisfaction earned through the fulfilment of third layer goals may transcend. Examining the third layer's vessels, namely storytelling and characters, will reveal tools and methods for achieving this effect.

Literature Review Part II: Character

The Role of Storytelling

The role of storytelling and the closely associated act of gossiping are believed to be a survival instinct. According to literary scholar Blakey Vermeule, humans gossip to provide emotional support, build alliances, and create feelings of well-being (2010, p.11). "We humans spend a great deal, perhaps most, of our energy seeking to explain ourselves and other people (p.11)", she states and further proposes that readers of fiction are "rewarded with the most intense cognitive simulation imaginable. [...] Social information. The deep truth about people's intentions – including, perhaps, one's own" (p.14). "We scan other people because we have to cooperate with them and compete against them," Vermeule elaborates, stating that the ability to anticipate someone's actions is crucial (p.33). Humans are motivated to consume fiction via autonomous motivation with intrinsic goals of self-preservation and self-improvement, and are heavily focused on the social agents of stories, namely the characters.

The Role of Characters

We sometimes confuse fictional characters with real ones, questioning their motifs and believes as if they had true agency. Audiences may develop feelings of emotional proximity to characters, and neuroimaging shows that it is possible to view a character in the same manner as close friends (Rain, 2021, p.3). Benefits of such unlikely relationships are the complete evasion of any risk of rejection as well as the simulation of intimacy (Rain, p.3). Audiences can relate to, identify with, even feel empathy, hatred or responsibility for characters as if they were real. Characters are essential to the appeal of storytelling because they serve as tools to simulate and stimulate emotional connections.

Emotional Engagement

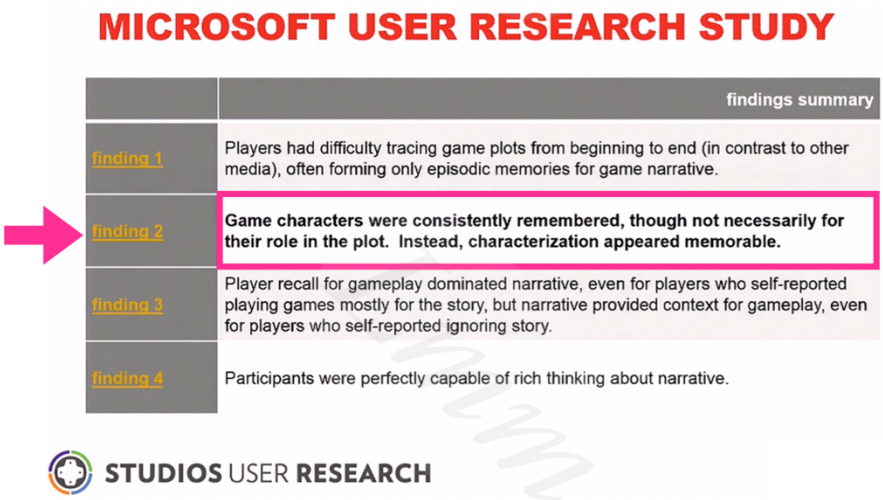
Research into storytelling and its effects on the brain by neuroeconomist Paul Zak shows that individuals listening to engaging stories produce increased levels of cortisol and oxytocin, two hormones responsible respectively for focusing attention and conjuring empathy for characters (Future of StoryTelling, 2012, 1:48). The emotional engagement of the tested audience in characters' wellbeing ran deep, even chemically. In fact, the more the audience cared, the more likely they were to donate money, showing that empathy or emotional involvement with characters posses the power to create volition and strong motivation (Future of StoryTelling, 2012, 2:20).

The Player Character

The most consistently binding and influential character of a story, the "someone" in Bernstein's definition, is of course the protagonist, who is nearly always the Pchar. Because players spend the most time with the Pchar, they represent the most frequent opportunities for consistent emotional engagement and motivational reinforcement.

A study by researcher Deborah Hendersen, shown in a presentation by designers Richard Rouse and Tom Abernathy, emphasizes the importance of the Pchar through the following findings (Figure 4)(GDC, 2016, 17:48):

Figure 4 : Microsoft User Research Study Findings by D. Henderson (Annotated)



Player vs. Character Identity

Players tend to speak in first person when recalling their gameplay actions (Vella, 2016, p.2). Game lecturer Daniel Vella coins the term "embodied ludic subject" to refer to players' adoption of the Pchar's spatial and auditory standpoint within the game world, distinguishing it both from the player's identity and the diegetic character (Vella, pp.1-6). The character itself, meaning their disposition and skills, determines the player's capabilities and limitations inside the game: "Entities in the game world, then, gain meaning according to what the playable figure can and cannot do with them, meaning that, from the embodied ludic subject-position, the gameworld takes an experiential shape determined by the possibilities for action the playable figure grants the player" (p.4). Similarly, professor of digital media Nick Montfort compares Pchars to a vehicle players "steer" (2007, p.140).

Vella elaborates that "capabilities and limitations, however, only make sense with a view towards the purposes towards which they can be wielded", adding that "goal orientation is also a key element of the embodied ludic subject-position" (p.4). Goals, and consequently motivation, can

thereby be seen as the vehicles driving force.

Yet, while players can feel embodied by Pchars, it would be false to assume that they automatically feel represented by them and the vehicle's prescribed direction.

Emotional & Motivational Parity

Game designer Harrison Pink states that players and Pchars must have "emotional and motivation parity", or else players will "completely disconnect from the scenario" (GDC, 2019, 12:11). Furthermore, designer Alexander Freed believes that "player motivations and Pchar motivations should, at a minimum, converge, even when they do not overlap" (2014). Not understanding or empathizing with the Pchar and not wanting to do what the Pchar needs to do is detrimental to narrative progressions and guaranteed to stomp autonomy. The player's emotional engagement and motivation must therefore not only be focused on the Pchar but should be identical, or at least similar to the Pchar's. Adopting, or internalizing another's goals and motivations has previously been defined as the extrinsic-intrinsic motivation composite identification. A character's strong pull on their audience causing identification is by no means a reach, as affirmed by research into the cognitive process of character identification.

Character Identification

Behavioral scientist Marina Rain explains that human personality traits and experiences lead to different attachment styles, determining the type of characters people relate to and the strength of emotional parity (2021, p.1). While attachment styles are not relevant to this paper, the following material is derived from attachment theories.

Rain's research highlights three different kinds of cognitive processes behind character engagement, which indicates the type of character attachment (2021) (Figure 5):

Figure 5 : Types of Audience & Player-Character Relationships after M. Rain (2021)

	Criteria/Descriptors				
Attachment/ Engagement Style	Audience experiences events as the character?	Audience experiences diminished sense of self and surroundings?	Audience is emotionally involved in character?	Audience shares character point of view, goals, emotions, and knowledge?	Audience attention focuses on plot?
Character Identification	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Parasocial Interaction	X	X	✓	X	X
Parasocial Relationship	X	X	✓	X	X

As can be seen, character identification is the strongest and most unified relationship between an audience and a character. Audiences are deeply involved in the story and its events, connected via and focused on the character's point of view, goals, emotions, and knowledge.

Within the context of this paper, achieving character identification would mean that the second layer of motivation (player motivation) and the third motivational layer (Pchar motivation) have been successfully intertwined.

According to Vella and Worch, it may be argued that players and Pchars becoming one entity is inherently impossible in video games due to the distinction in identity. However, this argument pertains mainly to a physical identity, and may not extend to emotional perceptions, especially when considering that the concept of character identification stems from non-interactive media and is by no means exclusive to games. It is therefore possible that even while maintaining discrete physical identities, a player can still experience a story as if they were the character on an emotional level.

According to the qualifiers of character identification, audiences identify with characters if they share something. Logically, information can only be shared if given by the creators. It is thus implied by the framework above that player motivation is heavily dependent how much game designers reveal about the Pchar, and how convincingly.

Parasocial interaction and relationships, which resemble celebrity-fan relationships (Rain, p.5), are also plausible player engagement styles, but lack motivational identification and an audience's focus on plot. While players strongly sympathize with the character and are witnesses to their journey, their motivation and goal is more likely to help or assist the character in the achievement of their own goal. The plot becomes the character's backdrop. According to the standards and parameters established in this paper so far, parasocial character engagement would signify failed emotional engagement in a narrative.

Methodology

It is now possible to conduct case studies to analyze to what extent character identification is established in existing games.

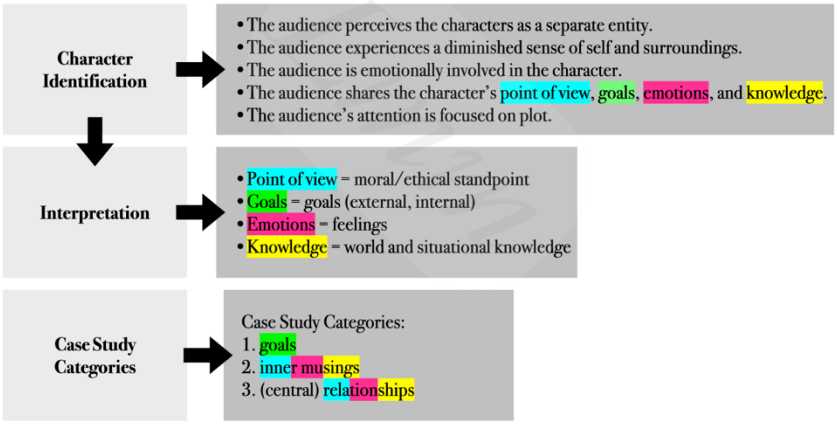
The games chosen as case studies are: Syberia (Microids, 1999), Dreamfall: The Longest Journey (Funcom, 2006)(Dreamfall), and Xenoblade Chronicles (Monolith Soft, 2010) (XC). Each involve a prominent, linear narrative (summaries available in Appendix B) with a strong and distinct protagonist.

Player identification with the player character will be evaluated through a content analysis of each game in the following categories:

1. Initial Goal & Motivation
2. Inner Musings
3. Central Relationships
4. Changed Goal & Motivation
5. Summative Findings

The first three categories were chosen to represent descriptors for character identification that pertain to character development rather than audience disposition or reaction, as shown in Figure 6. Since a character's point of view, emotions and knowledge can be subject to change or accumulation, and since the categories are vague and impalpable, the games' delivery thereof will be filtered through writing pertaining to a character's inner musings and central relationships.

Figure 6 : Methodology Adapted from Descriptors of Character Identification after M. Rain



"Inner musings", or inner monologues, will be viewed as an unfiltered and direct delivery of a character's authentic point of view, and emotions. Because Syberia and Dreamfall are both point-and-click games, the respective Pchars make regular practical observations about their environment. As these evidently contribute to knowledge parity, they will be taken into account but not analyzed beyond this point. "Central relationships" will target the portrayal and development of the Pchar's most impactful and narratively relevant relationship, revealing point of view and emotions.

The fourth category, "changed goal & motivation", will provide material for comparisons to "initial goal & motivation" to acknowledge the progression of player identification throughout the narrative. In accordance with aforementioned designer Harrison Pink's framework for motivational parity, new obstacles provide both players and characters with an opportunity to re-evaluate their own motivation and goals (GDC, 2019, 12:00), meaning player identification must not just be established, but also maintained. It is expected that the quality of content from the preceding categories, inner musings and relationships, will cumulatively affect the outcome of a player's re-evaluation of their identification with the Pchar's changed goal & motivation.

In the fifth category, the "findings" of each individual case study will be synthesized and interpreted with regards to their impact on goal, point-of-view, emotional, and knowledge parity.

Finally, the findings will be analyzed under the lens of pre-established design techniques and compared to one another.

All conclusions will cumulate in a practical design framework which will aim to provide adoptable methods for creating character identification in game design.

Case Study: Syberia, Kate Walker

The protagonist of Syberia is Kate Walker, a 30-year-old lawyer from New York.

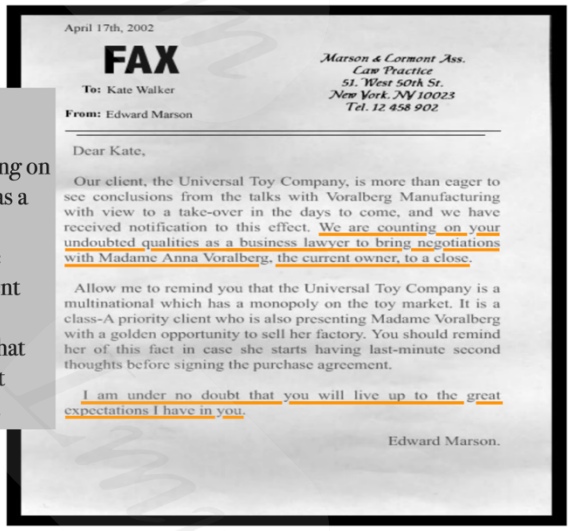
Initial Goal & Motivation

Kate's initial goal is to handle the signing of a contract to sell the once famous "Voralberg Mechanical Toy and Puppet Factory" to a high-profile client. For this, she travels to Valadilene, a small and solemn town in France. Her mission is detailed in a brief (Figure 7.1).

Figure 7.1 : Kate's Goal

Transcript:

Employer: We are counting on your undoubted qualities as a business lawyer to bring negotiations with Madame Anna Voralberg, the current owner, to a close.
[...] I am under no doubt that you will live up to the great expectations I have in you.



April 17th, 2002

FAX

Marson & Cormont Ass.
Law Practice
51, West 50th St.
New York, NY 10023
Tel. 12 458 902

To: Kate Walker

From: Edward Marson

Dear Kate,

Our client, the Universal Toy Company, is more than eager to see conclusions from the talks with Voralberg Manufacturing with view to a take-over in the days to come, and we have received notification to this effect. We are counting on your undoubted qualities as a business lawyer to bring negotiations with Madame Anna Voralberg, the current owner, to a close.

Allow me to remind you that the Universal Toy Company is a multinational which has a monopoly on the toy market. It is a class-A priority client who is also presenting Madame Voralberg with a golden opportunity to sell her factory. You should remind her of this fact in case she starts having last-minute second thoughts before signing the purchase agreement.

I am under no doubt that you will live up to the great expectations I have in you.

Edward Marson.

Her goal is extrinsic, assigned by her employer, and her motivation type is external regulation (see Figure 2, page 9). While she may desire self-aggrandizement, which is typical of introjected regulation, she is heavily driven by the pressure applied by her employer. Moreover, she does not identify with her goal, is unenthusiastic and feels her time is wasted by complications (Figure 7.2); clear signs of externally regulated motivation.

Figure 7 .2 : Kate's Attitude

Inner Musings

Insight into Kate's feelings is given sparingly.

During the first phone conversation with her employer, Kate is repeatedly interrupted and pressured. She clearly wants to explain herself but is not given the time (Figure 7.3). Instead of expressing irritation, she sighs and stays silent. An unpleasant call with her egotistically characterized boyfriend ends in the same manner. She appears frustrated but is too aloof to share her unfiltered thoughts with anyone, including players.

Figure 7.3 : Kate's Conversation with Employer

Transcript:

Kate: I've just gotten to Valadilene and there's a slight problem, Mister Marson, I'm afraid. Mrs Voralberg is dead...

Employer: That is most unfortunate... but I seem to remember we made provisions for just such a sad eventuality and we know that there was no heir.

Kate: Yes... That is right... but...

Employer: So where's the problem, Kate? [...]

Transcript:

Kate: Very good, Mister Marson.

Employer: Right. I've got to go, Kate. Keep me up to date, eh?

Kate: I just... *sighs*

Central Relationships

Kate's central relationships are hard to pinpoint as she interacts repeatedly and meaningfully with numerous characters. Her narratively significant relations can be grouped into two categories: her past relationships and her new ones.

Kate frequently receives phone calls from her relations in New York. Every one of these conversations results in confrontation, scolding, or disregard for Kate's situation and feelings (Figure 7.4). No one wants to listen or help.

Figure 7.4 : Kate's Old Relationships

Employer

Transcript:

Employer: Listen to me Kate! [...] I don't care how weird that town is. All that matters is that you do not set foot back in New York before you're tied up the deal. Get the picture!

Mother

Transcript:

Mother: Honestly! You're just as stubborn as your father! Don't complain that your mother didn't warn you!

Boyfriend

Transcript:

Boyfriend: To hell with your mission! I don't know why you accepted it in the first place! If you just stuck to the middle of the road then we wouldn't be in this mess!

Best friend

Transcript:

Best friend: There you go! Just takes one word and you're up on your high horse! I'm beginning to see Dan's point of view. It's getting harder and harder to back you up all the time...

The people she meets and searches for on her journey are the opposite. Most are shy, awkward, sensitive and innocent. The elderly innkeeper, the disabled child Momo, the neurotic and socially-awkward robot companion Oscar, and the person she sets out to find – the disabled, elderly Hans – are each portrayed as someone Kate needs to care and take responsibility for (Figure 7.5).

Figure 7.5 : Kate's New Relationships

Innkeeper

Transcript:

Innkeeper: [...] Such a great loss for Valadilene [...] the factory will close. But you are here to stop that happening aren't you? Our future is in your hands, miss Walker!

Momo

Transcript:

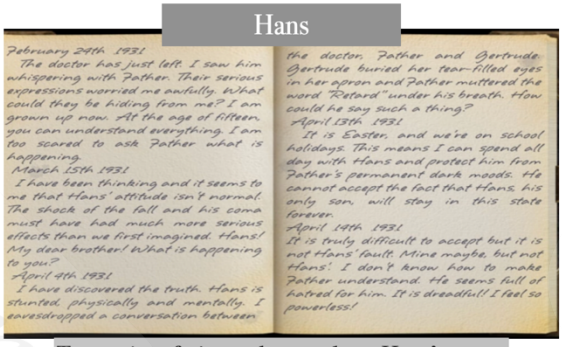
Momo: Momo and Kate friends!

Companion Oscar

Transcript:

Oscar: Rust awaits my every movement, if I leave this train, Kate Walker! And what would you do with a rusty engine driver?

Hans



Transcript of a journal entry about Hans' childhood accident:

Hans' Sister: *[...] Hans' attitude isn't notmal. The shock of the fall and his coma must have had much more serious effects than we first imagined. Hans! My dead brother! What is happening to you?*

Changed Goal & Motivation

At the end of the game, Kate makes the drastic choice to follow Hans and help him on his life-long mission to find Syberia. In a dramatic scene, she runs from her employers' helicopter and jumps on Hans' train (Figure 7.6).

Figure 7 .6 : Kate's Choice

The repeated disagreements with her old entourage have formed Kate's true goal, which is Hans' wellbeing and her own curiosity. Kate finally admits that she is motivated by sympathy and lust for adventure and rejects the controlled motivation in lieu of an autonomous one.

Summative Findings

Player identification with Kate in Syberia is not immediate.

Kate's extrinsic goal and regulated motivation, paired with her unenthusiastic attitude are highly unlikely to move players. Not only is Kate emotionally detached from her own objective, but her point of view comes is morally misaligned with the player's, resulting from antagonization of the characters enforcing her goal.

Her New York relations are characterized as condescending, opportunistic and disregard Kate's situation, whereas the new characters – whom she is essentially sent to exploit – are sympathetic and vulnerable. Additionally, seeing her struggle to meet the expectations in her old oppressive relationships as her own feelings are repeatedly disregarded builds sympathy for her and distances her from her villain role. Her unease is palpable as she holds back and struggles to communicate**.** Players anticipate, if not desire, change.

The development of Kate's new relationships thereby creates emotional parity and builds identification.

When Kate finally frees herself of her externally regulated motivation at the end and self-actualizes, full identification can occur in a highly satisfying conclusion.

The Pchar's and players' game world and situational knowledge is cohesive. Players are briefed on world lore and learn new information simultaneously with Kate, who travels to unfamiliar settings and encounters unexpected situations.

Figure 7.7 summarizes the findings.

Figure 7.7 : Syberia Summative Findings

	Identification Criteria/Descriptors				
	Knowledge Parity	Goal Parity	Point-of-View Parity	Emotional Parity	**Summative Character/ Motivational Identification**
Initial Identification	✓	X	X	X	X
Changed * Identification	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

*After character's change in goal & motivation

Effect of Inner Musings	**Effect of Relationships**
No explicit effect on character identification criteria. **Additional Finding:** Build consistent characterization.	Gradually develop **emotional** and **point-of-view** parity.

Case Study: Dreamfall, Zoë Castillo

Zoë Castillo is a 20-year-old college dropout who is struggling to find her purpose and direction.

Initial Goal & Motivation

Zoë 's journey begins when her ex-boyfriend Reza disappears under mysterious and violent circumstances. Her goal becomes to find him (Figure 8.1), driven by the internal motivation of worry.

Figure 8.1 : Zoë's Goal

Transcript:

Zoë : I can't do that. This is Reza we're talking about. He's in trouble. I can't just sit here and wait for him to come back. What if he needs my help?

Inner Musings

Zoë is an extroverted character who shares her deepest thoughts and feelings with nearly everyone (Figure 8.2).

Figure 8.2 : Zoë Sharing Emotions

Speaking to father

Transcript:

Zoë: We've had this discussion already. I wish it was that easy. Don't you think I miss having direction and ambitions? Now, I'm just...

Speaking to best friend

Transcript:

Zoë: You're probably right. And I do complain way too much, don't I? I don't want to be the whiny, apathetic Zoë. I want to be me again.

Transcript:

Zoë: I guess I just don't care as much about martial arts as I used to. It doesn't seem as important to me anymore.

Transcript:

Zoë: I don't know about that. I don't feel particularly lucky. I just feel like I'm wasting time.

Zoë sharing her thoughts and feelings so openly often comes across as exposition and thus as a narrative tool instead of characterization.

Since there is nothing left to share with players exclusively, Zoë's inner musings resort to sarcastic or self-deprecating humor (Figure 8.3). Players have no access to her unfiltered, authentic thoughts.

Figure 8.3 : Zoë's Humor

Transcript:

Zoë: What would I say to them? 'Stay in school'?

Transcript:

Zoë: I've spent so much time on that thing lately, it's a wonder my butt hasn't ballooned.

Transcript:

Zoë: Jardin des Roses. It's even less exciting that it sounds.

Transcript:

Zoë: When I find you, Reza, I'm giving you a big hug... and then you're buying me new shoes and pants. And a very big cup of hot coffee.

Central Relationships

Reza being the objective of Zoë's journey identifies him as a central relationship.

The first and last time Reza and Zoë meet is for a brief conversation during the game's exposition. While Zoë discloses her struggles and Reza attempts to encourage her, he remains vague about his concerns. He has information that he cannot or does not want to disclose to Zoë and is heavily preoccupied with the conspiracy he is investigating (Figure 8.4).

Figure 8.4 : Zoë & Reza Conversation

Furthermore, Zoë's leaves her hometown, where any other potentially deep relationships, such as her best friend Olivia or her speaking, conscientious, and loving toy monkey Wonka, reside. Since Zoë continuously travels and is predominantly unaccompanied, character casts change entirely multiple times and lack development.

Changed Goal & Motivation

Zoë decisively alters her direction around halfway through the narrative, when she chooses to actively involve herself in the unraveling of the world-threatening conspiracy that triggered Reza's disappearance (Figure 8.5). Her main motivation becomes the sense of responsibility she feels after discovering the wicked plot Reza was researching herself.

Figure 8.5 : Zoë 's Choice

Summative Findings

The matter of player identification with Zoë's initial goal and motivation is complicated:

Players are likely to identify with Zoë's initial objective to find Reza, who presumably has all the information about the mysterious occurrences players witness. However, Zoë's intrinsic motivation of worry for Reza's safety is unlikely to reach players due to lacking emotional parity.

Zoë only meets Reza briefly once before his disappearance. He is not explicitly likeable, preoccupied and distracted by his mysterious affairs. Players are unlikely to develop emotions for him during this dialogue, and their motivation probably leans towards external regulation with anticipation of reward in the form of information.

Additionally, all of Zoë's deep relationship are pre-established, and players feel more like observers than addressees in her emotional conversations. Much like strangers, they are deflected by her sarcastic inner monologues, which prevent rather than build intimacy and divide points of view.

Zoë's choice of changing her objective from finding Reza to exposing a conspiracy does little to resolve the emotional discrepancy. Zoë's and players' goals remain in alignment, as both still seek information about the conspiracy. Because of its more high-stakes, all-encompassing nature, players could potentially identify more with Zoë's new intrinsic motivation of assuming responsibility for not just Reza but everyone, and her point of view. Vaguer stakes however still fail to engage players emotionally, thus maintaining the distance and emotional disparity between Zoë and players.

The Pchar's and players' game world and situational knowledge is cohesive. Players are briefed on world lore and learn new information simultaneously with Zoë, who travels to unfamiliar settings and encounters unexpected situations.

Figure 8.6 summarizes the findings.

Figure 8.6 : Dreamfall Summative Findings

	Identification Criteria/Descriptors				
	Knowledge Parity	Goal Parity	Point-of-View Parity	Emotional Parity	**Summative Character/ Motivational Identification**
Initial Identification	✓	✓	X	X	X
Changed * Identification	✓	✓	✓	X	X

*After character's change in goal & motivation

Effect of Inner Musings	**Effect of Relationships**
Missed opportunity to create point-of-view and emotional parity. **Additional Finding:** Inconsistency in inward and outward behavior harms identification.	Underdevelopment results in **emotional** and **point-of-view** disparity.

Case Study: Xenoblade Chronicles, Shulk

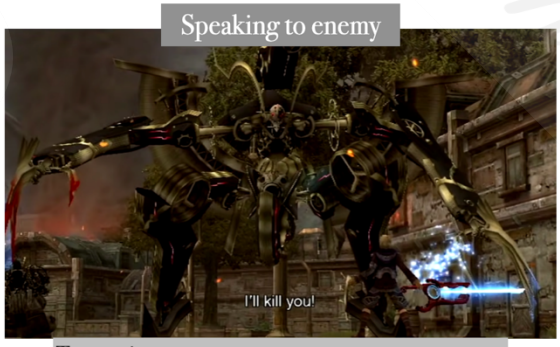
Shulk is an orphaned 18-year-old aspiring researcher and mechanic.

Initial Goal & Motivation

Shulk's initial goal is to avenge the death of his childhood friend and implied love interest, Fiora (Figure 9.1), internally motivated by grief and anger.

Figure 9.1 : Shulk's Goal

Speaking to enemy



Transcript:

Shulk: I'll kill you!

Speaking to best friend

Transcript:

Shulk: I will find that Mechon - find it and destroy it. Destroy them all!

Inner Musings

Shulk is an introverted character and keeps many of his thoughts and knowledge to himself. In his internal monologues, Shulk addresses the withheld thoughts and suspicions that he fears will burden his friends (Figure 9.2).

Figure 9.2 : Shulk's Inner Monologues

Transcript:

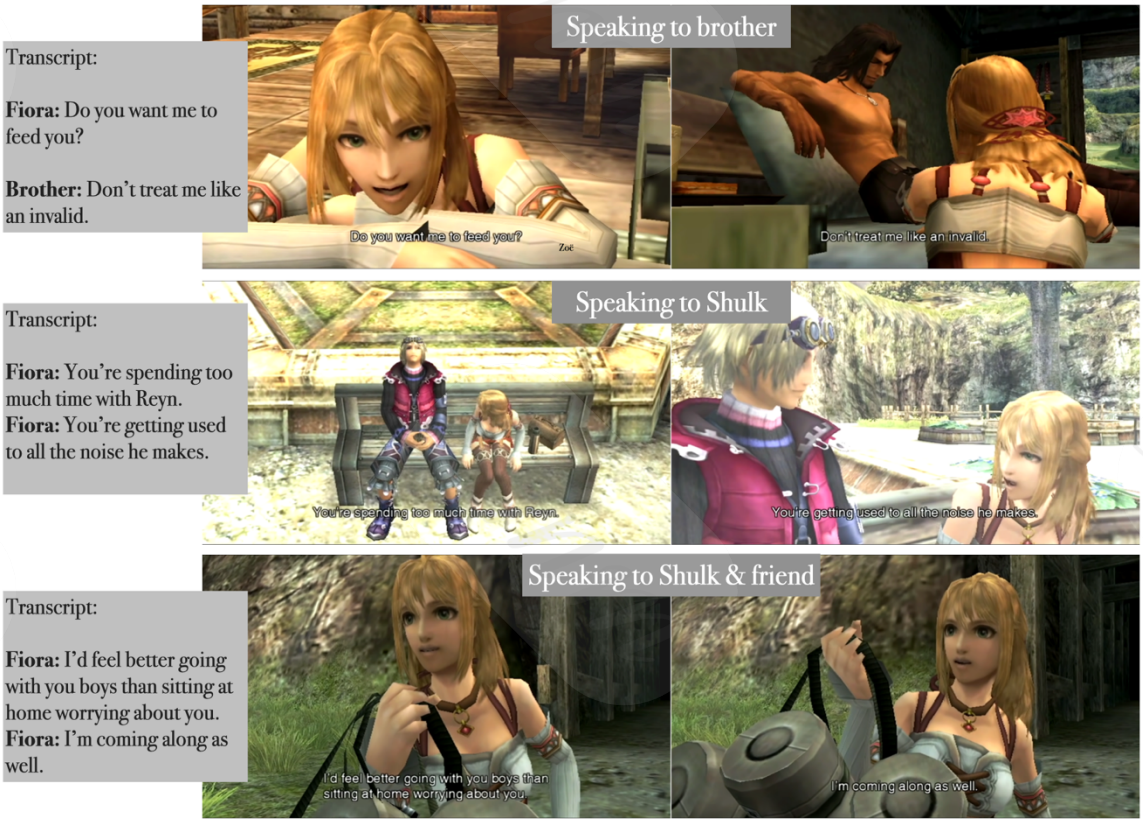
Shulk: It wasn't a dream. Was it a vision?
Shulk: What should I do? I could tell Reyn *[his friend]*. But... I don't know...

Central Relationships

Fiora's death triggers Shulk's initial goal, qualifying her as his central relationship.

Fiora is introduced in scenes prior to her death and in a brief section, she is even the sole playable character. She is depicted as caring and brave via moments in which she nurses her ill brother or accompanies Shulk on a mission to protect him (Figure 9.3).

Figure 9.3 : Fiora



Shulk has and gains other significant relationships, most of which are with members of the player party.

Changed Goal & Motivation

Shulk typically well-defined moral compass changes significantly around halfway through the narrative:

In the game's prologue, a character named Mumkhar betrays Dunban (a player party member) on the battlefield by defecting. He is instantly eaten by the enemy and presumed dead. During the main story, Mumkhar is revealed to actually be alive, to be working in disguise for the enemy and to have murdered Fiora. Shulk's main aim having been to avenge her death, killing Mumkhar would represent the fulfilment thereof.

However, after defeating Mumkhar in battle, Dunban charges to kill him and is interrupted by a suddenly pacifistic Shulk, who reasons that they are of the same species, and that instead of revenge they should now seek understanding of the conflict itself (Figure 9.4).

Figure 9.4 : Shulk's Choice

Transcript:

Dunban: Have you forgotten everything he's done? Where is your killer instinct? Now is the time!
Shulk: I hate him Dunban. For what he did to Fiora [...]. So of course I want to get my revenge! [...] But... [...] Are you really willing to kill another Homs [*human*]?
Dunban: Yes. sometimes needs must!
[...]
Shulk: When we set out, I wanted to destroy all Mechon [*enemies*]. That was my aim. But now... [...] I have to know why. What's the reason for all of this? Why do Bionis [*humans*] and Mechonis [*machines*] have to keep on fighting? I have to find out why!
Dunban: So, that is your fight?

Summative Findings

Player identification with Shulk's initial goals and motivations is likely strong because of Fiora's development in the exposition.

The establishment of sympathy for Fiora and the time given to players to familiarize themselves with Fiora independently of Shulk strengthen the emotional parity that occurs after her death. Shulk's **goal** to avenge her murder and his motivation of raging grief resonate emotionally with players.

When Shulk chooses to spare Mumkhar in a sudden pacifistic gesture, player identification may be broken due to the polar-opposite nature of Shulk's old and new points of view.

In case Shulk maintains player identification, it is likely because of his inner monologues, which characterize him as kind and considerate towards his friends, as well as rational and tactical. He reasons with himself and weighs others' argumentation, all for players to witness. The resulting intimacy may lead players to trust and understand his judgement, re-enforcing motivational parity.

It is worth briefly mentioning the role of Xenoblade's seven-member player party in this instance. In case Shulk fails to maintain player agreement with his new motivation and goal, it is possible for player identification to default to another party member, especially those questioning Shulk. Because all members ultimately accept Shulk's leadership and goals, this deviation is unlikely to affect the nature of player motivation and offers a backup option before identification breaks entirely.

No inconsistencies between the player's and the Pchar's world and situational knowledge were found. The Pchar's and players' game world and situational knowledge is cohesive. Players are briefed on world lore and learn new information simultaneously with Shulk, who travels to unfamiliar settings

and encounters unexpected situations. Knowledge on Shulk's special powers is given through inner musings.

Figure 9.5 summarizes the findings.

Figure 9.5 : Xenoblade Summative Findings

	Identification Criteria/Descriptors				
	Knowledge Parity	Goal Parity	Point-of-View Parity	Emotional Parity	**Summative Character/ Motivational Identification**
Initial Identification	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Changed * Identification	✓	X/✓*	X/✓*	X/✓*	X/✓*

*After character's change in goal & motivation

Effect of Inner Musings	**Effect of Relationships**
Create **point-of-view** and **emotional parity**. **Additional Finding:** Support player-onboarding for character decisions, consistent and logical.	Support and drive **goal** and **emotional parity**.

*Parity might be possible but is not guaranteed.

Case Study: Comparative Discussion of Techniques

The case study findings will now be analyzed through the lens of existing game theories and compared in their application thereof.

Assuming Responsibility

In his book Creating Emotions in Games, David Freeman writes that assuming responsibility for another character is a valuable first-person character arc (2004, p.262); an arc players can identify with.

It is indeed remarkable that in all three games, the Pchar's autonomous motivation and goal revolve around assuming responsibility for a vulnerable character. Zoë wants to protect Reza, Shulk belatedly defends Fiora by avenging her death, and Kate eventually decides to assist the elderly, disabled Hans in fulfilling his life-long dream.

Syberia most strongly supports Freeman's theory, as Kate's independent, unsusceptible, and invulnerable New York acquaintances do not appeal to autonomously motivated action from neither Kate nor players and trigger no desire to improve their unfortunate attitudes and lifestyles. In comparison, Kate's disagreeable and neurotic, but highly vulnerable robot side-kick Oscar sparks feelings of affection and the desire to teach him, aligning points of view and creating emotional parity.

Pre-established Relationships

Harrison Pink argues in his framework for character attachment that telling players to care for a character like the Pchar does is ineffective, as relationships take time to build (GDC, 2019, 2:40).

All three characters have pre-existing, pre-established relationships with varying impact. Players only meet Dreamfall's Reza once during a brief and not explicitly emotional conversation. He remains a stranger to them despite being told of Zoë's emotional attachment to him. Shulk and Fiora's bond would be equally impotent without the buildup. The enduring and favorable spotlight cast on Fiora during the exposition allows players to relate to Shulk's point of view. Surprisingly, Kate's old New York relationships function similarly, since players are led to relate to the frustration Kate directs at them, albeit the development thereof takes longer than the narrative's exposition.

Simultaneous Experiences

Designer Sheldon Lee proposes shared experiences as a way for developing parity between player and Pchars (2013, pp.50-52). This theory is supported by Harrison Pink, who states that players witnessing "the explicit motivating event that sets up the rest of the story" (10:35) creates emotional unity by developing a shared point of view of significant and emotionally charged plot points (GDC, 2019).

Reza disappears at some unspecified moment off-screen and players know nothing about his mental or physical state. Conversely, players witness Fiora's murder and Kate's final escape in cutscenes. This results in shared emotional experiences and parity.

All three games evidence that knowledge parity can equally be created through shared experiences. By focusing their narratives on a journey to new and unfamiliar places, new world information is revealed to players and character simultaneously.

Balanced Characterization

In relation to player-NPC attachment, Pink names balanced characterization as crucial. From the case study findings, his arguments can be applied to player and Pchar identification as well:

Deep, specific, and detailed characterization, Pink argues, is crucial to making characters believable (GDC, 2019, 23:30) and trigger emotional reactions. For emotional and point-of-view parity to occur, players must understand and be able to retrace behaviors. Both Kate and Shulk's personalities are consistently applied, clearly shown by the content of their inner monologues, or the lack thereof. Conversely, Zoë's inconsistent behavior puts her authenticity and identity into question, and players may not know in which direction she develops or whom to identify with: the overtly emotional and open version of Zoë shown during dialogue with other characters, or the sarcastically avoidant one displayed in her inner musings?

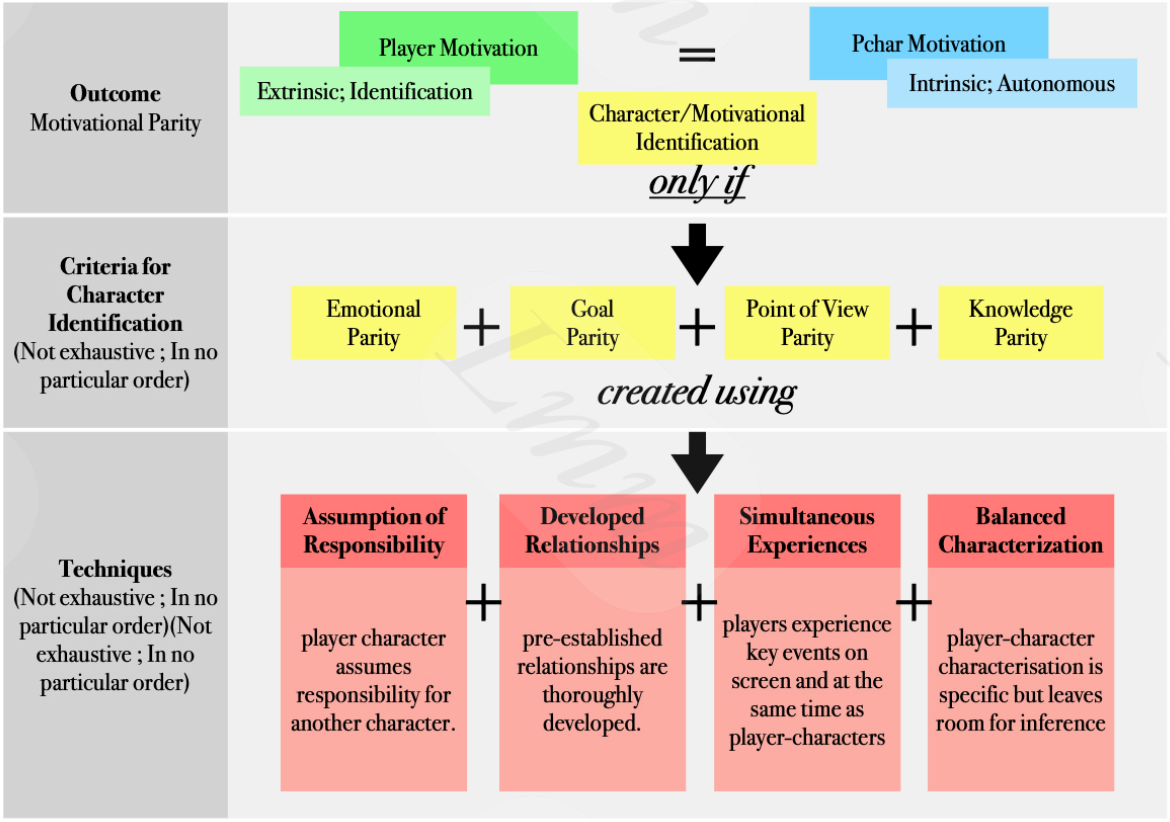
Granting opportunities for players to identify by projecting their own thoughts is also important, and specificity can be overdone according to Pink (GDC, 2019, 25:30), especially during exposition as elaborated by Freeman (2004, p.259). Kate leaves ample room for inference and self-projection via the lack of internal monologues or general emotionality. Conversely, Zoë's divulgence of her every thought to every character corners players into either accepting or rejecting her feelings, especially since her inner monologues provide no nuance to her statements either. Shulk is emotionally reserved with other characters and though his inner monologues do detail him significantly, they are used sparingly, mainly to onboard players during crucial plot moments or to detail side-quests. This balance leaves players sufficient room to infer and project behavior.

Design Framework

From the literature review and case study findings, it is clear that emotionally impactful narratives occur when motivational identification and character identification have been established through parity in various criteria.

The design framework below (Figure 10.1) illustrates a summative overview of the necessary parameters and techniques:

Figure 10.1 : Design Framework for Creating Emotional Parity between Player and Player Character (Pchar)



The framework proposes that players motivationally identifying with the Pchar can most effectively occur when the Pchar is autonomously motivated.

The techniques displayed within the framework each impact more than just one criterion for character identification. The criteria and techniques in the framework are not exhaustive, and there are of course other factors to consider, such as player personalities. The components listed above are manipulable by game designers and function independently of genre, plot quality or player disposition. They are therefore the most tangibly and practically alterable parameters for game designers.

It can also be concluded that the individual criteria for identification are not equally impactful. Figure 10.2 shows how the criteria affect identification individually.

Figure 10.2 : Examples of Character Identification Criteria Disparity after Case Study Findings

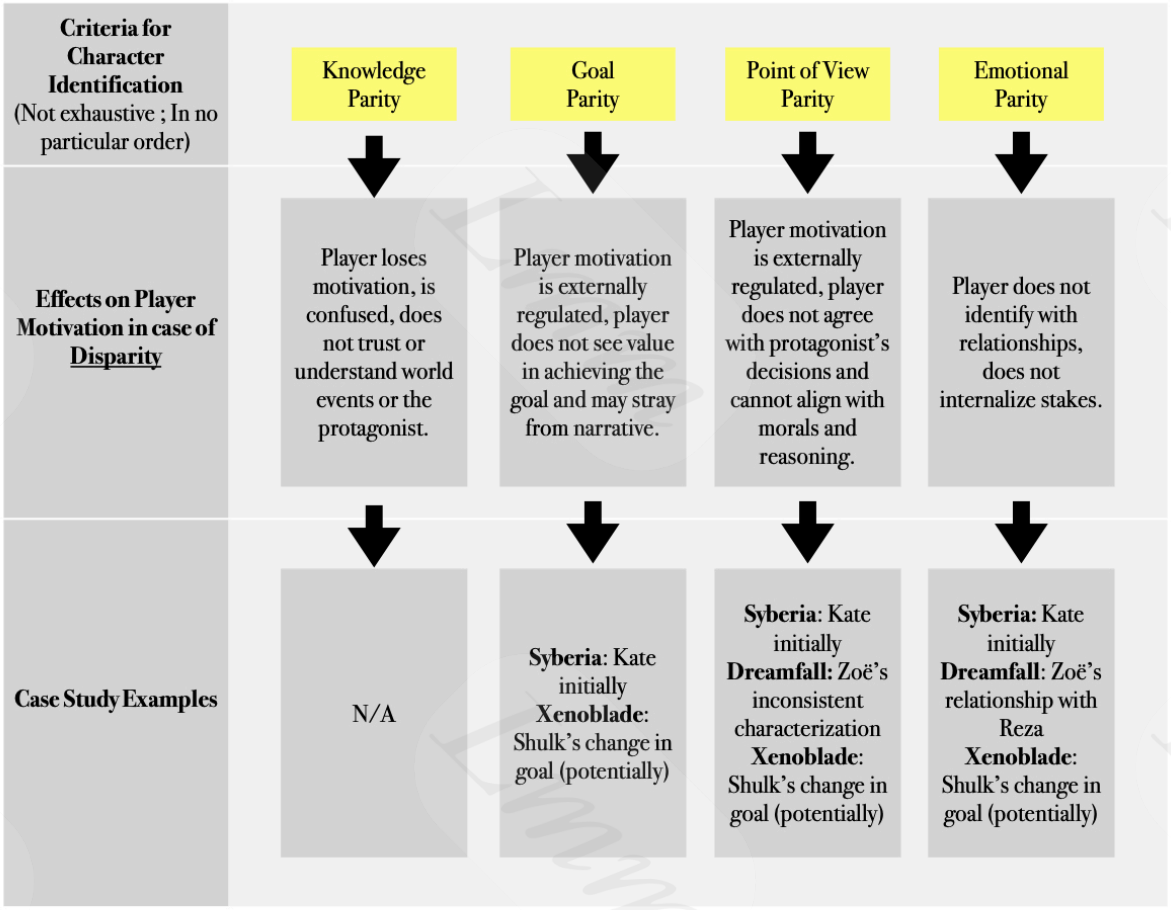
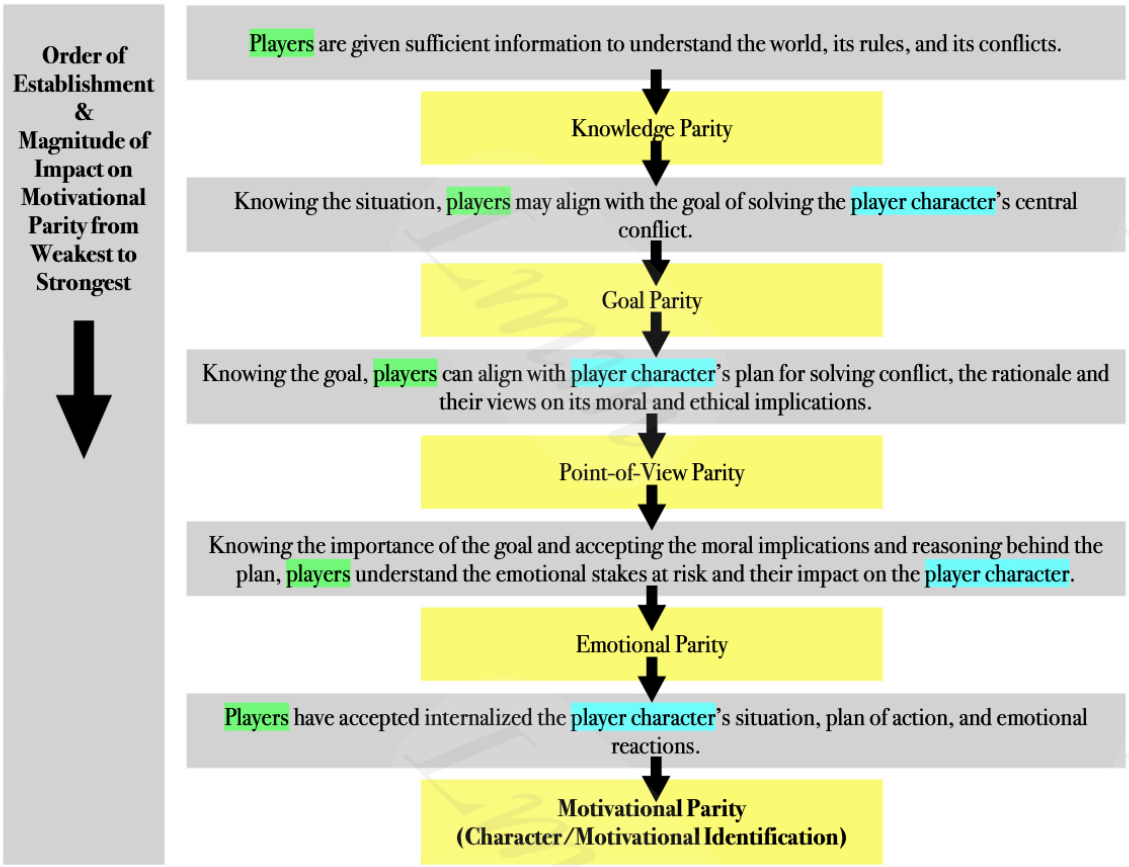


Figure 10.3 shows the relationship between the individual criteria and their accumulation to motivational identification. Though their order does reflect their impact on identification, it is unlikely that one criteria can be neglected or skipped.

Figure 10.3 : Order of Establishment & Magnitude of Impact of Character Identification Criteria



An assumption of this paper's research and the framework is that the Pchar is designed to be reliable and trustworthy. An unreliable Pchar may give players untrue or incomplete information to potentially manipulate motivational parity and the order of criteria above.

Conclusion

Why do we play games? Designer Alexander Freed argues that unlike consumers of films or literature, players do not engage with the medium to sit back and passively examine a character's behavior. Players do not want to see how far a character will go to achieve their goals, players are not interested in unexplainable and unrelatable behavior (2014). Instead, players engage with games to simulate fantastical and unknown experiences and make characters behave like they themselves would.

We play games to partake in fiction. Games therefore need to motivate and call us to action, and what better way to do so than to appeal to our deepest, most fundamental need to understand one another, or even ourselves?

To answer the research question explicitly, player and player character motivations can be aligned by establishing emotional, point-of-view, goal, and knowledge parity, which result in motivational identification with a character, also known as character identification. This paper's findings also indicate that the gradual development and maintenance of unified motivations is ultimately more effective and longevous than the instant establishment thereof during narrative exposition. Emotionally impactful game narratives are supported when players are let into, understand, and adopt a character's psyche, because a player's motivation to follow imposed tasks becomes as autonomous as possible and transcends the fiction. Players who have reached and maintained motivational identification no longer play to win, but to self-improve by simulating and learning social behavior.

A topic briefly mentioned in this paper worth further investigation is the impact of fully playable player parties and unplayable sidekicks, as seen in the Xenoblade and Syberia case studies respectively, on player identification. Both design choices have displayed significant influence over emotional and point-of-view parity and may therefore provide intriguing comparisons and valuable extensions to the framework's scope and applicability.

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List of Figures

Figure 7.1-7.6 : Syberia Figures

Transcribed screenshots of:

Microids Anuman Interactive (1999). *Syberia* [Video Game]. Microids.

Figure 7.7: Syberia Summative Findings

by author of this paper

Figure 8.1-8.5 : Dreamfall Figures

Transcribed screenshots of:

Funcom (2006) *Dreamfall: The Longest Journey* [Video Game]. Micro Application (Xbox).

Figure 8.6: Dreamfall Summative Findings

by author of this paper

Figure 9.1-9.4 : Xenoblade Figures

Transcribed screenshots of:

Monolith Soft (2010) *Xenoblade Chronicles* [Video Game]. Nintendo.

Figure 9.5: Dreamfall Summative Findings

by author of this paper

Figure 10.1-10.3: Design Framework

by author of this paper

Appendix A: Glossary of Terms

Narrative Terminology

Term	Definition
Character	*(by Bernstein)* Someone who wants something.
Narrative	*(by Nicklin)* the "way in which the story is told".
Protagonist	The character at the main focus of the work, typically central to the story.
Story	*(by Bernstein)* Someone who wants something badly and is having a hard time getting it.

Video Game Terminology

Term	Definition
Embodied Ludic Subject	*(by Vella)* "[...] a situation in which the player engages with the gameworld through an embodiment in the form of a playable figure within that world – what is often called the avatar or the player-character [...]".
NPC	**Non-playable character**. A character players have no control over.
Player Character **(Pchar)**	The character players assume control over.
Player Party	A cast of characters that follow the player character during gameplay. These characters may be playable.

Motivation Terminology

Term	Definition
Autonomous Motivation	*(by Vansteenkiste, M., Lens, W. and Deci, E.)* "[...] involves the experience of volition and choice [...]"
Controlled Motivation	*(by Vansteenkiste, M., Lens, W. and Deci, E.)* "[...] involves the experience of being pressured or coerced."
External Regulation	*(by Vansteenkiste, M., Lens, W. and Deci, E.)* "[...] behavior is prompted by external contingencies, such as rewards, punishment, and deadlines, and the contingencies or reasons for performing behavior have not been internalized at all."
Goal	*(by American Psychological Association)* "the end state toward which a human or nonhuman animal is striving: the purpose of an activity or endeavor."
Variation : Extrinsic Goal	*(by Vansteenkiste, M., Lens, W. and Deci, E.)* "[...] extrinsic goals have an 'outward' orientation [...] or a 'having' orientation [...] that is concerned with external manifestations of worth rather than basic need satisfaction."

Variation : Intrinsic Goal	*(by Vansteenkiste, M., Lens, W. and Deci, E.)* "[...] goals are labeled *intrinsic* because they are satisfying in their own right and they provide direct satisfaction of basic psychological needs."
Identification	*(by Vansteenkiste, M., Lens, W. and Deci, E.)* "refers to the process of identifying with the value of an activity and thus accepting regulation of the activity as one's own. [...] represents a fuller form of internalization that is characterized by an internal perceived locus of causalty."
Internalization	*(by American Psychological Association)* "the nonconscious mental process by which the characteristics, beliefs, feelings, or attitudes of other individuals or groups are assimilated into the self and adopted as one's own."
Introjected Regulation	*(by Vansteenkiste, M., Lens, W. and Deci, E.)* "[...] people engage in an activity to comply with internal pressure which is based either in the pursuit of self-aggrandizement and (contingent) self-worth or in the avoidance of feelings of guilt and shame."
Motivation	*(by American Psychological Association)* "the impetus that gives purpose or direction to behavior [...]."
Variation : Extrinsic Motivation	*(by American Psychological Association)* "[...]an external incentive to engage in a specific activity, especially motivation arising from the expectation of punishment or reward [...]"
Variation : Intrinsic Motivation	*(by American Psychological Association)* "an incentive to engage in a specific activity that derives from pleasure in the activity itself [...] rather than because of any external benefits that might be obtained [...]"
Volition	*(by American Psychological Association)* "the faculty by which an individual decides upon and commits to a particular course of action, especially when this occurs without direct external influence. The term encompasses a crucial set of activities involving the self, including choice and decision, self-control, intentional action, and an active rather than passive response to events."

Character Attachment Terminology

Term	**Definition**
Attachment Styles	*(by Rain)* "[...] how we approach intimate relationships [...]"
Character Engagement	*(after Rain)* An umbrella term to encompass the types of relationships audiences have with characters.
Character Identification	*(by Rain)* "When identifying with a character, audiences experience the story vicariously through that character [...]

	Individuals who identify with a particular character come to share that character's point of view, goals, emotions, and knowledge."
Emotional Parity	*(after Pink)* when player motivation and player character emotions are unified
Goal Parity	when player motivation and player character goals are unified
Knowledge Parity	when player motivation and player character knowledge are unified
Motivational Parity	*(after Pink)* when player motivation and player character motivation are unified
Parasocial Interaction	*(by Rain)* "[...] when consumers feel they have an intimate and personal relationship with a media persona. [...] viewers feel a sense of mutual awareness between themselves and on-screen characters [...]."
Variation: Parasocial Relationship	*(by Rain)* "[...] enduring, long-term bonds with characters that extend beyond a given exposure [...]"
Point-of-View Parity	when player motivation and player character points of view are unified

Appendix B: Game Summaries

Syberia

Kate Walker, a 30-year-old lawyer from New York, is sent to handle the signing of a contract to sell the once famous "Voralberg Mechanical Toy and Puppet Factory" to a high-profile client. For this, she travels to Valadilene, a small and solemn town in France.

She learns shortly after her arrival that the owner of Voralberg Mechanical Toy and Puppet Factory, Anna Voralberg, has died. Even more unfortunately, Anna's brother Hans, who presumed to have died from the aftermath of a terrible accident during childhood, is still alive and the official heir of the business. Needing his signature to proceed with the sale, Kate decides to find him. Inside the factory, she discovers two of his inventions, a mechanical train and its conducted Oscar, and leaves on her journey.

She learns on her journey that Hans, despite being well and alive, sustained major brain damage from his childhood accident and that his only goal since has been to find the Mammoths in Syberia. As she becomes deeply immersed in the trail of his mesmerizing inventions, her family, friends and employer become increasingly unpleasant and pressure her to return to New York. Her failure to comply results in her best friend and boyfriend backstabbing her, and her mother and employer losing faith in her capabilities.

Kate finds Hans in the final scene and acquires his signature for the sale. On her way to the helicopter sent to return her to New York, she experiences a dramatic change of heart and decides to abandon her New York life and responsibilities to help Hans along his journey to Syberia.

Kate's journey continues in three following games, Syberia II, Syberia III, and Syberia: The World Before.

Dreamfall: The Longest Journey

Zoë Castillo is a 20-year-old college dropout who is struggling to find her purpose and direction. One day, her investigative journalist ex-boyfriend Reza asks her to pick up a highly confidential package from a mysterious corporation in his stead. She complies but is greeted with violence at her destination that result to multiple battles, deaths, and even her brief arrest. Zoë also finds that she is being stalked by a little girl who appears on TVs and radios she passes and orders her to find and save a woman named April. Additionally, Reza disappears, and Zoë, decides to set out in search of him, full of worry for his wellbeing and safety.

On her journey, she learns about two things: Firstly, the classified development of new

technology called dreamers, devices that send people into controlled dream states and compromise their cognitive abilities. Secondly, she discovers the existence of a parallel universe in which a genocide of magical beings is being conducted by a ruthless military group called the Asadi.

Her back-and-forth travels between cities and universes eventually lead her to uncover one half of the dream-stealing, mind-numbing conspiracy and her own unexpected involvement as a key figure in the traversing of universes. She discovers who the little girl stalking her is and finds the woman, April.

At the end of the game, April dies despite Zoë's efforts to find her. Reza remains missing in action, and Zoë's only option is to obey a cold and calculating scientist named Helena, who demands the little stalker girl Faith be killed, but send Zoë into a dreamer-induced coma instead.

Zoë's journey continues and concludes in the next series installment named Dreamfall Chapters.

Xenoblade Chronicles

Shulk is an orphaned 18-year-old aspiring researcher and mechanic. He grows up in a small colony with his two best friends, Fiora and Reyn.

One day, the colony is attacked by invasive machines named Mechon that are unsusceptible to human weaponry. In a desperate effort to defend his home, Shulk retrieves the Monado, the mysterious sword he was found with when orphaned, from his laboratory. The Monado is known to severely injure anyone who uses it, but also to be the only weapon capable of damaging Mechon. Fortunately, Shulk discovers he is immune to the Monado's damage and that it grants him visions of the future. Though the colony successfully fends against the invadors, Shulk's best friend Fiora is brutally murdered before the enemies retreat. Enraged and begrieved, Shulk and Reyn set out to find the Mechon who murdered Fiora and avenge her by killing it.

Throughout their journey, they are joined by five more party members. As they become more engrossed in the conflict between Mechon and humans, they discover the bigger forces at play and dedicate themselves to resolving of true nature of the conflict between Mechon and humans rather than enacting revenge and perpetuating violence.

Appendix References

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