



How Does Character Design Affect the Way We Play Video Games?


A **Humanities** Dissertation Submitted by
Gemma Grange

In partial fulfillment of the requirements of the award **MA**
Creative Media Arts: Data and Innovation

Media Production
Faculty of Media and Communication
Bournemouth University
2016/2017

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I declare that this dissertation/project is all my own work and the sources of information and the material I have used (including the internet) have been fully identified and properly acknowledged.

Student signature 

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The intention of this research project is to analyse the creation of video game characters and the potential way in which audiences can be affected by their designs – I want to demonstrate the significance of the characters themselves, rather than games as a whole, and argue that character design and creation are the most essential part of developing a successful game. I have selected a variety of game examples that I feel best represent the effects of character design, ranging from life simulators that allow us to feel as powerful as a god, to over-sexualised female-led action games that have gained cult feminist followings. I intend to analyse these examples through a range of theoretical perspectives that will offer a unique insight into this area of research.

While this is a humanities dissertation, I want there to be a strong focus on psychological and sociological elements, alongside relevant media and audience theories, as there are many applicable ideas from these fields that can relate to this topic as it involves people, behaviour and cognitive processes. In terms of methodology as well, this also means that primary data of my own will be collected and analysed in order to support secondary ideas and theories.

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I would personally like to thank my dissertation supervisor and head of course, David Garcia, for his continual support throughout this process. The rigorous deadlines, the attention to details and all the encouragement really helped get me through this stressful time.

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Introduction

What is a story without characters? Is it even possible? We as an audience need something to relate to in order to fully engage with a narrative; there needs to be something there that allows us to transport ourselves into that narrative so that we may also partake in that journey, either for the better or worse. Video gaming has made this connection stronger through interactivity and the ability to explore characters through our own controls, we the players become those characters as we share their story and their experiences. We are also able to relate to things such as looks and clothing – Gaming is an industry that is becoming more diverse by the day, introducing and encouraging new demographics to join in with every new release.

Our connection with video game characters as an audience delves further than just aesthetics however. Developing a strong sense of relatability through character personality and mannerisms is just as important – Players need characters they can connect to and project on. This is the point where games become more than just a form of entertainment, they become a platform of adventure in which players can live out their wildest fantasies by escaping into the form of another.

The primary function of this dissertation is to establish a relationship between player and character, and demonstrate the ways in which that relationship can be affected – Although character design is a broad topic with much to be said, I feel as if this specific idea is unique, particularly as it takes concepts from psychological and sociological theories; Important areas of study when looking at human relationships, whether this be with real humans, or simulations. The games that have been chosen for this essay are there to represent a microcosm of different character types, different time periods and different genres of gaming. All aspects of game design are important, however this essay will attempt to display how character design is the most significant element when it comes to audience connection and representation – Some of the most essential parts needed to make successful game.

Literature Review

This chapter is here to give some context on the type of research that has already been done, either on this subject or on subjects of a very similar nature. The topic of this work could be considered as too broad, which is true as there is a lot of literature out there about character design etc., so the main challenge here was to carefully select what was relevant and what could provide the best theoretical or contextual evidence. This chapter features a range of sources, from online videos to articles to academic journals. As the academic world progresses, it is becoming more apparent that in order to get the most out of research one must use a variety of sources, not just written texts – This is especially relevant when it comes to media. Gaming is something that is explored and discusses via a multitude of different platforms, so this chapter is an attempt at a microcosm of that.

Some of the most important theories and ideas for games do not come from scholarly academics, instead they come from those who've played them, those who've designed them and those who've lived them. Gaming is an artistic medium and certainly requires a decent level of understanding of the world of design in order to fully appreciate them for what they are and what they represent. Designers and developers put so many unique concepts into their games, some overtly obvious, some a little subtler, that really takes someone from a similar craft to understand. *Extra Credits*, (2017) a YouTube channel dedicated to showing how and why games matter, does exactly this. This series of short videos gives such a great insight into the complicated world that is game design – So much has to be considered in order to develop a successful game that will be relevant yet timeless, action packed yet well told, in-offensive yet exciting. This online series was created by a group of game developers and media veterans who develop credible and well thought out critiques of both the processes of making a game and elements of the games themselves. They cover a wide variety of subjects, most of which are relevant to the focus of this research piece, and these videos provided a great deal of inspiration during the initial development processes of this work. There was also a lot of new information that has been learnt by watching these videos, such as theoretical models like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (1956) which help to both create and decipher characters; an important exercise

that will be heavily explored in this work. It seems as if this series of videos have been the most useful source of information for this dissertation piece so far and I intend to use them as one of my primary bases for conceptual information surrounding my subject areas. Below are some of the videos that were deemed most relevant, and why exactly their content was fundamental to this research.

- Myers Briggs and Character Creation (2013)
“Psychology helps in many aspects of game design...But we rarely talk about its utility in terms of character design.”

A psychological model that helps to further understand human characteristics and personality traits. Today it is also a key tool in complex character design.

(See below)

- Overwatch and Asymmetric Character Design (2016)
“Of course there are other ways to limit this by creating characters that have roughly the same movement styles and roles as existing characters, but that kinda clashes with one of Overwatch’s greatest strengths, which is character diversity.”

This game is perhaps the best example of successful character design. The video explores the idea of taking time in creating characters in order to make them unique, whilst still being able to fit in the already created environment. The asymmetric nature of its design allows room for diversity, meaning that the game hosts a wide variety of characters of different ethnicities, gender, sexualities etc. This video realises the importance of that diversity and explores how the developers are able to constantly release new and successful characters.

- True Female Characters (2012)
“The reason this particular topic has been so long incoming is that we’ve been waiting for the industry to provide us with a good, topical example of a well-done female character.”

Female characters and female representation in the media is an extremely relevant topic in today's media landscape. Of course there are some very good examples of well-done female characters, but unfortunately there is more bad than good. It has come to light that it is very difficult to discuss character design without talking about female representation, simply because it is increasingly obvious that there is not enough of it. The discussion of female characters will be one of the main points explored in the essay – Though it has been studied numerous times, the point that will be made here will be wondering as to exactly why it has become such a big issue, noting that the problem has now become self-aware.

- The Illusion of Choice – How Games Balance Freedom and Scope (2013)
“As a designer it is important to think of choice not only in the context of narrative, but also in the context of play.”

Character and narrative go hand in hand – The characters need a purpose whilst the story needs something to progress it. Interactive narratives are games that allow players to explore characters from different angles and situations. They are an important evolution in storytelling that gives power to the audience. This video explains how, while it is important to have this element of free choice, that designers must also know when to implicate some element of control as there is only so far that something can go before it turns to chaos.

- Learning from Other M: Metroid and How not to Write a Character (2012)
“This flawed execution leaves us with a character that doesn't quite match the Samus we've come to understand over the years.”

This game is perhaps the best example of how not to write a character, particularly one that has already been established in previous games. This subject will be explored further in Chapter 1, comparing it to games of a similar nature that were actually successful in their endeavours.

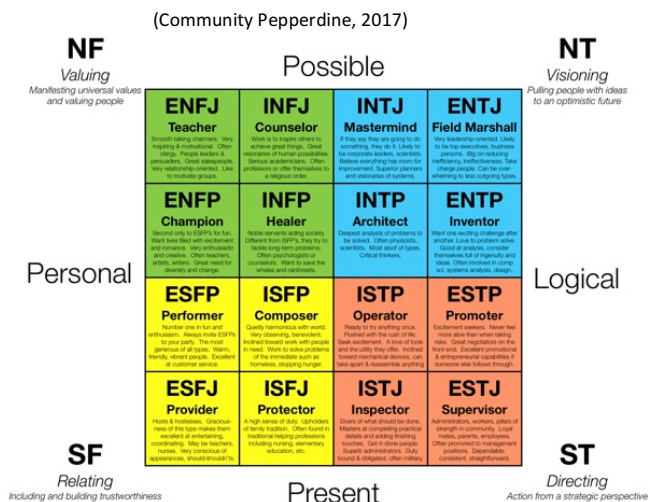
Linking on from the brief mention in the last paragraph, this theoretical model will be introduced and explained in order for its ideas to perhaps be used later on in this dissertation as an example to deconstruct character types. This also introduces the

psychological element of this work, supporting my main question. Spawning from the ideas of Jung's typological theory, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (1956) (Briggs & Briggs-Myers, 2015) is an *"introspective self-report questionnaire"* (Wikipedia, 2017) that helps to determine personality traits of an individual. The four basic sectors are: Introversion vs Extroversion, Sensing vs Intuition, Thinking vs Feeling and Judging vs Perceiving. Of course, the model itself is much more in-depth than this simple example, but for now it is just an explanation, this model should be used

in practice in order to show the true complexity of its work – e.g. when designing personality traits for a character and, subsequently, the way in which they would interact with other characters. The type indicator is a very useful tool of some game designers who find it helps them to create rich characters with many dimensions –

Whilst a protagonist may be an extrovert, their decisions are lead by thought rather than feelings etc. However, it does not seem to be the most popular way to design/dissect characters for many reasons (the majority being its fairly unknown) but the intention of this essay is to explore it to its full potential and use it as a tool to try and understand a popular character that has already been created in order to try and further appreciate the way in which they have been created.

It is true that *"characters have a right to their own lives in the game,"* (Sheldon, 2006) but who are the ones responsible for creating those lives? Going back to a point made in the first paragraph, it seems when it comes to gaming that it is the designers that provide us with the greatest understanding into the inner workings of the industry. Written by a game designer, *Character Development and Storytelling for Games* (Sheldon, 2006) gives us a useful insight into the struggles that come with trying to develop well-rounded *"three dimensional"* (2006) characters. Primarily focusing on Part II, Chapter 3, *"Respecting Characters,"* (2006) this section breaks down the steps to creating, not only a decent lead character, but also support characters, NPCs and the environments in which they live in. It



supports the question of the essay, demonstrating the importance of good character design and how failing to pay attention to those details can result in a failure. This chapter explores the three key elements that are crucial in design – The physical, the sociological and the psychological. It would be interesting to use these elements later on in this essay, when game examples are introduced, to see if iconic characters fit within these three categories and to what extent they succeed e.g. *Metroid: Other M*. (Nintendo, 2010) *Samus* is a mysterious character and audiences can predict a backstory for her based on her profession and the way in which she behaves. *Other M* (2010) almost ruined the franchise by developing this convoluted story about a character that invalidates everything that audiences had come to love about her. This will be a significant text in this research as it seems to cover a lot of base points that are needed for understanding character design, and is easy to trust in terms of credibility as it is written by somebody from the industry.

Gaming and Cognition: Theories and Practices from the Learning Sciences by Richard Van Eck (2010) is yet another great piece to introduce the psychological element of this research, it argues against previous pre-conceptions that games were a dangerous waste of time, or “mindless,” (Van Eck, 2010) and actually can be very beneficial in strengthening and developing cognitive behaviour. It focuses more on “action video games” (2010) rather than those of an educational manner and breaks free of the standard type of video game research that has been done before, such as taking research that has been done before and adapting it to use on a small, qualitative sample of participants. It explores gaming from a child’s point of view and their desire to do things that involve their interaction, compared it to other activities such as watching TV, which some children found frustrating as they could not make the characters do as they pleased – Van Eck talks about his previous chapter on a similar subject, written in 1984, and argues that “although games have developed in complexity, variety, animation and graphic quality, the issues concerning cognitive and social development have not changed.” (Van Eck, 2010) It is refreshing to read an academic piece that is in favour of video gaming and has proved what it can do to help train our minds. In relation to characters, Van Eck talks about the importance of interactivity and control, using RPG’s and MMORPG’s as an example, explaining how designers want to create an empathic connection between player and character. He suggests that player-lead character games teach us how to empathise, a key social skill to have.

This text is a core part of this dissertation, due to its real-world applicable research that also provides an important message, that its okay to enjoy playing video games and, despite what is the common belief, can actual be beneficial for your cognitive growth. It provides a solid bridge between the conceptual ideas (characters and gaming) and the theoretical ideas (psychology and sociology) and will be often referred to in order to give credibility to the research in this essay.

A similar type of work to the one that was discussed previously, *Gaming and Simulations: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools and Applications* (Various, 2011) delves more into the process of simulations that take part in games. It discusses the representation of reality as a type of spectrum, stating that some simulations can be much further away from reality as others. This chapter provides a much more technical view on gaming, which is always useful when discussing design and development, but does also provide an element of social theory about perceptions and understanding. Unlike the other text I mentioned, this one has a particular focus on educational gaming – While this might not seem so relevant for the most part, there are sections surrounding character-play (again, focusing mainly on RPG's) which could potentially be useful.

The final text that was sourced was *an Integrated Development Model for Character Based Games* (Filho et al. 2009) Although I was only able to access the abstract of this research paper, it does cover something important that is needed when looking at characters in video games – The significance of NPC's (Non Playable Characters) and how their behaviour and level of interactivity can effect gameplay. This paper is essentially stating how crucial it is to use the best technology in order to create the most effective algorithms that in turn produce the most believable characters in your environment. Whilst the the playable and main supporting characters may take centre stage, having an actualised environment full of other interesting characters adds a whole other dimension onto the world. It is not something that can be a second thought.

Essential Character Theories

No matter in what type of context characters are being discussed, it is impossible to go without exploring two most classic character theories. Although these ideas are somewhat dated now, originally being written to support the structure of literature narratives, they may still be applied in today's media as they can be easily manipulated to fit more complex characters and narratives. Many story based games still fulfill the basic steps of these theories, yet aim for originality by breaking apart and re-structuring the basics. For example, interactive narrative gaming has been a steadily growing genre since the early PC days – They feature multi-strand narratives that allow the players to explore different variations of a character based on situational events. No longer are things predictable.

Below is a short explanation of the two most prominent character theories and how they could possibly be used in relation to gaming.

ARCHETYPES

Yet another theory derived from Jungian ideas, character archetypes explore reoccurring themes and ideas throughout media, literature and art. Beginning as a psychological/spiritual based list exploring the self, ego and soul, nowadays these archetypes are more commonly known to describe types of characters. These types include: Protagonist, Antagonist, Mentor, Herald, Ally, Trickster, Shapeshifter and Guardian. These 8 are the most common tropes of a character, though other theorists argue that there are many, many more. Each character has their own role throughout the story in order to lead the protagonist to his goal (as is most common.) This cycle of events is known as the Hero's Journey.

THE HERO'S JOURNEY (Campbell and Cousineau, 2014)

The Hero's Journey is a narrative pattern that occurs in many different types of literature and media. It's a 17-step journey that is broken down into 3 segments, documenting the rise and fall of the protagonist character. It is known as the standard method of story telling as it is the most basic and commonly used structure. Later on, the Heroine's Journey was also developed in order to explore the significantly less common female protagonist. The Hero's

Journey is a useful tool for both writing and analysis of a story and is often done subconsciously.

17 steps of the Hero's Journey:

1. Call to adventure
2. Refusal of call
3. Supernatural Aid
4. Crossing First Threshold
5. Belly of the Whale
6. Road of Trials
7. Meeting with the Goddess
8. Temptation
9. Atonement with the Father
10. Apostatis
11. The Ultimate Boon
12. Refusal of Return
13. Magic Flight
14. Rescue from Without
15. Crossing the Return Threshold
16. Master of Two Worlds
17. Freedom to Live

It will be interesting to explore these (somewhat dated) theories in relation to gaming – An industry that prides itself on non-linear narratives, interactivity and unique character choices. However, it is virtually impossible to talk about characters without first addressing these theories and ideas. Even though they may not be the most relevant in this field, they are important to consider as they form the base of everything that this essay intends to explore.

Methodology

Being a humanities dissertation, much of the literature and resources used in this research will come from secondary sources. This is not to say however that this dissertation lacks credibility of original ideas – Many of the texts used have not been analysed in such a way as they are in this dissertation, so the results of those findings are, themselves, original. All the games that are mentioned in this piece of work have been studied thoroughly: time of release, cultural and social impacts, designs, development teams, even analysing the mantras of the companies that produce/publish them. Gaming is all about representation, in every element of the word, so it is highly important to cover all bases.

In order to properly study the games that are covered in this essay, a combination of research techniques was used. The majority of these games have been played by either myself or by a reliable peer so I was able to use that gameplay experience as a method, particularly when it came to describing the games. This made for particularly interesting results when comparing personal experience with other players from around the world, reviews and even theoretical analysis of certain games. Textual analysis is a key technique in a humanities dissertation, particularly when it comes to media, so I used this on the titles that I have no prior knowledge on. I watched play-through videos, cut-scene footage from the games themselves and, again, tried to cross examine these with secondary opinions, reviews and theories that were available to me. This mixture of different methodical procedures really allowed for a broad, complex picture of what is being studied. Looking at games conceptually and artistically has a lot more to do with people than raw theory – The main focus on this essay is the relationship between character and player, so naturally it is vital to take note into what the audience is saying.

This being said however; this piece is not totally without its theoretical support. This dissertation has a foundation of psychological and sociological study, giving academic credibility to the conceptual nature of the work. Again, though it may be secondary research, applying such theories to original thoughts and ideas raises interesting questions that then must be explored and deciphered. Although perhaps the use of these types of

theories isn't strictly methodology, it is important to note exactly how they are to be used in order to provide what is needed for this essay.

One of the original intentions for this dissertation was to have it paired alongside a social study that analysed the way in how players pick certain characters to play as in games. It could be down to gender, design or simply just the way in which they can be played, e.g. statistics, techniques and powers. The type of game that was to be used for this study would have been 1v1 fighting games, due to the fact that the way the fights are won are not often down to the type of character that is picked, it is down to the skill of the players themselves. Speaking from personal experience and play, I usually choose the characters that I know and recognise and have the most pleasing designs. I also mainly play as females due to the fact that I can relate to them more and it excites me to play as a female that is on par with a male counterpart. I know many others that also play based on aesthetics, but then I am aware of many players who also choose their characters tactically, naturally the smarter way to play. Below is a short conceptual abstract of the study and how it would be structured etc.

This would be a long-term, qualitative study that intends to answer the question, do certain people choose to play as certain types of characters? I would obtain a fairly large sample size (between 15-20 subjects) that would have an equal mix of genders, age and backgrounds. Each subject would be studied individually. There will be three games as part of this study, each from the fighting game genre that cover different styles, characters and themes. These games include:

- Super Smash Bros WiiU/3DS (Nintendo, 2014)
 - *Nintendo game. Features many iconic and nostalgic characters. Arguably the "lightest" fighting game out of the four.*
- Street Fighter V (Capcom, 2016)
 - *Capcom game. Kept same style of gameplay since original arcade modes. Features both classic and new characters.*

- Mortal Kombat X (NetherRealm Studios, 2015)
 - *EA property. Also originates from arcade gaming. Known for excessive, over-the-top violence.*

Each subject will be made to play five rounds of each game with a control player. The characters they choose to play as will be recorded. The results of the play do not matter. The subject will then be debriefed and asked a few questions as to why they decided to select the characters that they did. The answers to these questions will then be recorded and, when all are collected, will be cross examined with the rest of the results as well as other critical data e.g. information about the type of player.

Although this study was not able to be completed as part of this project, it seems as if it would be a good chance for future research in relation to this subject. Many things can be changed and improved, such as the sample size and the types of games, but the data would always be qualitative. Although this is not necessarily the most effective way of collecting data, for a study of this type it is the most suitable option. Choosing your character in a game is a personal and emotional choice – It is something that represents you and so, naturally, people have their preferences. I would very much like to conduct this study in the future as to continue my research on character design within video games.

Chapter 1 – Deception, Projection and Reception

THE DO's and DON'Ts OF FEMALE CHARACTERS: SEXISM, FAN SERVICE and OWNERSHIP

The sexualisation of female characters in video games is something that has been discussed time and time again in many different forms of media and literature, due to the fact that this problem is still so relevant, and gaming is no exception. Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to talk about female characters in gaming without having some kind of debate surrounding sexualisation. Due to the infinite possibilities that come with designing characters in games, it means that there is more room for over-the-top proportions that set

impossible expectations. While yes, this is also an issue with male characters (e.g. *Dante* from the *Devil May Cry* (Capcom, 2001) series) it is undoubtedly more of an issue when it comes to females. One of the main culprits are games with customizable character options, such as online MMORPG's, that often get complaints about the way they portray female characters. A common problem usually surrounds attire, not surprisingly enough, due to the fact that when female armor is upgraded it tends to show more skin – Those who play as female characters of course want to use the higher-level clothing to show their progress and move further into the game, yet this often leads to a more demeaning result. This is not so much an issue with male characters as their armor upgrades are based more on functionality than aesthetics.

SAMUS ARAN – METROID SERIES

Metroid (Nintendo, 1986) is a sci-fi action-adventure series from *Nintendo*. Originally released in 1986, it has since had 13 titles, with two more in the works. The lead character of this series is a rogue bounty hunter named *Samus Aran*, who is tasked with the job of stopping Space Pirates from exploiting alien parasites known as Metroids. *Samus* is known for the iconic gold armour, red helmet and laser cannon attached to the right arm. This character was nothing like anything seen before by *Nintendo*, particularly at the end of the first game when the helmet and armour were removed. Players of the game were shocked to find out that this powerful bounty hunter was female, with even the instruction manual suggesting that under the suit there was a man; she was the first of her kind, being predeceased only by male leads or anthropomorphic creatures. Also compared to other female characters in games of that time that were often seen as annoying and overly girly (*Amy*; *Sonic the Hedgehog* (Sega, 1991) series) or in need of rescue (*Princess Peach*; *Super Mario* (Nintendo, 1985) series,) *Samus* is “depicted as a melancholic, heroic loner of few words,” (Wikitroid, 2017) yet again breaking another trope for female characters. *Samus* was relatively well received as a female character – Everything she represented, both through her actions and (lack of) personality was fresh and original, another successful notch for *Nintendo*. However, the problems for *Samus* began early and have since escalated from there. The issues first began with her design; even though this character had just been on an epic adventure in outer space with pirates, lasers and alien lifeforms, the artists still

wanted to remind players that she was a woman. This was then complicated further when *Samus* herself was portrayed as the secret prize at the end of it all – Finishing the game in certain timeframes would allow the player to see *Samus* in a different outfit, ranging from her full body armour to a bikini.

“To make sure you could tell it was a woman despite the low resolution and limited palette, they threw in all the gender signifiers they could manage. If you did it in five hours, Samus would take off her helmet and reveal a face with cherry-red lips and big ’80s hair. But maybe that wasn’t enough, so for under three hours you’d see Samus’ whole body — hourglass-shaped, with exaggerated breasts and a pink leotard.” (scwiba, 2015)

Whilst by today's standards this is seen as incredibly sexist and degrading, was it simply just accepted back in the 80s because it was ‘of the time?’ Did Nintendo need to find a way to soften the blow in revealing this character to be a woman? It's important to *“think about the message being sent: even from the very first Metroid game, Samus’ body was a reward. She was commodified — a thing you were treated to as trophy.”* (scwiba, 2015) Historical evolution is important when discussing the development of character design, as it is interesting to see whether or not games developers learn from their mistakes. From a feminist stance, *Samus’* design has had issues since the first game, due to the voyeuristic and rewarding nature of seeing her exposed body at the end, and one would hope that things have been learned from this. However, it seems that a character such as *Samus* cannot win even by today's standards. *“What boggles my mind is that rather than seeing a less sexualized portrayal of Samus over time, as feminism and progressive ideas become more mainstream, the exact opposite happens.”* (scwiba, 2015) Whilst this statement could be seen as true in regards to her physicality, it could be argued that in games such as *Other M* it appears that the main issues are surrounding her characterisation and personality. It is also interesting to note however ways in which this statement could be seen as inherently sexist within itself. Yes, there has been an obvious change in *Samus’* character design over the years – Her original specifications told us that she was 6’3” and 198lb, whereas nowadays she is portrayed at 5’3” with accentuated female assets – yet this doesn’t mean that her strength and power have been compromised in any way. Even with the introduction of the *“infamous, skin-tight Zero Suit”* (scwiba, 2015) she is still able to fight,

roll and do everything that she was able to before. It is assumed that females cannot be sexy and powerful at the same time, these traits are apparently mutually exclusive. Of course there are female characters that are designed for this specifically (as is discussed in the latter half of this section) yet it is wrong to be dismissive of characters such as *Samus*



Mackie, 2008

who, whilst their sexuality may have been shoehorned in alongside the rest of their traits, can still perform as well as she did before it was known she was a female. *"We all know the purpose of the Zero Suit, and it has nothing to do with making Samus' life easier. It's for the player's benefit; it exists to show off Samus' body as much as possible while maintaining Nintendo's "family*

friendly" reputation." (scwiba, 2015) Whether or not one believes that this outfit (which first appeared in *Metroid: Zero Mission* (Nintendo, 2014)) is created purely in the male gaze, there is an extent to which *Samus* can be criticised for her sexuality and femininity before it simply becomes an excuse to demonize another female character. Canonically, the bodysuit has its functions – It is worn under the armor suit for comfort, it still provides protection if the armor becomes faulty and is tight and flexible to compliment acrobatic movement. Perhaps its greatest function was giving full confirmation of her gender to players who still were not in the know. The concept of the zero suit is a tricky area to discuss; firstly, calling it 'zero' has sexual connotations in itself as brings about the idea of nakedness. In later designs the suit also has high heels to even *further* remind audiences that they are playing as a female character. For the most part, *Samus'* characterisation is consistent but her designs are not and do not fit well together. Though you get to embark together on wild space missions and fight pirates, at the end of the day the developers don't want you to forget that you are doing all of this whilst still trying to remain *"feminine."* (scwiba, 2015)

The problems surrounding *Metroid* came to a climax when *Metroid: Other M* was released in 2010. The game was co-developed by Japanese company Team Ninja; the same company that is responsible for the infamous spin-off to the popular fighting game, *Dead or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball 3* (Team Ninja, 2016), the game that popularised the term

“independent breast physics.” (Klepek, 2015) *Other M* (Nintendo, 2010) was considered a relative failure in terms of sales, between August and November it had sold under half a million copies (North America); well below Nintendo’s expectations, and received very mixed reviews from both fans and critics alike. Co-creator of the *Metroid* (Nintendo, 1986) series, Yoshio Sakamoto, stated that the reason the game failed was because it *“featured a female character”* and that its not *“just about the sales.”* (Nintendo Life, 2013) He went on to apologise to gamers if they felt *“emasculated”* by the character, and stated that *“if Other M had disguised Samus’ gender like in Metroid Prime, Other M would have surpassed the entire Metroid series.”* (Nintendo Life, 2013) This is a very interesting series of comments, particularly from one of the driving forces behind the development of the game. This feels like a very broad and sweeping assumption to make about the desires of audiences, as well as the character herself. If anything its to do with the *“flawed execution [that] leaves us with a character that doesn’t quite match the Samus we’ve come to understand over the years.”* (Extra Credits, 2012) Judging by the type of criticisms this game was getting by reviewers, her gender was not the problem. It was not even close – The problem lies in the story, the method in which the story was told and the characterisation that was guided by this story. To give some context, *Other M* essentially tried to develop a backstory for *Samus* in order to further develop her character through the traumatic events in her past. However, playtime is sacrificed in place of cut scenes that can last up to 15 minutes’ long with overdrawn exposition, all narrated by a *“lifeless and boring”* (Haywald, 2010) portrayal of *Samus*. *“There’s an old adage in film and literature; show, don’t tell... And there’s a parallel adage in games; do, don’t show. Unfortunately, Other M fails spectacularly at both of these.”* (Extra Credits, 2012) When players finally get the chance to be in control, most of the choices and actions are dictated by *Samus’* superior, *Commander Adam Malkovich*. This is his first major role in the *Metroid* series, but many players were not happy about his contribution to the game. Being a rogue bounty-hunter, one would expect *Samus* to be in control of her own destiny and resisting rules set for her by the Federation Police, however *“what we actually end up seeing is a tale about Samus’ desperate need for approval from a male authority figure.”* (Extra Credits, 2012) *Metroid: Other M* (Nintendo, 2010) was essentially the final nail in the coffin for a character that has had a rough reception from their first game. *“At the end of the day, I have a hard time believing that the Samus we’re shown in this game is the same woman that has, until now, completely wrecked the Space Pirate shit on a regular*

basis. I'm not saying Samus should just be a total bad-ass ice queen all the time and never show weakness or emotion because that would be silly. A character without human flaws is a bad character." (Extra Credits, 2012) It could be argued that *Samus Aran* is in no way a good example of female character design in video games, adding to the already long list of other bad examples, but this does not mean that this is all she has to offer. In games aside from *Other M* (Nintendo, 2010) her portrayal is significantly better, such as the *Metroid Prime* (Nintendo, 2002) series, which currently has a fourth instalment in development, which is described as "*a shining example of how a classic video game series can be vividly reborn*" (Metacritic, n.d) – This series is all played in first person shooter mode. Players can clearly see the reflection of *Samus'* face on her helmet visor (so you know she's a girl) but that's all that's needed in order not to sacrifice game play or the validity of her character and her capabilities. So yes, while *Samus* does have a lot wrong in terms of her designs and portrayals, and why it is surprising that a game made as recent as 2010 would depict her as extremely subservient, there is still hope and room for her evolution. It is a struggle for female characters to break out of their pre-set moulds, particularly when it comes to those in franchises, so it will be interesting to see how her representation develops from this point onwards and hope that lessons have been learned from titles such as *Other M*. (Nintendo, 2010)

Princess Zelda, another iconic Nintendo OC, has a slightly different story in terms of her development yet still struggles as being a strong representation of a female character within her games. Even though the wildly popular franchise (selling over 75 million copies from 1986-2016) is named after her, Zelda as a character does not have much to do with it herself; instead, she fulfils the typical plot device/damsel in distress type of role that is common with female characters in action-adventure games. It is interesting to note that while her character means a lot, she does not do a lot, again another typical trope when it comes to female characters.

In the lore of the game, Princess Zelda is a human reincarnation of the goddess Hylia (the creator of life in the land of Hyrule) and as such must be protected/rescued at all costs. It could be argued that her lack of action is due to her status and the fact that she is so significant to the land of Hyrule. Princesses are not commonly seen running around with

weapons fighting enemies in classic action-adventure games, yet she does have her fair share of action when it is deemed appropriate, and by that meaning when you cannot recognise the character as herself. The two best examples of this would be *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, (Nintendo, 1998) where the Princess disguises herself as a Sheikah warrior named *Sheik*, and in *The Legend of Zelda: Wind Waker*, (Nintendo, 2002) where a pirate captain named *Tetra* just so happens to find out that she is the long-lost Princess Zelda. It seems to be that *Zelda*, whatever version she may be, can only partake in the action when she is in disguise, either as a man or a scrappy tomboy; once the dress and crown are present, suddenly she is the damsel in distress once again. Same goes for Nintendo's other famous princess, *Princess Peach*. In the main strand of *Super Mario* (Nintendo, 1985) games, as is expected *Peach* is there to serve as the plot device for *Mario* to send him on his journey to rescue her. Like *Samus*, the pre-set role of these female characters are not to say in any way that they are useless, for example *Princess Peach* possesses the power to jump and hover in the air for short distances at a time, something that no-one else in the *Super Mario* (Nintendo, 1985) games can do. The issues that have been brought up here are more to do with the fact that female representation as lead characters in games is lacking, but if they are placed in a lead role then they seem to receive harsher critiques and are all more prone to fitting in with typical female tropes. Nintendo is known for its ability to create timeless, iconic characters and there is no doubt that these female characters are recognisable, it is more the fact that due to the original period and way in which they were developed, that they appear to be stuck in a time-capsule that doesn't quite allow them to explore their full potential.

So what exactly were to happen if a female character is given the liberation and powerful representation that male characters are so often given? How successful would a game become with a female lead that takes control of her own self and what she stands for?

Bayonetta, *Bayonetta* series

Bayonetta, is the titular character for two action games developed by PlatinumGames in 2010 and 2014. She is an Umbra Witch, meaning her powers include shapeshifting and magical attacks using her hair, however, her main choice of weapon is a variety of firearms

that she attaches to her outfit. Bayonetta's concept took well over a year, with character designer Mari Shimazaki and director of development Hideki Kamiya finally agreeing on a *"modern, female witch that wears glasses and wields four guns."* (Shimazaki, 2009)



"Bayonetta emerged as a long-haired, black-clothed witch with a beehive hairdo (in place of the traditional pointy hat) and glasses (which Kamiya "really pushed for ... to differentiate Bayonetta from other female characters and give her a sense of mystery and intelligence")" (Shimazaki, 2009)

Kamiya openly admits that he designed Bayonetta to be his *"ideal woman,"* (Ramsay, 2009) even going so far as to say *"I*

really wanted to get Bayonetta's backside perfect. I guess I am in to that sort of thing."

(Williams, 2009) There is no denying at all that Bayonetta is an overtly sexual character. The way that she fights, moves and even bleeds oozes femininity and sexuality. IGN called the game a mixture of *"action and a great big helping of fan service,"* (Shea, 2009) which also cannot be debated here – Bayonetta is clearly a character that has been designed in order to attract a mature audience, (it has an age rating of 18+.) The fact that the game sold 138,000 copies on its first day of release surely demonstrates that sex sells, and that her design is the only reason people wanted to buy this game, right?

While the aesthetics of character design are one thing, it is also just as important to focus on the character's personality and the way in which they portray themselves – Particularly a problem that is found among female depiction. Many female players are often deterred from playing games due to the fact that their only representation is young, straight girls with certain hair colors, certain ethnicities and certain measurements that are submissive and in need of rescue, all whilst proving a level of fan service. A game that was mentioned earlier in this chapter that provides a strong example of this is *Dead or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball 3*, which features characters that are essentially on par with the sexiness and femininity of Bayonetta, but the critical backlash from this game came from the way that

the player could interact with these females. The game was given a Mature rating for sexual content despite some of the characters being around 14 years old and became famous for its coining of the phrase *"independent breast physics."* (Klepek, 2015) It was no wonder that this game was banned from having a western port, meaning that those who wanted to play it would have to go through a lot in order to import it direct from Japan.

This of course sparked much of a debate online over whether or not it was considered sexist, or if people were just too easily offended. *"Its just a video game... I'm all for equality but I can't help but get annoyed at most of the crying from people who get "offended" by everything."* (Klepek, 2015)

The purpose of this research piece however is not to sit here and debate who is right and who is wrong in this scenario. Yes, as a female I do feel as if there should be a broader range of representation of female characters, but that is not what is being discussed. In regards to character design on a whole, this game ultimately fails because its not played for players to develop an interest or connection with the characters and story, its simply there to look good. This is where it becomes interesting however, because surely that's simply all that Bayonetta does, look good? Even her developer and designer have said that. So what is it that makes her so unique and appealing to males and females alike? Ownership.

Bayonetta's personality has been designed to be powerful and sexual and to use her beauty and assets to her advantage. Unlike so many other female characters (see above) it is obvious that she does not fit into any form of female stereotype. *"From the first CGI sequence, Bayonetta is all out there in the glory of being over-sexualized and saturated for the eyes that they cannot comprehend the vision of austere lush being thrown into their faces."* (The Feminist Stance on Bayonetta, 2013) Bayonetta as a character is a prime example of how female sexuality can work in favor for a character, primarily due to the fact that her personality, look and nature have been an obvious and honest design choice from the beginning. Bayonetta is there for the male gaze, there's no doubt about that, but she's also there for the female gaze and for anybody's gaze that wants to enjoy playing as a *"strong, confident person. Not just a woman."* (2013) Is this then perhaps the way in which designers should go about developing female characters and their roles within games? Focus less on masculinity and femininity (unless it is part of the fabric of their being, like

Bayonetta) and spend more time creating just a solid, sustainable person with personality, vulnerability and functionality. Visuals are of course a large part of good character design as well, as they must compliment the way in which the character acts and moves. There are many do's and don'ts when it comes to designing female characters and there is still an obvious struggle to portray them as successfully as many of their male counterparts, but the gaming industry is forever changing and evolving and there is no saying that female characters have not earned their place on the pedestal as much as any other character has.

Seen and Not Heard: Silent Protagonists and Visual Storytelling

Characters need to have some level of relatability in order for audiences to fully engage with them. Even if the titular character is overly exaggerated, over powered and completely superfluous, there has to be some level of vulnerability there in order to allow players to share their experiences. An example of this being *Nathan Drake* from the *Uncharted* (Naughty Dog, 2007) series. This character is known for his macho persona and treasure hunting skills. His Indiana Jones-esque attitude means he spends the whole game quipping one liners and making jokes to a near constant degree – Much to the dismay of the other characters and even some players. He is also designed to be classically handsome and harbours a strong superiority complex as he has believed throughout his whole life that he is related to the famous explorer Sir Frances Drake. Put all of these traits together and this seems like the most alienating character possible, however, *Nathan Drake* works as a character due to the fact that all of his undesirable mannerisms are revealed to be simply just a façade to cover up the fact that he was an orphan boy that later became a young fugitive. *Drake's* story is revealed bit by bit through each installment of the franchise, meaning that players can follow along on the adventures whilst learning more about his character and where he came from and, after a while, his vulnerability shines through. These games promote a strong case for the idea that successful games “do, don't show.” (Extra Credits, 2012) Players have to put the effort and the hours in, in order to fully understand this character and begin to engage with him.

Character personality is as crucial as their design and, if done well, players get an insight into the character without having to sacrifice play time or enjoyment. This being said however, it is of course a lot easier to understand a character when they are able to converse their thoughts and feelings through snappy clips of dialogue, interactions with other characters or even body language – As long as any expositional points are not being dragged out so much that the game no longer becomes engaging, then there should be no issue with conveying a relatable and enjoyable character. So how is it that a game with no dialogue, no discernable story and no obvious leading character can be voted one of the greatest games of all time?

Journey (thatgamecompany) is a 2012 indie game developed by thatgamecompany for the PlayStation3 / PlayStation 4. An adventure game that is supported by highly aesthetic backgrounds and a haunting soundtrack, from the moment the story starts players are not given a clue as to who they are or what their purpose is within the game. Your character is a small, robed figure, appropriately named *the Traveler*, whose only notable features are two yellow eyes that can be seen from beneath their hood, and a long patterned scarf that flows behind them. As the player you don't know where you are or why you are here – Your only clue is a glowing mountain that looms over you from the horizon, practically begging you to go to it.



thatgamecompany, 2012

The Traveler cannot speak or express emotions in any understandable manner, instead it communicates through chiming. These chimes can be used to manipulate/activate surrounding objects in the game or, on rare occasions, to communicate with other travelers – This game also has a feature that allows two random players to connect and partake in the

journey together anonymously. The companions may assist each other, but only when the credits for the game role does the actual name of the other player get revealed. For all intents and purposes, *Journey* is an incredibly simple game, yet despite this the game is incredibly impactful. It is a critically acclaimed title having won many awards, including four BAFTAs, and was even placed 42nd on *Edge Magazines Top 100 Video Games of All Time*. (2016) So what exactly does *Journey* owe its success too? It is undoubtable that the game is a visual masterpiece but it feels as if there is much more too it than that, especially when it comes to the mysterious *Traveler*. So how has this silent, indie-game, robed character become such an icon within the past five years?

During the literal journey that you make throughout this game there are many high and low points that occur. One moment you could be surfing the sand dunes, the next you're stuck down in the bottom of a trench. The game is very much of a linear narrative and mechanic, meaning that there is no possibility you can stray too far from the path and each 'level' is concluded by a short hieroglyphic-style animation that shows you your progress so far. Throughout the game however, no matter what events take place, the character remains as a blank slate – The only indication of any kind of emotion is the body language that is conveyed now and then during significant points. The silence of the *Traveler* allows the player to become that character. Without scripted dialogue, you create your own, meaning each player has their own individual experience of the game. You begin to feel empathetic towards this figure as you have projected yourself onto them as you experience what they experience. While "*the concept of empathy is notoriously ambiguous,*" (Decety, 2012) the general consensus suggests that it is a sensitive response to the "*suffering of others.*" (Decety, 2012) This is particularly relevant to a scene in the game near the end when the *Traveler* seems to collapse from exhaustion. It appears that, particularly in relation to this topic, that empathy is "*a form of on inner imitation,*" (Decety, 2012) meaning that we project ourselves onto another to "*establish a meaningful link.*" (Decety, 2012) As the main character in this game is an unidentifiable figure with no age, gender, obvious features etc. then it appears to be much easier for a wider array of players to be able to relate to what they see in front of them. "*The classical theory of empathy ... considered it a kind of projection of one's own physical state into foreign bodies.*" (Decety, 2012) There are many reasons as to why this game has become so successful, but from a psychological and

emotional standpoint it seems this is the most reasonable explanation. Everybody experiences games in their own unique way, so there is no definite way to explain why *Journey* has become so popular yet judging from personal experience, as someone who has played this game many times, this feels correct.

The argument still stands however – Is this anonymous way of portraying characters better than having them already established? It is very clear that this kind of design does work however; after the success of *Journey*, Matt Nava (art director for the game,) went on to create another title with Giant Squid Studios, this time called *Abzû*. (Giant Squid, 2016) This game is of a very similar style and mechanic, yet instead of being set in the desert the game takes place underwater. Though it was critiqued for being a simple game it still received high praise and reviews for its artistic style and ability to evoke emotion. The indie game scene is growing fast, with many games now playing with the idea of anonymous characters. Games such as *Thomas Was Alone*, (Mike Bithell, 2013) a platformer developed by Mike Bithell, received very positive reviews, even though the lead character is a literal square. This is not to say that indie games have given up on the idea of character design however – It takes just as much work to create such a character that all audiences can project onto as it does designing one that is already complex and well established. Unique character designs, such as in *Journey*, appear to have aided artistic games in becoming more accessible by provoking an emotional response through an empathetic connection with a blank-slate character.

Chapter 2:

Playing God: Does Absolute Control lead to Absolute Evil?

A case study of *The Sims* franchise

Players are often dictated by design as to how they should play their games – What characters they should be, how the game works, what path they need to take in order to complete the story or mission. Even games such as RPGs with customizable options have their limitations to a certain extent. But what happens when the player is given almost

complete control? Given the power to be a God-like figure to their own creations in the game, deciding their fates and the way in which they should lead their lives. Players are given the opportunity to control their own worlds with their own characters, but even then to some this is not enough. Games of this type have the possibility to go even further in creating a warped reality where money is no problem and anyone can drop dead at any moment. God-simulators encourage total freedom and mayhem – They are sandbox games and, just like a sandbox, the creative options are endless. The purpose of this chapter is to analyse the type of play that is put into these games and how the potential of having total control over a simulated world could lead to darker paths.

“The Sims is different ... the player does not take on the “identity” of any one character in particular, but is expected to create and manage multiple characters.” (Wolf and Perron, 2013) The Sims franchise became popular with the games *Sim Earth* (Maxis, 1990) and *Sim City* (Maxis, 1989); arguably some of the most successful and notable God-simulator type games; these lightening-in-a-bottle ideas gained their popularity as they were released at the height of PC gaming and were simple and easy to play. The franchise evolved however, focusing more on micromanagement of individuals as opposed to larger scale environments. The first true *The Sims* (Maxis) game was released in 2000 and was an instant hit, both with new players and those who were already aware of the franchise. Since then, *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000) titles have sold over 200 million copies world wide and is one of the best selling games of all time. There is no true purpose or aim to this game; Players begin the game by creating either an individual or family of ‘sims,’ before placing them onto either an empty plot of land or a pre-built house. Players may approach the game however they please – They may wish to make life easy for their ‘sims,’ obtaining them good jobs, finding someone to marry and have children and fulfill their lifetime wishes. On the other hand, they may just want to cause total chaos by neglecting their needs, pitting them against each other and placing them in dangerous situations. The possibilities are endless and the ‘sims’ themselves are easily disposable. Everything in the game can be customized, ranging from the personality of the ‘sims,’ to the furniture that is placed in their house. It is up to the player to manage all of these elements from a distance and manipulate the game how they wish. Us as ‘Gods’ are never directly involved in the action however, instead *“the game is structured for the player to be the “eye-in-the-sky.”*” (Wolf and Perron, 2013) Players are

also not limited to just one character for the whole game and may pick and choose at will. Even 'sims' that were pre-made in order to develop a type of community can be controlled and destroyed. *"In The Sims, players can control any character they desire, by quickly switching among them and zooming in and out of different houses."* (Wolf and Perron, 2013)

In Mark JP Wolf's book *The Video Game Theory Reader* (2013), he discusses the notion of this God/mother role and how easily it can be to disregard our own characters as we ourselves are not placed in the action in order to gain sense of the world we have created. *"While players can develop 'favourite' characters that they soon focus more playing time on, the ability to just as quickly 'dump' or literally 'evict' characters (or families) does not force the same attachment that FF9 does."* (Wolf and Perron, 2013) Here, Wolf compares the playing styles of *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000) vs. *Final Fantasy 9* (Square Enix, 2000) (one of the many games in the popular JRPG series,) as the player gets a full view of the world, yet is only able to control one character. With this model of play, it means that the player forms a strong attachment to the main character and, if anything were to happen to them during the story then the player would be more empathetic due to the amount of time and effort that has been put into their endeavors. *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000) is clearly a very different story in that there are so many characters that one can control, it is difficult to form any kind of attachment. Whilst some may be prioritised, as the player is causing their life events rather than partaking in them, meaning that a connection is hard to form. We may put hours into creating a certain character, then instantly get bored, kill them and move onto the next. So how it is that we can just toss away these creations so easily without even a second thought?

One of the many things that gaming teaches you is to be responsible for your actions – Everything has consequences and sooner or later those consequences will effect you in a way that could potentially alter the whole game. *"Game design has consequences, and while many choices can be seen to be liberating, these choices can also be constraining in other ways as well."* (Wolf and Perron, 2013) The biggest and most obvious example of this is trying to stay alive in games that require action or combat. You teach yourself to fight in new ways in order to confront new enemies, failure to comply with that results in the character dying and having to backtrack a portion of the game. The constant threat of

consequence is what keeps players on the straight-and-narrow in games that punish you for failure. On the other hand, however, it is an interesting point to bring up the idea of consequences in gaming when talking about a game such as *The Sims*. As a sandbox style game, there are no achievements or milestones to reach in terms of narrative or skill, so players are free to make whatever decisions they want without really effecting their progress in the game – If something happens to one of the creations, the player can simply make another and start over. The player is free to make consequence-free choices. There are no punishments and no setbacks, if a player decides they are done with a certain character they may simply destroy them and make another with no tarnish on their progress.

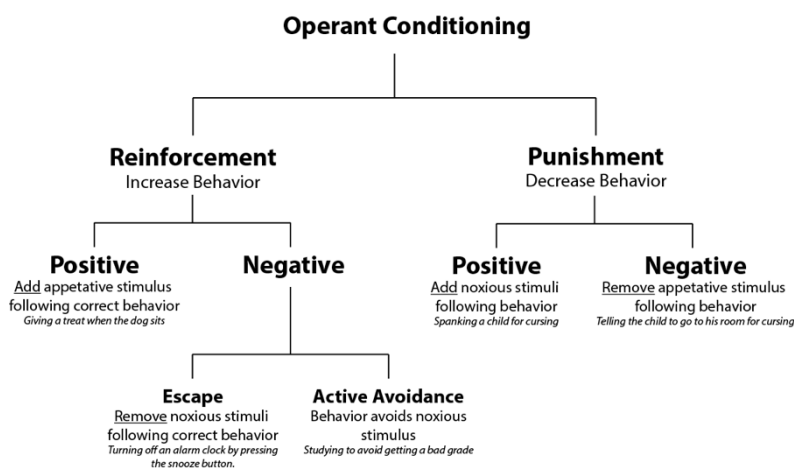
So let's take a look at other games that provide a completely different style of gaming to *The Sims*, (Maxis, 2000) and see how a game that is formed around its consequences of actions and how players interact with this. *Until Dawn* (Supermassive Games, 2015) is a horror survival game that bases its narrative upon the butterfly effect theory. It's a multi-strand story and every decision the player makes in that game changes certain story elements that end up effecting the events as a whole. What may seem like an insignificant interaction at the beginning of the game could have huge implications later on. Players become personally attached to the characters (there is a cast of 8 main characters that are all playable at different points) and can feel personally responsible and even have emotional reactions if something happens to them. Of course, there are certain aspects of the game that cannot be controlled by the player, but it's a solid example of how consequences in games can have such a big impact on both the story and the player – A completely polar opposite model to *The Sims*. (Maxis, 2000)

So what exactly happens when those consequences are taken away? What happens when the player has the freedom to choose their own outcomes? *The Sims* does not punish the player, instead it seems to punish the characters. An example: If a Sim is not looked after for a significant period of time, then they start to become uncomfortable – Like humans they have certain needs that have to be attended to in order to function every day e.g. bathroom needs, sleep and eating. If these are ignored, then things such as the mood and health of the character declines. Eventually, if they are left too long, they will die. To reiterate: The

player may feel some kind of emotional connection with the character, yet the game itself does not punish the player. If a Sim dies then the game simply carries on as if nothing has really happened, ergo the player learns nothing.

B.F SKINNER – Theory of Operant Conditioning (1938) (Catania and Harnad, 1988)

This is an interesting approach to analysing the idea of consequences and how humans actively try to avoid or partake in certain outcomes.



Positive presence of a stimulus

Negative absence of a stimulus

Reinforcement increases behavior

Punishment decreases behavior

Escape removes a stimulus

Avoidance prevents a stimulus

(Wikipedia, 2017)

If behaviour is reinforced negatively via punishment (as is seen in most games e.g. losing lives) then there will be an active effort in reducing that behaviour. If it is reinforced positively, or not at all, then there will be a continuation of that behaviour. So taking a look at this idea from the players' perspective, there is little to no worry that the game will be ruined for them because of their actions, and the more they play

the more they realise what they are capable of achieving within the game. This idea is further reinforced by the in-game cheats that can be applied. By entering certain shortcut 'codes' into the game, players can enter deeper into the raw mechanics and manipulate them at their will. One of the most well-known cheat codes is 'Motherload,' which instantly adds 50,000 Simoleans (in game currency) to the family funds. Players would continue to do this in order not to have to go through the longevity of making a 'sim' work for their money in a proper job, yet could still reward themselves by upgrading things like houses, cars and swimming pools. This is an example of reinforced behaviour, as it can provide such benefits for the player and, in turn, their characters. One of the other popular cheats is the ability to resurrect dead 'sims' at the will off the player. This is further reinforcement because even if the worst were to happen, there are simple ways to fix your mistakes and never learn from them. The whole game appears to be one long exercise in reinforced behaviour in which the

characters may potentially suffer or prosper depending on the decisions of their 'God.' Skinners' theory is perhaps one of the most competent theories to explain behaviour in relation to *The Sims*, but even then it has its flaws. This study was originally done under controlled, clinical conditions and when talking about it in comparison a game that has amounted 200 million copies sold worldwide, there is no telling exactly how every player decides to run their game. However, there does seem to be a general consensus within *The Sims* community that in order to get the most out of the game, one must exploit it to its full potential.

MONSTER FACTORY

As was mentioned earlier, *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000) has endless customizable options within the game ranging from the characters themselves to the environment they live in. As the more recent titles have been developed, and the technology has improved, the extent to which elements can be customized has reached new heights. A YouTube series created by the games journalists at *Polygon* takes character creation and the role of 'God' to the absolute extreme. Their aim is to purposely create abnormal 'monsters' which are then placed into a world where they are dictated by the desire for entertainment. Often they set tasks for themselves in order to increase the difficulty of the game, but the ultimate goal is simply to wreak havoc and cause chaos. This leads us to question the motives of players of this game and the level of mortality that comes with being in total control. As was discussed in the previous paragraph, the fact that there is no means of punishment in this game teaches the player nothing. There is nothing stopping them from doing as they please, which could result in negative repercussions, for the character, not the player. Of course, the players of these games are not necessarily explicitly evil, but in the position of a 'God,' then all morality is lost to exploitation and personal gain of entertainment. Although it may sound ridiculous to talk about these programmes as if they were real people, it is the principle of the matter and the actions that are taking place – It is up to the player to make these decisions. If they choose a darker path, then could potentially be a comment on their character and the way in which they experience the world.



Monster Factory: Recreating a Beloved Sitcom in The Sims 4 (2015)

[In this part of the play through, players Justin and Griffin McElroy (*Polygon.com*) have purposely decided to kill the roommate (Cousin Specialagent) of a disfigured father and son duo (Dark Vader & Daytrader Vader.) After a failed attempt to bargain with the Grim Reaper, they later place the urn of their deceased friend in their open planned bathroom, next to the toilet, *"his favourite place in the world."* The epitaph reads *"amber was the colour of my energy."*] (2015)

This episode has been watched many times in preparation for this research and this is the most accurate review of events possible. Naturally it sounds like gibberish to those out of context, but that demonstrates the extent that these players go in order to inflict chaos. It can even be seen in the way that the characters are designed, with their over exaggerated features and strange clothing. This also leads onto the interesting point surrounding the discussion of morality and the possibility of sociopathic tendencies – Sociopathy being someone *"who lacks a sense of moral responsibility or social conscience."* (Dictionary.com, n.d) Though it may seem out of the question that a game such as *The Sims* could trigger this kind of behaviour, it is important to look toward other situations in which control over another lead to this type of conduct and see how and why it could be possible.

STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT – Philip Zimbardo (1971) (2017)

In 1971 Dr. Philip Zimbardo attempted to perform an experiment order to investigate perceived power. The participants of the study were first split into two groups – Prisoners and guards. The prisoners were simply told to follow the authoritarian regime of the guards,

no matter what else may occur. It began well, each group following the role which they were given. Problems arose when, before long, those playing the guards began to exercise their authority too much – This led to the guards becoming too powerful, submitting some prisoners to psychological and physical trauma. Despite these obvious ethical flaws however, Zimbardo allowed this violence to continue. In the end, the experiment was abandoned after six days after becoming too extreme.

“Because of the nature and questionable ethics of the experiment, Zimbardo found it impossible to keep traditional scientific controls in place. He was unable to remain a neutral observer, since he influenced the direction of the experiment as the prison's superintendent.” (Wikipedia, 2017)

The participants that took place in this experiment were just *“24 males whom they deemed to be the most psychologically stable and healthy,”* (Smith & Haslam, 2012) yet ended up in the experiment with *“modified [behaviour] ... [showing] their dominance even when it was not necessary.”* (Wikipedia, 2017) Though this experiment has received harsh criticism due to its lack of moderation and ethical guidelines, its findings and conclusions have been applicable to cases all around the world. Environment is a large part of developing sociopathic tendencies, which is where this study starts to become relevant with *The Sims* games. In this sense, the players are the guards and the ‘sims’ are the prisoners – We exercise our power over them in a fantasy, authoritarian world where we get literally to decide who lives and who dies. Just like Skinner’s theory however, the *Stanford Prison Experiment* isn’t the ultimate answer to explain the thought processes that go into playing a game of this nature – It is simply just another idea to suggest as to why certain choices are made when there is almost zero limit to what can be achieved by the player.

In the end, *The Sims* is a popular franchise that allows its players to enjoy what it has to offer in any way they see fit. The uncapped limit on imagination in this game permits the player to even understand themselves more as they play, potentially uncovering untapped desires for structure and stability, or the need for total destruction. A God-simulator is as a God-simulator does, providing players with a platform to explore their full power for either

better or worse. Wanting to play *The Sims* doesn't make you a sociopath, but at the same time it essentially teaches you how to be one.

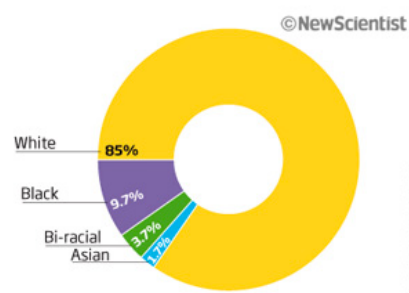
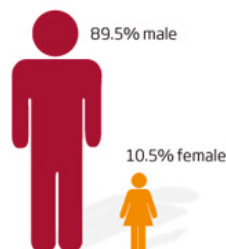
Chapter 3

Kicking up a Storm: The overwhelming success of *Overwatch* and the inclusivity of Blizzard

By now it should seem fairly obvious how significant good character design is and how it can effect those who play the games – Solidarity, consistency and equality are all key elements in creating a successful character, alongside memorable design and strong personality traits that actively want players to keep revisiting these characters. Whilst these are all significant points, it could be argued however that one of the most important parts of character design is inclusivity and representation. Such as it seems with many other forms of media, there tends to be a vast majority of games that lead with a certain type of identity; primarily young, white males.

Virtual game census: primary characters in a game

Data weighted according to games' sales



(Sung, 2009)

“Looking at the top 150 games sold on Xbox, Xbox 360, PlayStation, PlayStation 2, Nintendo GameCube, PSP, Game Boy Advance, Nintendo DS and PC, the researches found, not surprisingly, that several subgroups within gender, age, and race groups are (or were) under-represented in video games at that time: women, children, elderly and black people.” (Sung, 2009)

This lack of representation in gaming could potentially cause severe *“identity-based problems,”* (Sung, 2009) significantly those of a younger age who are perhaps just beginning to understand themselves and are craving something to relate to. It has been proven time and time again that variety in media representation works and can warrant very positive responses, so why do companies continue to fall into majority and refuse the possibility of gaining a whole new demographic? Take the *Call of Duty* (Activision, 2003) franchise for example, the most popular First Person Shooter in the world. Out of its fourteen titles, out of its fourteen hero characters there is only one that is not a white male. This kind of underrepresentation is also extremely prevalent in its player mindset. Like many competitive community games, *Call of Duty* (Activision, 2003) have a yearly eSports championship, yet the lack of female presence at these events are becoming more and more obvious. As Julia Hardy from Viceland writes, the common belief is that the lack of women is down to the fact that *“girls don’t like guns,”* (Hardy, 2015) yet there are countless other shooter games in which females rank best in the world, such as *Halo* (Bungie, 2001), *Counter Strike* (Valve Corporation, 2000) and *Left 4 Dead*. (Valve South, 2008)

“Perhaps the shortage of female players in CoD is due to its jock-like presentation. When done on a mega scale in the States, the whole thing has a very ESPN/Sports Center vibe, all ties, shouting, slick-back hair and late-night trips to casinos. Women, if they're even around, are generally girlfriends cheering their partners on, work in PR for the events, or are one of the infamous eGirls – the assumed-to-be-groupies cheer squad that attends events.” (Hardy, 2015)

Whilst *Call of Duty* (Activision, 2003) is just one example in a sea of games that infamous for its underrepresentation, its influence on players and the world of gaming cannot be underestimated. It is a huge franchise with a massive following but has seemingly backed itself into a corner in terms of diversity within its demographic. It appears to be that if you are not a young, white male that likes guns, violence and a sense of superiority, then this game is not the one for you. That’s not to say the franchise doesn’t do well however, as was mentioned it is the best selling FPS of all time, but is that not then fueling the flames of the problem?

Of course, representation through character creation is much more than just gender alone. Recently in other forms of media, such as film and TV, there have been a rise in the number of LGBT characters, POC, those with disabilities and a broader range of ages starring in titular roles – They are no longer just the tokens in order to obtain the views and the fandoms. Games designers are trying to demonstrate that they are there to add complexity and depth to the characters' backstories and personalities, whilst also aiming to include a wider range of people, by trying to eliminate the potential stigma, for example, that selecting a character that just so happens to be gay would hinder the play in any way. Possibly the best example of this would be a character named Tracer, the 'poster-girl' for Blizzard's 2016 smash-hit success, *Overwatch*, (Blizzard, 2016) who was revealed by the developers to be a lesbian a good year after the game became popular. This chapter is dedicated to the analysis of this particular game due to its rich roster of characters that range from a 60-year-old Egyptian sniper, to a 19-year-old Korean pro-gamer, each with varying sexualities, ethnicities and, in some cases, disabilities. Before we delve further into this particular example however, let's first take a look at the game itself and try to decipher just how and why *Overwatch* (Blizzard, 2016) became an overnight sensation with fans from all over the world.

The game itself is a highly stylized, online multiplayer, first-person shooter game with a colourful cast of diverse characters each with their own skills, weaknesses and personalities. *Overwatch* was born from the ashes of a previously failed game; this failure however allowed developers at Blizzard to reevaluate their processes and create something innovative, after seeing the current state of the shooting-game market, they wanted to create something groundbreaking. It is a class-based shooter, with its characters falling into one of four categories: Offence, Defense, Tank and Support. Whilst more experienced players can use tactical strategy in order to level up and improve their competitive ranking, *Overwatch* is not unkind to new and less experienced players that are looking for a more casual environment to play. The development team were inspired by MOBAs (Multiplayer Online Battle Arenas,) such as *Team Fortress*, (Valve Corporation, 2007) in order to contain the action and have the players focus more on capturing points than completing long-winded missions, in order to keep the matches short, snappy and interesting. The matches take place in well constructed maps that are based on real world cities e.g. the obviously

Greek themed city, Ilios, takes its design and imagery from the island of Santorini, complete with its high walls, white buildings and blue roofs.

Overwatch Fire, n.d



Each map has certain elements that accommodate to certain characters' skills. Speaking of Ilios, the construction of this map is beneficial for characters that have defensive attacks as they are able to easily knock enemy players off

the edge of the map.

The level design in *Overwatch* is one of its most interesting features and is certainly worth mentioning, particularly as the characters and levels appear to go hand in hand. *Overwatch* maps are notable because of their asymmetry that *"provides variety and creates interesting tactical options for the player every time they play."* (Extra Credits, 2016) As mentioned earlier, *Overwatch* takes much of its design inspiration from MOBAs, yet other games of this sort tend to show symmetry in their level designs – Whilst easier to develop and understand, this can create problems as players may develop preferences for certain areas of the map and could become disappointed when they are not given the option they want. Asymmetrical map design has its pros and cons, such as players becoming frustrated when it feels as if the opposite team has an advantage based on environmental factors vs what characters are chosen, but ultimately it works out to be a better play in the end because *"on any well designed map, the action doesn't just occur at one point the entire length of the match. Instead, you'll find yourself pushing through different choke points."* (Extra Credits, 2016) It may seem irrelevant to talk about level design when the focus of this research is to discuss characters, but as was mentioned earlier that personality is as important as aesthetic, it appears that relation with the environment is also key for character development. Each character in *Overwatch* (Blizzard, 2016) has their own unique interactions both with their settings and with other characters – These come in the form of both player-controlled voice lines and voice lines that just occur naturally. For example, according to the lore of the game, two characters named *Ana* and *Widowmaker* have a complex past together meaning that they are now sworn enemies. If they are placed in the

same group together then they acknowledge each other by the way of a scathing interaction:



Overwatch Wiki (Widowmaker,) 2016

W: *"You were once a legend, but what are you now? Just a shell of a woman."*

A: *"I take it you don't want my autograph then."*

Blizzard, 2016



Overwatch Wiki (Ana,) 2016

Overwatch (Blizzard, 2016) features many of these subtle interactions throughout the game, allowing players to get a better insight into the different relationships between characters as well as the overarching backstory that surrounds the game, all without having to sit through hours of exposition and boring dialogue. This clever use of communication has the players invested in the characters from the moment they begin a match, meaning that they want to find out more and more as they go along. We are given small droplets of information that feed into the larger picture of each character – A picture that developers at Blizzard have taken great care in constructing.

Around the time of release of the game itself, Blizzard also released a series of short animations that focused on certain characters, creating the story that would support the game. These shorts demonstrated the themes of the game in a way that was gripping and left the audience hanging on for more answers. Answers that they could figure out themselves if they were to buy the game and play it. Good vs evil, family values and redemption are all ideas that are explored in these animations that set the initial tone for the game. Nowadays as the game develops and adds more characters to its roster, the shorts are created to promote new members and show how they fit into the story as a whole. Some are part of the main narrative, some are part of the variety of subplots, but in the end they all connect within the game.

The game itself however is not dictated by its lore however. Things happen, lines are said but the backstory is essentially non-canonical. This leads us back to the point that was made earlier about the character of *Tracer*. Around the Christmas period (one of the many times during the year when *Overwatch* (Blizzard, 2016) has in-game events) *Tracer* was revealed to be in a monogamous, lesbian relationship that was demonstrated through a simple piece of official artwork.



Blizzard, 2016

This of course sparked much of a debate online – The majority of the response was positive but was still tainted by the occasional troll, particularly those based in the bisexual community as they did not feel like she should be represented by the partner she currently has. The internet went into a frenzy until Blizzard released a statement:

“Tracer is a lesbian on the LGBTQ+ spectrum. As in real life, having variety in our characters and their identities and backgrounds helps create a richer and deeper overall fictional universe. From the beginning, we’ve wanted the universe of Overwatch to feel welcoming and inclusive, and to reflect the diversity of our players around the world. As with any aspect of our characters’ backgrounds, their sexuality is just one part of what makes our heroes who they are.” (Dane, 2016)

Blizzard also stated that *Tracer’s* sexuality was something that they decided when they were “developing [the hero] early on,” yet no attention was brought to it straight away as “[they] want stories about characters’ relationships [to] really do them justice.” (Jamarque, 2016) This is a strong statement on the character development process at Blizzard, with the fact that they did not feel they had to make a big statement about one of their characters being LGBT, just as if they would not make a big statement if they were straight. Then again, could it have been tactical? As *Tracer* was the poster girl of the whole campaign, perhaps Blizzard were worried that revealing her sexuality could effect popularity in certain circles. Perhaps

they wanted to wait until *Tracer* was established as the primary pick and players had fallen in love with her personality and mechanics before dropping her big secret. Either way, it is clear that inclusivity of different types of people is clearly a top priority for the company. In further discussion of this point, it is time for several other characters to be analysed in order to get a better scope as to how Blizzard designs its heroes. Here is a short investigation into four other characters from the game (each from a different class.)

Sombra (Offence)

Overwatch Wiki (Sombra,) 2016



Sombra is a 30-year old hacker from Mexico. She is often affiliated with the antagonist groups in the lore of the game. Her abilities include hacking enemy players, turning invisible and transporting via homing beacons. Her interest for hacking and computers began when she was a young orphan and, as she grew, lead a revolt against the government in her country single handedly.

Sombra is a strong representation of women and girls in technology and computer science, particularly as a Hispanic character that comes from a poorer background. She is at the crossroads of witty, smart and evil, demonstrating that women can really have it all.

Torbjörn (Defense)

Overwatch Wiki (Torbjörn,) 2016



A 57-year old weapons designer hailing from Sweden, 'Torby' is the best at what he does. Though he is married and has eight children, he is not afraid to get his hand dirty and support his team in any way that he can. Torbjörn is a cyborg, alongside several other characters in the game, which seems to be Overwatch's way of representing characters with physical disabilities.

Torbjörn is also described as being a bit of a racist when it comes to discussing the 'Omnicos,' believing them to be of a lower intelligence. Although this representation is not of a decent person, it is representation all the same.

Zarya (Tank)

Overwatch Wiki (Zarya,) 2016



Aleksandra Zaryanova is a 28-year old soldier from Russia. She is the strongest woman in the world and originally a celebrated athlete for her country, Zarya gave up her dreams in order to protect her family and community. Her village was destroyed by 'Omnicos,' and so she too harbours a strong hatred of them.

Zarya represents a female body type that is rarely explored in not just video games, but media in general, highlighting the significance of her representation. Her sexuality is also up for debate (it is hinted to that she is also a lesbian) but in order not to offend Russia and its players, Blizzard have not fully confirmed this, suggesting that players make up their own mind about her love life.

Symmetra (Support)

Overwatch Wiki (Symmetra,) 2016



Satya Vaswani is a 28-year old architect from India. She was a scientific and engineering protégé from her young age, and her skills include literally bending reality and light in the hopes of creating a perfect world. She was noticed for her talents as a child and plucked straight from a poverty-stricken background.

It has been confirmed that Symmetra is on the autistic spectrum, again representing a group of people that are rarely seen in any form of media. She displays many traits to those who are autistic such as a hatred of crowds, a craving for structure and a severe lack of empathy – All things that can be picked up on through the way she interacts with other characters.

These characters are but a fraction of the entire cast of the whole game, but they represent a fair variety that demonstrates exactly how diverse the game is when it comes to its character design. As with the level design, the character design for this game is also asymmetric – This means that each character possesses their own unique skills and powers, all of which that are incredibly useful but are further heightened when pit against certain other characters or on certain maps. Designers need to make sure that the locations they

create don't only cater to the characters but also to the players, as "*someone designing those maps has to ask themselves, "am I designing this for pickup groups or am I designing this for premade teams?"*" (Extra Credits, 2016) Of course, character design is ultimately for the benefit of the player and having a cast that caters to any level of play is another reason this game is diverse and innovative. Each character is also graded with a difficulty rating, again allowing new players to ease themselves into the game without fear of being overwhelmed. When looking at it logically, it appears as if Blizzard have overworked themselves when it comes to their process of developing a unique play space – They've created a world full of asymmetric characters that have vantage and disadvantage points on every map from either side, whilst still keeping in mind the variety of different playing styles and keeping it interesting and accessible for everyone. However, the success speaks for itself as *Overwatch* (Blizzard, 2016) was one of the top-10 selling games in 2016 overall.

It is very clear that Blizzard as a company cares deeply about inclusive representations within its games. This can even be seen by other titles from the company, such as *World of Warcraft*. (Blizzard, 2004) This renowned MMORPG, that essentially launched the popularity of multiplayer online gaming, also celebrates diversity in its own fantastical way. The RPG element of the game lets players customize their own avatars that will represent them within the online community. Players can select their own race of character, ranging from humans, dwarves, elves and even gnomes. They may even choose their alignment in the game and can select either good or evil. Although this may not seem as relevant to debates surrounding diversity such as having a disabled or LGBT character feature, but it demonstrates the thought processes of Blizzard since their early days. *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004) has become such a worldwide phenomenon and has evolved into a pop-culture icon. The level of impact that this game has had on the world is outstanding, and has "*proved that gaming could be for a truly global audience.*" (Blacklisted News, 2009) In its most basic form, it teaches acceptance through diversity, similar to that in *Overwatch*. (Blizzard, 2016) Whether they are gnomes or Russian powerlifters, players are forced to explore new cultures through irreplaceable characters that the gameplay cannot do without and, in the end, is that not the best way to get the message across. The success of character design is hard to measure, but the easiest way to gauge its accomplishments is by how much

of an impact its had on the gaming community. By these standards, *Overwatch* (Blizzard, 2016) is very much a winner.

Conclusion

The first and most important point to conclude from this research is how truly significant good character design is key to developing a successful game. A game is nothing without its characters, but the characters made for those games must be created in a way in which it feels as if they are dictating the story, not the other way around. Of course as we've seen this isn't always the case, an example being the case of *Metroid: Other M* where a poorly told story resulted in a complete transformation of a pre-existing character. This game demonstrates how a lack of foresight and a lack of research into understanding a character can negatively impact both the story and the character themselves. My own personal understanding of this game sees it as a learning curve in the complexity of character design and displays how it is something that cannot be an afterthought. Pre-existing characters that have the intention to be rebooted deserve the same treatment as original creations, particularly as they may already have an established audience fan base.

I feel as if this dissertation has made some strong original points when it comes to character design, particularly when it comes to the psychological elements of connecting with their audiences. There is no way to determine exactly how each player interacts with the games they play, but it is interesting to look at real world examples that can be applied in this case. Behaviour is relative and the things that can affect our behavior cannot be recorded in the traditional sense, such as quantitative research, but the way in which this essay uses such things as psychological and sociological theories gives a level of insight and brings about a new discourse surrounding a more academic approach to gaming. I feel as if this method of comparison between human studies and character-player relationships could potentially open up a new branch of research of this kind. This dissertation topic could even be taken further through practical social studies that may possibly further cement the ideas brought about in this work.

In answer to the primary question of this project, character design affects the way we play video games through a level of relatability and our ability to reflect our own persons onto these simulations. Everyone experiences gaming in their own unique way but it becomes clearer through the research done here that there must be some level of emotional connection from player to character in order for us to be engaged in some way. We see ourselves as these heroes, villains and everything in between – We direct these stories, meaning that they are as much ours as they are theirs.

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