Using Characterization Theory to Study the History of Video Game Characters

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research into the history and evolution of video game characters (VGCs), understood here as an umbrella term for both player-characters (PCs) and non-playable characters (NPCs), is still in its infancy. Rehak (2003), for example, offers some valuable insights into the origins and early developments of VGCs and their avatars, such as avatars' "relentless acquisition of "liveliness"", as they evolved into entities we can compare to human beings (2003, 108) or the "increasing subjectivization of video games" where games gradually grew to align the perspective of the player with that of the VGC in a fluid, three-dimensional world (2003, 108-109, emphasis removed). Eder & Thon (2012), who compare digital characters in film and video games, list some more 'filmic' or technological evolutions of VGCs, like the steady evolution towards photorealism (2012, 161-162; cf. Schröter 2013, 29), or the increasingly common practice of having characters voice-acted by film actors or stars (2012, 163). While undoubtedly important developments vital to gain an understanding of the gaming experience, historical analysis of VGCs should also go further, beyond the technological, in order to fully grasp the "deceptively complex entities" (Aldred [2014] 2016, 355) that VGCs are. The ways in which VGCs have evolved on other levels (e.g. the ludic or the narrative), for example, deserve to be explored further.

For instance, apart from their increasingly common voice-acting and photorealistic appearance, in many current games VGCs exhibit the complex psychology that early game studies once noticed they lacked (e.g. Frasca 2001, 168; Aarseth 2004, 50;

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Lankoski 2010, 11) but which they now share with characters in other, commonly referred to as 'traditional', media. Such character aspects like detailed background stories, motivations, emotions and carefully orchestrated character conflicts (instead of conflicts based purely on action; cf. Lankoski 2010, 11) have become common and analyzable aspects of VGCs (Caracciolo 2015, 238; Willumsen 2018, 7-8) in ways that they were not always before (Lankoski 2010, 11). This becomes clear, for example, when comparing the characters of the original *Final Fantasy VII* (Square 1997) with those of the more recent *Final Fantasy VII Remake* (Square Enix 2020), which attributes larger character depth and complexity to its characters than was the case in the original: intercharacter relations are given more attention, the characters are more grounded (Tifa makes sure Cloud has his own apartment, after which they both set out to help the neighborhood, which they did not in the original), side-characters (e.g. Jessie) are given more distinct personalities and motivations, and Cloud's troubled psychology is fleshed out more through Sephiroth-related visions and hallucinations. Non-playable "stage characters" (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith & Tosca 2016, 209), used in many games primarily to fill the decor of the game world, vividly react to Avalanche's actions and place these into perspective, indicating the characters' role and varying reputations in their world. Additionally, as console hardware has evolved over time, the possibilities for character traits and emotions to be transmitted through haptic feedback (cf. Willumsen & Jaćević 2018), have also improved: controller vibrations are used during Cloud's hallucinations to indicate his disturbed, chaotic psyche and (literal) shivers.

One possible approach to studying the history of VGCs is based on characterization theory. "Characterization" is a term from literary studies and refers to the various ways in which textual devices convey information about a given character. A recent and most practical model of (literary) characterization is that by De Temmerman & van Emde Boas (2018, 23), which, based on earlier literary models, distinguishes the following characterization techniques in literature: (1) name-giving, (2) direct characterization, i.e. character information distributed directly/explicitly, and (3) indirect characterization, i.e. character information distributed indirectly/implicitly. The latter category is further subdivided into (3.1.) metaphorical characterization, i.e. information distributed through comparisons, contrasts, etc., and (3.2.) metonymical characterization, i.e. information distributed through various aspects related to the character (emotions, membership of a specific group, action, speech, focalization, appearance and setting). In recent years influential theories of literary characters and characterization (e.g. Rimmon-Kenan [1983] 2004, Margolin 1986) have made their entrance into game studies as well (e.g. Lankoski, Heliö & Ekman [2003] 2010; Vella 2015; Willumsen 2018; Willumsen & Jaćević 2018) and a theoretical framework of video game characterization is currently under construction by the authors, whose list of characterization devices will additionally include objects, (voice-)acting, film arts, statistics, movement, controls, haptics and interface as metonymical game-textual devices able to convey character information of PCs. For NPCs, the situation is a bit different, as the categories of controls and haptics are omitted, for example.

Characterization theory is beneficial for studying the history of VGCs as it proposes several distinct categories through which a VGC can be considered. As elaborated above, a framework of characterization lists specific textual devices that provide an accessible entrance into the complex structure that a character is. This framework can aptly integrate various currently fragmented insights into a larger, coherent whole. The history of the VGC could then be studied by comparing a diachronic selection of VGCs on the several levels on which character information is transmitted, and by answering such questions as 'how have PCs developed on the level of action, e.g. their ludic (cap)abilities and affordances?', 'in what ways have the controls of PCs evolved over time?' or 'has there been an evolution in how NPCs function in games?'. The terms

'evolve' or 'evolution' are employed here not as an argument that current VGCs have become ever more 'sophisticated' or 'advanced' compared to earlier games, but rather to describe their chronological development. We believe that (a carefully adapted video game model of) characterization theory can provide a useful method for researching these questions, and may bring us one step closer to understanding how characters, after all a "crucial part of gameplay" (Fizek 2012, 11), have developed in video games over time.

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