

Building and Reconstructing Character. A Case Study of Silent Hill 3

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ABSTRACT

Characters are in an important role in many games. A good player character is likely to leave good lasting impression about the game. It has been argued that creating the personality for a player character is problematic. However, there are multiple methods used in games to inform a player about the nature of a player character: predefined functions, goals, possible and impossible actions, and more traditional audiovisual means. In this paper the player character of Silent Hill 3 is analyzed using presented categorization. This paper shows that the classification is a useful analytic tool, but it needs to be developed further to include belongings and space as elements describing a player character. The categorization also highlights aspects that need to be addressed when designing player characters.

Keywords

Game characters, interpretation, computer games

INTRODUCTION

Characters have an important role in games (when a game has characters). For example, game designer Steve Meretzky [13] argues that a good player character is the most likely feature in a game to make a positive impression on the player. Games use multiple methods to affect how a player character is experienced, traditional audiovisual and game-specific.

In this paper, I will provide an analysis on how the player character in Silent Hill 3 (Konami 2003) is built. I will use the character classification I have earlier presented in [11]. This shows how a character is influenced by the goals and sub goals, possible and impossible actions, predefined functions present in a game. [11]. I will use this analysis to validate and develop the categorization as an analyzing tool.

My method is similar to close reading in literary studies. Analysis presented here is based on my interpretations and my experiences of the game. I have played the game with the normal action and riddle level. I have intentionally left out the options and alternative material made available after the game is solved first time or some inside jokes and references to other Silent Hill games. For example I do not consider implications about alternative endings or references to *Silent Hill 2* (Konami 2001), which happens only if a player has Silent Hill 2 save file in memory card. Although I will be using the classification as a tool for analysis, it is also possible to use when designing characters. By analyzing the functions defining character I also hope to highlight

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issues that bringing them to life in a game.

PLAYER CHARACTERS

Why is it that people perceive Lara Croft in Tomb Raider series (Eidos) as an interesting character? How can games as interactive structures build characters that are perceived similarly by different players, even when the players themselves define the actions of the characters when they are playing? How can the designer affect the nature of the player character and make them serve the function highlighted by Steve Meretzky?

The problem with a player control is that it takes some of the traditional means of portraying character from a designer. Because of this, some have even argued that the control makes a player character problematic as a real character with a personality. In Gonzalo Frasca's words "[t]he more freedom the player is given, the less personality the character will have" [6]. However, what Frasca seems to have overlooked, is the fact that players never have limitless freedom in the game. Indeed, a system without restrictions and rules would not be a game anymore [4, 5, 15]. The rules, on the other hand, will always limit choices available to a player (or, at least restrict the players and this can be used to guide player's interpretations) [11]. There is also evidence that personification of media objects is made with minimal indications [14].

Cognitive psychology inspired film theorists argue that the processes people use to make sense of the real world and audiovisual fiction utilize same cognitive processes and schemata to comprehend human behavior and experiences (see e.g. [2, 3, 7]). Thus, theories are usable as the connection between film and games are peoples' mental processes.

Murray Smith [16] argues that all human agents share some qualities, which include a human body, intentional states, emotions, ability to understand natural language, capability for self impelled actions and potential for traits or persistent abilities. This set of qualities is used as a framework, which enables people to interpret another people and characters, and form expectations toward them. This framework is referred to the person schema. [16].

I have earlier argued that games use multiple methods to affect how the personality of a player character is perceived [11]. The categorization of methods is following:

- The goals and sub-goals of a player character (goals limit plausible actions for a player if s/he wants to progress in a game).
- Possible and impossible actions (what a player/character can and cannot do, and which are hard or easy things to do in the game).
- Predefined functions of a player character (e.g. cutscenes, pre-designed dialogue, movement style, gestures, and facial expressions).

In addition games use traditional audiovisual methods to reveal a player character like the external features of a characters (body, face, voice), proper and titular names, how other characters react to the player character, how the character is described by other characters or in game material and pre-existing knowledge about the character. For more detailed description of these see [16].

Parts of the categorization are derived from film and drama theory. However, I am not claiming that games, in general, should be analyzed like film or drama. My perspective is that when cer-

tain conditions are fulfilled, games, film, literature and real life experiences are (at least partially) coded using same mental structures (see e.g. [7]). Therefore, parts of audio-visual theory are applicable to computer games. One should note that the categories are not strictly exclusive. I also like to point out that the categorization is a work in progress and may not yet contain some used methods of building a player character.

For example, in *Thief III* (Eidos 2004) the player character's profession, and the aspects of the nature, related to it are communicated to a player using explicit goals, which are mostly related to stealing something, and making possible to pick pockets and locks and sneak in shadows (possible and impossible actions). Information for personality traits, like the player character's cynicism, is revealed in cutscenes and in the player character's spoken comments (predefined function, voice over). The spoken comments have also other function as they make external features of the character perceivable using traditional audiovisual methods. The picture of the player character in the cover of the box serves the same function.

SILENT HILL 3

Silent Hill 3 is a survival horror game, where Heather, the player character, finds herself trapped in a nightmarish world. In the game Heather is seen in third-person perspective.



Figure 1: Heather's nightmare.

The openings and preexisting knowledge have an important role for the whole experience since they have a special effect on the interpretation process; they set expectations and evaluation strategies for the rest of the experience [2] (see also [9, 10]). Thus I will pay special attention to the user guide, opening section and the first cut-scene(s) and their role in building the experience and interpretation.

Silent Hill 3 starts to feed information about the player character in the user guide. With a few sentences, Heather is described as an ordinary girl with a sharp tongue. Despite the fact that she is scared about her situation, she has the strength to survive. Images in the user guide, as well as in the first sections of the game set up the expectations of horror genre. The description in the user guide describes Heather's goal: survival (which remains the main **goal** for the player throughout the game).

The game begins with a playable nightmare where Heather is put against strange deformed monsters. After Heather has died, the player is taken to a cut-scene where Heather wakes up in a hamburger restaurant. The section works as a tutorial where the player can learn the controls and get familiar with the game world. The section also reveals how **possible and impossible actions** are used in this game to highlight how Heather really is quite an ordinary girl: the player needs to

activate a special mode by pressing and holding down a button in order to get Heather ready to fight. Only then, can a player attack by pressing another button. Compared to the common one-button attack of so many other games, e.g. *Ico* (Sony Computer Entertainment 2002) or *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (Ubisoft Entertainment 2003) to mention some, attacking is made relatively hard.

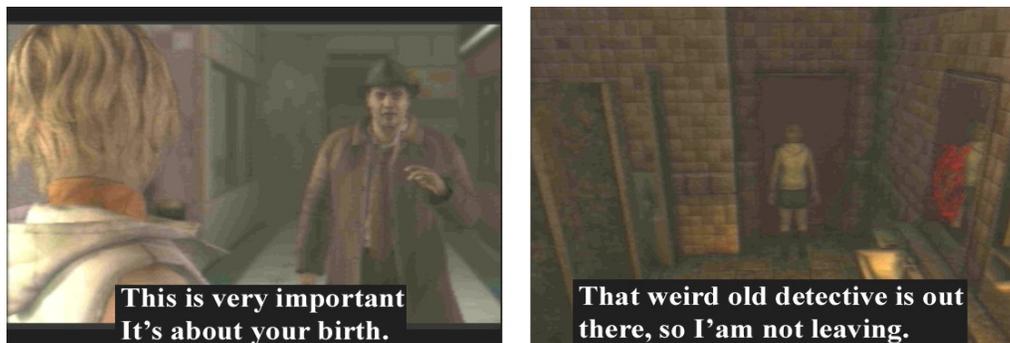


Figure 2: Douglas and Heather discussing (in the cutscene) and Heather refusing to comply to players commands.

After the nightmare sequence the game continues with a cut-scene where Heather calls her father. The dialogue (a player can hear and read only Heather's part of it) implies that she and her father have a warm father-daughter relationship. After the phone call, Heather meets a private detective (Douglas) who wants to talk with Heather about her birth (Figure 1). Heather refuses to discuss with Douglas and escapes to the ladies room, which ends the cut-scene. If a player tries to go back to the hallway where Douglas is, Heather will refuse (**possible and impossible action** and **predefined function**), written monologue (see Figure 2).

There is a strange symbol on the wall of the toilet. Heather comments that the symbol looks familiar from her childhood, but trying to remember makes her head hurt (**predefined function**, written monologue (see Figure 3)). These symbols, later encountered throughout the game, also serve as save points of the game. If the player decides to examine the mirror, Heather will comment that she does not like mirrors; they make her feel like an imposter is staring back out from another world (**predefined function**, written monologue; see Figure 3). The information revealed in predefined functions sets up the theme of the game; a journey to Heather's forgotten childhood. It also seems that a player mostly learns about Heather's past at the same phase as Heather remembers details.

After Heather has seen the strange symbol on the wall, the world changes to a nightmarish *other world* similar to what was encountered in the first section of the game. After defeating the boss monster Heather is returned back to the ordinary world and then, a bit later, back to the other world again.

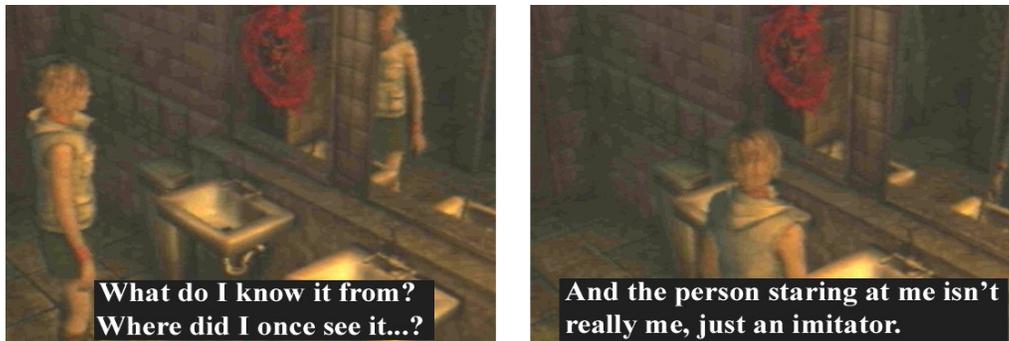


Figure 3: Heather reacting to a strange mark and mirror.

Later on in the game, a player is taken to Heather's home. Her room gives some hints about what Heather is like (being ordinary girl) – in a similar way as how seeing someone's home, their cloths, jewelry etc. feeds information about that person [12]. Information about spaces is also conveyed to players by using **predefined functions** (written monologue): Heather tells a player about rooms and about the memories they bring back of her childhood. Items also serve as a way to describe Heather. A player can for example find diaries or notebooks of various characters that reveal some aspects or views about Heather's past.

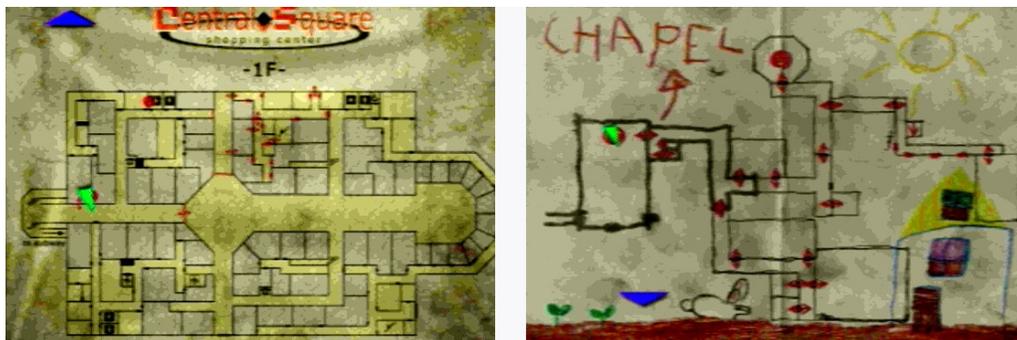


Figure 4: The map on the left hand side shows the style of maps used before last section of the game. At the middle of last section map changes to child's drawing (on the right hand side)

Usually facial expressions, voice and gestures are in an important role when we interpret people [16]. A problematic issue in the game is the quality of voice acting, which sometime breaks the illusion of a person. Also somewhat unnatural gestures and facial expressions have similar effect time to time (but this is currently a problem in many games that are pursuing realistic look). However, facial expressions are rarely shown or her voice is heard outside cut-scenes. Instead throughout the game players are given access to some non-visual information about Heather's physical state: a player can feel her heartbeat when situations get intense through the force feedback functionality of the controller (**predefined function**). Force feedback function thus has the ability to make visible (or, rather, tactile) some physical features of a player character in a quite unique way.

Heather's ability to use firearms (especially a sub machine gun without problems) is inconsistent to the image built earlier about Heather. Furthermore, the information offered to a player in the game about the world is sometimes contradictory constructing subjective and dreamlike interpretation. For example in the mall level, private detective Douglas' lines in the cutscene state that he

has been experiencing the same nightmare world that Heather had. Later in the cutscene dialogue another non-player character claims that Heather has been killing real people, not monsters, but he politely expresses that it was just a joke after seeing Heather's shock.

Another interesting detail is that the map of the last section of the game turns to a child's drawing (see Figure 4). With this and other above represented inconsistencies, status of the game world as an objective space is contested.

In general, the information offered about the game world and inconsistencies in abilities – especially the other world places, monsters and sounds make the game world dreamlike. Thorben Grodal has argued that incoherent and incalculable properties relate to felt subjectivity [8]. Inconsistencies in the game thus also imply subjectivity and the events in the game seem to represent more about Heather's mental states instead of being 'real'. Associating the 'other world' to Heather's nightmare (the monsters and places are encountered later on in the game) strengthens this kind of interpretation and feelings; the game world starts to work metonymically and presents Heather's mental state [1].

CONCLUSIONS

This paper shows how the categorization presented can be used to analyze and reveal underlying game mechanics that are used to construct and reveal the nature of a player character. As I have shown above, the major strategy in the Silent Hill 3 for revealing the nature of Heather is through the use of **predefined functions** i.e. dialogue and action in cutscenes. The game also uses **possible and impossible actions** frequently and usually they are usually employed in conjunction with predefined functions. Implications of possible and impossible actions are strengthened with the design of the controls. The game also utilizes traditional audiovisual methods, such as external features and descriptions by other characters. Yet, **goals** have only minor role in describing Heather.

Furthermore, the analysis provided in this paper demonstrates that player character can be revealed through design of possessions and spaces that relate to a player character. Belongings or space (like character's home) can convey information about character's taste and values. Moreover, space and possessions can also be used metaphorically or metonymically to a character's inner states. These aspects need to be addressed in more detail when developing further the tools for analyzing a player character in a game.

The categorization points out general strategies used in games to communicate the nature of a player character. Hence, it is possible to use the classification as a design tool when implementing a character what kind of different methods can be used to concretize the character design in a game.

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