Motherhood: Designing Silent Player Characters for Storytelling

Extended Abstract

Bria Mears
Drexel University
3141 Chestnut St
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104
bnmears@gmail.com

Jichen Zhu
Drexel University
3141 Chestnut St
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104
jichen.zhu@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The silent player character (SPC) is a reoccurring but not well-understood type of player character in narrative-driven games. In this paper, we present how our findings from an analysis of SPC development have been exemplified in an interactive narrative experience. The findings presented in this study were approved as a FDG'17 poster submission. First, we identify two main types of SPCs: projective and expressive characters. Second, we synthesized a list of methods designers can use to effectively communicate a SPC's story. Third, we present *Motherhood*, a short narrative experience featuring the development of a pre-defined SPC.

CCS CONCEPTS

•Software and its engineering → Interactive games; •Applied computing → *Computer games;*

KEYWORDS

Silent Player Character, Character Development, Interactive Narrative

1 INTRODUCTION

The silent player character (SPC), or often called the silent protagonist, is a reoccurring type of player character in contemporary narrative-driven games. Compared to other types of player characters (PCs), a SPC cannot speak; thus unable to verbally express their immediate thoughts and characteristics.

Some of the most iconic player characters in games are SPCs. Recent examples are *Tomb Raider's* Lara Croft, *Half Life's* Gordon Freeman, and *Portal's* Chell; but, popular SPCs span back into some of our earliest childhood memories, like Mario from *Super Mario* and Link from *The Legend of Zelda*.

There are on-going debates regarding if a protagonist that does not speak can be a useful design tool for storytelling. After all, the silence of SPCs makes it hard to apply many existing character development techniques, developed both in linear media, such as fictions and films, and in interactive media, such as computer games. However, there are many successful SPCs throughout the history of narrative-based games (e.g., *Bioshock* and *Half Life*). AAA and indie studios are continuing to develop new SPCs.

Despite their contemporary popularity and various usages, there are very few works on SPC character development. This paper presents our interactive narrative built using the initial SPC framework. The findings presented in this study were approved as a FDG'17 poster submission. First, we identify two main types of SPCs: projective and expressive characters. Second, we synthesized a list of methods designers can use to effectively communicate a SPC's story. Third, we developed *Motherhood*, a short narrative experience featuring a SPC that exemplifies how our found patterns can be implemented into a game's design to communicate a pre-defined SPC. *Motherhood* was built to evaluate the patterns developed in this study.

2 RELATED WORK

A traditional silent protagonist is often linked with the term "avatar" - defined as "a player's embodiment in the game" [2, 3]; in other words, the "blank canvas" PC. In the early days of digital games, game characters were little more than generic figures that lacked both personality and depth in their design [9] and players played through the game [1], focusing on their ludic goals, rather than taking an interest in the avatar itself. However, contemporary games have begun designing pre-defined characters for their game narratives and have been met with increasing success. Recently, designers use "blank-slate" characters to afford players with the actor role within the game narrative [2, 12], essentially becoming the hero character [2] but resulting in "game characters with internal personalities that are intentionally left open and loosely defined" [9]. Though sometimes beneficial, the "blank slate" approach ignores some opportunities that emerge with more complex characters [9], and many narrative games could benefit from the use of a well-defined SPC.

In this paper, we move towards a "character" approach to designing SPCs, rather than the "avatar" approach. The "character" is defined in PC research as a pre-defined entity, used to tell a story. Contrary to the avatar's ludic focus, a character has a "fictive focus on narrative and character development" [1]. While the avatar is largely played by the player, the character is read by the player [2], providing the impression of an individual with its own identity [11]. However, designing player characters, in general, as "characters" is not the same as designing them for other forms of media. The player has a significant role in determining the nature of the PC, and a PC is established through a set of interrelating medialities that, in addition to the linguistic and audiovisual, includes modes of signification that are specific to games [11]; a player's active role [in the game] always affords some degree of input in shaping the character [5, 6, 11], and a character is only defined once a player's ludic actions have traced a path offered by the game [11].

PC research defines methods in which designers may impact the player's interpretation of the PC. However, many researchers mention that a measure of personality of the PC shines through in the dialogue and cut-scenes [6, 9]. While some parts of PC design methods apply to SPCs (for instance, how actions and goals

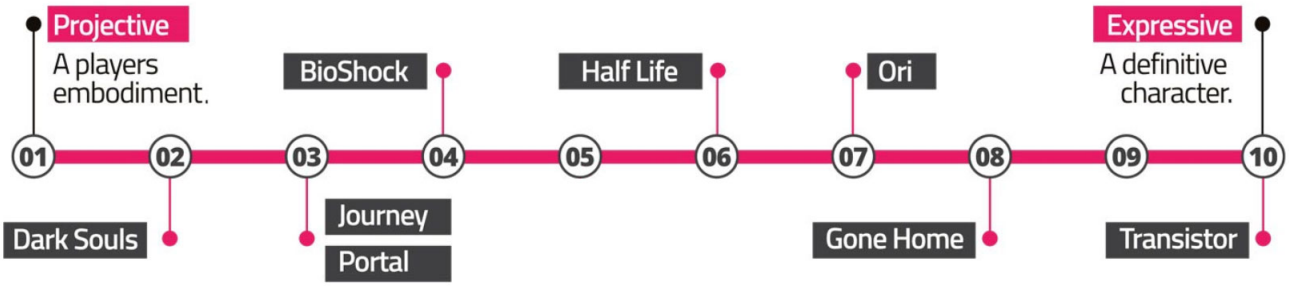

Figure 1: The SPC Scale. A 1 to 10 scale rating contemporary SPCs based on their characterization levels among the different SPC types.

impact interpretation [6]), other methods simply do not apply because of the character's lack of verbal (and often visual) expression. How can we construct characters that may not have "linguistic or audiovisual" cues or cannot "shine through in the dialogue or cutscenes"? Researchers ponder this limitation in saying, "SPCs [like *Gone Home*'s Kaitlin [4]] require far more in terms of reconstruction on the reader's part" [11] and call for other characterization methods.

3 SILENT PLAYER CHARACTERS

Silent protagonists are used for a number of different reasons; with the most common reason being the (1) *blank slate character*. A "tabula rasa" onto whom players can map themselves. Game designers often choose this type of PC with the intentions that the player will project themselves, or their own image, onto the character [12]. The silence affords the player a sense of presence and empty vessels offer more immersion into a role. SPCs can also be used as a (2) *narrative device*: to represent a theme or to tell a particular story. For example, *Transistor's* [7] protagonist losing her voice to a corrupt system. Another benefit is their ability to (3) *communicate tone*. For example, the sheer silence of a SPC may invoke a sense of fear and solitude in a dark environment. Silent protagonists also afford the benefit of allowing the player to (4) *experience the story, or construct the story* themselves; developing their own interpretation of the narrative. Games introduce a new layer of storytelling in popular media, they are given an active role in the story. Lastly, silent protagonists can be a (5) *practical and economical decision* for designers that may have less resources or limited time available to them. Studios can save time by not having to create dialogue scripts for the SPC, while saving money by not having to hire a voice actor for their protagonist. Designers working with the limitations of a SPC can utilize found methods for storytelling with this particular character design.

4 EXPRESSIVE AND PROJECTIVE SPCS

Designers use SPCs to deliver different experiences for the player. For example, some SPCs are developed anonymously for the player to embody, and others are developed as characters for the player to play *as*. For this reason, we categorize existing SPCs into two main types: *expressive* and *projective* SPCs. The projective character is a SPC with little to no characteristics, personality, or known history; the player's in-game entity. A representative example of a projective SPC is *Journey's* [8] protagonist - barren of a name, or personality - who the player is meant to embody and essentially experience a journey. In comparison, an expressive character is a pre-defined SPC with a personality, history, and characteristics that must be communicated to the player. For instance, *Gone Home's* [4] Kaitlin is an expressive SPC; players are aware of exactly who they are and their role in the narrative as they play the game.

Projective SPCs are designed to afford presence and immersion within the game space; often used for games with high levels of action, or high focus on the player's ludic goals. Expressive SPCs are designed to tell stories; offering the role of the main character to the player. Players understand their role in the narrative, and play as the character, rather than playing as themselves. Projective SPCs are dull and uninteresting within complex narratives; while expressive SPCs can be pointless and time-consuming in games where narrative is not a focus.

The SPC scale [see Figure 1] is meant to detail the varying levels of characterization among the different types of SPCs. A silent protagonist that is purely projective is placed at position 1, defined as an entity with no characterization involved; allowing the player to fully embody the SPC. Several positions differentiate SPCs based on the perspective or customization of the protagonist in the game. This is because the visibility of the SPC is a contributing factor in a protagonist's characterization [6, 11]. SPCs placed in position 10, for example Red in *Transistor* [7] are expressive characters that have the highest level of characterization throughout the course of the game - essentially the only thing missing from these characters is their voice. To lower a SPC's ranking on the scale would mean to decrease the amount of information players can infer about the character, specifically beginning with their reflection of an inner consciousness or personality separate from the player.

Overall, most existing SPCs belong to the projective category. However, as argued above, we believe that expressive SPCs have more narrative affordances and are currently less understood. Therefore, the rest of this paper presents our initial framework on character design for Expressive SPCs.

5 EXPRESSIVE SPC DESIGN PATTERNS

How do we develop complex characters that may lack appearance or body language communication methods, and above all, speech?

We conducted a survey of related games (these games include both AAA games and indie titles that utilize this particular type of character design) and compiled a list of reoccurring patterns to determine their design implications. Patterns here are defined as a categorization of "textual cues from which an attribute or trait pertaining to a character can be inferred" [11]. After a brief explanation of each pattern, we introduce our narrative, *Motherhood*, which was built to evaluate these methods.

Personal Cues. Our first pattern is the *Personal Cues*, which are defined as objects or hints that reveal information about the SPC's personality, characteristics, or history. These are items that tell various personal information regarding the character, thus impacting our interpretation of who they are. An example of this pattern in play is in *Gone Home* [4], where personal cues are found within the environment as hand-written post cards to her family; revealing her bubbly personality and desire to travel.

Personal Relationship Cues. The second pattern developed in this project is *Personal Relationship Cues*, similar to personal cues, which are objects or hints that reveal information about the main character through relationships with other characters in the narrative. These cues are designed to reveal the people who are close to the character and/or understand who the SPC is - giving more detail into their characteristics or history. An example of this pattern in play is in *Half Life* [10], where these personal relationship cues are given to the player as NPC communications directed at the SPC.

Narrative Assistant. Third is the *narrative assistant* which is defined as an object, character, or literal narrator that assists the player in a clearer understanding of various narrative elements; including how the SPC fits into the narrative. These assistants can come in the form of characters that talk with the SPC, or even a voice over. The narrative assistant is a strong storytelling tool, able to directly give the player narrative information that can frame the game's story. A clear example of this pattern in play is in *Ori and the Blind Forest*, where the narrative assistant is featured as an actual narrator, the voice of the Spirit Tree, delivering the game's narrative.

Mind Glimpse. Our next pattern is the *Mind Glimpse*, defined as a fixed incident or event that allows the player a peek into what is inside of the SPC's mind. Mind glimpse events are designed to communicate a character's inner intentions or thoughts; however, these incidents can occur in the present tense (displaying what the character is currently thinking), or through an object or past reference (displaying what the character was thinking at one point) - meaning that any access to the SPC's inner thoughts would be considered a mind glimpse. A contemporary example of this pattern in play is when Red, in *Transistor* [7], has a fixed event where she stares thoughtfully at her old concert posters (before she lost her voice). Red's pause displays the longing Red feels for her lost voice.

Character Identification. Lastly, a seemingly obvious, but important pattern is *Character Identification*, which describes the notion of revealing to the player exactly who they are in the context of the narrative. This pattern essentially describes the information the player must encounter to interpret who they are. A contemporary example of this pattern in play is in *Gone Home* [4], when players arrive to the house next to her luggage which has her name on the tag, that matches the name on her passport within her inventory.

6 MOTHERHOOD

In order to evaluate the patterns identified in this project, we designed a short narrative experience called *Motherhood*[1] [see Figure 2], featuring the story of an expressive SPC named "Alice." *Motherhood* is a first-person perspective, narrative-driven experience set in a 2-bedroom apartment with a horror-suspense atmosphere. Our project was designed to feature an expressive SPC. The goal of gameplay is to unveil the letter Alice has written by finding the specific objects she references. The items are presented as blurry, handwritten lines and the player must interact with the correct objects to unveil each line. Upon finding the object, the player must place it in a box of "Scotty's Things." Players encounter various instances during gameplay where the patterns are exemplified.

Figure 2: Screen shot of *Motherhood*.

6.1 Alice's Story

Alice and Nelson were high school sweethearts. Later in life, Alice was a hard-working stay-at-home mother; constantly taking care of her baby, Scotty, whom she loved with all her heart. While she was happily-married for years, Alice struggled with depression and anxiety, was on several medications, and developed a tendency to fight and argue with her husband. It became too much for him to bear. Nelson decided to move out of the house and initiate divorce proceedings. However, he felt that Alice was becoming increasingly unstable and stubborn with her medications, so he decided to hire a good lawyer and receive full custody over Scotty. Alice was destroyed by the fact that her once perfect life was falling apart at the seams, and Alice could not imagine living a life without him. She wrote a letter to Nelson, explaining to him all the important things their son will need when he picks him up. After soothing Scotty and turning on a lullaby, Alice went into her room and took a large amount of pills all at once. Alice awoke from her slumber with a goal. She was given a small window of time before her departure to finish caring for her son, one last time. Alice (as the player) packs Scotty's box of things and gives him one last kiss goodbye. Upon the arrival of her husband, Nelson, Alice disappears.

6.2 Game Design

The player begins in Alice's room [see Figure 3]. In the beginning, the only interact-able item is the letter Alice left on her side table.

[1]Motherhood can be downloaded or watched at http://ezbreezies.com/motherhood/

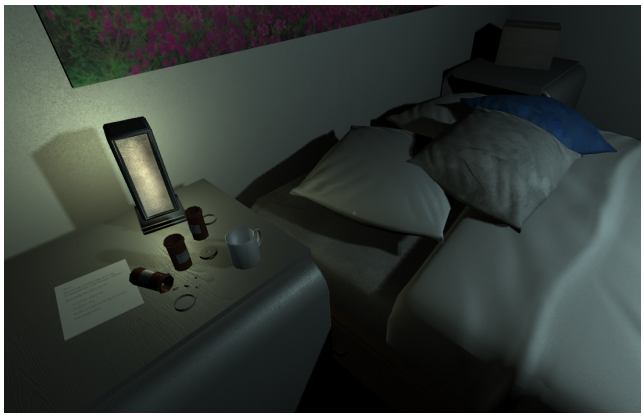

Figure 3: Beginning of *Motherhood*.

Once the letter is picked up and the goal of the game is revealed, players can interact with other objects in the bedroom (i.e. a birthday card, Alice's credit card, and a teddy bear). Upon finding the teddy bear, players can leave the bedroom by walking *through* the door. This is one of our design patterns exemplifying that Alice is a ghost. After this initial introduction, the player can then visit the other rooms in the apartment (the living room, the bathroom, the closet, the kitchen, and the office space); not including the nursery, from which the player can hear a lullaby playing through the door. The player can interact with various objects, and can pick up the specific items that must be placed inside the box of "Scotty's Things." Once the player has placed all four of the items listed into the box, Alice signs her name at the bottom of the letter and places it on top of the box. The player's only option is to then enter the nursery where they watch a cut scene featuring Alice's departure from the world.

While designing *Motherhood*, decisions were important to the aesthetic and player decision making. As stated, Alice is a first-person perspective character. This was done for two main reasons. (1) The most important reason was because we sought to tackle an important problem - communicating an expressive SPC that is also faceless. We wanted to make sure that Alice could be properly communicated to the player via our list of design patterns, without the need of showing her physical appearance. (2) Time constraints for the creation of the project made it a smarter design choice. Along with designing Alice as a first-person character, Alice's footsteps are left intentionally silent, and her shadow was intentionally hidden. This was meant to further the notion that Alice was a ghost as the player played through the game (in addition to Alice's ability to walk through doors). Alice is the sole character within *Motherhood* and the other characters are presented simply as voices. This was largely due to both time and technical constraints; however, this served beneficial to the player's overall feeling of isolation (similar to an emotion Alice is feeling throughout the game). The goal of gameplay - Alice collecting the things her son needs - was designed to (1) communicate what is important to Alice and how much she cares about her son, and also (2) to prompt the player to explore the environment aimlessly. Players were unsure of exactly what they were looking for, so they explored the environment and narrative elements more thoroughly, instead of rushing around the environment to simply finish the game.

In this project, we have used our design patterns roughly 24 separate times, represented through various objects or actions throughout the environment. One example of pattern usage in *Motherhood* is the "closet letters" as a *personal relationship* cue. Players can read old love letters displaying her long-term relationship with Nelson, her husband. Another example is the credit card as a *character identification* cue, where players learn Alice's first and last name.

7 EVALUATION

In order to test the design patterns exemplified in *Motherhood*, we have developed a user study that tests for both story comprehension via a semi-structured interview, and each pattern's individual impact within a questionnaire. With this study setup, we hope to find out if the player can 1) explain the general narrative of the game and the expressive SPC in detail, and 2) identify which patterns impacted their interpretation the most. After testing is complete, we will compare each player's story information to our expected story information, and each pattern's expected impact with the average impact; as well as search for emergent themes among player interpretations.

REFERENCES

[1] Peter Bayliss. 2007. Beings in the game-world: characters, avatars, and players. In *Proceedings of the 4th Australasian conference on Interactive entertainment*. RMIT University, 1–6.

[2] Andrew Burn. 2004. Heavy Hero or Digital Dummy? Multimodal Player-Avatar Relations in Final Fantasy 7. In *Visual communication (London, England)*, Vol. 3. Sage Publications, 213–233.

[3] Marcus Carter, Martin Gibbs, and Michael Arnold. 2012. Avatars, characters, players and users: multiple identities at/in play. In *Proceedings of the 24th Australian Computer-Human Interaction Conference*. ACM, 68–71.

[4] Fullbright. 2013. Gone Home.

[5] Henry Jenkins. 2004. Game design as Narrative Architecture. In *Computer*, Vol. 44. 118–130.

[6] Petri Lankoski. 2011. Player Character Engagement in Computer Games. In *Games and Culture*, Vol. 6. 291–311.

[7] Supergiant Games. 2014. Transistor.

[8] Thatgamecompany. 2012. Journey. (2012).

[9] Anders Tychsen, Doris McIlwain, Thea Brolund, and Michael Hitchens. 2007. Player-character dynamics in multi-player role playing games. In *DiGRA 2007 Conference*.

[10] Valve Corporation. 1998. Half Life.

[11] Daniel Vella. 2014. Modeling the Semiotic Structure of Game Characters. In *DiGRA 2014 Conference*.

[12] Emma Westecott. 2009. The player character as performing object. In *Breaking New Ground: Innovations in Games, Play, Practice and Theory*.