

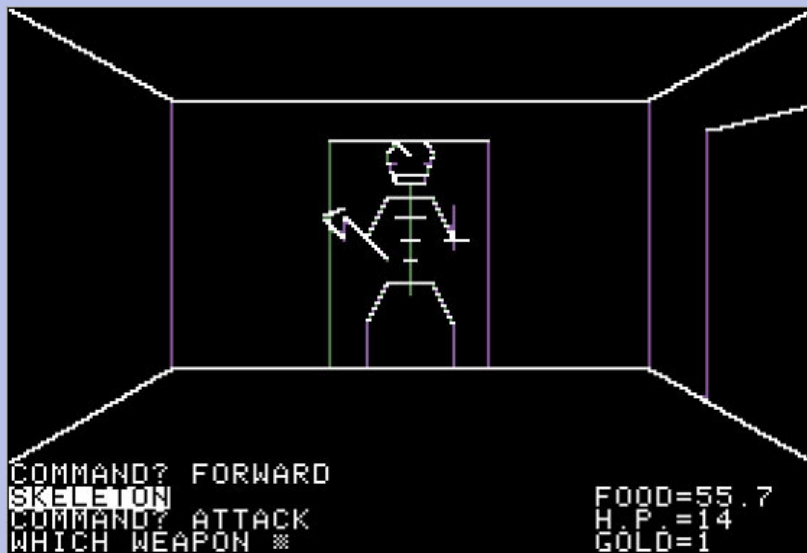
Building Character in Virtual Worlds

Using games and VR to help us become better people

Trond Nilsen

- The Ultima series

- Akalabeth (1979), Ultima I-III (1981-1983) – among the first CRPGs
- Ultima Online (1997-present) – first big MMORPG
- Gave us the term “avatar” as used in games



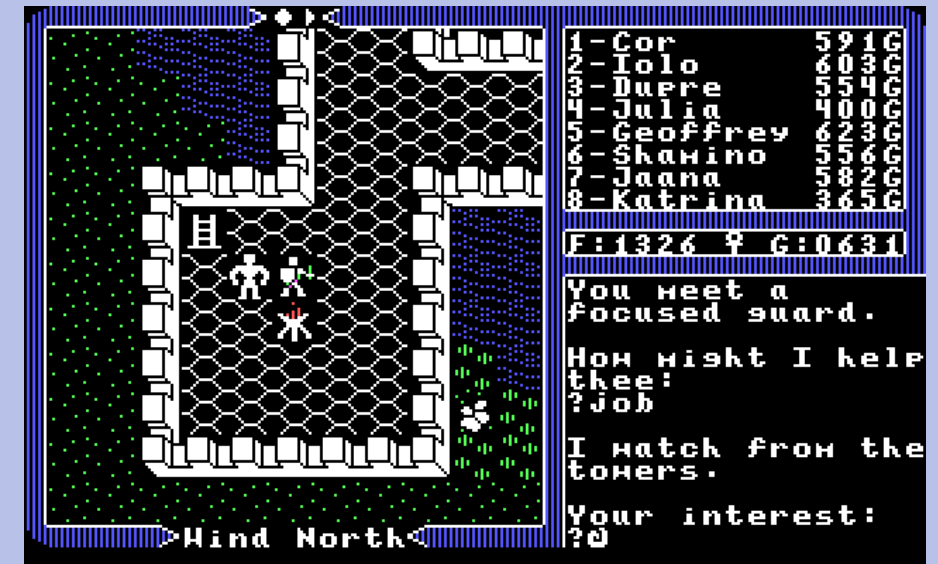
■ Ultima IV (1985)

■ Morality

- Moral choice defines character
- Moral behavior defines character progress
- Plot driven by demonstrations of moral behavior
- Player as actual character

■ World-building

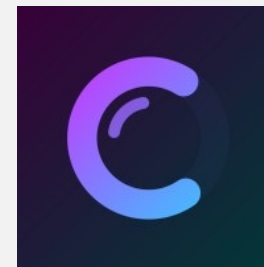
- A world laid out in detail with maps and geography
- Detailed environments, including day-to-day minutiae
- Characters behave as if they have lives beyond interacting with the player
- Time, light, moons, wind and other factors
- Society structured around a moral code of behavior



- Later games explored variations:
 - Ultima V (1988) – Distortion of a moral code by power and zealotry
 - Ultima VI (1990) – Xenophobia, discrimination, and moral conflict
 - Ultima VII (1992) – Moral Leadership – charisma, humility, and “moral”-washing.
 - Ultima VII, part 2 (1993) – Morality as a historical process



- I wear many headsets
 - Virtual World Society – Board Member
 - Moonbeam Inc. – Co-Founder / COO
 - CurieVision – VP of Engineering
- Key stuff I do
 - Engineer & Philosopher
 - XR Researcher, Designer & Developer
 - Community Organizer
 - Story-teller & Game Designer
- Areas of Interest
 - Virtual Worlds
 - Game Design
 - Medicine
 - Education



**SEATTLE IMMERSIVE
TECHNOLOGY ASSOCIATION**

- How many of you:
 - Play story-driven computer games?
 - Play story-driven table-top games?
 - Read or watch genre or alternate-world fiction?
 - Engage with place-based VR applications?
- Look back at your time in these activities.
 - Have you had meaningful experiences?
 - Have you changed as a result?
 - Have you reflected on your real problems, identity, and perspective?

■ Key Idea

- The experiences we have in virtual worlds can be as meaningful as those we have in the real world.
- We can have experiences in virtual worlds that are impossible or impractical to have in the real world.
- Personal growth is largely a function of experience and reflection on that experience.
- Virtual worlds are, therefore, offer powerful opportunities to improve ourselves.

■ Overview

- Definitions
 - Character
 - Virtual Worlds
- Tour
- Reflections

■ Tour Stops

- Learning to be virtuous
- Managing stress and anxiety
- Understanding and respecting others
- Developing fortitude and resilience

■ Disclaimers

- Diverse examples – we can only sample a few.
- I didn't make (most of) these examples.
- The use of virtual worlds is more an art than a science

- What exactly is “character”?
 - Intersubjective – Many definitions
 - Common Features
 - Factors which influence our choices and behavior
 - A mix of beliefs, ingrained behavior, and psychological attributes
 - Internalized; that is, it is automatic, not considered
 - Closely related with our definition of “the good”
- Working definition – Character is:
 - That which helps us better participate in civilized society.
 - An gestalt of the internal disciplines that help us be good people

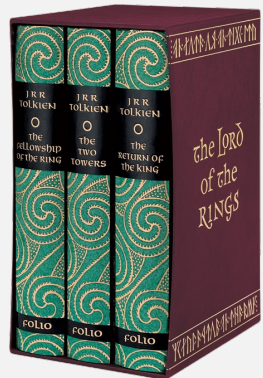
Character – Different Aspects

A word cloud featuring various character traits. The words are arranged in a circular pattern, with some in all caps and others in lowercase. The colors include purple, blue, green, brown, and red. The traits include: GENEROSITY, FLEXIBILITY, reliability, PERSEVERANCE, forgiving, optimism, honesty, politeness, ambitiousness, fortitude, thoroughness, forgiveness, responsibility, COMPASSION, loyalty, lovingness, conscientiousness, encouraging, KINDNESS, empathy, self-disciplined, RESPECTFULNESS, authenticity, integrity, SERVICE, resilience, courage, humility, self-awareness, COURAGEOUSNESS, composure, and fairness.

GENEROSITY FLEXIBILITY reliability
PERSEVERANCE forgiving optimism
honesty politeness ambitiousness
thoroughness forgiveness fortitude responsibility
loyalty lovingness conscientiousness encouraging
KINDNESS empathy
self-disciplined RESPECTFULNESS authenticity
SERVICE resilience courage humility self-awareness
COURAGEOUSNESS composure fairness

- Building character is not simply a matter of gaining knowledge
 - Knowledge gives understanding, but does not on its own change attitudes or behavior
 - Time, experience, and reflection may benefit from knowledge in building character.
- Building character is not simply a matter of learning skills
 - When and how should skills be applied?
 - How should skills be applied in new scenarios?
- Character is not a matter of pursuing good behavior for external rewards
 - What matters is how we choose to think and behave without or even in the face of incentives
 - Résumé virtues vs Eulogy virtues
- Character is not a matter of compliance with a specific moral code
 - Inflexibility and limited perspective
 - Susceptibility to group-think and capture
- Character implies principles that are frequently in conflict with one another
 - We must learn to assess circumstances and make trade-offs

- What do I mean by virtual worlds?
 - A place, accessed in some mediated way, that feels real but is not
 - A venue for meaningful experiences
 - Limited only by the imagination of the author or of ourselves
 - That have no direct impact on our day-to-day lives



Written Word



Film

<- Passive Interactive ->



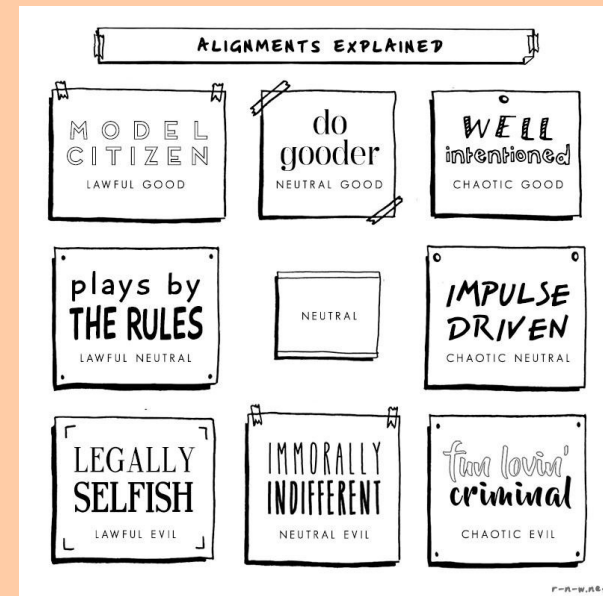
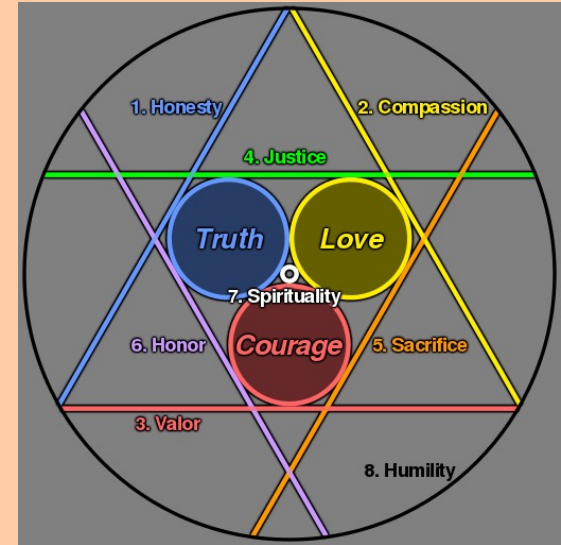
Game

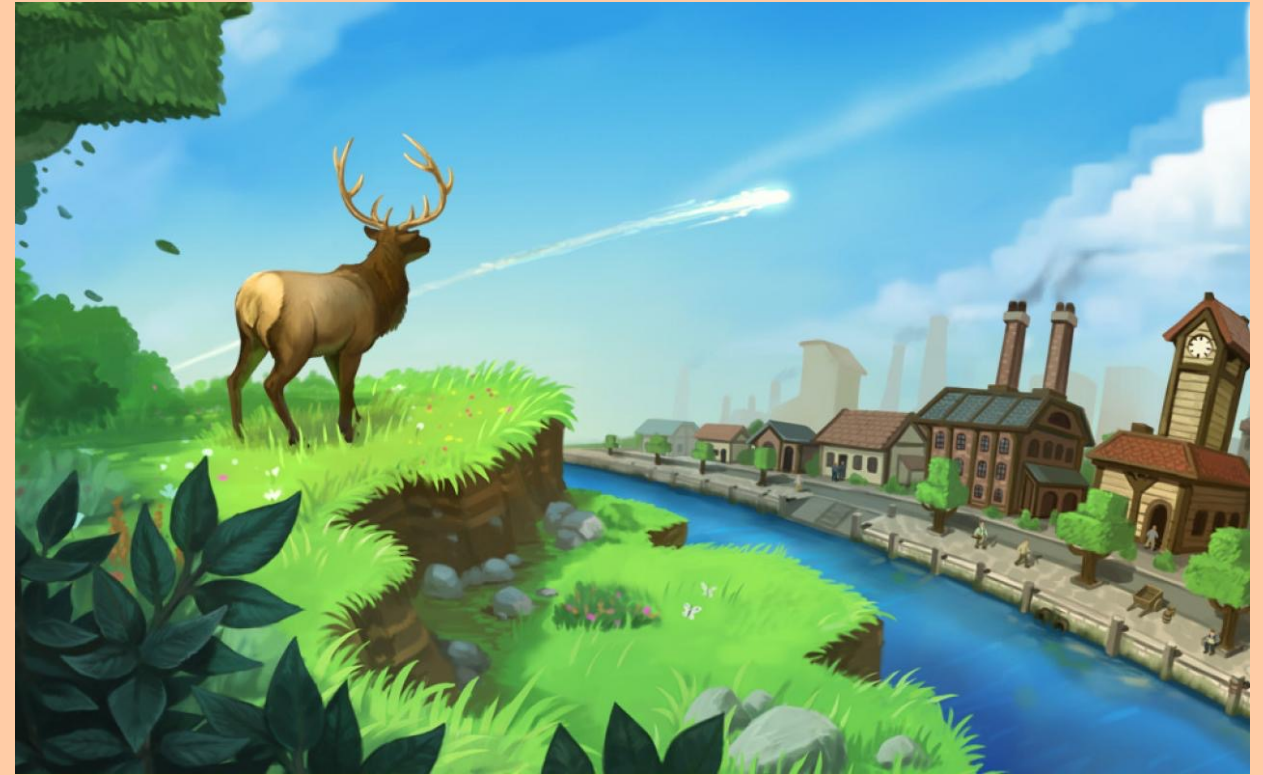


Immersive

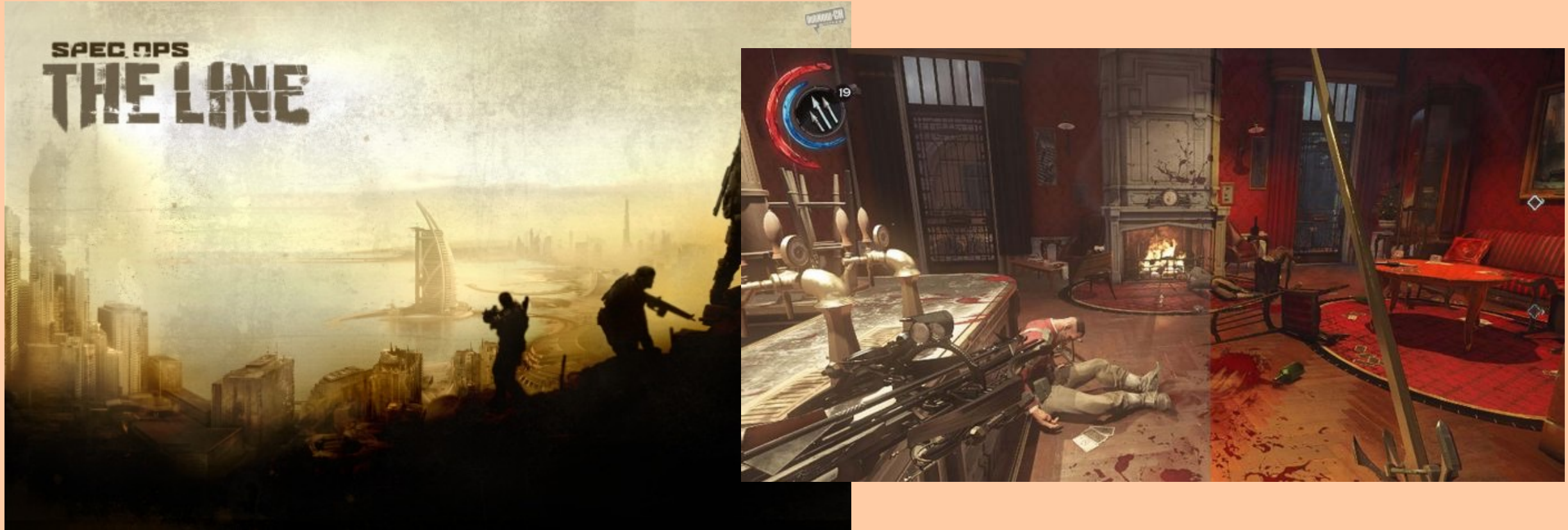
- Separate from the technology used to access it
 - Technology and presentation are less important than a sense of meaning and place
 - Immersion vs engagement
- A sense of place
 - Coherent – the world makes sense, within its particular rules
 - Responsive – our actions have meaning
 - Persistent – this place exists separately from us
 - Robust – the entities and processes stand up to rigorous inspection
- Social interaction and shared experience
 - The presence of others may greatly enhance a sense of place
 - May also limit or shape the experience in undesirable ways
 - Interactions in shared virtual worlds may have social consequences

- Virtual Worlds as vehicle for ethics and morality
 - Building on Ultima IV
- Overt use of morality
 - Exposure and vocabulary
 - Allows morality to be addressed directly
 - May define moral codes & structures
- Morality as a game mechanic
 - Assign moral valence to player actions
 - Moral choice and branching narrative
 - Requires formal model
- Developing moral literacy
 - Embed moral conflict into narrative
 - Realistic depiction of human behavior
 - Opportunity to reflect / observe consequences

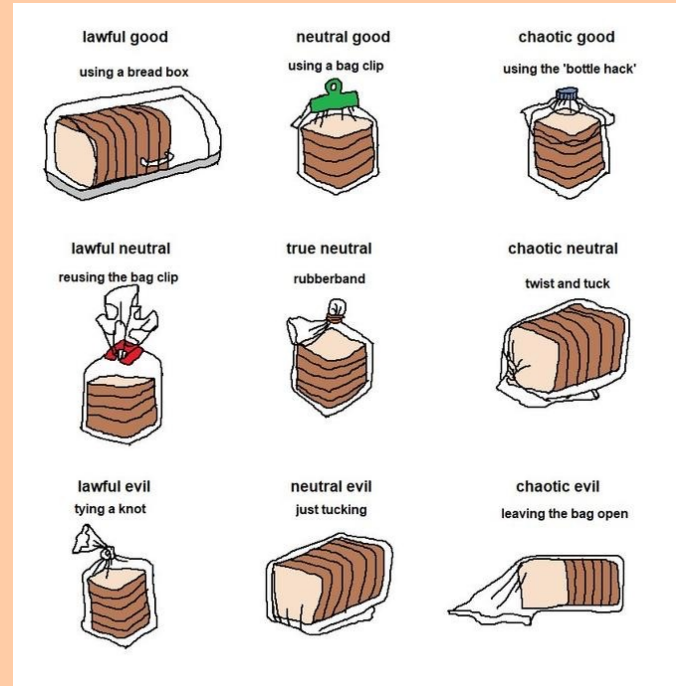




- Life is Strange – Complex and textured narrative
- Eco – Engage players in complex systems with real world implications



- Spec Ops – The Line – Inspires reflection by deliberately creating discomfort
- Dishonored – Invests gameplay with moral implications



- Pop Culture tends to caricature things
- Everything can eventually be reduced to a joke
- Simplistic design leads to simplistic, even harmful lessons

- Distinguishing between moral knowledge, literacy and instinct
- Reflection and dialogue are critical
 - Game studies, critical analysis in academia
 - Growth of popular channels
 - Games appreciation course
- Three approaches
 - Overt - The experience actively tries to teach a lesson
 - Veiled - the lesson is there, but concealed within a story
 - Accidental - there is no authorial intent, yet players find lessons to draw
- Games that don't tell you what is right, but show you a complex world and let you decide

- Virtual Worlds as a means of managing stress and anxiety
 - We're all a bit stressed out and anxious these days
- Different causes, similar symptoms
 - Lack of interest in others and the world around us
 - Impulsive behavior
 - Decreased productivity
 - Irritability, anger, even aggression
 - Difficulty resting and experiencing joy
- Both are related to difficulties in regulating our emotions
- When we are stressed, it is harder for us to be good
 - Harder to stop and think through circumstances
 - Harder to give others the benefit of the doubt

- Virtual worlds as an escape hatch
 - Get away from mundane stress and the expectations of others
 - Opportunity to
 - Reflect
 - Dream
 - Do meaningful things
 - Tell stories where we are the hero
 - Spend social time with real or imagined friends
 - Example – Ocean Rift



Stress & Anxiety - Escape



- Stardew Valley – Relaxation and control
- Astroneer – Fantasy, exploration, and cooperation

- Going beyond escape
 - Focused Meditation
 - Controlled / Resonant breathing
 - Biofeedback
- Mindfulness
 - Developing awareness of our own physical and mental processes
 - Diverse practices and skills
 - Spiritual dimension

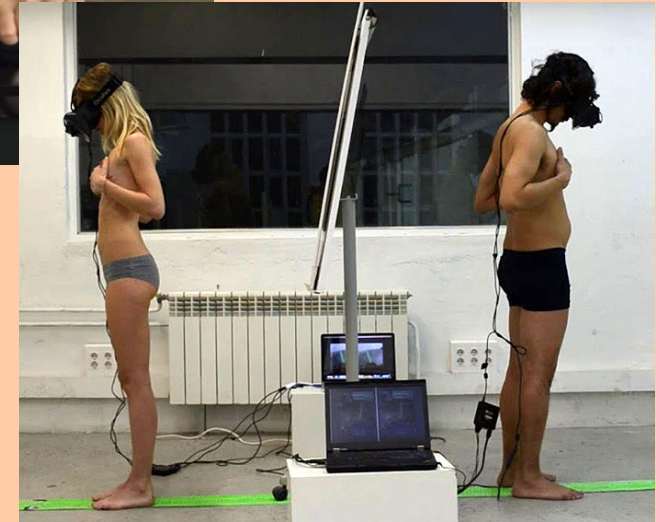


- Cognitive / Behavioral Therapy
 - Observation / Attention to detail
 - Selection bias - positive and negative
- Presented within compelling world and narrative
 - Designed to create delightful, wondrous, and comfortably paced experience



- Virtual worlds as a means of seeing the world from different perspectives
 - Building empathy from experience
- Understanding others' experiences
 - Challenges and obstacles
 - The reactions of others
 - Triggers, priorities, and emotional context
- Why?
 - Empathy leads to compassion and (may) reduce conflict
 - Ability to work together to solve hidden problems
 - Cultural understanding and connection can smooth relationships and enhance collaboration
- Warning – empathy can be misleading and dangerous
 - Avoid channelling anger
 - Avoid taking ownership of another's struggles

Empathy - Examples



- Nonny de la Peña
- Queerskins

- DrinkIQ
- Machine to be Another



- Papers, Please
- A Mortician's Tale



- Cultural Practices
- GlobalVR - Business, Communication, and Negotiation Skills

- Virtual Worlds as a place to learn resilience
 - Learn to face real world challenges by facing virtual ones first
- Impossible, abstract, dangerous
 - Facing challenges that we cannot in the real world
 - Difficulty is important
- More fun
 - Scaffolding
 - Structure and Reward
 - Simple and Isolated
- Life Lesson - Cheating isn't any fun





- Dark Souls – A game that it is not even remotely fair
 - Presents as a series of struggles that, while extremely challenging, can be overcome
 - Emphasis on practice and learning
 - Minimize opportunities to give up
 - Reduce friction involved in trying again



- Rogue-like games – Failure as a core game mechanic
- Rogue-lite games – Scaffolding that makes repeated attempts interesting and fun

- Factors
 - Refined Challenge
 - Sense of clear reward
 - Feedback & Progress
 - Learning a little bit at a time.
- Closely related:
 - Csikszentmihalyi's Flow – Optimal experience occurs when skill and learning are closely matched
 - Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development – Optimal learning occurs during tasks that require slightly more than current skill

- Story-telling with serious themes
 - Tragedy & Loss
 - Complex moral texture, ambiguity, and value trade-offs
 - Diversity and empathy with the struggles of others
- Robust and engaging world-building
 - Visual detail and aesthetic design
 - Narrative, history, philosophy
 - Economics, character behavior
- Showed that games (virtual worlds) could be about more than simple entertainment

- How important is the social context?
 - Shared experience more likely to lead to conversation
 - Individual experience is safer and more directed
- How important is immersion?
 - Visual spectacle, increased bandwidth to the brain
 - Greater sense of transport
 - Increased sense of realism
 - Much higher cost
- Virtual Worlds vs the Metaverse
 - Individual or small group :: open to the public
 - Directed Narrative or Design :: Environmental Design
 - Structured Activity :: Free Action
 - Any media :: Spatial / VR

- Misuse of the technologies of persuasion
 - Indifferent – unintended consequences
 - Ill-advised – bad design
 - Ill-intentioned use – propaganda and brainwashing
- Alienation & the risk of addiction
 - Virtual worlds are very attractive; the real world may not be
 - Commitment to a fiction may lead to detachment from real world connections
 - Games, in particular, employ motivational structures that can be highly addictive (skinner boxes, gacha machines)

- How might we design virtual worlds to achieve these goals?
 - Vast possibility space for innovation
 - Lack of invested resources
- Character-building is a life-long process.
 - It pertains to difficult aspects of human behavior that can't be changed on a whim.
 - We must reflect, learn, fail, and try again
- Failure is a short-term option in a long term process.
 - Opportunities for us to fail fast and learn
 - A safe place to do this
- Inspiration vs Teaching
 - Goal should be to inspire people to examine themselves and their experiences, not to force knowledge upon them

Questions?