Building Character in Virtual Worlds
Using games and VR to help us become better people

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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

Ultima – Morality & Worldbuilding
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, 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
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 in 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
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
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
- **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
- 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?