Chapter 4 Summary – Working with Dramatic Elements

There are two basic elements to a successful game. These are the game formal elements (player, procedures, rules, etc) and the game dramatic elements. The formal elements are the playability part of the game and the dramatic elements add the emotional elements to the game. Without Dramatic Elements the game likely won’t have any connection with the player. Dramatic elements can be found in the game narrative, the game structure, and the gameplay itself.

Modern game players want games to have more of a narrative element. Even basic platformer games, such as Celeste, that focus on precise platforming game mechanics also have a game narrative element. The reason for this new focus on including game narrative in traditional games is based on player requests. Dramatic Elements could include game narrative but could include just game mechanics, which create tension and anticipation in the player. The goal is to involve the play emotionally in the game.

Including Game Narrative in a game is not easy and it can quickly go wrong. While basic game elements (outlined in Chapter 3) the player is engaged at a gameplay level. The game provides procedures, objectives, and rules that present conflicts and goals. These are basic mechanic elements and provide the game player interesting challenges and skills. Narrative game elements are used to involve the player at a more emotional level.

Game Narrative can give context to the game and involve the player into the game progress and gameplay. Basic challenges/skills involve the player but a game that include story and character will (if done well) more deeply involve the player in the game. In order to use game narrative to involve the player at a more emotional level you need to understand how these narrative elements can be used in the game.

Dramatic Elements will be found in:

- Game Challenges
- Game Play
- Game Story
- Game Premise
- Game Character
- Game Story
- Game World Building
- Game Dramatic Arc
Game Challenges

One of the dramatic elements in a game are the game challenges presented to the player. Challenges can have a dramatic effect on the player in a variety of ways. These include:

- Challenges are linked to player skills – as the player learns or increases their skills the game presents challenges that require use of such skills. The table 4.1 in the book shows the relationship between difficulty of challenges and player skill levels.

![Flow diagram](image)

The game challenge flow tries to match the challenge with the skill (ability) but not in a straight line fashion. If the challenge is too much for the player’s ability then the player is frustrated and if the challenge is too easy then the player gets bored. However, a good game that makes challenges dramatic will vary the flow so that there are challenges that can be easily done by the player followed by difficult challenges.

- Challenges require multiple and focused abilities – dramatic challenges are those that require the players complete attention on the gameplay. These could be boss fights or particularly difficult challenges. The game designer does not want to throw a lot of these at the player at once, but should include these throughout the game to signify progress.

- Clear challenge goals and clear feedback on progress – as the player confronts a challenge they should understand what the goal is and should be given clear feedback on their progress. This helps make challenges dramatic and interesting to the player.

- Challenges should focus the players attention – games that use various game elements to focus the players on the challenge will result in more engaging games. A challenge that includes multiple goals or does not provide good feedback will lose the players interest.

Designers Questions about Challenges:

1. What skills does your target audience have? What skill level are they at? Within that knowledge, how can you best balance your game for your players’ abilities?
2. How can you give your players clear, focused goals, meaningful choices, and discernible feedback?
3. How can you merge what a player is doing physically with what they need to be thinking about in the game?
4. How can you eliminate distractions and fear of failure; that is, how can you create a safe environment where players lose their sense of self-consciousness and focus only on the tasks at hand?
5. How can you make the game activity enjoyable as an end in itself?
Example:

**Game Play**

Another area that can engage the player into the game is GamePlay. This term refers to how the player interacts with the game during gameplay. There are different kinds of Play in games. The following table outlines these kinds of play:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competitive play (agón)</th>
<th>Freeform play (pāida)</th>
<th>Rule-based play (ludus)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competitive play (agón)</td>
<td>Unregulated athletics (foot racing, wrestling)</td>
<td>Boxing, billiards, fencing, checkers, football, chess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chance-based play (alea)</td>
<td>Counting-out rhymes</td>
<td>Betting, roulette, lotteries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make-believe play (mimicry)</td>
<td>Children’s initiations, masks, disguises</td>
<td>Theater, spectacles in general</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vertigo play (illinx)</td>
<td>Children “whirling,” horseback riding, waiting</td>
<td>Skiing, mountain climbing, tightrope walking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.9 **Examples taken from *Man, Play and Games* (diagram based on *Rules of Play* by Salen and Zimmerman)**

These kinds of play include competitive play (completing against other players or NPCs), chance-based play (gambling), make-believe play (inhabit a character), and vertigo play (skiing, etc).

While these kinds of play don’t map perfectly to video games, some of these will be found in different kinds of games.

Along with kinds of play there are also categories of game players. From the textbook chapter these are:

- The Competitor: Plays to best other players, regardless of the game
- The Explorer: Curious about the world, loves to go adventuring; seeks outside boundaries—physical or mental
- The Collector: Acquires items, trophies, or knowledge; likes to create sets, organize history, etc.
- The Achiever: Plays for varying levels of achievement; ladders and levels incentivize the achiever
- The Joker: Doesn’t take the game seriously—plays for the fun of playing; there’s a potential for jokers to annoy serious players, but on the other hand, jokers can make the game more social than competitive
- The Artist: Driven by creativity, creation, design
- The Director: Loves to be in charge, direct the play
- The Storyteller: Loves to create or live in worlds of fantasy and imagination
- The Performer: Loves to put on a show for others
- The Craftsman: Wants to build, craft, engineer, or puzzle things out

When designing a game to engage the player it is useful to understand how different kinds of players want to interact with the game.

The final feature of gameplay is the level of engagement by the player. Clearly, the game character or characters are controlled by the player but the game designer needs to consider how engaged should the player be in various aspects of the game.
**Game Premise**

The Premise of a game is the context or setting of the game. The Premise is more than just the game setting. It is also used to set where the game takes place, some background to the game world, and some of the motivations of the game characters. While the game narrative will include a lot of story exposition and character dialog will be part of the game narrative, all of this is set in the context of the Game Premise.

Examples of games setting a Game Premise can be found in a variety of games. The FPS game, Wolfenstein The New Order, is a game set in a world in which Germany won world war II by developing advanced weapons. The Last of Us is set in a world where highly contagious fungi result in people losing their minds and becoming “zombies”, causing the breakdown of social order. The game Red Dead Redemption 2 is set in the old west just prior to the industrial revolution.

Each of these games uses the Game Premise to set a context for the game narrative, gameplay, graphics, and game character development. By choosing an interesting and exciting Game Premise the game designer can emotionally connect the game with the player and make the game interesting to play.

Example:

**Game Character**

An important element to the design of a game are the Game Characters. In most cases, the player will use the main Game Character to interact with the game while other Game Characters are Non-Playable Characters (NPCs). One way to make a game have emotional impact on the player is designing an engaging set of Game Characters.

There are games that don’t have a defined character but have a point-of-view whereby the player interacts with the game. These would be simulation or strategy games. However, even such games might benefit from defining the “point-of-view” into a Game Character.

Characters can be found in many kinds of entertainment media (books, movies, plays, etc). The main character is called the protagonist and is what the player controls. The primary opponent to the protagonist is the antagonist. The main Game Character seeks to achieve objectives and engages in various conflicts in this pursuit. The definition of the game’s protagonist and the development of this character can emotionally engage the player.

There are different kinds of Game Characters. These include:

- Characters that stand-in for the player by expressing the players desires or conflicts
- Characters that represent stereotypes the player understands.
- Historical Characters

Stereotypical characters are much easier to create and define but do not have the emotional impact of stand-in characters. Historical Characters may already have pre-defined elements that make them difficult to evolve. The choice of which type of character to create depends on the kind of story being told in the game.

The methods of defining a Game Character include:

- What the character says and what the character does
- What the character looks like
- What others say about the character

Characters can be “flat” or “rounded”. Flat characters typically do not change in the course of the game and are normally stereotypical in nature. Rounded characters typically undergo changes to their behavior during the course of the game.
When creating game characters the designer needs to ask:

- What does the character want?
- What does the character need?
- What does the audience/player hope?
- What does the audience/player fear?

Game Characters have two important elements, Agency and Empathy. Agency is the player performing actions in the game through the character. Empathy is how the player relates to the game character. Balancing these two elements is critical to defining a good game character and will impact much of the game design.

For example, a Game Character with a balance for more Empathy would be pre-defined. They would likely have a backstory and a set of already defined traits. A Game Character with more Agency than Empathy would be more like a simple Avatar, representing the player in the game. These kinds of Game Characters would likely include tools for the player to define and customize the character. The Game Avatar is the creation of the player and so would always act as the player. However, the Game Character would have their own motivations and would require the player to understand their backstory and motivations.

Another distinction in kinds of Game Characters is difference between Free Will and Player Control. Game Characters that have their own set of behaviors and decisions may not accord with what the player wants them to do, while more Avatar type characters are under the complete control of the player.

Example:

**Game Story**

Designing a game to include a story leads to several issues. The first is story agency. Stories in books or movies are controlled by the author, but games are controlled by the player. Forcing the player into following the story sequences can make players frustrated. Other games use an Open story structure. These allow the player to control the story by creating branching stories. These are games in which the story progression and outcome are based on player decisions. There are benefits and drawbacks to both methods of telling a story inside a game.

Controlled Story Benefit: The game designer has more control of the game. The story might have sections corresponding to “chapters” that would all end up as designed. Players would traverse each chapter in a generally controlled fashion.

Controlled Story Drawback: The player may feel that their agency in the game is being limited and feel frustrated with the game. Players may not feel that their decisions in the game have any effect. These kinds of games tend to have low replay ability.

Open Story Benefit: The player feel more in control of the game and the game story. They also tend to value their choices in the game. This also gives the game more replay ability.

Open Story Drawback: Creating a branching story is much more difficult than creating a controlled story. Some player choices may result in un-interesting outcomes.

Example:

**Game World Building**

Another element to a game that can involve the player is World Building. This consists of embedding narrative elements in the world through books, posters, letters, or other background information that refers to the game world. The consistency of the graphics, sound, and music will contribute to this world building.
There are a couple of benefits to putting effort into world building:

- The player has a higher level of immersion into the game and will likely be more invested in gameplay
- The world gives structure to the players expectations and gameplay and supports consistent game mechanics.

Example:

**Game Dramatic Arc**

Games involve goals and objectives and player conflict. What drives games forward is the player engaging in conflicts in order to achieve an objective. The general structure of games that include stories and narrative is similar to traditional narrative structure.

![Game Dramatic Arc Diagram](image)

### 4.20 Classic dramatic arc

At the start of the game the player is given some background information about the world and the game character. The player is also presented with a tutorial on gameplay mechanics and other game control elements. As the player is confronted by a series of objectives and conflicts they develop the skills necessary to overcome the obstacles. As the obstacles increase in difficulty the player progresses through the game. At some point, the player likely confronts a Boss. After the Boss is defeated there are some final wrap-up pieces and then the game resolution.

Example:
Chapter Exercises:

A. Choose three games you have recently played and create a document with the following information for each game:
   a. The name of the game and the platform on which you played the game.
   b. Describe the Game Premise of the game.
   c. Describe how the Game Premise affects the game narrative.
   d. Describe how the Game Premise affects the game characters.
   e. Describe how the Game Premise affects the gameplay.

B. Choose three games you have recently played that include some kind of story element. For each of these games write down the following:
   a. The name of the game and the platform on which you played the game.
   b. Describe the main game character including what the game tells you about the background of this character.
   c. Describe some of the significant objectives the main character has in the game.
   d. Describe how the main game character changes over the course of the game.

C. Choose three games you have recently played that include some kind of story element. For each of these games write down the following:
   a. The name of the game and the platform on which you played the game.
   b. Outline the game story presented in this game.
   c. Describe the main game character and how the related to the game story.
   d. Describe how the main game character’s gameplay related to the game story.
   e. List any choices the game gives the player and how these choices related to the game story.