

Matthias Worch
LucasArts
<http://www.worch.com>

GDC

THE IDENTITY BUBBLE

A Design Approach to Character and Story Creation

These are the annotated slides for my 2011 GDC talk. They can be downloaded at <http://www.worch.com/downloads/>
Comments and feedback are welcome: matthias at worch dot com.



"Sometimes I do stupid stuff, and I don't even know why - as if my body were being controlled by some demented, sadistic puppet-master."
Bernard Bernoulli, Day of the Tentacle

FIG1. DOTT

2

GDC 25

No notes.

Matthias Worch

Lead Designer | LucasArts



FIG 2. ABOUT ME

GDC 25

Welcome! I'm Matthias Worch, a lead designer at LucasArts. I'm currently working on an unannounced game with Clint Hocking and Kent Hudson. Below are the shipped games that I worked on.



This talk is called "The Identity Bubble". It's billed as "a design approach to character and story development." But on a deeper level, it's really a lecture about identity concepts in games - understanding them and using them to full effect.



FIG 4. MOTIVATION

5

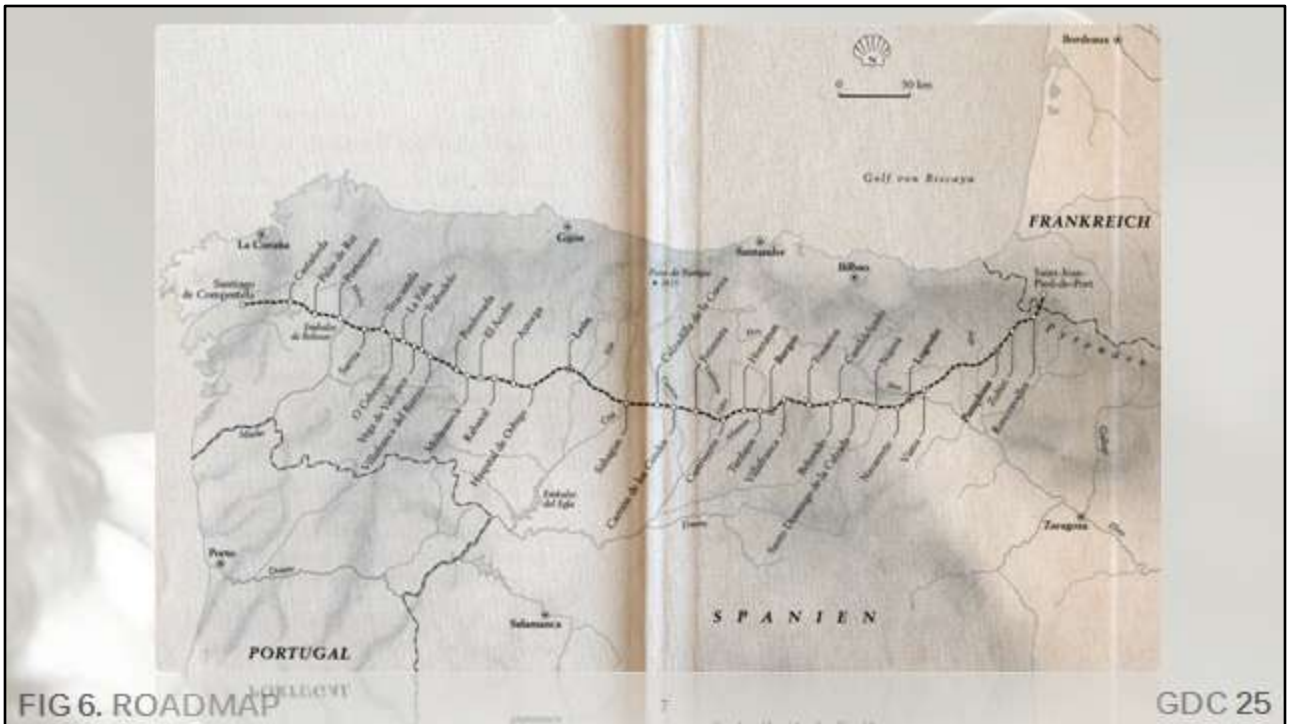
GDC 25

Even more specifically, it's a talk about motivation and how writing for games is different from writing for other media. I could have filled slide after slide with examples of bad game writing or bad player identity, but I realized that I just had to show you one example:



...Lair, a game I worked about four years ago. Lair had this huge disconnect between the player and the player character. I didn't believe in the story missions or my supposed motivations, and all this culminated in a bombing run on a supposedly evil city towards the middle of the game. The player character threw himself at the mission with enthusiasm – even though I, as the player, already knew that it wasn't right.

So this makes this a somewhat personal talk. Ever since Lair I've been looking for help in this area. Unfortunately, our industry doesn't even seem to be able to agree on what our actual problem with story *is*, let alone how to solve it. And I've come to think that's because it isn't a singular problem. There's two very distinctly different approaches to character creation, both with their own philosophical baggage and ideologies attached. And that makes this topic somewhat divisive - and difficult - to talk about, because it's very easy to split any room right down the middle. Writing for games covers a huge spectrum - for every Portal, there's an Uncharted 2, and for every Fallout 3 there's another Final Fantasy.



I will try to reconcile these extremes in this talk, and dig up the underlying commonality between all these games mentioned.

I will do this in 5 parts:

Part 1: Establishes an identity range (a graph) that captures both extremes of how we may choose to author player identity

Part 2: Explains double consciousness: why it makes writing for games different from other media, and how we use the knowledge to create good players identity

Part 3: Look at 3 specific examples that manage the challenges discovered in part 2

Part 4 (which is actually wedged between part 3): Myth Reinforcement – what it means and how it can help us with game narratives

Part 5: Takeaway - specific tips and tricks gleaned from the talk



We will start by talking about identity approaches. And to do that, we should start talking about avatars.



FIG 7. AVATARS

GDC 25

We use avatars to enter the game world. Ultima was a great example of how one school of thought looks at the player/avatar relationship of one identity approach.



"The character is a tool, a puppet, an object for the player to manipulate according to the rules of the game." - Rules of Play

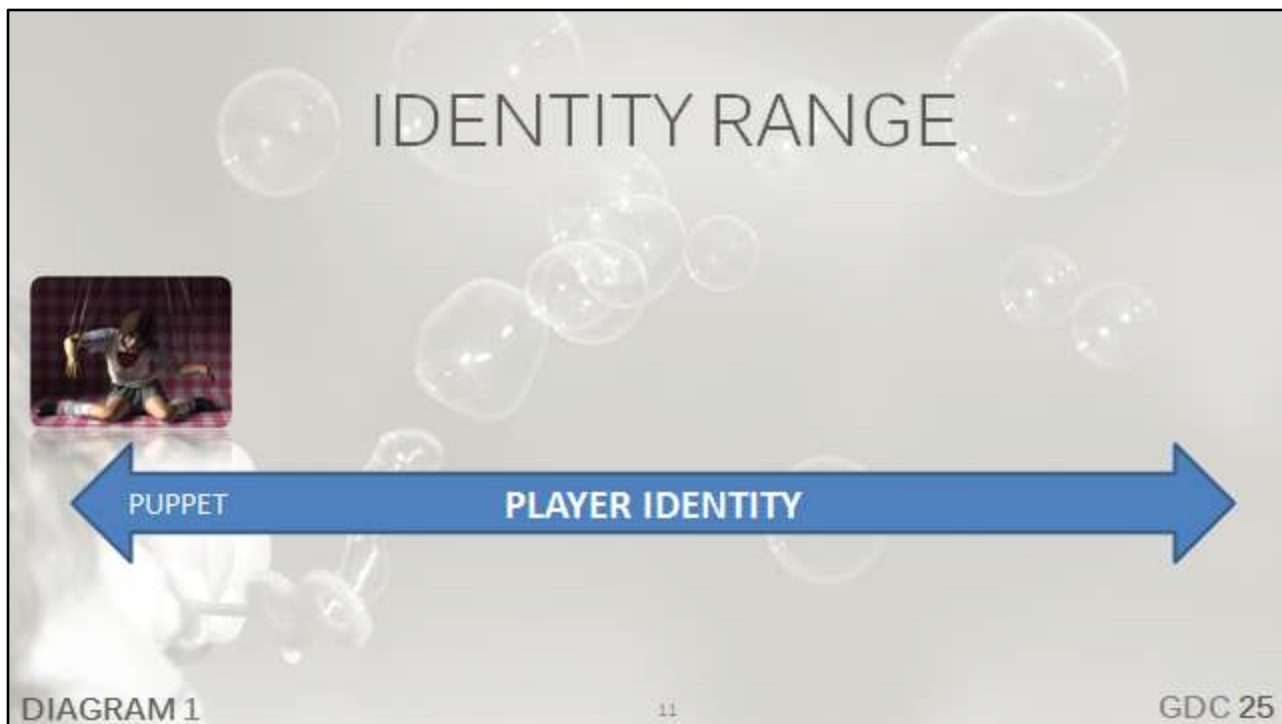
FIG 8. PUPPETS

10

GDC 25

Rules of Play describes the avatar used in this identity approach as a "puppet, an object for the player to manipulate according to the rules of the game." We can easily understand what it means: we regard the avatar as a lifeless puppet - the gamer's physical extension into the world. The player projects himself on this puppet. Its personality is that of the player.

This analogy works best for games with weakly defined characters. Games that put a premium on high agency - the player story.



If I was to map the puppet to an identity range, it would live on the left side of the spectrum. It's a very common approach to authoring player identity, but it doesn't explain all games because there's the other extreme: strongly characterized, fully fleshed out avatars with their own motivation.

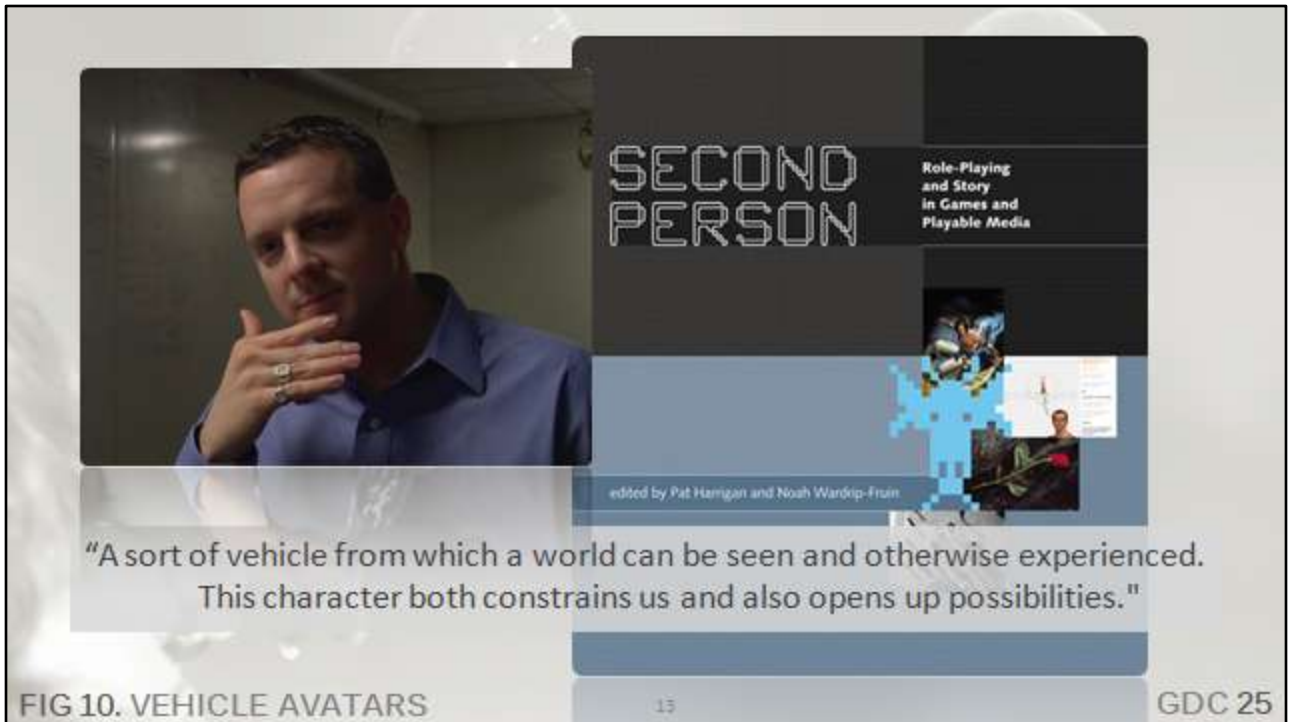


FIG 9. NATHAN DRAKE

12

GDC 25

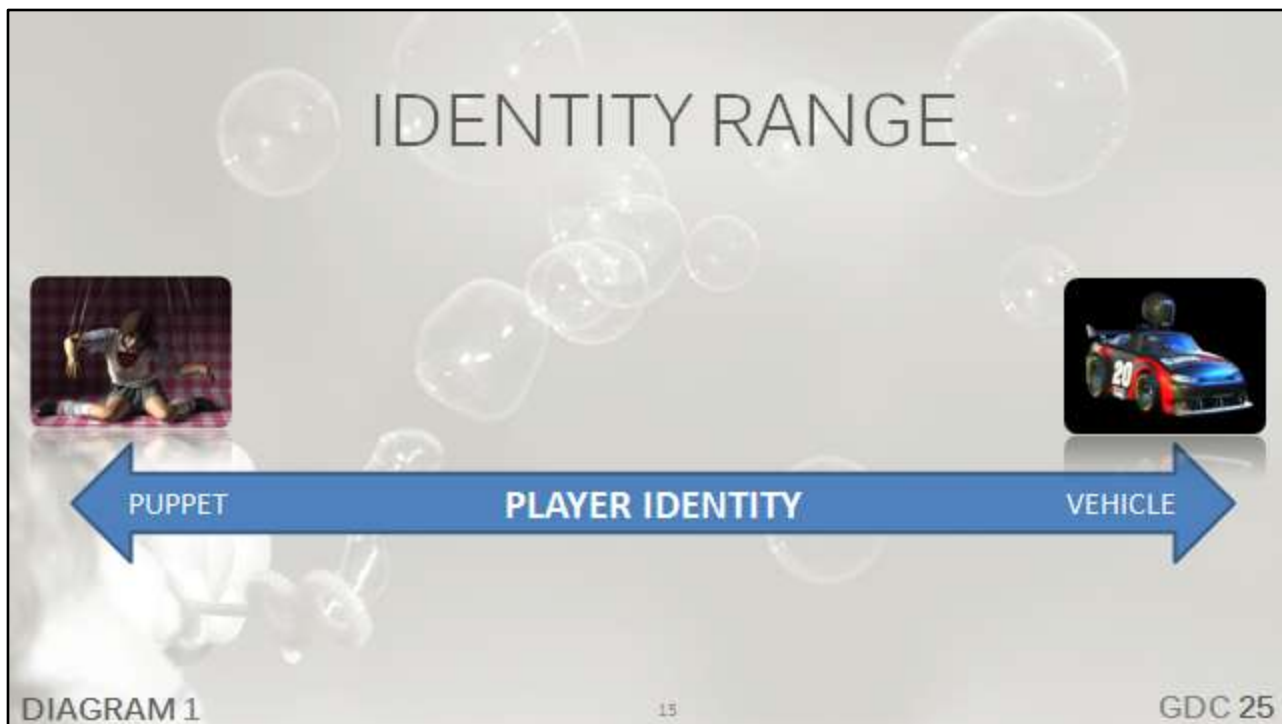
Nathan Drake, for example. He's not really a puppet, is he? At least not all the time: he talks, he sets directions, he acts in cutscenes, he has a pre-authored past. This is a radically different approach to authoring identity.



Nick Montford has a great metaphor for this in the essay "Fretting the Player Character" (published in "Second Person" and on the web), saying that the player is steering the avatar like "a sort of vehicle from which a world can be seen and otherwise experienced. [...] This character both constrains us (we have to remain in the vehicle) and also opens up possibilities (we can use this vehicle to get around and even to effect changes in the world)."



I like the vehicle metaphor because it visualizes how active cinematic experiences like Uncharted 2 work. Uncharted 2 is strongly structured, locking the player into a specific story progression. If we visualize that structure as a road network connected by tunnels (which represent structural points like story cutscenes), we can see that driving Nathan Drake across the road allows for some choice and expression during play - but with limitations: we cannot drive off the map in whatever direction we choose, and our progression is predetermined, gated by the tunnels that connect each piece of road.



We put vehicles on the opposite end of our identity range, and have two cornerstones to anchor this spectrum.



Regardless of how we look at it – player exerting his will on a puppet or player driving a vehicle - we can see that player and avatar always remain separate entities.

Rules of Play calls this concept "double-consciousness" - the idea that players, even when fully immersed, are always aware of the fact they are playing a game - and that in playing a character, they are manipulating an artificial construct.

The interesting part is that the player himself establishes double-consciousness: HE chooses to enter magic circle, HE chooses to push aside parts of his identity that prevent him from enjoying - and acting appropriately within - the game.



In a way, the player willingly turns himself into a schizophrenic.



... and by doing so, he submits himself to all sorts of voices with different points of views and different agendas, whispering inside his head.

As game writers we have to understand double-consciousness - it's key to the topic of this lecture. All the information is out there in various talks and texts – but maybe double-consciousness hasn't yet become institutionalized knowledge in our industry because it's hard to understand and multi-layered.



FIG 15. A DREAM...

19

GDC 25

It's a bit like a dream within a dream within a dream, and for this lecture, we have to drill down into this concept not once, but twice.



No notes.



As we dig deeper into double-consciousness once we get to Gary Fine and the book Shared Fantasy.

In this book (which is about real-life table-top RPG groups, but also applies to digital games), Fine splits double-consciousness into three parts of identity which players experience when playing a game:

- Character - The fictional character embodied by the player ("I am Ulgar the dwarf!")
- Player - The player himself, acting within (and exploring) the framework and the rules of the game ("I'm rolling the dice.")
- Person - The player as a Person with life demands, which are pushed aside during play, but are never forgotten ("I have to leave at 6pm.")



To avoid ambiguity between the Player actual, and Gary Fine's identity part, we will call one Gamer and the other Player for the rest of this talk.



In psychology, we call these layers “frames” – the Character frame, the Player frame and the Person frame. These are those schizophrenia-induced voices whispering to the player inside his head. Voices who want to be satisfied, with their own goals and motivations. If we want to keep somebody satisfied we need to understand what defines them and what motivates them.



FIG 19. ...WITHIN A DREAM...

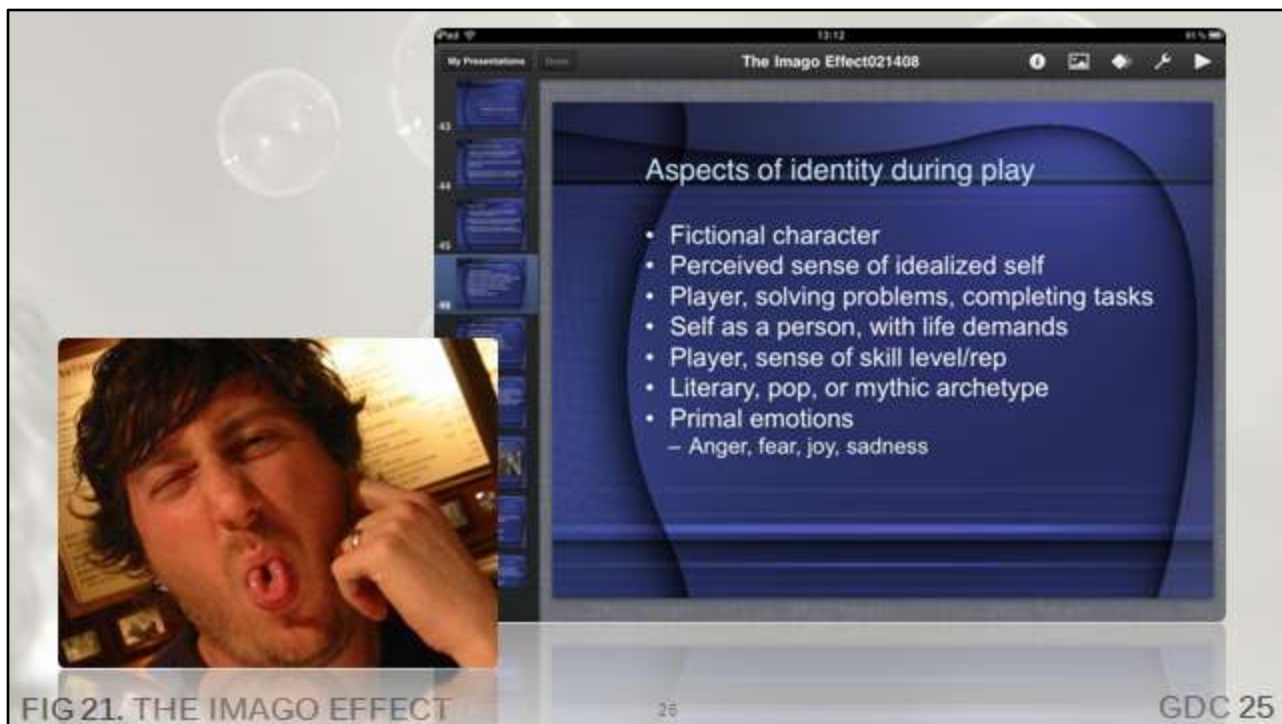
24

GDC 25

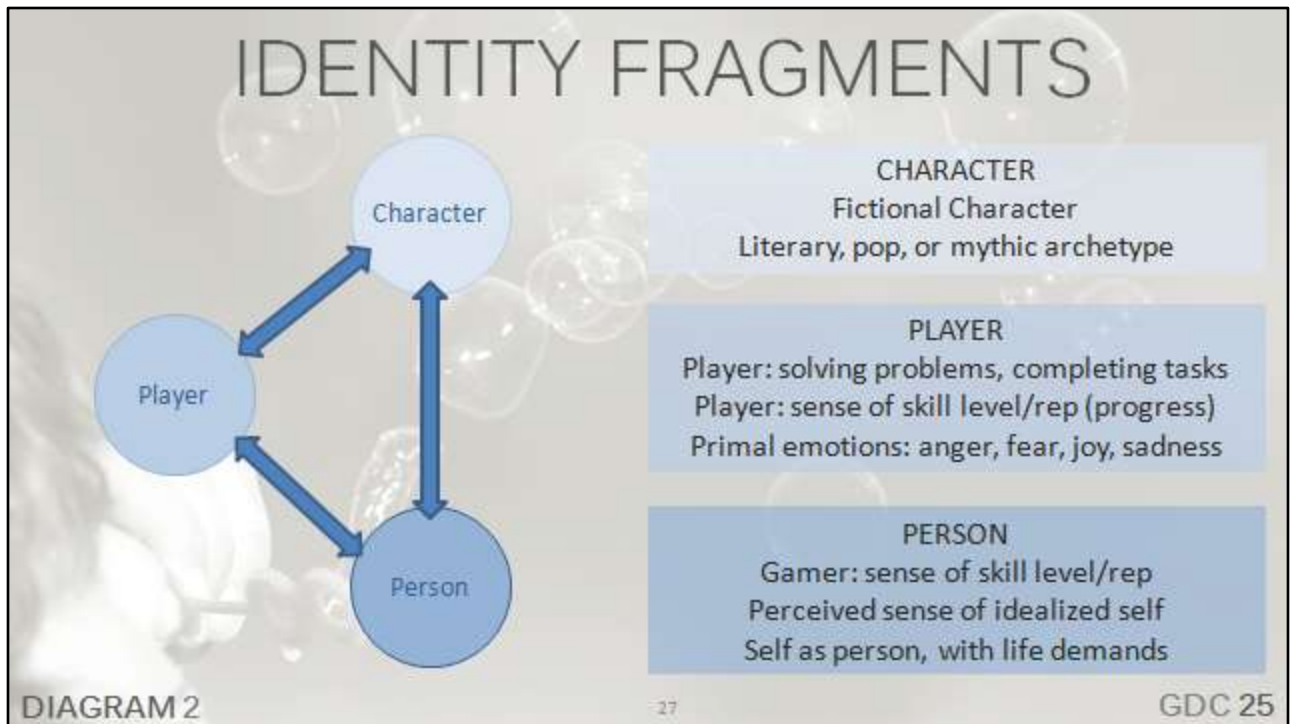
This is where we drill one level deeper into double consciousness.



This is Harvey Smith. He's the co-creative director at Arkane Studios in Austin, and last year I had the good fortune of doing a lecture on environmental storytelling with him. Before that, in 2006, he did a talk called "The Imago Effect", which a lot of the material so far has been based on.



In that talk, Harvey “psychoanalyzed” Gary Fine’s identity frames and came up with a more detailed list. We could call them frames inside the frames, but I will simply call them “fragments”. You can see them on the screen here. Slightly adjusting the list, we can map Harvey’s identity fragments back to Fine’s identity frames.



We come up with this:

- The Character is the fictional protagonist of the game, and might be based on a literary, pop or mythic archetype.
- The Player: solving problems and completing tasks (this describes moment-to-moment gameplay); the Player with a sense of skill level/reputation (which maps the sense of mastery, or progress as she gets better at the game); and the Player who brings primal emotions like fear and anger into the experience.

Character and Player exist within the magic circle (one half of double-consciousness). The Person usually is outside the magic circle.

- The Person is the gamer with a sense of skill level/rep (we won't go into this in this talk, but this covers achievement points, water cooler talk or posting game progress updates to social networks). The person has a certain view of himself (his perspective of who he might be, how other people view him, and who he wants to be). And of course the Person has life demands.

PLAYER IDENTITY



CHARACTER

Fictional Character
Literary, pop, or mythic archetype

PLAYER

Player: solving problems, completing tasks
Player: sense of skill level
Primal emotions: anger, fear, joy, sadness

PERSON

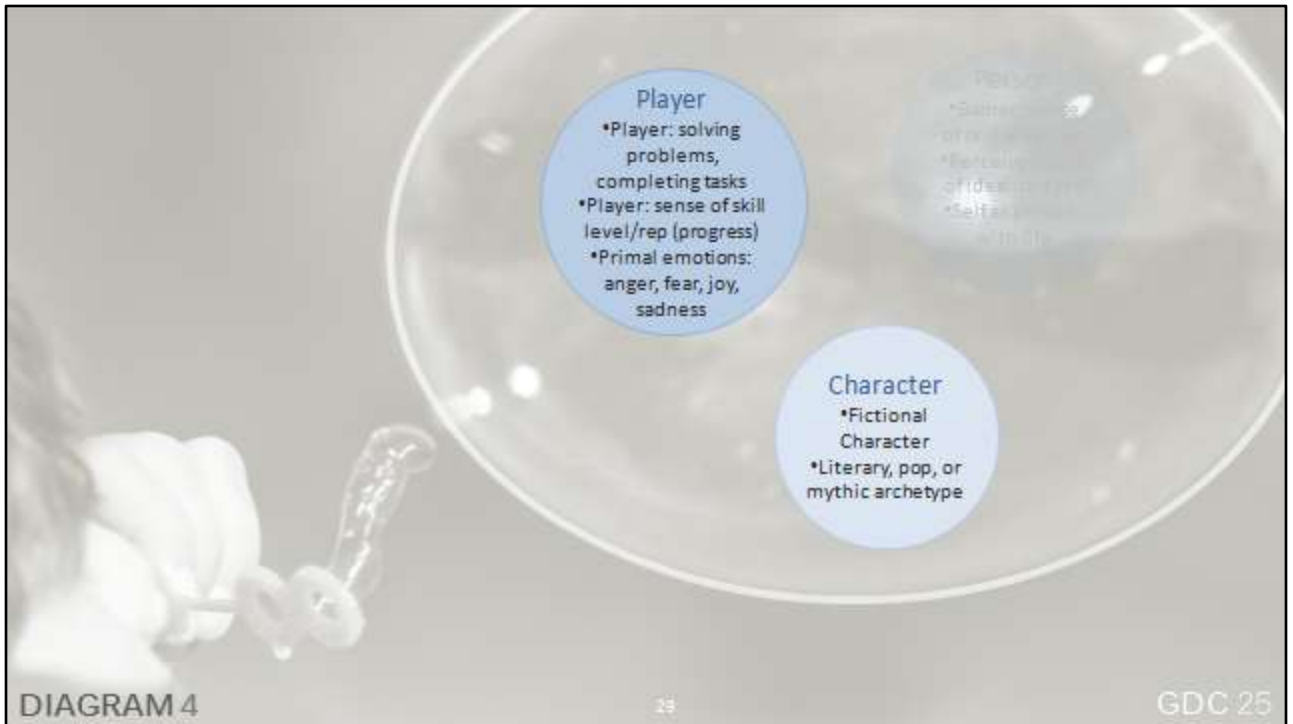
Player: sense of reputation
Perceived sense of idealized self
Self as person, with life demands

DIAGRAM 3

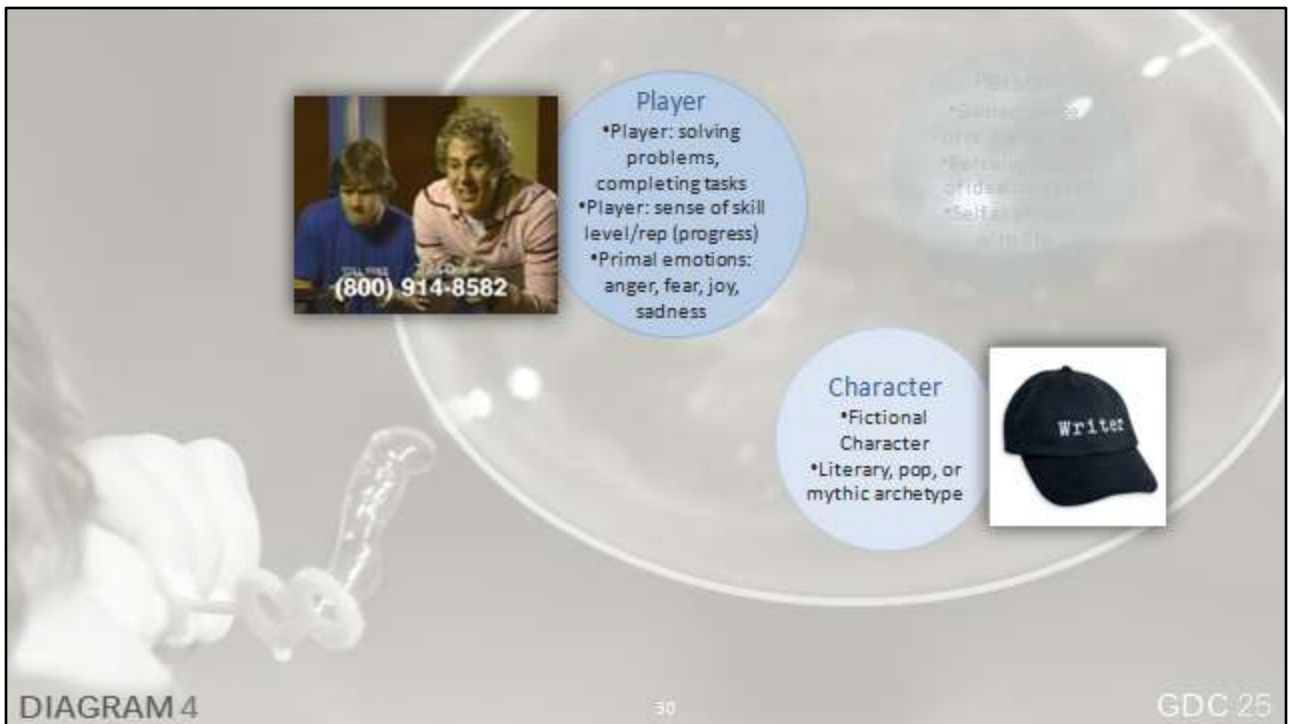
28

GDC 25

What you see here is double-consciousness, deconstructed. And this is your player when he's playing a game. We're going to ignore the Person frame for now because he exists outside the magic circle, and including him and is going to complicate figuring about the core concepts.



The concept behind the “identity bubble” is reconciling the identity frames. We imagine identity in games as a bubble in which Character and Player float along. Identity during play will be maintained when Character and Player frames drift in the same direction. If one lags behind or floats in an entirely different direction, the bubble pops and identity is lost.



The idea that the identity bubble has to be maintained is an important one, because this includes development. Writing for games means cooperation between writer and designer for the entire duration of development. We can see that right here in the bubble: one frame represents the writer, the other one the designers. The practice of hiring a writer towards the end of development to “write the story” doesn’t work. Hiring writers who do not understand the details of writing for games is going to create all sorts of problems. Our game stories aren’t bad because we lack in talent. What we lack in is understanding. Maybe we can explain this better by showing what makes writing for games is different from other media. The high level summary is simple: games are participatory, movies and books are reflective.

REFLECTION

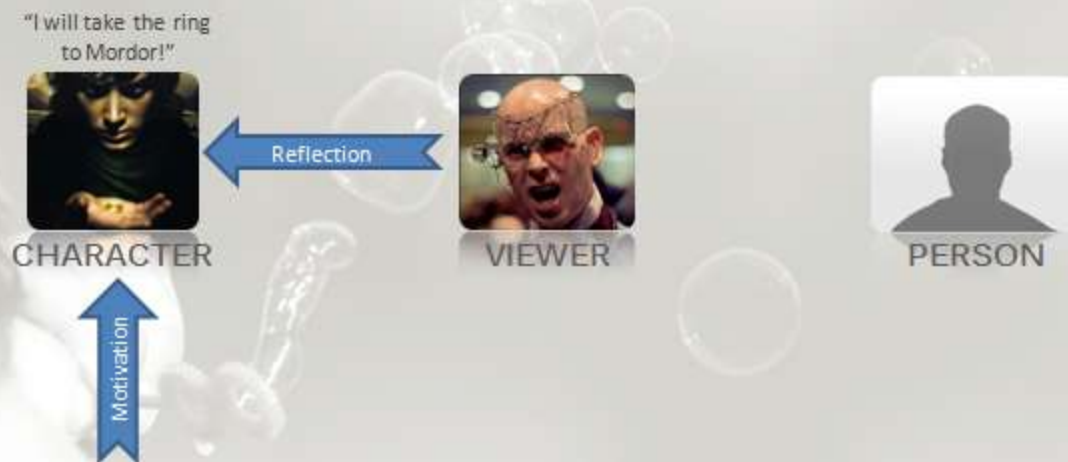


DIAGRAM 5

31

GDC 25

In linear media, motivation is created in the Character frame, and the Player (in this case the Reader or Viewer) observes the Character's actions. That's the reflective part: the Viewer compares his own values and frame of reference, to the depicted situation.

REFLECTION



DIAGRAM 5

32

GDC 25

The Viewer is engaged in an internal dialog about what is happening on the screen, and meaning emerges. Like this example, where it's all about cheering on Frodo and telling ourselves that, if called upon, "I would be just as brave as Frodo." This is pretty straight-forward, and we have mastered this flow of consumption over thousands of years.



FIG 22. NEVERENDING STORY

33

GDC 25

A few books/movies, like *The Neverending Story*, have played with the Character/Viewer relationship in interesting ways, but ultimately, the experience is always reflective. Games don't work that way.

PARTICIPATION



CHARACTER

"Experience! Levels!
Systemic advancement!"



PLAYER

"Did I leave the
gas on?"



PERSON



DIAGRAM 6

34

GDC 25

Games are participatory. Motivation in games is created in the Player, not in the Character! This is the reason we play games: the ability to drive the action, to express ourselves, to lead.



Things become tricky is that we often want to use story lines and Character motivation to fictionalize the Player's goals. Now the Player is reflecting <click> on the Character's actions...



...until here realizes that "wait a second, why am I reflecting?", he actually IS the character, so what does that mean? And now we have to deal with a duality where motivation is created in one identity frame, while a different identity frame is used to fictionalize this motivation.



The result is a very confused player. And we've all been there – we all know that nagging feeling of “why am I doing this again?” The feeling of not really driving the story, or the feeling of not caring about the avatar's motivations.



We call this hollow feeling of disconnect ludonarrative dissonance, a term Clint Hocking coined a few years ago.

LUDONARRATIVE DISSONANCE

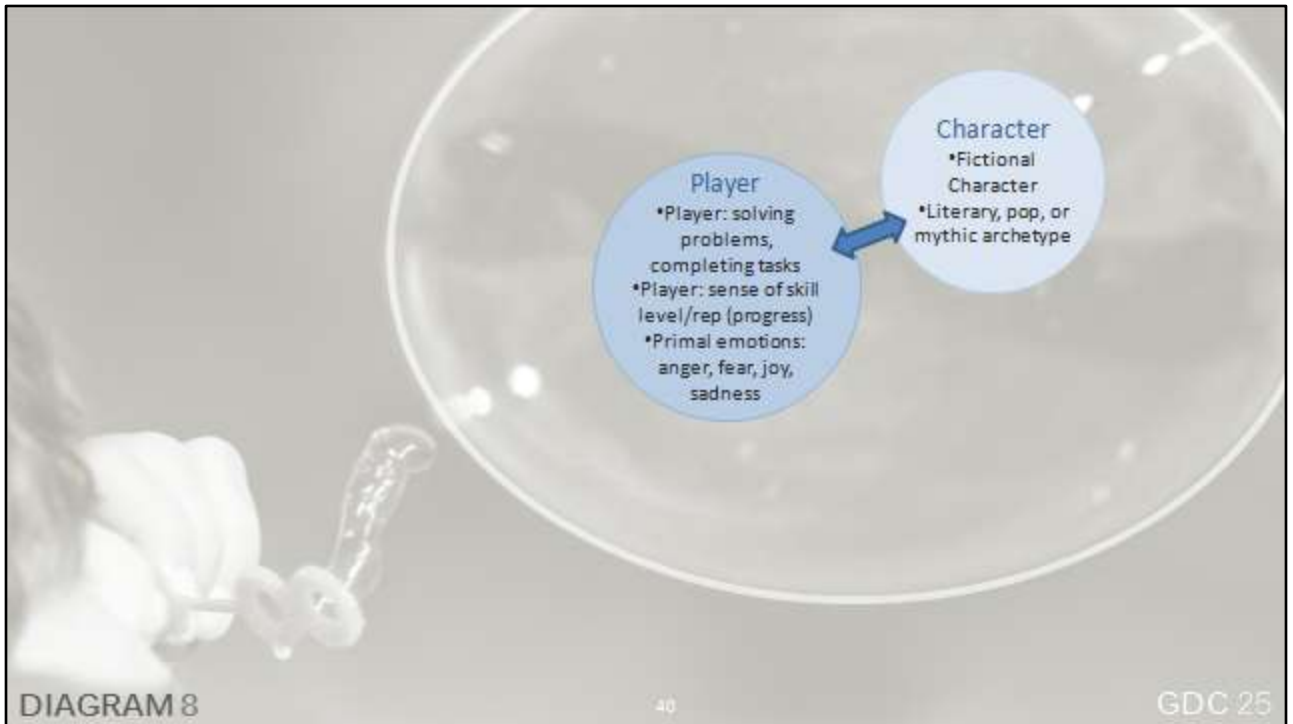


DIAGRAM 7

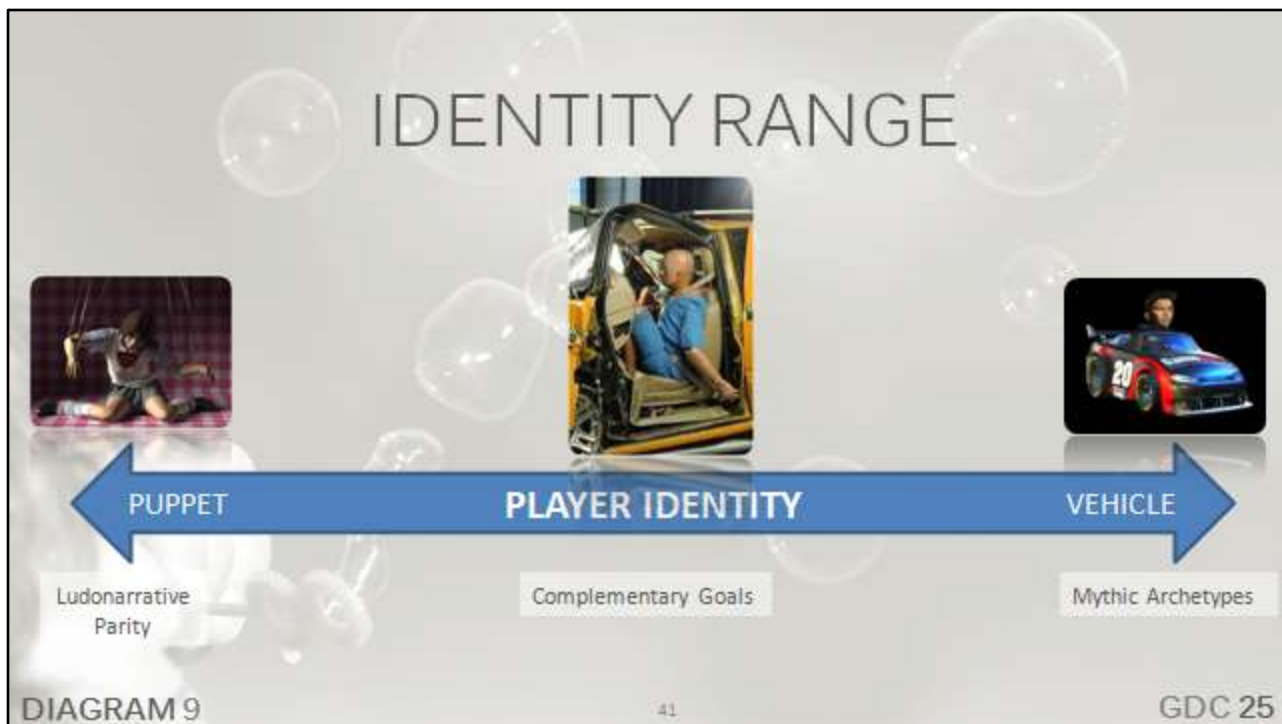
39

GDC 25

Ludonarrative dissonance is something that designers and writer create when we don't understand player identity. We open a rift between Player and Character. Once we understand the problem it's manageable, though...



...and the Identity Bubble is just an expression of that problem. It's the idea that if we keep all identity frames aligned by hooking them together, we keep the bubble from popping. The way we do this is to control the identity gap. I want to look at three examples of how this can be done.



All three examples coincide with the identity range we established earlier. It's important to know that this range is analog, and your approach might be wedged in somewhere in the middle. The three approaches are as follows:

- 1) We create ludonarrative parity using use a puppet avatar.
- 2) We create a hybrid approach using complementary goals.
- 3) We change the player's expectations of why he wants to play the game, using a mythic archetype.

The best way to talk about this is to look at an example for each of the three cases here. After that, we can find the commonalities and identify some lessons learned.



So we should start by looking at puppet games.

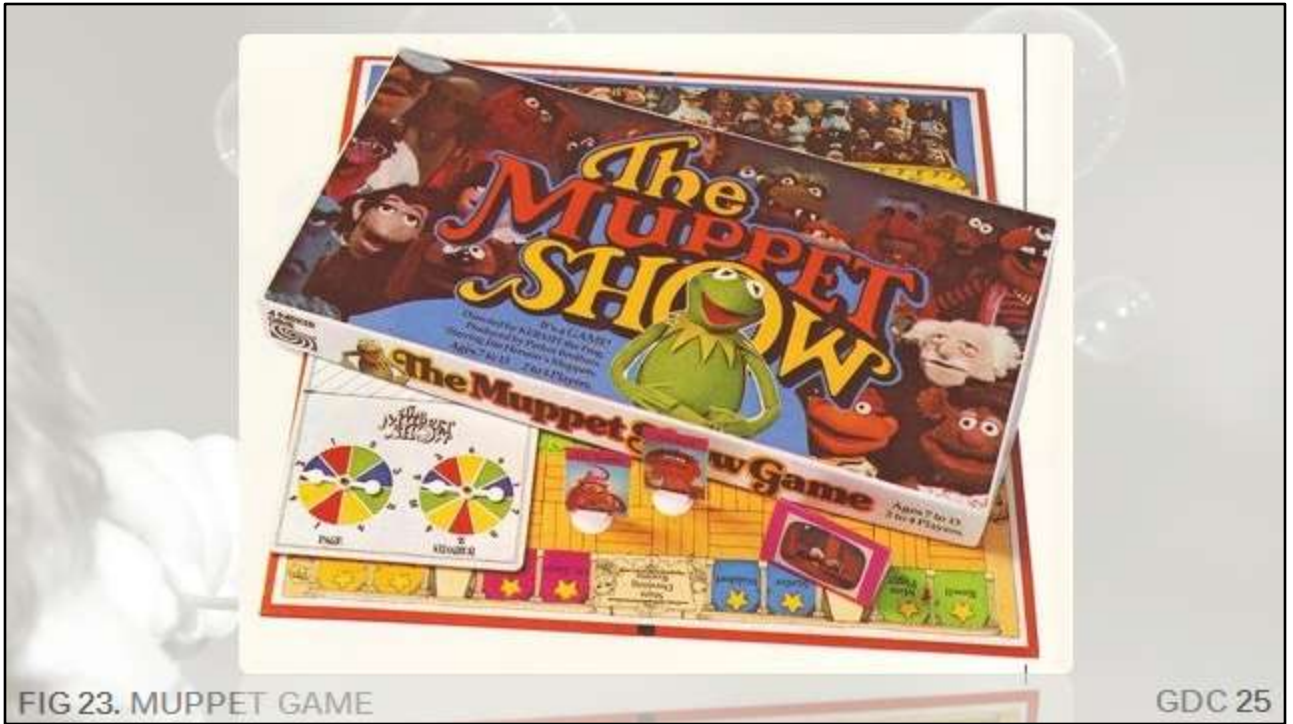


FIG 23. MUPPET GAME

GDC 25

Not this kind of puppet game, unfortunately.



FIG 24. PUPPET GAME

GDC 25

This kind of puppet game. The idea behind ludonarrative parity is to align gameplay and story goals so closely that the player's agency is synonymous with the game's narrative progression.

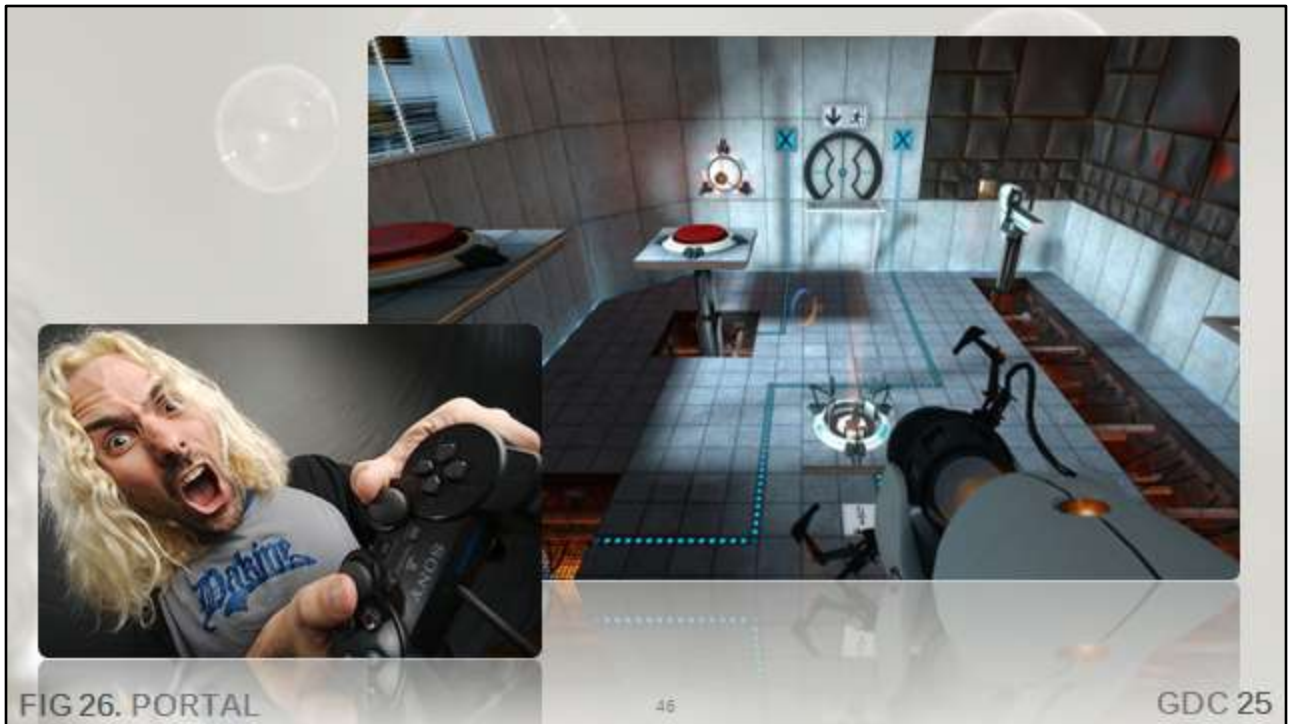
PORTAL



FIG 25. PORTAL

GDC 25

PORTAL is a good example of what I'm talking about.



I'm not here to analyze how PORTAL creates great gameplay per-se, I want to show how the game engages the different fragments of player identity.



Playing PORTAL:

I want to get to GLaDOS because I want to finish the game (Player: sense of skill level/rep).

I do that by finishing each test chamber, which means solving all the puzzles in each chamber with the gameplay mechanisms provided to me (Player: solving problems, completing tasks).

Through all of that, GLaDOS keeps deriding me, which creates anger and a sense of indignity, edging me on to kill that descending computer bitch (Primal emotions).



Now compare that to what the avatar wants to do. Her name is Chell, btw, but that's not important. What's important is that her name isn't important.

Chell want to get to GLaDOS because she wants to get out of this fucked-up situation and be free (Player: sense of skill level/rep).

She does that by finishing each test chamber <click>, which means solving all the puzzles in each chamber with the tools provided to her (Player: solving problems, completing tasks).

Through all of that, GLaDOS keeps deriding her, which reinforces the anger and a sense of indignity that's been inflicted through her capture – giving her righteous fury to kill that condescending computer bitch (Primal emotions).

Both examples are remarkably similar and demonstrate ludonarrative parity.

LUDONARRATIVE PARITY



CHARACTER

LUDONARRATIVE
PARITY



PLAYER



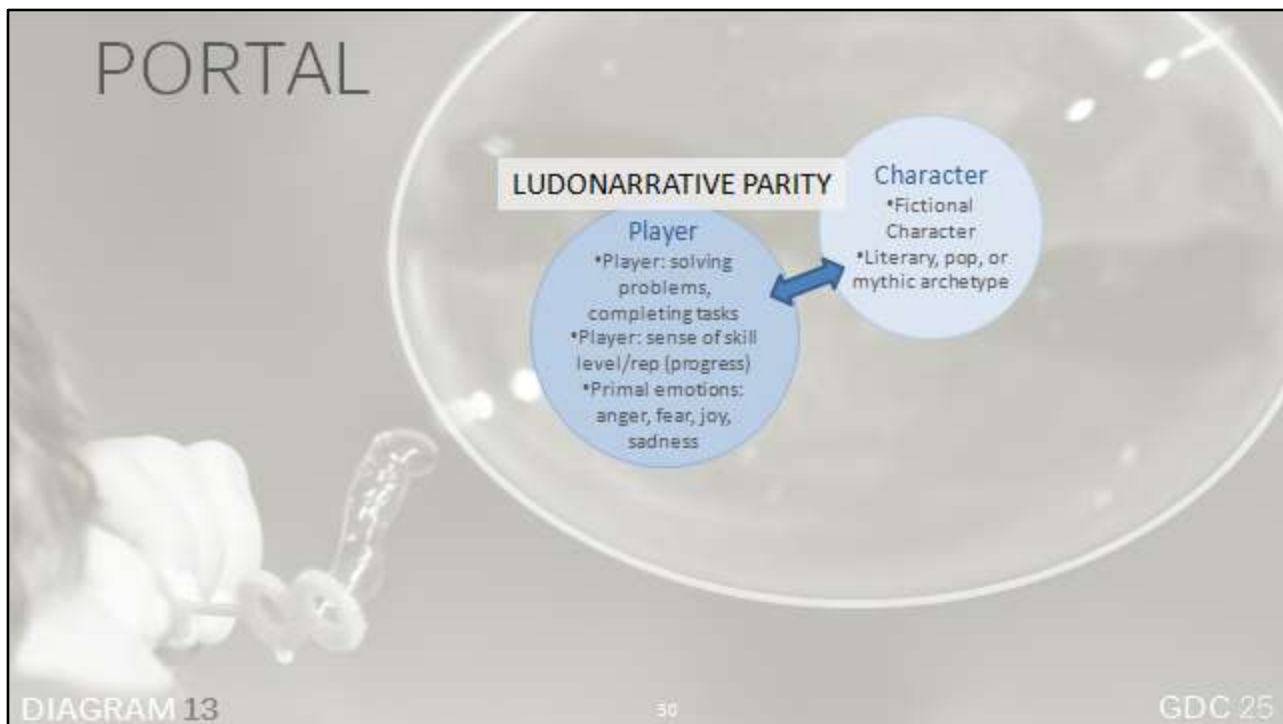
PERSON

DIAGRAM 12

49

GDC 25

In PORTAL, there never is an identity gap, because the game maintains ludonarrative parity.



Player and avatar are united through their situation: incarcerated by a sadistic computer, with the overwhelming urge to escape, and the hope of sticking it to GLaDOS when the ordeal is over. The player knows exactly what it means to be the avatar, what his/her motivation is, and how to act on this motivation. This ludonarrative parity is evident in the identity bubble. Player and Character are pulling each other along. Both identity frames are working towards the same goals. The bubble never pops, identity is strong.

Fictionally, Chell is her own person, but in gameplay terms she is identical to the Player. This evidenced in the writing of this game: during the entire game, GLaDOS' commentary is addressing Player and Character alike. The brilliance of PORTAL's writing (beyond great characterizations) is that it constantly reminds the player of the shared situation, and keeps their identity frames aligned. Every time GLaDOS addresses Chell, the bond between Player and Character is renewed.



PORTAL's ludonarrative parity works because it is based solely on primal motivation, something that we inherently understand. There aren't even objectives because every goal in the game flows from this primal motivation. Things get more complicated when we want to add external, more nuanced motivation, with bigger ideas – and have that drive the game progression.

EXTERNAL MOTIVATION



CHARACTER



PLAYER



PERSON

DIAGRAM 14

52

GDC 25

Because now we're dealing with the duality problem we looked at earlier, where we motivate one identity frame through gameplay (Player), but use another identity frame to contextualize this motivation (Character). We can deal with this problem through complementary goals. This means weaving player identity into the core gameplay loop. Fallout 3 is a great case study for this.



FIG 27. FALLOUT 3

33

GDC 25

In Fallout 3, the avatar him/herself is an empty vessel, shaped and driven by the player – even more so than in PORTAL because we can customize this avatar both visually and statistically.



Fallout 3's gameplay is driven by the Player - his motivation to explore the world for resources and the joy of systemic advancement. (This is why we play the game.) But this systemic exploration of the game doesn't drive Fallout 3's story. That goal is introduced externally in the Character.

FALLOUT 3

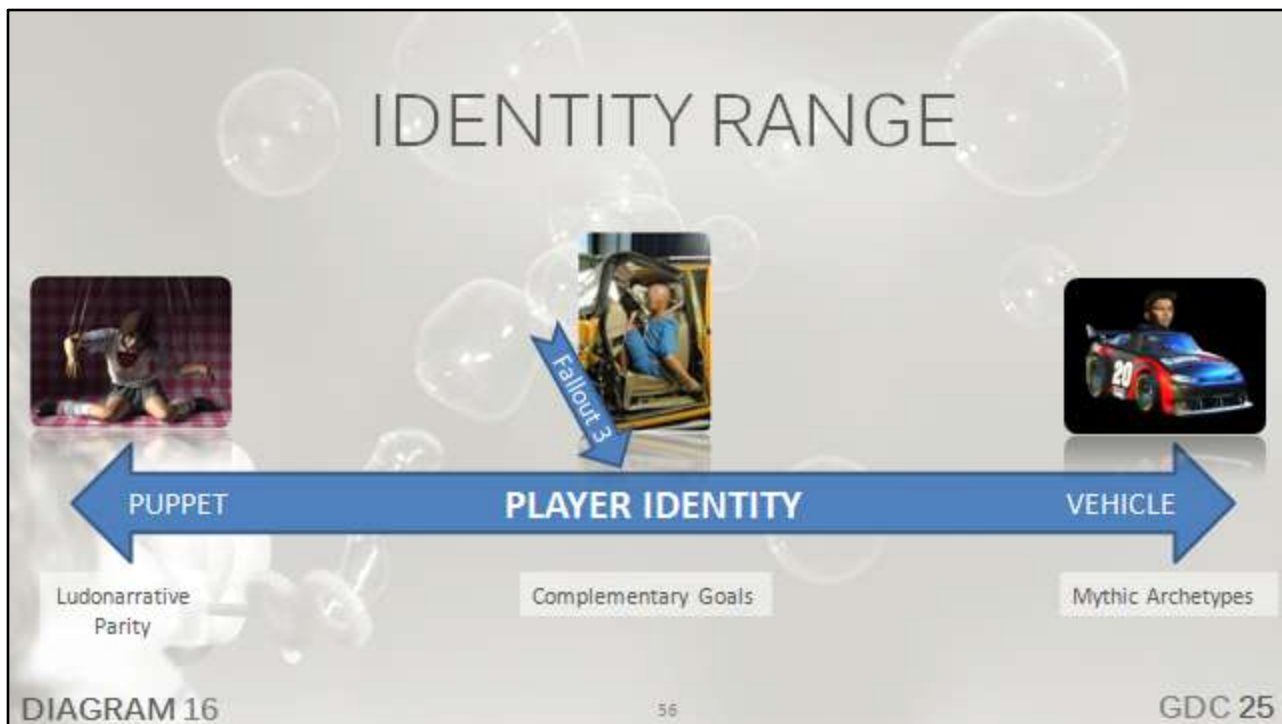


DIAGRAM 15

55

GDC 25

As Fallout 3's pre-authored story goes, the avatar wants to find her father and, once successful, help him on his quest to bring clean water to the wasteland. This opens up an identity gap, because these goals aren't fundamentally derived from Fallout's gameplay mechanics, and following them doesn't reward the player on the systemic level (beyond experience points) .



In our identity range, Fallout's character is somewhere in the middle of the chart. The avatar is a puppet that the player controls, but he has a pre-authored back story that establishes fundamental gameplay goals. This is how Fallout 3 deals with this setup:



FIG 28. FALLOUT 3

57

GDC 25

When it comes to the base motivation, Fallout 3 does a very smart thing early on, establishing the father as an instrumental figure in the gamer's life. He literally teaches the gamer how to play the game in the tutorials. That creates a bond, and makes the gamer care about the father's fate.



FIG 29. FALLOUT 3

GDC 25

But that only takes us so far once the gamer is out on her own in the Capital Wasteland, where the world is her oyster and tons of open world points of interest are available. Once the gamer leaves the fallout shelter, Fallout needs to maintain the identity bubble – making the Character's quest match the Player's gameplay actions. It does this by making Player and Character actions fundamentally complementary.

“Level 20, here I come!”



SCRAPPING AND
EXPLORING

“Dad?”



SCRAPPING AND
EXPLORING

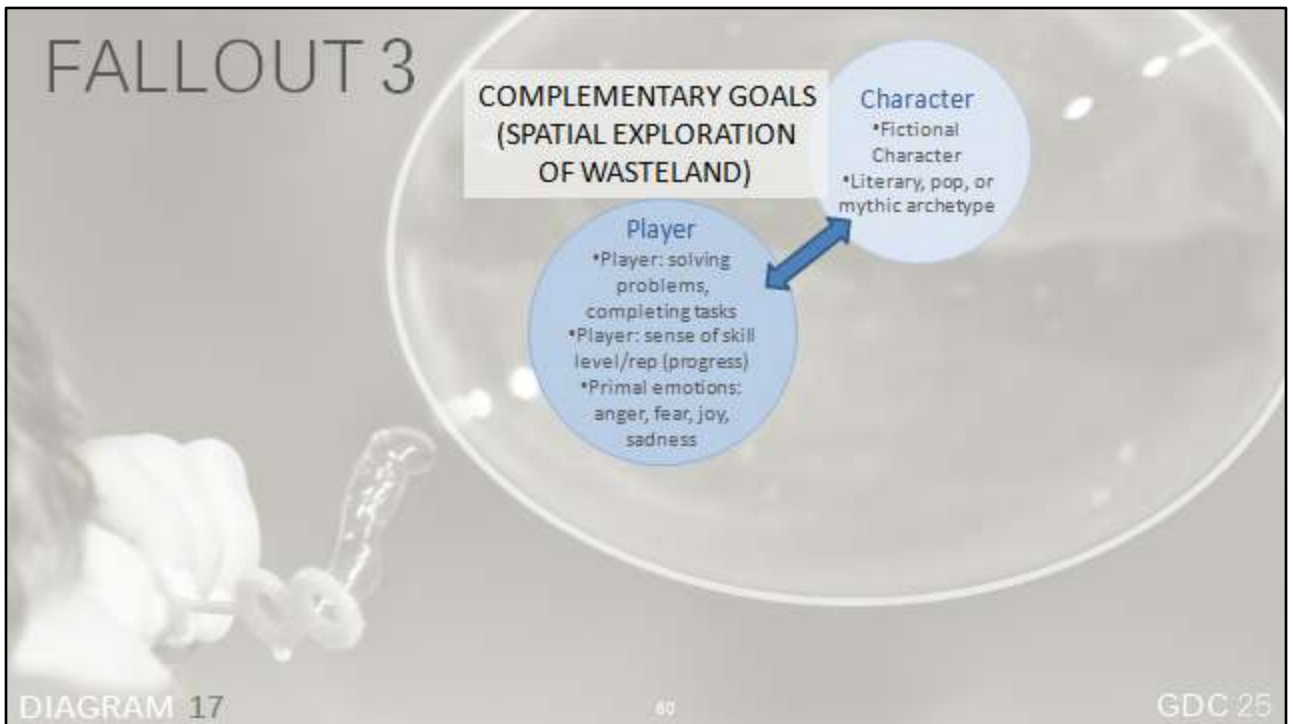
FIG 29a. FALLOUT 3

59

GDC 25

- As the player, building up an RPG character in a post-apocalyptic wasteland means scrapping and exploring
- As the fictional character, trying to find her father, survival in a post-apocalyptic wasteland means scrapping and exploring

This creates alignment. Fallout 3 create ludonarrative... well, not parity, but harmony. The Character's identity is mirrored in the game's fundamental, systemic play actions. Even if the gamer does not care about finding “her” father, she kind of follows this story goal automatically by exploring the wasteland.



The spatial exploration of the wasteland (which ties together most of the game mechanics) hooks Player and Character identity frames together. We can see that in the identity bubble. The Player explores to grow in power, while the Character explores to find her father. Every time we enter a new location, we are reminded of our story goal.

FALLOUT 3



DIAGRAM 17

GDC 25

Beyond that exploration, and creating ludonarrative harmony by weaving the Character identity into play actions, there's something else holding together the identity bubble. Something you might not expect to come up in this context: the American Dream. If we look at what Fallout 3's gameplay arc really represents, it's a typical story of the American Dream: rags to riches, rewards for hard work. The freedom to do what you want to do, with the promise of prosperity and success. The sky is the limit – and that promise is expressed in Character and Player frames:

- Character: she enters the Capital Wasteland as nobody, working her way up to the top.
- Player, grinding and doing fetch quests to level up and turn his Player self into somebody.

This brings the Person frame back into the picture, which we kicked out earlier to make things easier to understand. Our inherent knowledge of the American Dream, and our urge to believe in it, is part of the Person frame. Through an activity like playing Fallout 3, we prove to ourselves that these values, which we hold so dear, might actually be true. The game transcends the magic circle and stays with us after we stop playing. It reinforces our beliefs.



Since this is a concept that will become more important as we go on, I want to explore it in more detail now.

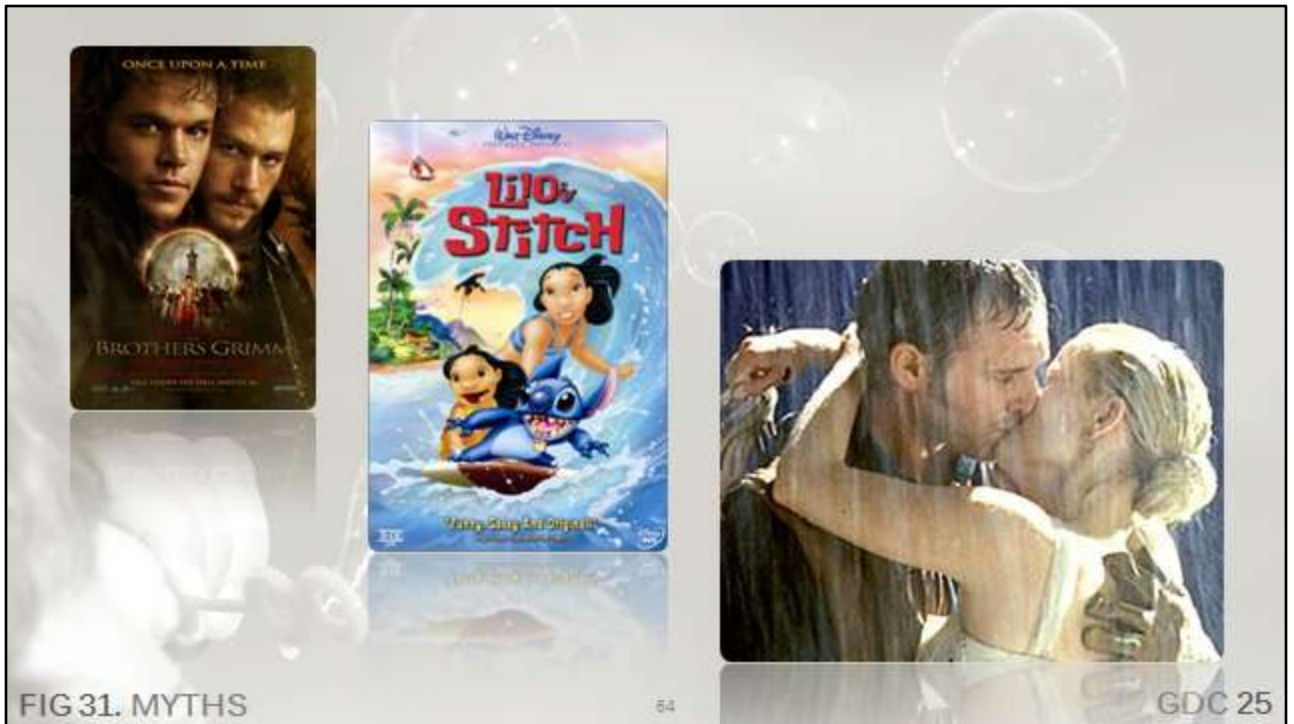


"Games are essentially myth-reinforcing activities. [...] Players tend to choose the kinds of games that reaffirm their own personal myths."

FIG 30. BOB BATES

GDC 25

This is my former boss at Legend, Bob Bates. In his 2005 GDC talk "Into the Woods: A Practical Guide to the Hero's Journey", he presented the idea that - just like other media - "games are essentially myth-reinforcing activities. And I believe that players tend to choose the kinds of games that reaffirm their own personal myths." Bob quotes the who-is-who of the psychological world to show that we consume media as a way to reaffirm our personal belief systems of the world.



It's the reason we have fairy tales; the reason small children watch Disney movies until they can recite them backwards <click>; the reason my wife watched Sweet Home Alabama about 100 times reassuring her that Mr. Right was out there somewhere.



FIG 31. MYTHS

GDC 25

Well, and then she met me... It's the reason you can't get enough of Die Hard, and it's the reason I watched the SF Giants win the 2010 world series about 20 times, because fuck it, that was cool – my hometown warriors , “my San Francisco Giants”, were bringing home the world series trophy.

Myths are important. They reinforce our views of the world, and we gain psychological well-being from this because it's comforting to know that we can trust in our beliefs.



"For some it might simply be a need to bring order out of chaos. For them, Tetris is a fine way to re-assert that belief. [...] If you want to reinforce deeper, more complex myths, which in turn can create deeper and more satisfying gameplay experiences, then you need to turn to stories."

FIG 30. BOB BATES

GDC 25

Bob then argues that *games* are myth-reinforcing entities, as well:

"For some it might simply be a need to bring order out of chaos. For them, Tetris is a fine way to re-assert that belief [...]. But Tetris can't reinforce the belief, for example, that [...] 'it is better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all.' If you want to reinforce deeper, more complex myths, which in turn can create deeper and more satisfying gameplay experiences, then you need to turn to stories."



Reinforcing myths tickles our perceived sense of idealized self in the Person frame.



FIG 32. FALLOUT 3

68

GDC 25

We can see this in Fallout 3. Fallout 3 is an interactive way of reliving the American Dream - of building and shaping our own myth.

FALLOUT 3



COMPLEMENTARY GOALS
(SPATIAL EXPLORATION
OF WASTELAND)

Character

- *Fictional Character
- *Literary, pop, or mythic archetype

Player

- *Player: solving problems, completing tasks
- *Player: sense of skill level/rep (progress)
- *Primal emotions: anger, fear, joy, sadness

Person

- *player: sense of skill level/rep
- *Perceived sense of idealized self
- *Self as person, with life demands

MYTH BUILDING
(AMERICAN DREAM)

DIAGRAM 19

69

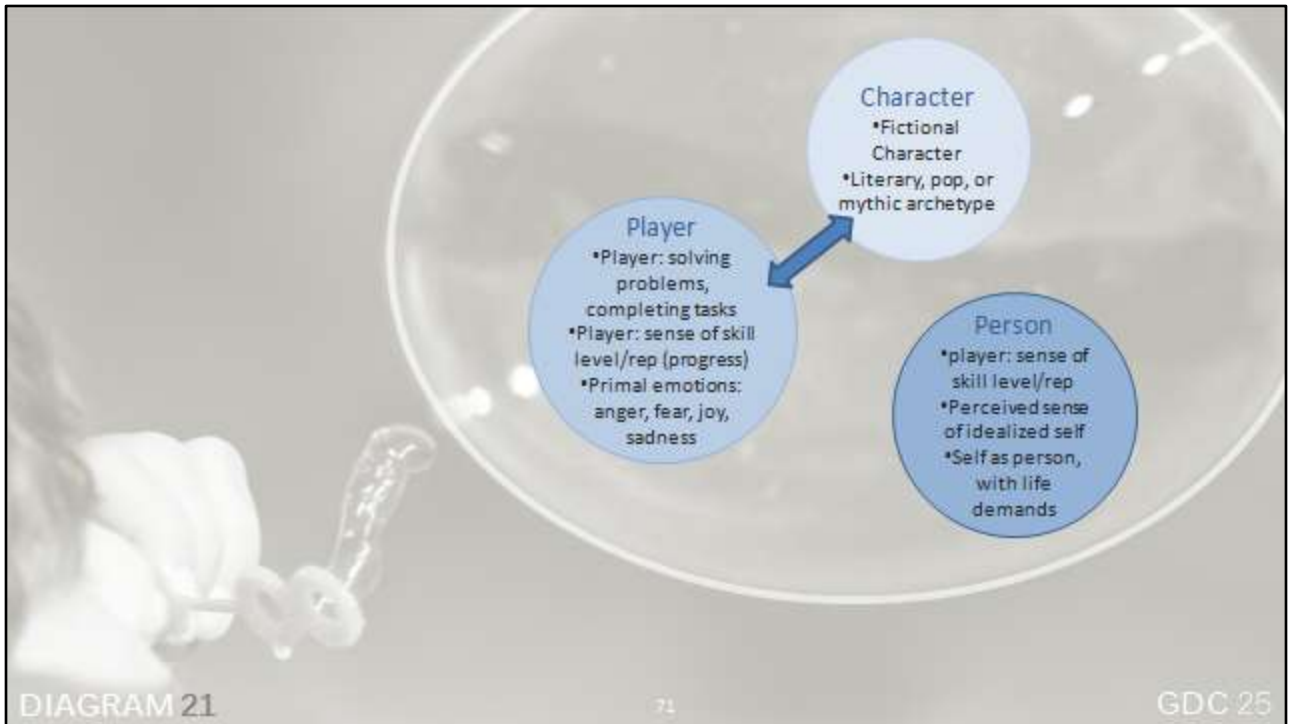
GDC 25

For Fallout 3 we might argue that the myth of the American Dream, and how fundamentally it is anchored in all identity frames, unifies the identity bubble.



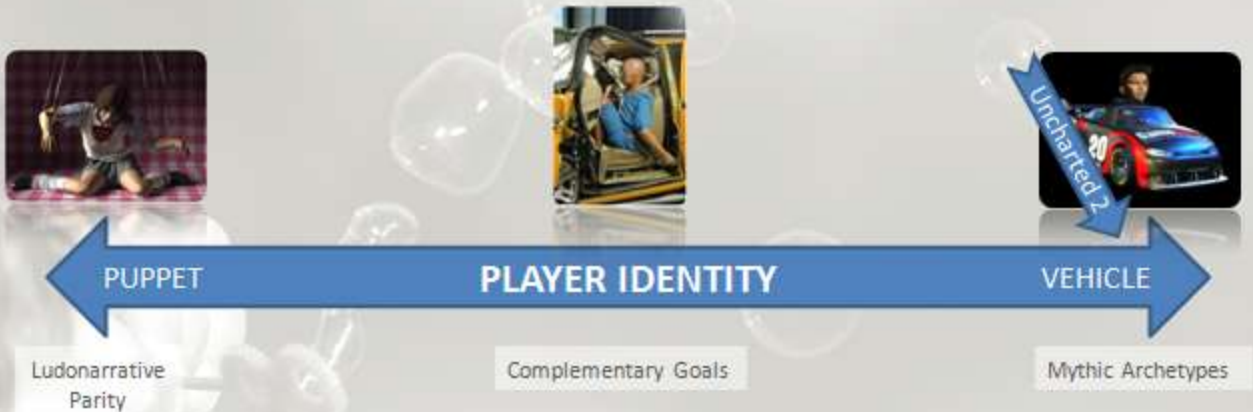
We can make the same argument for PORTAL: At its very core, PORTAL is a “Monster in the house” story. We might say that it’s a retelling of the labyrinth of Minos, but this situation from Saw might resonate more.

I still remember the first trailer for Saw, which simply stated (over footage) “This is fucked up.” We are deeply afraid of a situation like this one, trapped by a nihilist monster. We watch Saw because we want to steel ourselves, and to reinforce our belief that we would survive in a similar situation. PORTAL is more humorous in the way it tells its story but fundamentally, it’s the same story about a similar nihilistic monster. Finishing PORTAL reinforces the same belief – interactively.



I had ignored the Person frame up to this point: it isn't part of the magic circle, and it wasn't required for a working identity bubble - we were able to hook together Player and Character without its help. But engaging the Person (and its yearning for positive reinforcement), can add meaning to the play experience.

IDENTITY RANGE



DIGRAM 22

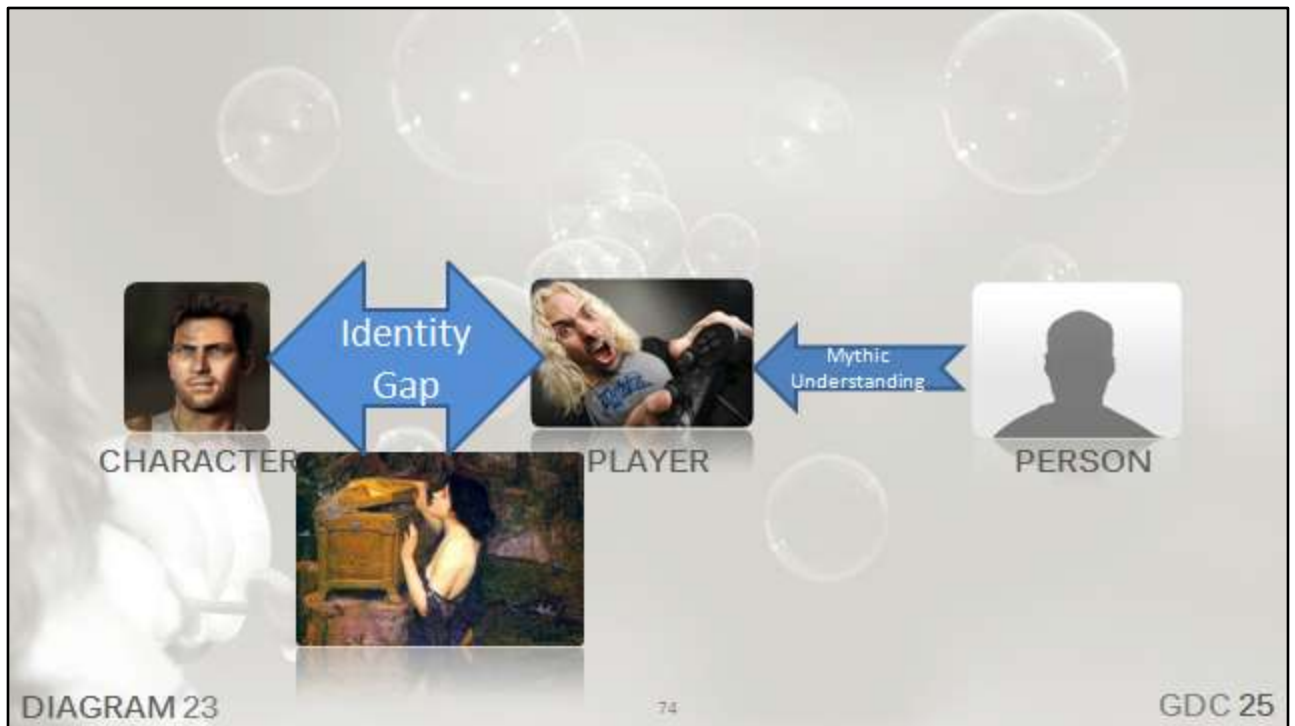
72

GDC 25

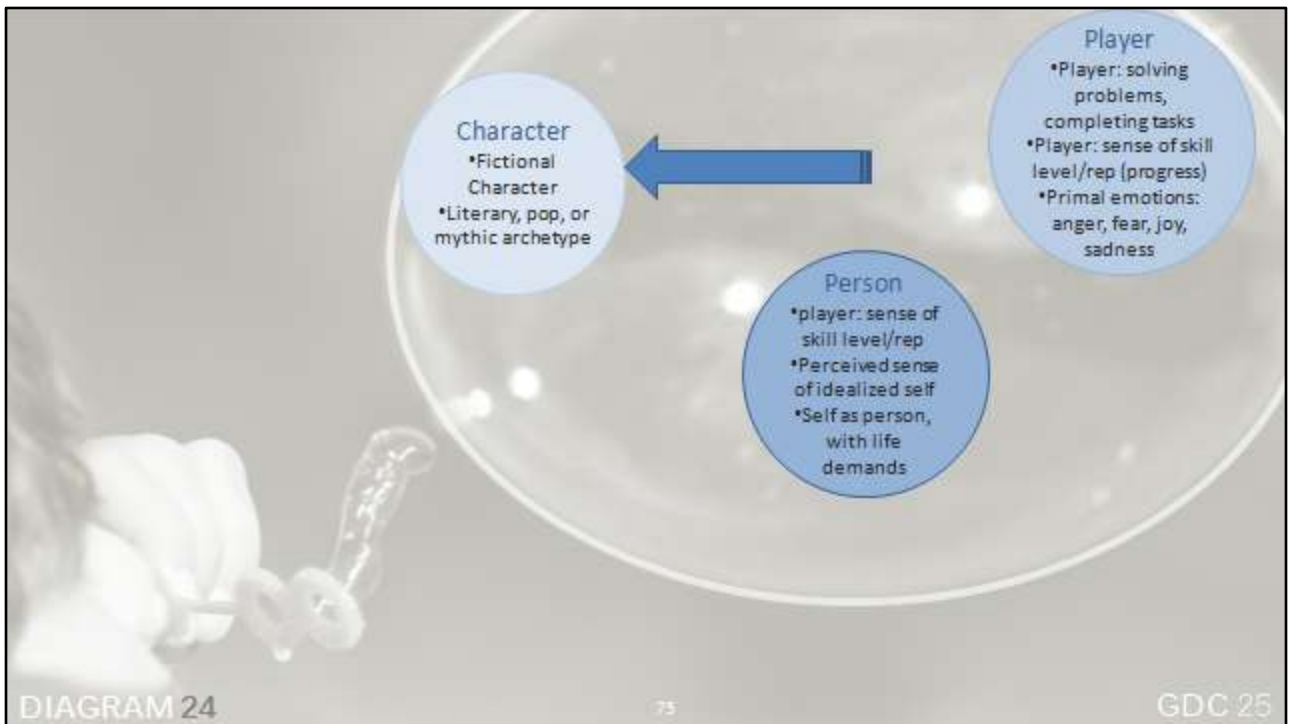
That optional nature changes now. As we talk about vehicle games (and Uncharted 2 specifically), we'll see how important the Person is going to become.



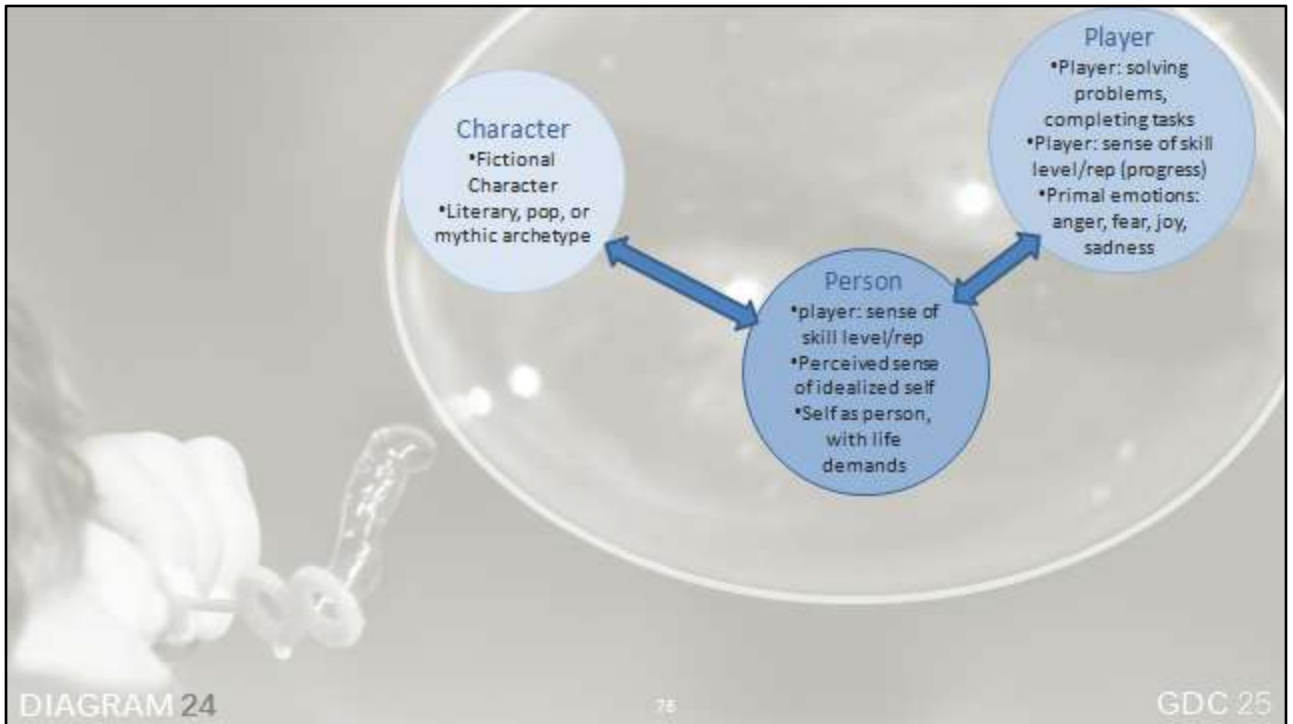
I've already talked about the fact that Uncharted 2 is pretty much the exact opposite of Fallout 3, both in its structure and identity approach. It's an active cinematic experience – highly structured, story-driven game with strongly authored characters who constantly speak for themselves and set goals that propel the story forward.



With such a strongly characterized avatar, we're automatically opening Pandora's Box.



In other words, we're opening an identity gap: With every self-motivated, unexpected step that the avatar takes, Character and Player drift apart. It's hard to feel agency when your destiny is driven by the actions of the on-screen character who keeps doing his own thing. The connection between Player and Character are going to be stretched very thin. It might even snap at times.



This is where we use gamer's understanding of myths – his collective unconscious – to hold everything together.



FIG 33. UNCHARTED 2

GDC 25

The reason this works in the first place is explained in Bob's talk. We consume media to reinforce beliefs. I believe that gamers' identity expectations are different for story-driven games. We've seen how Fallout 3 let's us build our own myth in an interactive way, which is awesome for our medium. But there's the traditional way, as well: going on somebody else's journey. Many players are going to willingly sacrifice agency/player story to experience this kind of journey. We might name it "myth recall": we're going on somebody else's journey, driving him through the experience like a vehicle.



This flips around the way we create motivation in these games. Up until now, we've stressed that motivation should be created in the Player.



Now we turn that around, putting the Player in a frame of mind where he doesn't mind following Nathan Drake because he wants to be him. Because he *knows* Nathan Drake. Maybe not personally, but he's watched enough Indiana Jones movies to know what this journey is about. And guess what – he's always wanted to be Indiana Jones/Nathan Drake.

This is fantasy fulfillment, and all games cater to it some shape or form. But understanding this doesn't automatically solve the problem. We can't simply create a strongly characterized avatar based on a mythic archetype and think that we're closing the identity gap. We need to execute on it, as well.



Quite the opposite, this is where most of our bad stories come from, because we're acting like these guys, rather than the Uncharted guys. And we keep making Alan Quatermain movies instead of this The Last Crusade.



I didn't work on Uncharted 2, and the guys who did presented a number of interesting talks about the development of that game. I'm not here to analyze what makes Uncharted 2 so successful, I just want to show how it fits into the idea of the identity bubble.

- Gamers play titles like Uncharted 2 because they want to experience what it is like to be Nathan Drake, and the long list of archetypes he is based on (most notably Alan Quatermain and Indiana Jones).
- As developers, we engage the "Perceived sense of idealized self" identity fragment: the player sees qualities of himself in characters like Nathan Drake. He looks for opportunities to reinforce this belief - by playing the game.



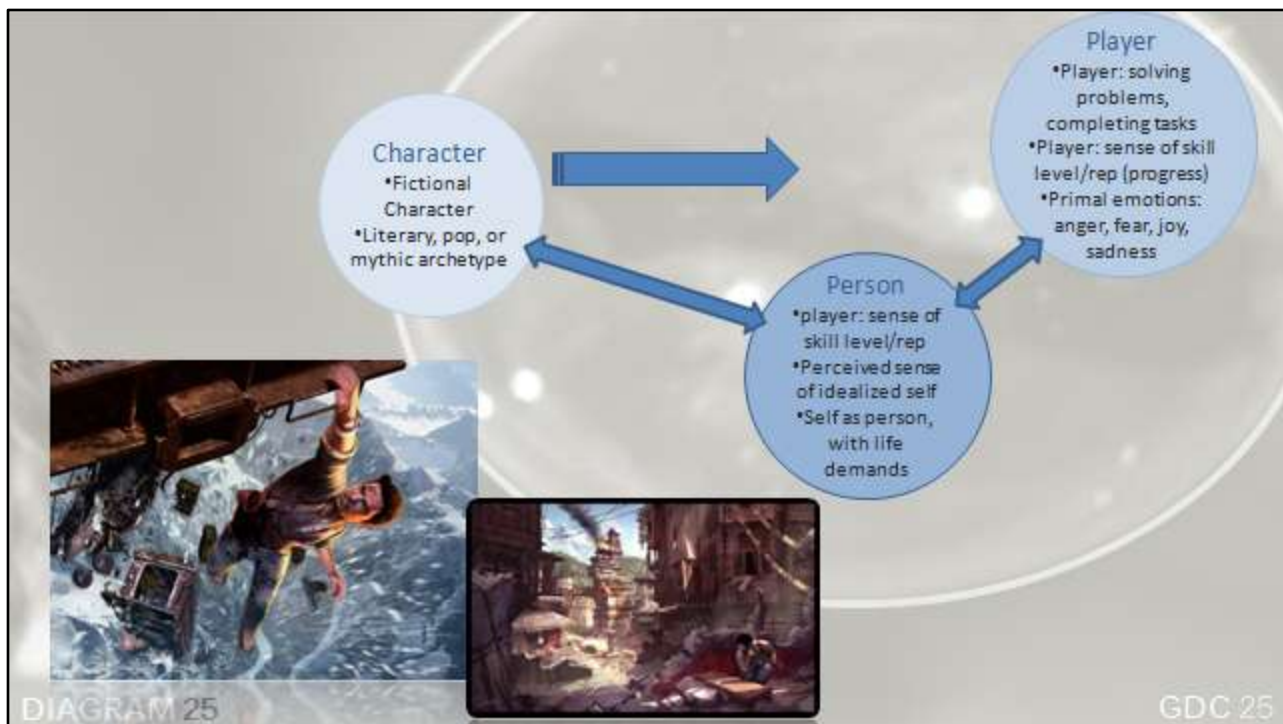
FIG 35. INDIANA JONES

82

GDC 25

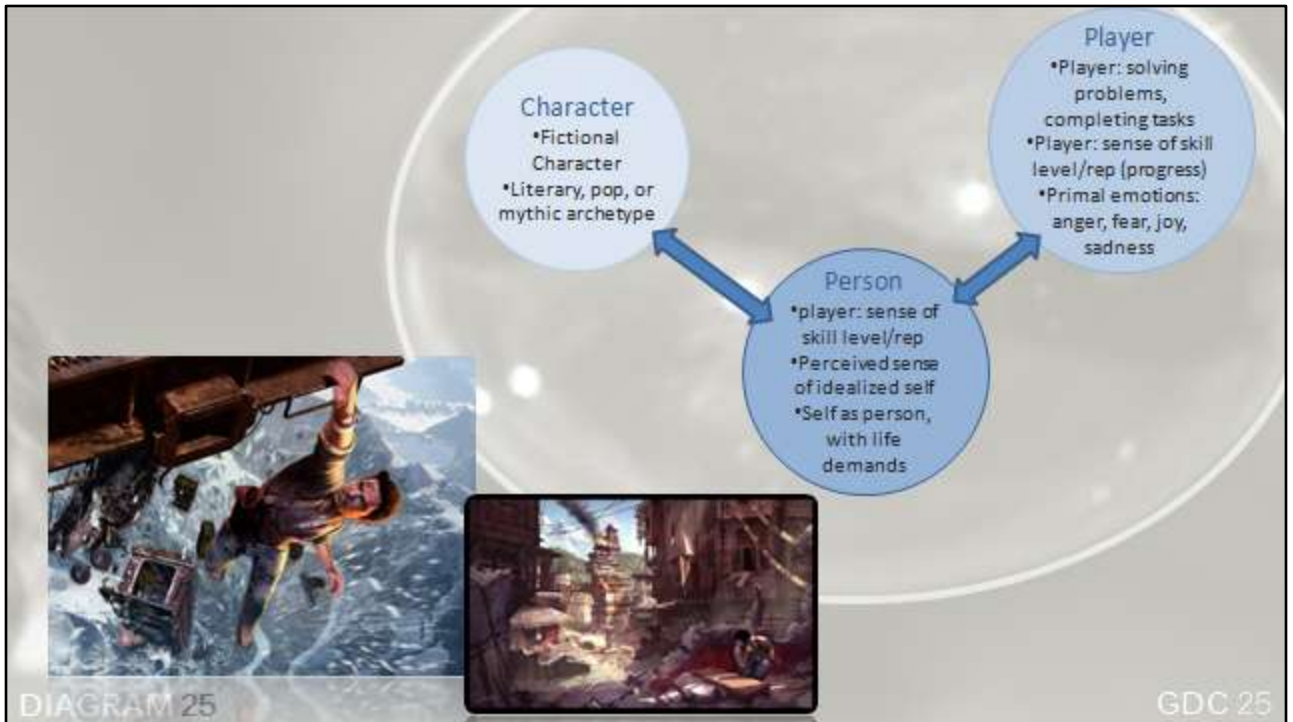
The gamer's expectations of how the game should play out are shaped by his inherent knowledge of the underlying story. That means that we need to create a story that actually follows those rules.

We could sum up Uncharted 2's narrative with three screenshots from Raiders of the Lost Arc and Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade: Uncharted 2 is a road movie, a story in which the journey is more important than the destination. This works in Uncharted's favor, because the same goes for the gamer's agency expectations – the journey is more important than unlimited expression.

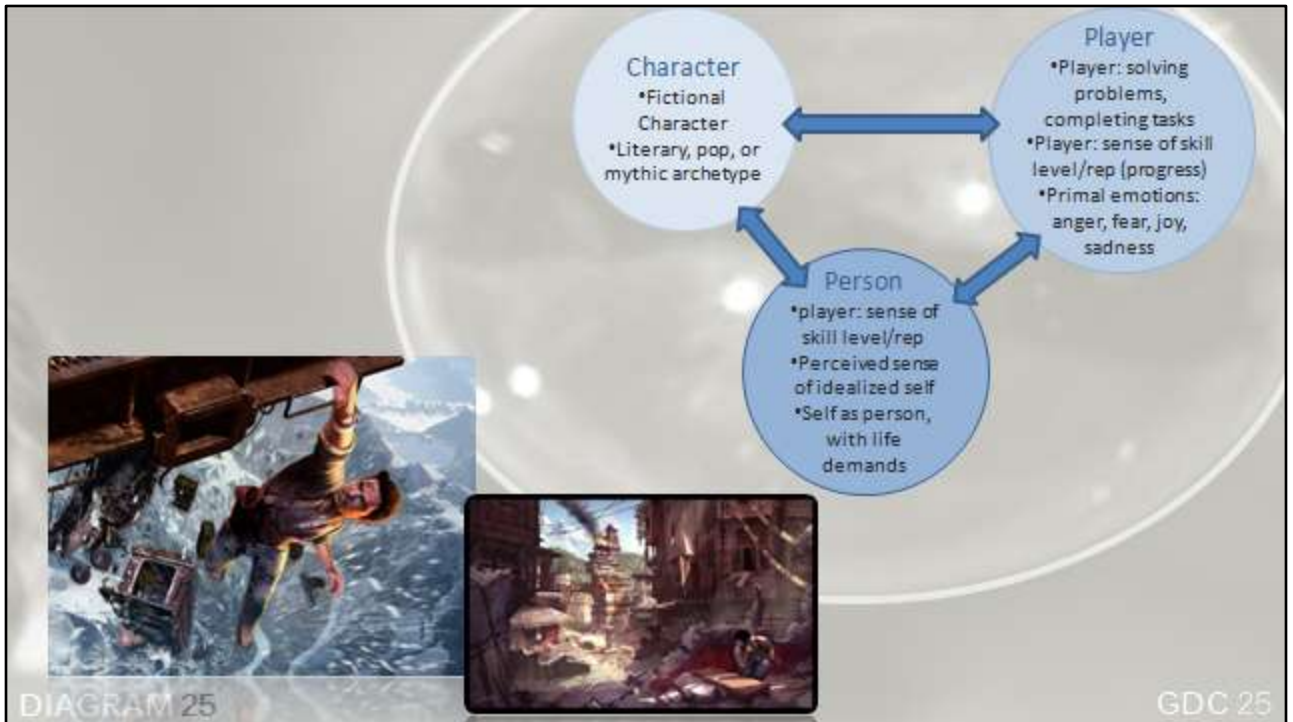


Our mythic understanding of the story is the glue holding everything together. And it buys us a bit of leeway, because the journey is never quite as unexpected as we think it might be. We know we will get to Shambhala. The question is, “how do we get there.” Naughty Dog also invests an large amount of attention to realign Player and Character.

One technique is what ND called “the gap”. It’s the idea that each unexpected obstacle thrown in Drake’s way wipes out information about the journey ahead. It levels the playing field – bringing Player and Character on the same page. The gamer’s sense of driving the action is reinforced with the use of landmarks – every time Nathan Drake sets a direction, this landmark is something the player can navigate towards.



All of this brings Character and Player closer together, but these events are low-frequency, and the identity frames might start drifting apart in the meantime.



This is where Uncharted 2 engages the moment-to-moment experience, similarly to what we saw in Fallout 3: it hooks Character and Player together by fundamentally weaving the Character's identity into core gameplay actions.



Nathan Drake is a treasure hunter at heart. The player acts out this character trait by searching for hidden treasure along the path. Drake is clever, and has a knack for unraveling historic mysteries – a trait that the player acts out when solving puzzles. Drake’s resourcefulness is woven into the game’s traversal gameplay. On a base level, all of Uncharted 2’s gameplay actions are geared towards reinforcing Nathan Drake’s character. They are geared towards making the guy in the costume very happy.

The Player knows “what it’s like” to be Drake. He almost feels like Nathan Drake. There’s a very high level of identification – which isn’t a great term, though, because it doesn’t quite express what’s going on when playing the game. I want to call it “identity absorption”, instead.



FIG 37. IDENTITY ABSORPTION

87

GDC 25

The effect that we see here is very similar to a concept that Scott McCloud talks about in *Understanding Comics*: when we drive a car, we remain a separate entity from our car - but we often become so immersed in the driving experience that we start talking about the car in first person. "HE hit me." "He cut ME off!"



Nathan Drake is a car, and the same thing happens. We don't become Nathan Drake. But we absorb his identity, and that's how we relate to his character.

IDENTITY GOALS



HIGH AGENCY



HIGH IDENTITY
ABSORPTION

89

GDC 25

If I was to state the design goals that we should strive for our identity cornerstones, it would be this:

Puppet avatars = high agency

Vehicle avatar = high identity absorption

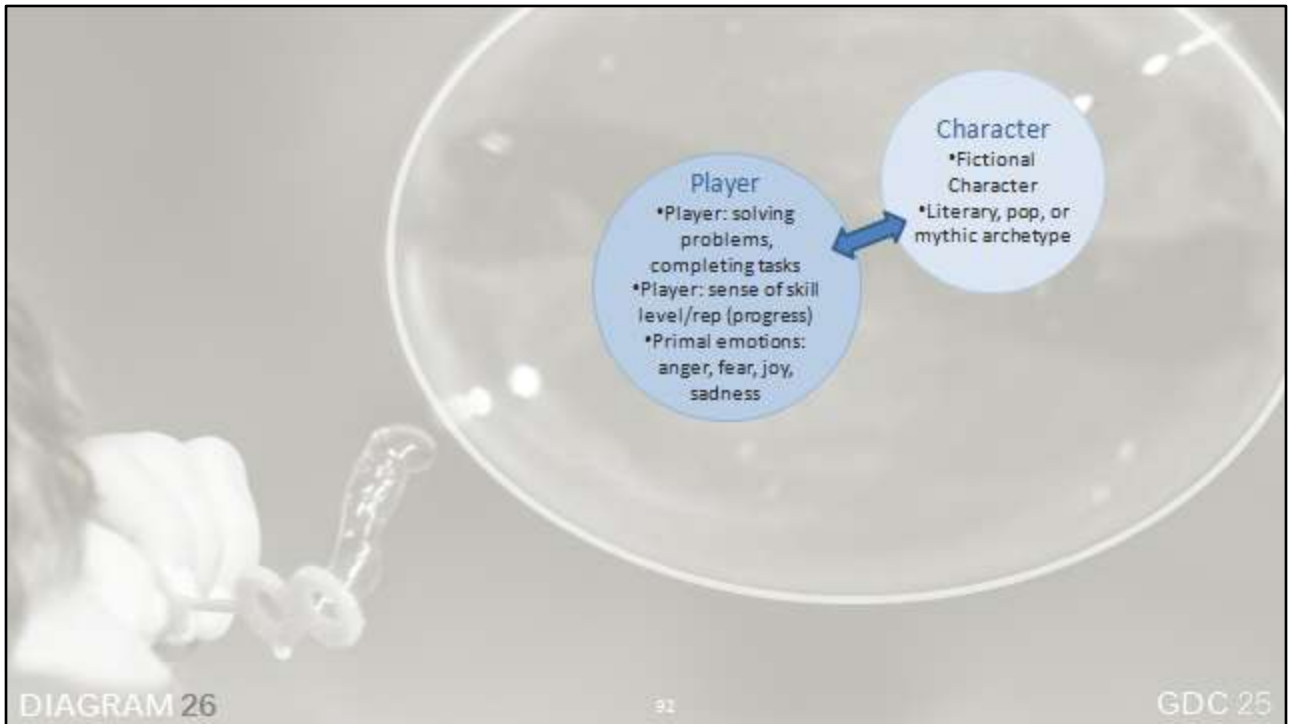
This is the reason why Uncharted 2 works.



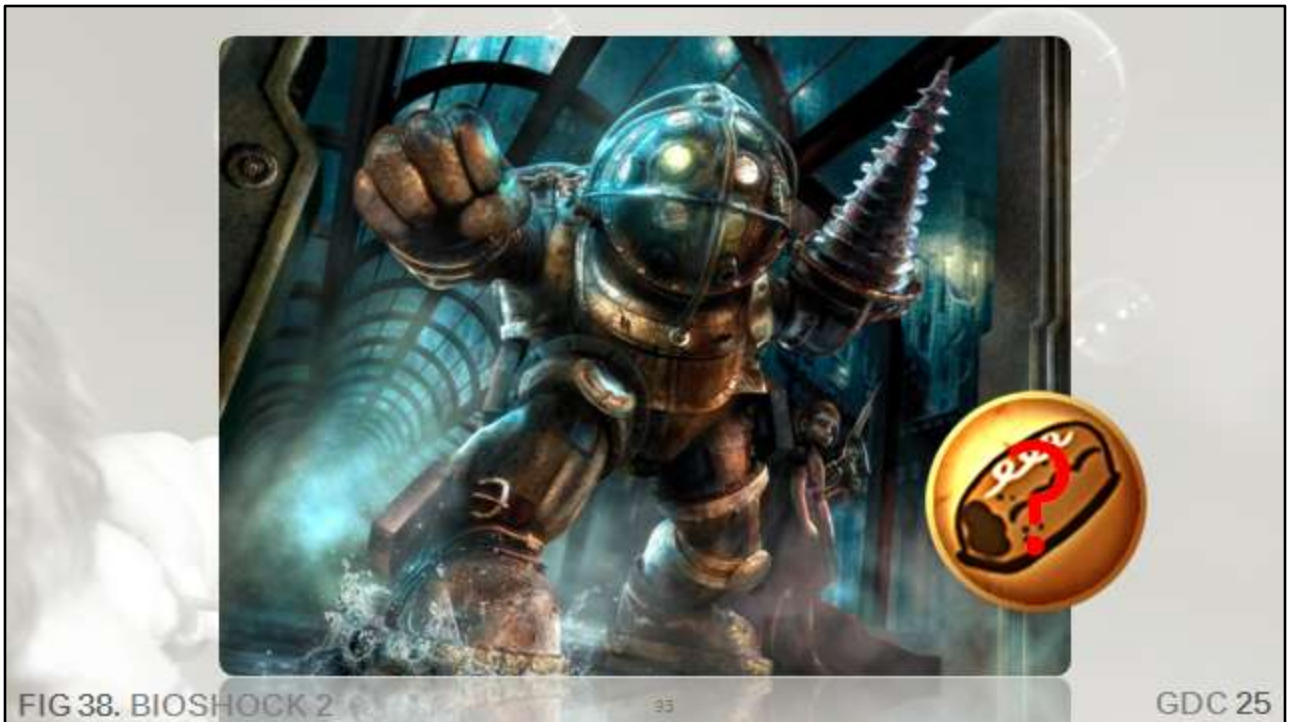
We have seen three divergent examples to authoring player identity. You have hopefully been able to see the underlying identity concepts shine through in each example. I want to finish this talk with some advice derived from all of this.



Before you're even writing the story, always ask yourself the question: what does it mean to be X? Then we have to fundamentally express that identity in gameplay.



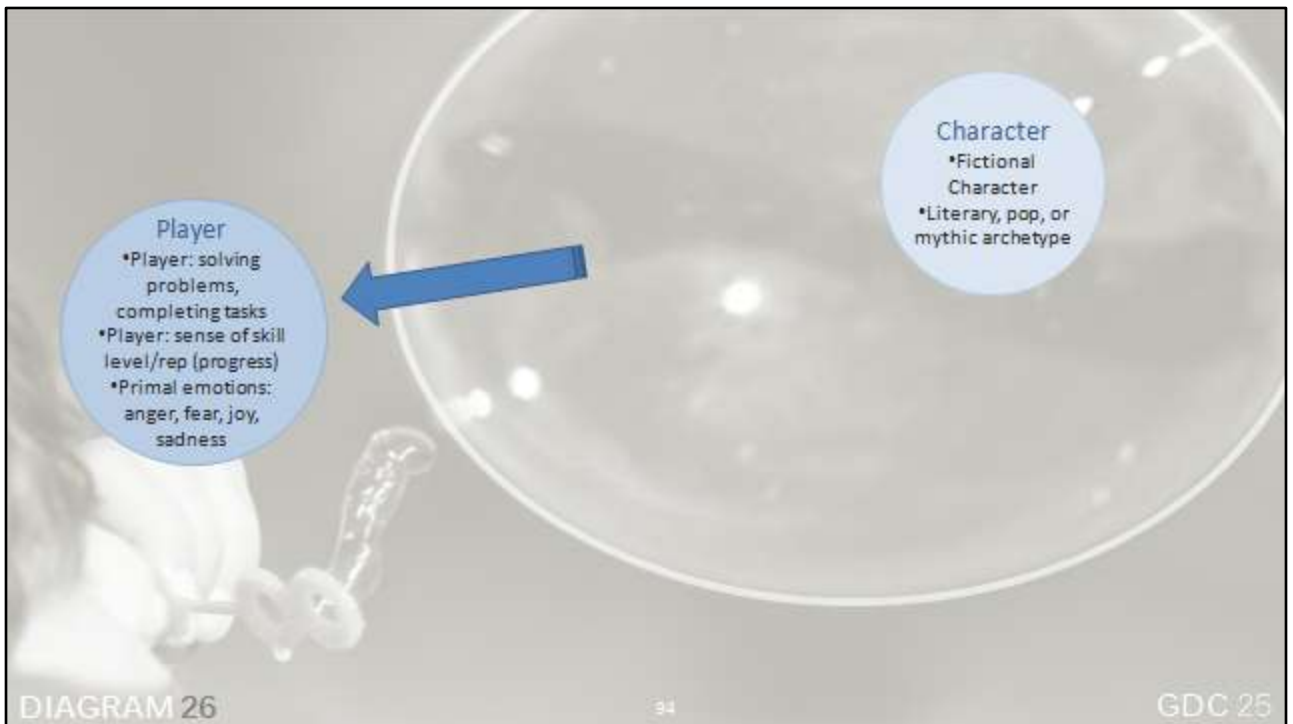
This way, the feeling of being the Character is constantly reinforced through the Player's gameplay actions, and both consciousnesses stay aligned. You keep sending impulses to hook these frames together and never allow them to drift far apart.



To show you how important this concept is, I want to look at Bioshock 2, which was a great game but had a very bad sense of player identity.

Bioshock 2 puts the gamer in the role of a rogue Big Daddy. Big Daddies had a clearly and narrowly defined role in the world of Bioshock: they're bad-ass protectors of "those little girls". Bioshock 2 is too schizophrenic on the Big Daddy archetype. On the one hand, many of the core gameplay actions treat the gamer as if his character was human, eating cream cakes and drinking coffee (through the helmet?) to regain health.

On the other hand, the game is expecting the gamer to feel, and sometimes act, like a Big Daddy. But it presents the ganer with the choice of harvesting the Little Sisters, which feels completely out of character in the context of being a Big Daddy.



This inconclusive treatment of the character's identity compromises the identity bubble. The story casts the avatar in one role, while moment-to-moment gameplay is communicating a different direction for the character. Every time the gamer eats a cream cake or harvests a little sister, Character and Player drift apart a little bit more. Until, as awesome as Bioshock 2 was, it lost all sense of identity for me.

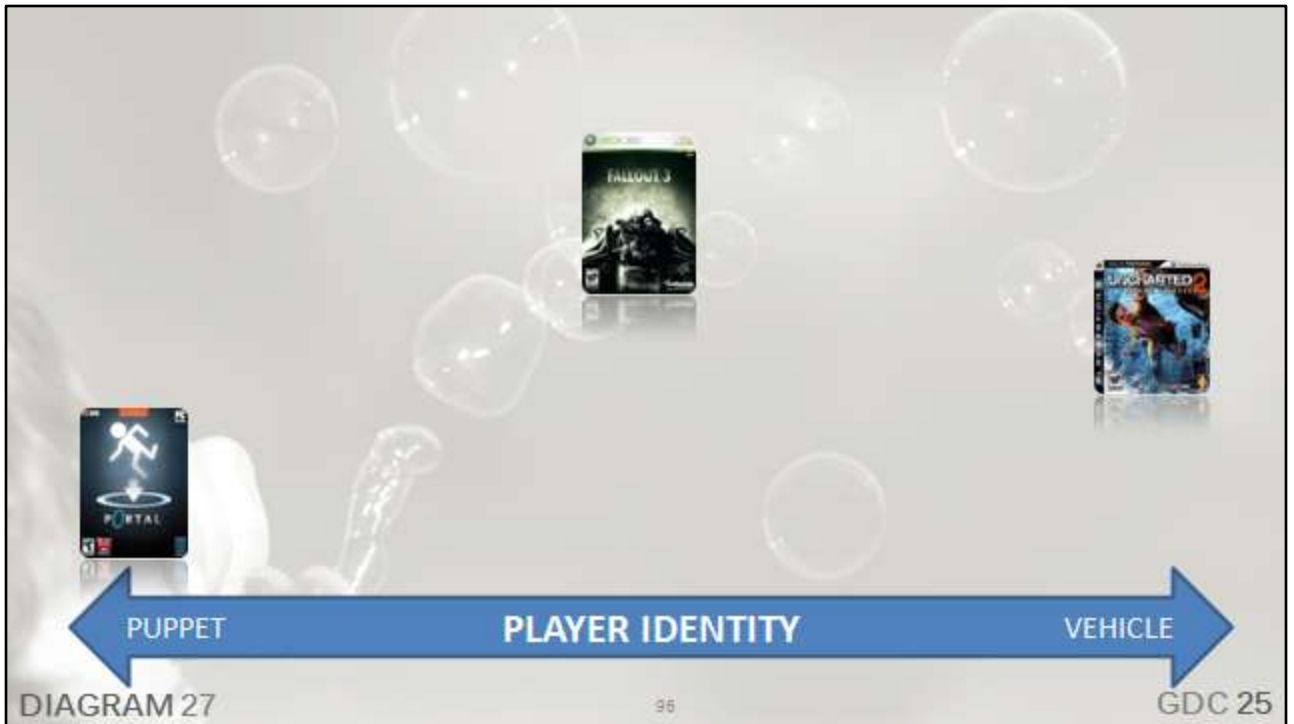
UNDERSTAND IDENTITY



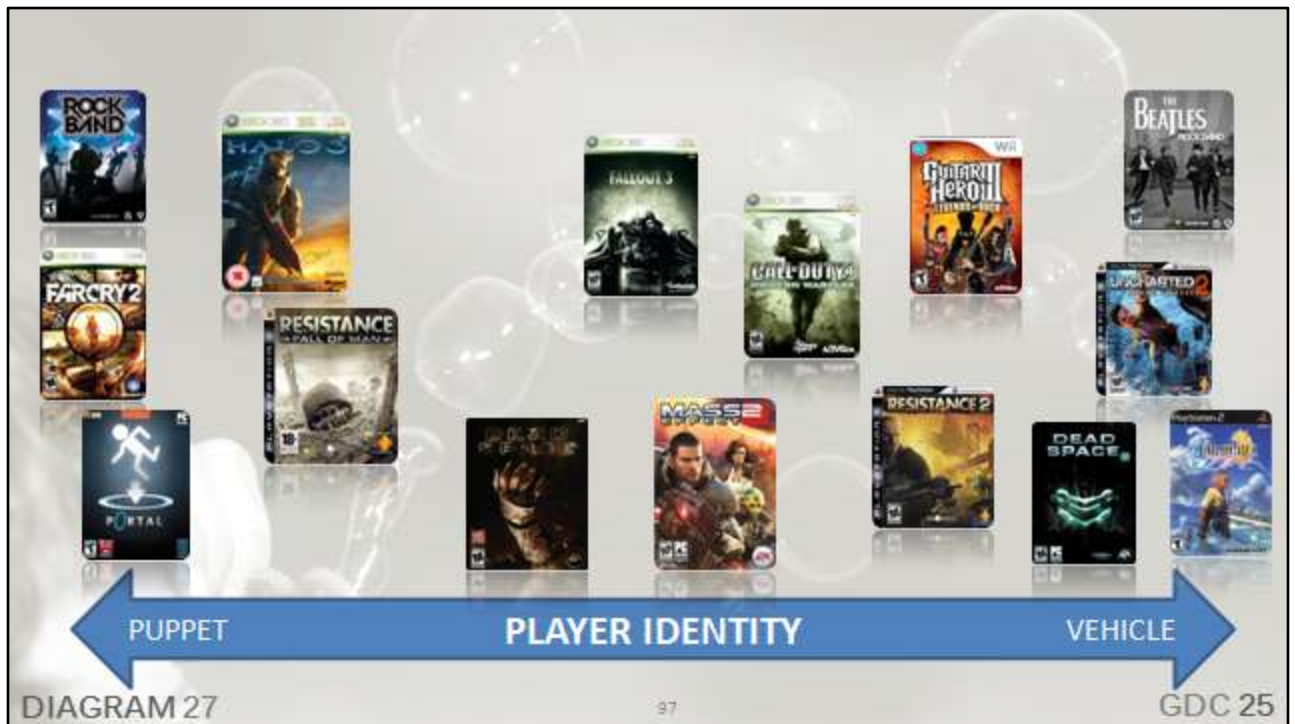
FIG 39. IDENTITY

GDC 25

The main lesson you should take away from this lecture is an understanding double consciousness, with its Character, Player, Person model, and Harvey Smith's identity fragments forming each frame. You should be able to articulate why driving for games is different from books and movies. Most bad game identity can be traced back to treating game writing like writing for other media.



Beyond this, I hope to have imparted some concepts and language you can use to categorize and talk about games and their identity approaches. Here we have the games that we used to anchor our identity range.



Here's additional examples just to give you an idea of where they belong. We can use this to show how the identity approach changed between games in the same franchise. Dead Space, for example, which added a voice to Isaac in DS2 and moved him to the vehicle end of the spectrum. Or Resistance, which also changed their approach between game #1 and game #2.

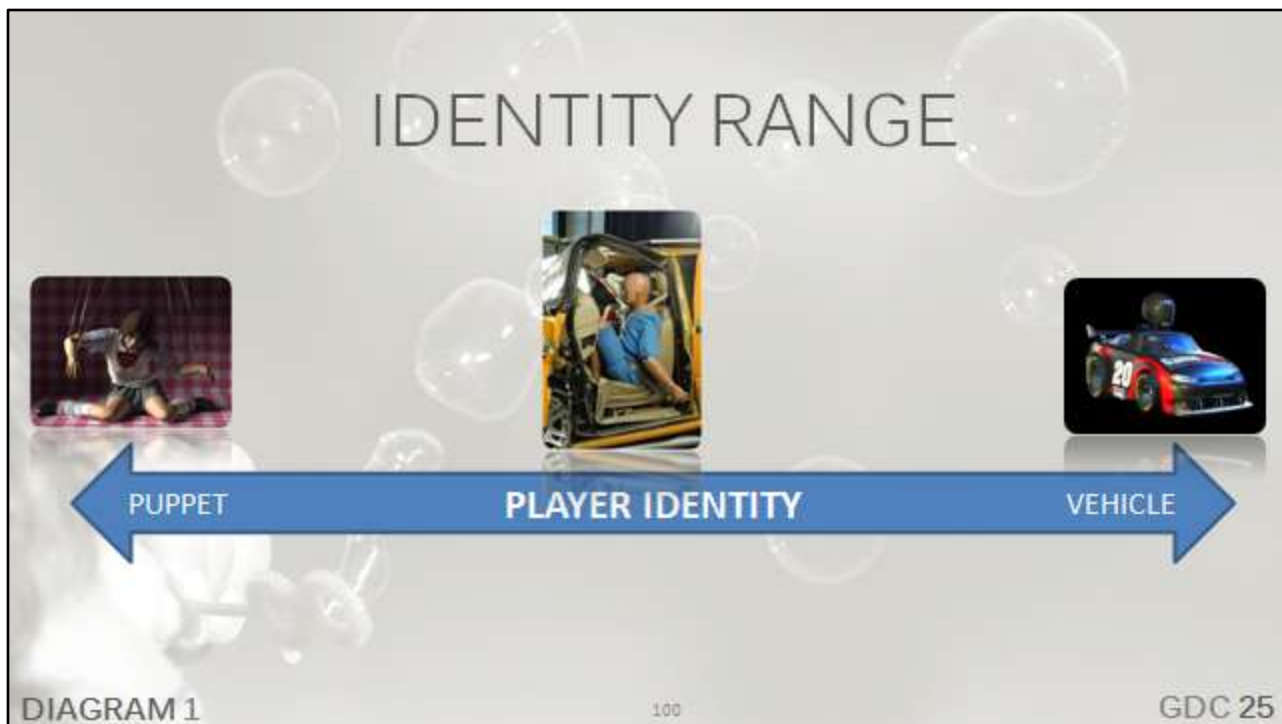
This even works in other genres, like Rock Band. The main Rock Band games are all about creating your own "rockhood", while Rock Band Beatles is all about experiencing what it's like to have been the Beatles. Guitar Hero also lives on this vehicle side of the spectrum, leaning much more on collection and playing with established rock stars, rather than your own avatar.



We can create a similar chart for the mythic quality of various games. Here we have the examples I used today.



Here's a bunch of other games that fall somewhere along this spectrum.



If you have been tasked with coming up with a character/story for a new game, here's some closing thoughts:

Figure out what kind of game you're making. Are you making a puppet, a vehicle game, or something in between? All approaches are valid, but they guide what you should and shouldn't do in the game.

- A puppet game will most likely be non-linear, with an emphasis on the player story and allowing the player to build his own myth. There won't be cutscenes or other mechanism that take away control from the player.
- A vehicle game is most likely highly structured and linear, with an emphasis on myth-recall. You can use cutscenes and pre-authored character traits that propel the story forward.

But be very careful when you're making a vehicle game. Be 100% sure that you understand what you're getting yourself into and who you are creating.



You're essentially a talking car. And while talking cars might have been awesome in the 80s (and especially where I come from), they can also be annoying.



Or even be completely unnecessary.



FIG 42. HIGHWAY 1

103

GDC 25

Imagine driving down Highway 1 and witnessing a beautiful sunset over the Pacific Ocean. All of the sudden, you hear this voice saying “Oh god, look at that beautiful sunset!”



FIG 42. HIGHWAY 1

104

GDC 25

And you realize that your sitting inside your car, and it's talking to you. Does that remark really enhance the moment? Or should it be experienced in quiet appreciation? Once again, the decision is personal. Just be aware that every time the Character expresses a sentiment that's not shared by the Player, you're widening the identity gap.

MYTH REINFORCEMENT

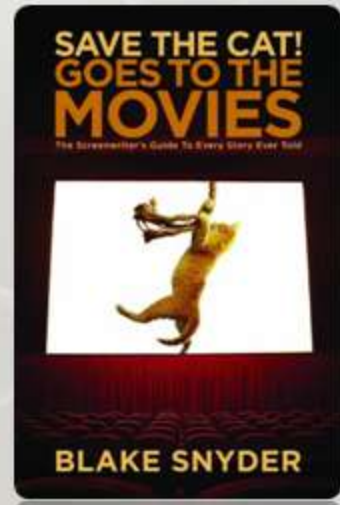
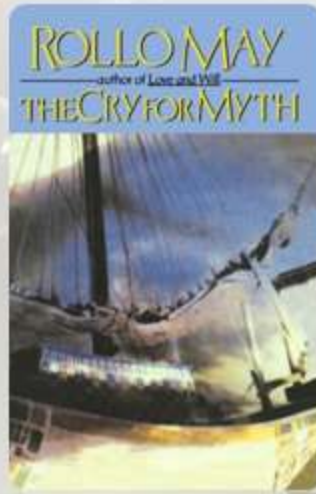
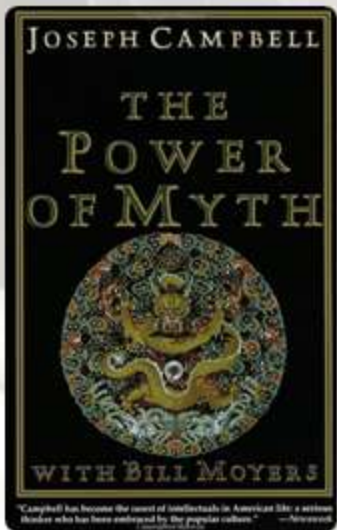


FIG 43. MYTHS

105

BLAKE SNYDER GDC 25

Finally, understand the underlying myth of your game. If you're creating a story-driven game with a vehicle character, you must identify and execute on the myth that your game will be based on, or it will feel aimless and hollow. This lecture can't dive into this subject, but if you're looking for further reading, I suggest the late Blake Snyder's book: "Save the Cat! Goes to the Movies".



FIG 44. PERSEPHONY AND PLUTO

105

GDC 25

Both types - myth-building games like Fallout, or myth-recalling experiences like Uncharted - have merit, and players will seek them out equally, if for different reasons. As designers we need to understand the distinctions between both types, and take these differences into account when designing the game.

But hey, I definitely believe in myth reinforcement. That's because I'm a game designer. Game design is a black art, with few actual truths to hang our hats on. It's up to all of us to come up with our own belief systems as to what works and how we should design our games. We might then scour the media landscape, psychological texts and GDC talks to test - and hopefully reinforce - that belief system. Because it is comforting to know that we can trust in our beliefs.

This here has been my own belief system on player identity. I hope you find it useful. Maybe you can make it your own.



Matthias Worch
mworch@lucasarts.com
<http://www.worch.com>
@mworch

THE IDENTITY BUBBLE

A Design Approach to Character and Story Creation

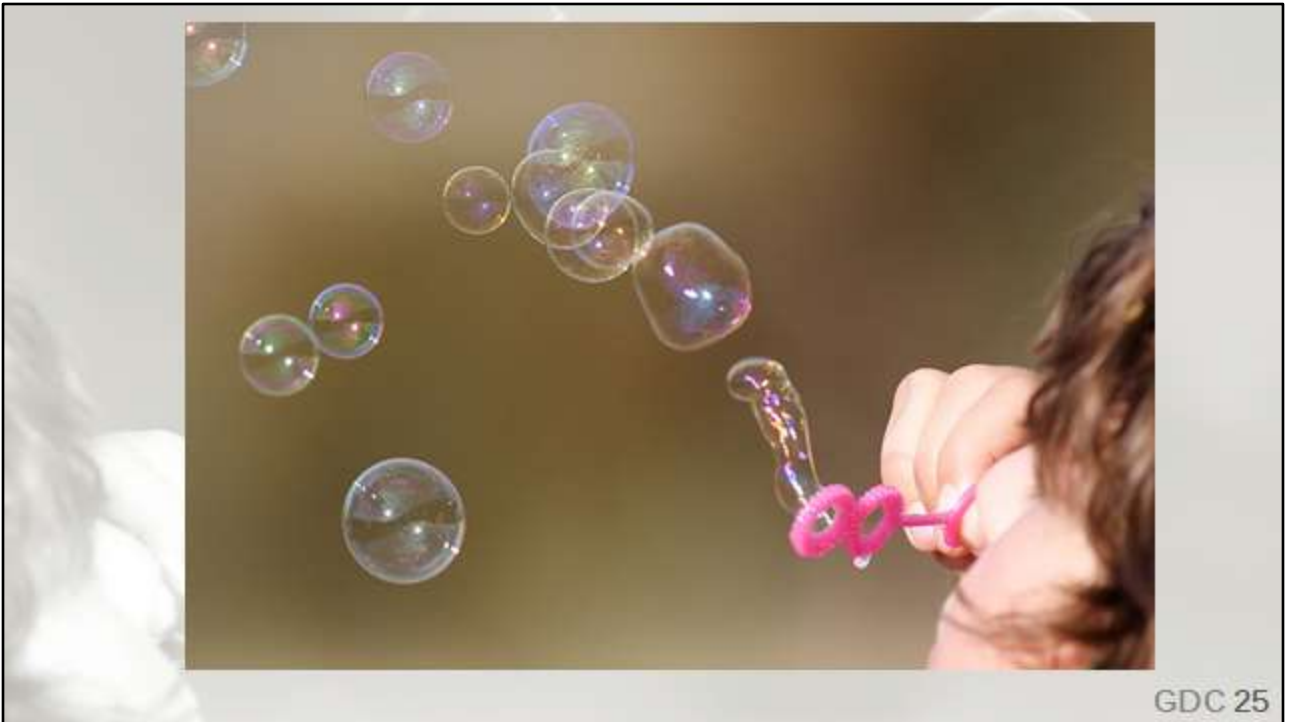
Thank you very much.

RESOURCES

- Rules of Play (Eric Zimmerman and Katie Salen)
- "Fretting the Player Character" (Nick Montfort)
<http://nickm.com/if/fretting.html>
- Shared Fantasy (Gary Alan Fine)
- The Imago Effect (Harvey Smith)
<http://www.witchboy.net/articles/the-imago-effect/>
- "Into the Woods: A Practical Guide to the Hero's Journey" (Bob Bates)
http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/2330/into_the_woods_a_practical_guide.php
- Save The Cat! Goes to the Movies (Blake Snyder)
- Cry for Myth (Rollo May)



© Matthias Worch, 2011



The original image used in this lecture lives at
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Girl_blowing_bubbles.jpg.

Taken by [Fir0002](#) Camera Details:

Camera: Canon 20D

Lens: Canon 400mm f/5.6 L

Permission is granted to copy, distribute and/or modify this document under the terms of the [GNU Free Documentation License](#), Version 1.2 only as published by the [Free Software Foundation](#); with no Invariant Sections, no Front-Cover Texts, and no Back-Cover Texts. A copy of the license is included in the section entitled [GNU Free Documentation License](#). **1.2 only**www.gnu.org/licenses/old-licenses/fdl-1.2.htmlGFDL 1.2GNU Free Documentation License 1.2true

This image is not in the Public Domain. In order to comply with the license this image is released under, any reproduction of this image, in any medium, must appear with a copy of, or full (hyperlinked) URL of the GFDL license. In addition, attribution of this image to "Fir0002/Flagstaffotos" is required and you are required to release the image (or any subsequent derivatives of it) under the GFDL. No other conditions may be added to, or removed from this license without the permission of the author and copyright holder. If you require a less restrictive commercial license please [email me](#) to negotiate terms.

However please note that some of my images are of people and buildings (eg the War Memorial) which I can't give permission to use due to personality and copyrights.