Key 4: Craft Connection

Explore how to directly involve people who can speak to both diverse perspectives and the nuances of identity to build an authentic connection with players.

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Key 4 Overview

We present two learning achievements you can strive toward as you craft connection:

1. Represent: Gather feedback throughout development from people you want to represent.
2. Listen: Refine games based on feedback.

At the end of this section, you will also find the list of core concepts introduced in this section and references.

Achievement 1: Represent

Gather feedback throughout development from people you want to represent.

Method: Build a Diverse Team

Think about representation behind the scenes. Surveys show that the gaming industry is not very diverse. According to the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) biannual survey from 2021:

- Women constituted about 30% of game-developer positions globally.
- Only 4% of overall respondents identified as Black, African American, African, or Afro-Caribbean.

Read IGDA's Diversity in the Game Industry report [here](#).

Method: Paid Internships

Many aspiring game developers get their start through internships, but often, these opportunities are unpaid. This internship structure disadvantages talent from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who cannot afford to gain work experience without compensation.

Paid internships can elevate underrepresented voices in your creative development.

Read about the approach that ustwo games takes to internships [here](#).

Method: Consult

Engage experts and organizations focused on the authentic portrayals of underrepresented groups.

If you have the resources to do so, identify and engage experts who can partner with you throughout creative development. Some approaches are project-specific contracts and ad hoc hourly consulting. Take a look at our resources page for organizations that can support you in your work.

If your team doesn't have members from the groups you intend to include in your game, and you're short on funds to hire consultants or offer paid internships, it's especially vital to carefully plan your approach, as we discuss in Key 1. Aim to involve sensitivity readers as well as your playtesters, which we'll discuss next.

In-Game Example

Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice, by Ninja Theory
For their game *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, developer Ninja Theory worked with trained experts, such as psychiatrists and audio specialists, as well as experts with lived experience, like individuals in recovery from psychosis-related disorders, throughout the development process — but especially at the start, in pre-production. These experts were not just sources of information but also an integral part of the iterative design process.

Read more here.

In-Game Example

Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna)
Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna) shows how creative development in close partnership with communities represented can be effective. The idea for the game, which is based on a traditional Iñupiaq story, originated with Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC), a nonprofit that represents Alaskan Native people in the Cook Inlet region, so the developers (E-Line Media and Upper One Games) worked closely with them. The creative team traveled regularly to Alaska to consult with tribal community members and the CITC on the game's narrative and visual design. This close collaboration was met with a positive response from both the industry and players: It was nominated for over 50 "best of" lists and many awards, with over 3.5 million downloads and an average rating of 9/10 on Steam. The success of this partnership led CITC and E-Line to continue their work together on impact games and other collaborations.

Read more about the partnership process from the perspective of a CITC member here.

Method: Sensitivity Readers

Evaluate how your game resonates with representative groups by engaging sensitivity readers.

What it is: A sensitivity reader is someone who reads works-in-progress for offensive content, misrepresentation, stereotypes, bias, lack of understanding, etc. A sensitivity reader will often come from a specific identity or community that the author is writing about. They create a report, which can include academic as well as personal experience, outlining the problems that they find in a piece of work and offering solutions for how to fix them.

We suggest that a game developer hire more than one sensitivity reader, especially if they are writing about a culture that they are not familiar with. Although many of us may share the same cultural background, we are all shaped where we grew up and our unique personal experiences.[1]

Why it matters: Not only does this process improve the quality of the content, but it also helps boost the likelihood that the content will be positively received by all audiences.

Questions to Ask

Establish a process for regular check-backs at key milestones in your development cycle, ensuring that the perspectives of team members or consultants continue to be authentically integrated. This step is especially important for games with lengthy development timelines since they often involve multiple changes in team members.

- Have team members or consultants been part of the conversation throughout the development process, not just once or twice?
- Have you established organizational practices and policies to ensure your workplace provides a safe space for team members of all backgrounds and seniority levels to speak up?
- Are team members' and/or consultants' perspectives meaningfully incorporated in the game?

Achievement 1 Complete!

Apply It
Establish a process for regular feedback with consultants or team members from relevant groups, ensuring that their perspectives are consistently integrated into the development process.

Achievement 2: Listen

Make a plan to collect, evaluate, and respond to playtester feedback on character and narrative choices, and refine elements based on that feedback.

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[1] For more on sensitivity readers, check out the guidance from University of Alberta: https://guides.library.ualberta.ca/writing-editing-and-publishing-indigenous-stories

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Method: Playtesters

Why it matters

Playtesting provides valuable insights from an outside player's perspective and can help developers understand how outside player's perceive representation and inclusion aspects of the narrative and characters.

This section provides information on who ought to be included to make playtesting inclusive, what questions to ask playtesters when soliciting representation and inclusion feedback, and how to incorporate that information when revising your game.

Even with limited resources, game designers can gain valuable insights toward their inclusivity goals from having people not involved in development play their game and provide feedback.

Steps for inclusive, informative playtesting:

- **Diverse Recruitment:** Try to recruit a diverse group of people to try out your game. To find players of diverse genders, ages, sexual orientations, and race/ethnicities, ask friends, family, friends of friends, and peers. If your game includes storylines and characters from marginalized communities, aim to recruit people from those communities to playtest.
- **Informed Playtesting:** Let your playtesters know that you are seeking feedback on identity-based representation, that you want feedback to refine aspects like cultural accuracy, and that you are interested in identifying possibly inaccurate and offensive narratives and portrayals.
- **Anonymous Feedback:** Provide feedback options that allow playtesters to share insights anonymously.. This will allow them to be more open and honest, and help you to weigh all feedback equally.
- **Check Back:** If playtesters identified specific issues, go back to them to ask whether revisions corrected issues identified. With anonymous feedback, this is more complicated, but one way to check is to give playtesters the opportunity to playtest again, if substantial edits were made.
- **Acknowledgement:** If playtesters helped shape your game in a substantial way, find a way to formally acknowledge them, such as by naming them in the end credits of your game.
- **Compensation:** Members of communities you engage with should be compensated for their time. If resources are limited, think of ways to continue your relationship with the communities you work with. This can include grant writing, free distribution of your game to that group, inclusion in future work, or helping that community with tasks they request in the future.

Questions to Ask:

- Do most of my playtesters share identities with the characters in the game?
- Do my playtesters identify with narratives presented in the game?

- Have playtesters been part of development throughout the process, not just once there is a shareable build?
- Are my playtester's perspectives meaningfully incorporated in the game?
- Have I established a lasting commitment to the groups I've consulted with, and have I credited them appropriately?
- Is there an ongoing relationship with playtesters whose experience is being portrayed or represented so that they can see and comment on changes over time?

Achievement 2 Complete!

Apply It

Formalize a dynamic feedback process with playtesters, thereby helping to refine game elements for enhanced connection with players.

Core Concepts

Inclusion: An approach of welcoming and respecting all identities in a way that an individual feels valued, respected, and heard.

Stereotype: Categorical representations that reduce groups of people and places to basic generalizations. Stereotypes often include making assumptions about individuals based on a group they are a part of, and can reinforce the dominant ideology and power of elite groups because they influence the audience's attitude toward the people and events being described.

Underrepresentation: Underrepresenting marginalized groups relative to their real-world population. This imbalance distorts one's view of society and can reinforce harmful stereotypes about marginalized groups.

You have attained Key 4!

Next, Key 5: Craft Belonging.