Key 2: Craft Stories

Create captivating games with culturally competent storytelling.

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Key 2 Overview

This section is divided into three achievements that you can work toward as you craft your game:

1. Context: If your game is set in a real time and place from history, what historical and cultural realities do you want to reflect? Incorporate research, expert consultation, and collaboration with team members to make these choices.
2. Challenge: Develop narratives and characters that actively challenge identity-based stereotypes and biases.
3. Counternarrative: Write more complex stories and broaden narrative opportunities by featuring diverse perspectives, voices, and experiences using creativity and innovation.

At the end of this section, you will find a list of core concepts covered in Key 2, as well as references.

Introduction

This step considers the building blocks for crafting representation equality in gaming narratives. After all, these narratives are the backdrop for characters' identities.

Time Period

Does your narrative occur in a real place or time, like during the Middle Ages or the U.S. Civil War? If you air for cultural accuracy, research the political, social, and cultural realities of that time period.

History is far more varied than is often portrayed, so explore the perspectives and experiences of nondominant groups from that period. Those realities shape your story and the identities of all the

characters in your world. Be sensitive to historical treatment of marginalized people and if/how you choose to portray the realities of the time.

Be aware that players may have mixed reactions when a game attempts to address historical inequities with new possibilities, such as the option to play the role of a Civil War general as a woman. Historical-based video games are inherently fictional, as players are literally stepping into the past, so taking inspiration from history to create a contemporary, engaging and inclusive player experience will naturally involve some elements of creative freedom if the intent of the game is entertainment.

In-Game Example

Mafia III

In 2016's *Mafia III*, you play as Lincoln Clay: a 23-year-old man of mixed race who goes to a New Orleans–like city to find redemption and revenge against the mob. The developers at Hangar 13 carefully developed the environment, characters, music, and narrative. *Mafia III*'s team featured a Black, queer senior writer and a diverse team that prioritized historical accuracy and authentic representation of the 1960s in the U.S. South, leading to a powerful backdrop for the story.

Read the NPR article *How One Video Game Unflinchingly Tackles Racism With History And Raw Interactions* [here](#).

Environment and Worldbuilding

Do your characters reflect the environment in which the story takes place? It doesn't matter if that environment is imagined — a rich world means a rich variety of identities.

Ask questions. Are there a specific set of rules for your world? Is there a social structure? Characters emerge from a set of social structures that afford certain advantages and limit others.

For example, adding a Black female protagonist to a game without thinking through how this character's race and gender shape her experience in her fictional world makes her identity less meaningful.

To bring depth to your character, reflect on your world's broader social structures. Simply swapping character identities to create the appearance of a diverse cast won't have the same impact.

Contextual Themes

Does your content highlight structural sources of inequality?

Many inequalities are the result of large-scale systems or structures that cannot easily be changed. For example, someone's socioeconomic status influences their access to education, healthcare, and other resources. Recognizing the larger factors that play into a character's life is important for accurately portraying their experience.

Does your story hit on any bigger themes about groups and power, such as colonialism, terrorism, war, or genocide?

Misrepresenting these themes can be especially hurtful, so do careful research for accuracy and to note potential sensitivities. Great resources include organizations from nondominant communities dedicated to accurate representation. Check out our resources page for ideas.

Narrative Goal

Does any part of your story hinge on a particular identity, like featuring a woman working in a male-dominated field?

If so, aim to actively involve folks with that identity right from the outset of story writing. Ideally, team members who are part of the represented group would contribute directly to creative content since this can help avoid character tokenization.

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.

Take Action

- Research: Develop a comprehensive understanding of the culture or society you want to portray. Examine various aspects of social life, such as rituals, beliefs, norms, behaviors, and the material environment.
- Visit: Visit the actual location of your game (if it has one) and speak with the communities being portrayed.
- Consult: Consult with leaders of relevant community groups, nonprofit organizations, and/or subject matter experts. Here's a list of helpful experts for when you get to writing. [link to resources]

Achievement 1 Complete!

Apply It
Start with regular team discussions and workshops focused on exploring personal biases and perspectives. The key is being on the same page about the importance of mindful representation as you construct the game's narrative.

Achievement 2: Challenge

Develop narratives and characters that actively challenge identity-based stereotypes and biases.

Introduction

Narratives set the stage by establishing context and themes for characters. However, narratives can also perpetuate identity-based stereotypes, bias, and/or underrepresentation of marginalized groups when they are built around tired tropes. We'll take a look at a few of those next.

White Savior

The "white savior" trope refers to a character who is commonly portrayed as a Western, educated, white person who saves "primitive" people from their "ignorant" or "savage" ways of life. For example, this includes stories of explorers who tame "barbaric" indigenous populations and bring them Western ideas or inventions.

Why it's tired

These narratives perpetuate a cultural hierarchy where Western culture is seen as superior. They also perpetuate the myth that native and indigenous people are barbaric, savage, uncivilized, and uneducated.[1]

Hero's Journey

A "hero's journey" story is a common narrative structure centered on a protagonist who leaves their home in search of a reward, and who returns as a changed person after their successful journey.

Why it *can be* tired:
The hero's journey frequently reinforces the belief that masculine-coded skills are more desirable than feminine-coded skills when quests favor physical strength and violence, and when the hero shrugs off collaboration or teamwork, which is common in this type of story.

Damseling

The "damseling" trope refers to when a male hero character is on a journey to save a female character in crisis.

Why it's tired:
In these stories, the women lack agency because they cannot save themselves, and they are reduced to a prize to be won or a treasure to be found.

In-Game Example

Double Dragon
Double Dragon is a 1987 beat-'em-up arcade game that opens with a muscular man in a tank top punching a woman named Marian in the stomach and carrying her off screen. The protagonist (or, if the game is played cooperatively, two protagonists) then emerges from a closed garage and begins fighting the villain's henchmen. The ultimate goal of the game is to rescue Marian, who is the protagonist's girlfriend. In this example, the significant female character exists solely to motivate the actions of male character(s).

The Fridged Woman

"Fridging" is a term coined by comic book writer Gail Simone relating to a plot in *Green Lantern* where the hero comes home to find that his girlfriend has been killed and stuffed into a refrigerator by one of

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[1] Read more: Bezion, Kristin. (2018). "The Perpetual Crusade: The Rise of Tomb Raider, Religious Extremism, and the Problem of Empire." In Woke Gaming. Eds. Kishonna L. Gray and David J. Leonard.

the comic's villains. In narratives that use the "fridged woman" trope, the male hero's background includes the violent murder of a woman he loves.

Why it's tired:
Not only does this trope necessitate women's trauma and present a narrative in which the female character lacks agency, but we also witness the male hero grappling with his guilt for his failure to perform his socially expected, patriarchal role of being the protector of women. Research by media scholar Emma Reay finds that dead children and women in video games are often used as a device for legitimizing hypermasculinized violence.[2]

Level Up

An alternative to the hero's journey is an ensemble cast. This format provides an opportunity for creators to stand out from the crowd of games using the tired hero's-journey-style narratives and enhance player engagement since each main character can have a unique backstory, motivations, and abilities that contribute to the overall impact of the story and game experience.

Explore more about the opportunities of ensemble casts in this video featuring a presentation by writer and narrative designer, Desiree Cifre: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jDjLfkUxD-Q

Achievement 2 Complete!

Apply It
Actively challenge and/or refine story elements that may perpetuate stereotypes.

Achievement 3: Counternarrative

Write more complex stories and broaden narrative opportunities by featuring diverse perspectives, voices, and experiences using creativity and innovation.

Introduction

Counternarratives are narratives that challenge dominant points of view or the status quo, and are typically from the point of view of a marginalized voice.

Why it matters:

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[2] Reay, E. (2023). The kid in the fridge: Sacrificial children and vengeful masculinity in contemporary videogames *Journal of Games Criticism 5*(1)

Narratives that assume white, masculine norms contribute to a cycle of underrepresentation — in other words, they continue to marginalize those who are already marginalized — and reinforce the idea that certain identities are, by default, "normal," while others are less important or even invisible.

Counternarration interrupts dominant narratives by focusing on new, diverse points of view. The strength of narratives that center on the point of view of marginalized identities lies in their ability to reimagine, resist, and remake ideas. And that makes for more engaging games!

Questions to Ask

- What are the different perspectives of your narrative's time period?
  - Whose perspective are you prioritizing, and why?
  - Whose point of view is missing?
- Are there lesser known people that should be featured? For example, historically, stories about scientific discoveries usually highlight men, even when women were integral to those discoveries. This is known as the "Matilda effect." Read more here.
- Does your game center the experiences of underrepresented or marginalized groups?
- Does it elevate the voice of underrepresented groups?
- How does your content actively challenge tropes and stereotypes about the groups represented?

In-Game Example

Say NO! More

A successful example of a counternarrative is the 2021 game "Say NO! More," whose narrative empowers the player character — an intern — to refuse to do demanding tasks or requests in a workplace setting. The game critiques corporate work culture in the U.S., which encourages overworking and prioritizing the needs of the company over workers' health and well-being. Additionally, the avatars in the game are identity-inclusive; players can select from diverse facial features, body and face shapes, skin tones, clothing, and hair when designing their avatar.

Take Action: Industry Resources

Authentic representation requires not only awareness among content creators but also the direct involvement of the voices who can speak to diverse perspectives and the nuances of identity.

Use resources that industry organizations provide to support hiring balanced development teams, such as:

- EmpowerUp: This toolkit and resource hub from Ukie supports U.K.-based game studios, publishers, service providers, and employees to benchmark where they are on their individual

equity, diversity, and inclusion journeys, and provides tailored resources and content accordingly.
● Women in Games International (WIGI) offers programs, newsletters, panels, workshops, and networking events in an effort to increase professional representation and normalize diversity in the games industry.

Take Action: Support

● Follow and support activists and organizations that have focused on the power of counternarratives:
  ○ Initiatives: Activist-journalist Tanya DePass created the initiative #INeedDiverseGames, a movement that advocates for diversity and inclusion within the gaming industry and community.
  ○ Nonprofits: Nonprofit organizations like AbleGamers, Black Voices in Gaming, Dames Making Games, Queerly Represent Me, and GLAAD108 are fostering more diversity in game design by providing resources for creatives from marginalized backgrounds.
  ○ Recognition: Games for Change, a movement that focuses on using video games for social impact and positive change, created a category for "Best Narrative Game" in 2022.
    ■ The 2022 winner, *Dot's Home*, is a story about a time-traveling Black woman who learns about her family's history and the traumas of systemic racism by exploring her grandmother's house in Detroit.
    ■ In 2023, the winner was *Gerda: A Flame in Winter*, which is a role-playing game that follows a young nurse trying to rescue her husband from the Gestapo during World War II.

Take Action: Organizational Structure

Establish organizational elements to consider power dynamics during the creative process.

● Recognize that power imbalances can exist among the team or in the workplace between writers and management that can impact story development.
● What systems are in place to ensure a safe environment for all team members of varying seniority to speak up if they see issues?

In Key 3, you'll explore how to support counternarratives through dynamic character development.

Achievement 3 Complete!

Apply It
Encourage a culture of openness to diverse storytelling.

Core Concepts

Tokenization: The practice of including a small number of individuals from underrepresented groups in order to give the appearance of diversity. This practice makes token individuals a stand-in for a larger group.

Social structures: The arrangement of institutions in which humans live and interact with one another such as social life, customs, traditions, roles, and norms.

References

1. Bezion, Kristin. (2018). "The Perpetual Crusade: The Rise of Tomb Raider, Religious Extremism, and the Problem of Empire." In Woke Gaming. Eds. Kishonna L. Gray and David J. Leonard.
2. Sarkeesian, A. (2013, March 7). Tropes vs. women in video games. Feminist Frequency.
3. Reay, E. (2023). The kid in the fridge: Sacrificial children and vengeful masculinity in contemporary videogames *Journal of Games Criticism 5*(1).

You have attained Key 2!

Continue? Next, Key 3: Craft Characters.