

Writing Characters You Can Get Invested In - Deep Dive

Abstract

Throughout my research into writing better characters, I found some key concepts that have helped me throughout my current projects. In this deep dive, I discovered how to write protagonists the viewer can grow attached to and invest themselves in throughout the course of the story. To do this, giving the character flaws and a followable arc helps establish the character as more realistic and followable to a person no matter the media format the character lives in. I also learned more about making interesting antagonists, such as making sure they are more powerful than the protagonist, starting at the least, and making sure their ethics and goals are established early to allow viewers to understand why they are committing to their villainy. Lastly, there were some fun methods of creating secondary characters. Making them fill in the protagonists missing skills and traits gives them purpose and a reason to be around the main character. Otherwise, using the same ideas for making a protagonist helps round them out as interesting or likable side characters.

Introduction

Over a semester, I was tasked with doing a deep dive into something I was interested in within the realm of game design. I have always loved writing and telling stories but found that writing characters people cared about was difficult. I'd sometimes find success through sheer luck or have a minor breakthrough when watching my friends' reactions to some of my work. Still, it wasn't something I understood at all and thus I wanted to create this deep dive to help me learn

about this fundamental in writing and provide a concise write-up for those wondering the same thing.

In this deep dive, I'll be covering many methods and concepts that I discovered that took my character writing to the next level. Then I'll be comparing it to some works that are popularly known because they were established using the methods I found. The primary example I use comes from an idol of mine, Stan Lee, and his character The Amazing Spider-Man. Previously I missed the opportunity to take an advanced writing course, so I am very pleased with what I found while creating this deep dive.

Background/Literature Review

Concepting and making a character is something I believe everyone can do. Everyone, to varying levels of detail, can make up a character in their heads and put it on paper. But not everyone can write a character with enough depth and interest to keep others attention. In the Master Class "Writing Tips for Character Development", they try to teach the primary methods of developing characters to everyone online. I want to look at what they talk about and compare it to some works that have proven to be exceptional, like Stan Lee's Spiderman and his continued development throughout the years of Marvel's history.

Starting, they explain what character development is and why it's important. "Without a clear sense of who a character is, what they value, and what they're afraid of, the reader will be unable to appreciate the events, and your story will have no impact." (MasterClass (2021-9-8)) What they say makes sense, and when compared to something like Spiderman, this is proven to be true. Spiderman was made during the downfall of the comic book superhero. Every hero was the same, they were adults, they were perfect in every way, and they were superhuman to varying degrees. However, Stan Lee came up with the idea to make Peter Parker a teenager

with some financial troubles, a lack of skills in talking to women, and the simple power to climb on walls. (Brittany Matter (2018-11-13)) The character was new and fresh, and most of all, they were relatable to a large audience of teenagers and young adults who found little interest in what were considered children's comic books.

Masterclass then establishes some basic guidelines to help their students get off the ground when starting to develop interesting characters of any kind for any story. They start by establishing the three primary types of characters in stories: The protagonist/hero, the antagonist/villain, and the secondary characters which serve many different purposes. When talking about the protagonist they give two main points to follow. First, give them flaws, second give them an arc. (MasterClass (2021-9-8)) The flaws make them more relatable, because nobody is perfect, and the arc gives the viewer a journey to follow as the character develops and grows alongside the viewing experience. Going back to Spiderman, Stan gave him some very common flaws that everyone in the world has likely dealt with at some point and can relate to. Then as you follow his story, he follows the arc of first gaining the courage to become a superhero in face of powerful villains, all the way up to his current arc in the Marvel movies where he strives to become a hero as great as his hero Tony Stark. (Brittany Matter (2018-11-13)) This continued attention to development and creation of new easy-to-follow goals are part of what makes Spiderman one of Marvel's most popular heroes to this day. What I hope to do with this is start to use these tips when developing the protagonists for my stories. They're a great foundation to build off of, but I'll need to experiment to find out how to assure that these flaws and arcs aren't poorly written and instead bog down the story and the viewers perception of the character.

The Masterclass also covers some great tips on making antagonists and secondary characters that are also very important to me in the development of my story characters. For the villains,

they recommend giving them morality and making sure that they are powerful. (MasterClass (2021-9-8)) The villain needs a reason to enslave peasants or kill the hero's family that makes sense or else he'll seem confusing or forced to the viewers. They also need to be a threat to the hero for their place as the villain to feel deserved. A good example in game design that establishes this is a trope used in some games called "the unbeatable first boss". The first boss of the game that the player is supposed to lose to so that they can come back later and feel justified in defeating them properly. These attributes of a good villain have greatly developed my understanding of how to create my own and have also given me good references for the villains I already have in place in some of my projects. I want to take this further though by exploring a villain's potentially questionable morality and ethics, along with trying to give villains power within different circumstances. For example, the player tracks down a villain after multiple encounters, picking up bits and pieces as to why they have committed the acts they have committed so far. As they follow them they also notice their encounters are always in locations with certain attributes that the villain uses to their advantage. Close to the final encounter with this villain, they discover the true reason why they have been so evil, and this reason brings to light a side that could make them redeemable. With this knowledge and the new knowledge of how to remove their power, they defeat the villain but are given a final choice to spare or execute them based on the knowledge they know. This gives the player a followable arc for the villain alongside the hero, and would hopefully make the climax of the game more impactful.

Finally, Masterclass talks about writing secondary characters. The other characters in your story fill all the other roles the protagonist and antagonist don't. They recommend making them complementary to the other two primary characters and making them oppositional to the protagonist. (MasterClass (2021-9-8)) For example, Spiderman's love interest throughout every version of his story has always been a secondary character that is complementary to his personality and flaws, but they are also oppositional to his role as a superhero. (Marvel) Peter's

identity as Spiderman must be kept a secret, creating unique tense moments where he must hide this to protect the person he loves. Secondary characters were always something I struggled with when writing. I just found making them matter in the story difficult sometimes while still also making them unique and interesting to the reader. I currently write a Dungeons and Dragons campaign for a large group of friends that place them as the protagonists, which is where I have gotten a majority of my story and character writing practice from. This campaign has served as a great environment for me to experiment with my character writing and development in a game design setting where I get to see players' live reactions to characters I've made. When developing secondary characters here I plan to use these tips and what intricacies might follow with their usage.

Something to remember is that there is a difference between writing characters for a novel or movie compared to a game. The difference is that the player has some influence over the pace of the story, and sometimes the direction it goes in as well. The game, and thus the story, only moves forward when the player wants it to. A key part of this, as explained by William Harms, is aligning the character motivations with the player motivations. (William Harms (2020)) A simple example would be to ask what the player character wants to achieve and how that lines up or match with how the player wins the game. If the player has no real reason to pursue something that the player character wants to do, then they are far less likely to do so.

To finish off the review, I wanted to bring attention to the teachings I received from Dan Watanabe. He recommends having your characters do things that the average viewer would look at themselves and say "I wish I had the courage to do that". (Dan Watanabe (n.d.)) This is meant to help viewers become emotionally invested in your characters and hopefully turn your character into an inspiration for them. In games, this can be taken one step further since the player can be the character doing these things! An example is Kratos from God of War fighting

gods with quick time events that make the player feel like they're in control and performing these godly feats. This idea isn't covered in the Masterclass, and thus I felt it was important that I included it in my deep dive. This is another effect I want to achieve with my writing. I want readers, viewers, or players to be emotionally invested in characters so they want to keep going through the experience to find out what happens to them, and to hopefully be inspired whilst going about their own lives. This method of making characters commit to these kinds of actions is something I plan to try in my current and future projects to gauge how successful it is. I plan on hopefully writing some very personable and likable characters that players will be happy to play as and care for during their playthroughs of my games.

Materials and Methods

While creating this deep dive I went through and found various sources and materials using a method I find to be very consistent at providing credible and reliable information. When searching for sources for my deep dive, I used Google Scholar which sources scholarly articles from verified websites, articles, and other writings.

Aside from Google Scholar, I also went to Youtube to find some of my information for my research. I specifically sought out recorded interviews of individuals that could prove that my research was true. My first reference was Stan Lee and some of the interviews he did in the years before his passing where he told the story of how he made Spiderman. While his talks on the topic are short, the stories he tells do prove the research I have found to be correct. After viewing these interviews, I found an article talking about what they thought made Spiderman such a memorable and favorable character in the eyes of the public. This helped me compare the view of the creator to the viewer about what they each believe to make the character such a success, and I found some fun comparisons to draw from for my writing.

I then went on to find commonly known credible sources. I wanted to make sure that what I found came from a place many people knew of to already be credible, and thus I found my way to Masterclass. Hundreds of industry professionals for practically any discipline have made classes and articles detailing, from their own experience, what the best method of working in the disciplines is. I knew that here I could find some great concepts and ideas that I could try out and even test with some of the exercises they provided.

I found another article that covered something I hadn't already discovered, and that was how to make people emotionally invested in my characters. The short video by Dan Watanabe helps explain that, and his credentials and methods of explaining the concepts pushed forward the legitimacy of his findings.

When it came to methods of testing my research, I implemented them in my projects that were already being viewed by friends of mine. I used them in my final Capstone project, and in a Dungeons and Dragons campaign I have been writing and running for a group of six people. From both projects, I have found favorable results from my friends that prove my research to be effective. They openly talk about how they can unconditionally help these characters become emotionally invested in them in tense moments, and ask me questions about them outside of the game.

Results

Overall, I've got a wide range of different results for methods, practices, and proof for how to write more meaningful and emotional characters. The use of arcs seems like such a simple thing to implement, and I am shocked I hadn't concluded its importance sooner since I've

noticed the term gets thrown around a lot. I suppose I just hadn't known what it meant until now. But, I now see why it's such a necessary fundamental for a story, and how it helps make a character more followable and likable.

The results I found for writing other kinds of characters, like villains/antagonists, were also really eye-opening. It makes a lot more sense why some of my previous villains were more likely to fail as interesting characters because I hadn't made them more powerful than the protagonist from the beginning. Making their morality and motives clear from the beginning is something I already understood, but my research has helped me solidify why this is important and how to do this more effectively.

Dan Watanabe's quick lesson on getting people emotionally invested into my characters was also a result I want to note. The idea is strong and is presented in a very clear way that clarifies why it works. Making a character do things that the viewer wouldn't have the courage to do can be inspiring, and help create emotional investment along with a brighter mood and outlook on the day ahead of the viewer.

Discussion

Looking over some of my findings, I want to discuss how some of the content I found in my research has already proven to be effective and helpful in my writing. Currently, in the Dungeons and Dragons campaign that I run at the time of writing this, I have a roster of five villains. In a previous attempt at running this campaign, the same five villains were present, but it was clear that they were not more powerful than the players from one of their early introductions in the fourth session of the game. The players never really cared about their interactions, didn't see the main driving force of the game as a threat, and found all of their interactions with these

villains fairly mundane or frustrating rather than tense or engaging. In the current version of the campaign, which I am running with completely new players, I have employed the methods for writing antagonists for these five villains. I have made sure that they are powerful enough to fear, but also enough to where some of the players already wish to rival and beat them. I have also introduced each villain's motive for why they are fighting against the world the players live in, sprinkling and coloring in more and more about why they are villains as the players move throughout the game. So far these methods have proven to be very effective, and the players in this version of my game respect the antagonist's power and constantly seek to find out more about them to either aid in their battle against them or just out of interest. Some of the players have gone as far as to create tier lists and charts of the five villains comparing them against each other and explaining why they like some more than others. That comes down to their traits, appearance, and quirks.

The methods I have found thus far don't color in the entire picture when it comes to writing villains. It is of course not as simple as just writing a character with power and a heinous reason to go against the protagonist. The players in my DnD campaign for example like a specific villain because he is more comedic than the other four, has a pirate aesthetic, and has a built-up history and relationship with the players through their encounters in the campaign and some of the player characters backstories which I worked him into. They have hardly spoken with this villain, however, and still find him more likable than other characters they've developed more with. From this observation, it's clear that what I found in my research is good, but not enough on its own.

Conclusion

Looking over it all, I've come to the solid conclusion that I have found some great proven methods for writing memorable characters, but these methods don't cover detail and don't guarantee success. I've gathered these "tips" and ideas and found that all of them can very well be used for any kind of character type, but they do work primarily for the archetypes they were designed for. Giving your protagonist flaws and an arc makes them feel more relatable, realistic, and more human despite not needing to be a human. Your antagonist should be more powerful than your protagonist to create a conflict that the hero needs to overcome throughout the story. The villains' motives and reasons for their actions in the story also need an explanation that fits them and their connection with the protagonist to make sure that their being in the story doesn't feel forced or thin. Secondary characters need to fill a role for the protagonist, whether that's a skill the hero doesn't have, an inspiration to keep moving forward, or someone who protects them when they're most vulnerable. These writing tips help for making these kinds of characters, but they don't cover everything and could arguably be switched around for some fun experimental narratives and character designs. Backstories, character traits, motives, and more also determine how much someone is gonna like your character. Finally, it can be nice to get your audience emotionally invested in what happens to your character. Do they want to see them rise above everything and succeed or fall because of their villainy? It keeps people invested for far longer and is quite rewarding when done right. Having your character do something out there that the viewer would never even consider doing themselves establishes a strong start for that emotional investment. From there the following story and journey they go on is what determines how invested someone can get.

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