

INTIMATION AND EXPERIENCE OF THE SELF IN GAMES

by

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A Thesis Presented to the
FACULTY OF THE USC SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA
In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
MASTER OF FINE ARTS
(INTERACTIVE MEDIA)

May 2012

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ABSTRACT

This paper contains a brief overview of several views of the “self” – from the soul in ancient philosophy to identity and character in modern day gaming – and explores the ways in which video games can help to restate traditional questions about the self in a new interactive context. It does this by framing the original thought arguments alongside the project *Intimation*, an interactive thesis game project about the powerful tools of characterization provided by mechanics in video games.

INTRODUCTION

Many great thinkers throughout history have struggled with the idea of “self” and the fundamental question, “Who am I?” Our ways of thinking about self have become more and more complex and sophisticated over time as countless minds have turned their powers towards trying to define it: from ancient ideas of the soul, to 20th century inquiries about the separation between mind and body, to modern problems of identity and how we view ourselves and others through cultural and technological systems, including identity anomalies such as fictional avatars. In recent years, the discipline of games and game design has finally matured to the point where it can and should begin to tackle big questions like this, and the unique tools offered by games allow us to do this in hitherto unimagined ways.

Games have an unparalleled method of allowing us to explore the idea of self: direct control over another persona. Traditional media asks us to watch the actions of a character and to empathize with that individual, imagining what it must be like to be them; games force us to become directly responsible for those same actions, to make choices and experience the consequences of those choices. As such, the experience of a character becomes not an exercise in imagination, but a fundamental aspect of the medium’s interactive nature.

The thesis game *Intimation* is an exercise in becoming something else. In this game the player inhabits a series of alien animals one by one, mastering

them in their natural environment and learning about their nature from a first-person perspective. The game does not ask the player to merely observe these creatures but to become them, learning about them from the inside out and understanding their nature on a fundamental level. *Intimation* asks the player to examine the question “Who Am I?” via exploration and experimentation, and to come to understand each creature's place in a strange world.

The game demo is composed of three playable creatures in a single environment. Each creature can in some ways be considered a game “level”; the player must inhabit the creature, learn its skills and mobility, and then complete a series of specific goals in order to master its behavior. When the first creature is mastered the second one is unlocked, and so on. In each experience, the player is asked to learn about the creature via experimentation and observation and to master a new set of controls and abilities. Though all three creature levels take place in the same environment, the player gains new perspectives on that environment by experiencing it in three different ways.

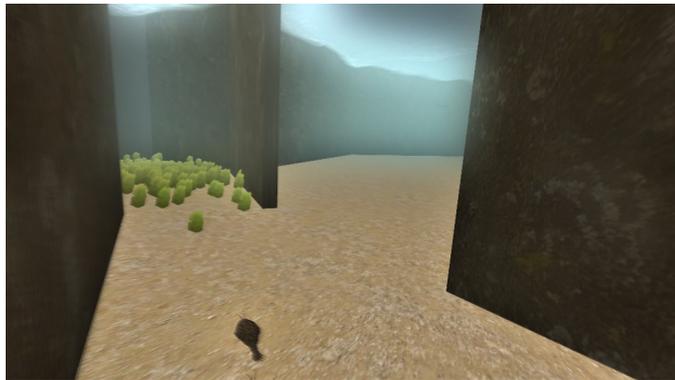
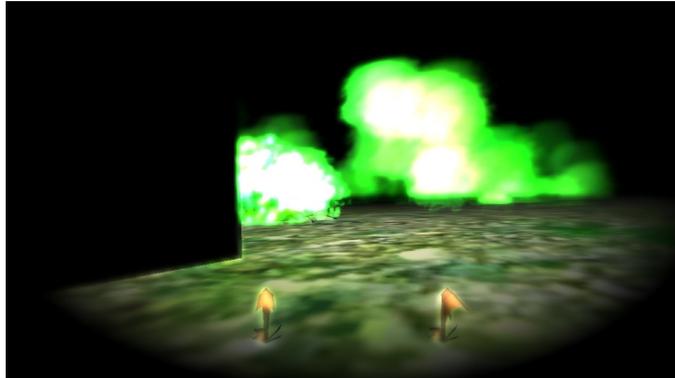


Figure 1: The Vision Modes for the Three In-Game Characters

This set of three characters is an exercise in the tools of empathy and characterization available within the medium of video games. By asking the player to take on the goals and behaviors of a creature, the game implicitly asks

the player to consider the creature's role in the environment; for instance, an exercise in repeatedly defending oneself from a predator can help the player to understand the fear and paranoia that comes from a position at the bottom of the food chain. By experiencing these different modes of being, the player can experience different “selves” first hand, in a way they might never have access to with another medium.

PHILOSOPHY OF THE SOUL: THE SOUL AS FUNCTION

One ancient philosopher to address the question of self, in this case the idea of the “soul,” was Aristotle. The definition of the soul was of great concern to him - what is the essential nature of a thing, and how do we tell the difference between something that has a soul and something that does not? Early theories on the nature of the soul in Aristotle's time formed a wide range of ideation, including the theory that a soul is what causes movement in an object.¹

Aristotle's definition of the soul had to do with an individual (or object)'s purpose. He envisioned all beings and objects on a continuum between their matter and their soul, where the soul is represented by the ideal nature of the object. The closer the object is to its ideal purpose and nature, the better and more real it is. As West Valley College philosophy chair Sandra LeFave concisely explains,

For example, a knife's function is to cut. A knife is a better knife, and more of a knife (it has more knife being) the better it realizes its potential to cut. Its entelechy is its knifely structure. The structure organizes its matter and at the same time limits and determines the possibilities for that matter. (Matter organized in a knifely way can cut, but it can't walk or carry on photosynthesis. Those limitations are imposed by the entelechy.) The optimal knife, the best knife, the knife with the most knifeness, is the one put together optimally to achieve the natural purpose of a knife. We help this along (by cleaning, sharpening, etc.) or hinder it (by leaving it out in the rain); knives can't be fully knifely without our help.²

1 Aristotle, *De Anima*. 350 BCE

2 LaFave, “Notes on Aristotle's Metaphysics and Psychology.” 2011.

Put simply, every being and object in the universe has a template, and the closer it matches that template, the closer it comes to its own true nature and purpose. Even more than that, “Aristotle believes excellent things are not only better but more real (more actual).”³ This viewpoint implies that everything in the universe—even conscious beings—has a single defined purpose, and it should be the goal of every being to live up to that purpose as much as possible and to encourage others to live up to that same potential.

Although this view of the nature of the soul is ancient in its origin, it can still be a useful way for us to consider the world - particularly an artificially structured world such as the one in a video game. In a game everything that exists truly does exist for a purpose, and each and every detail serves to form a particularly crafted experience for the player to live up to.

Any given object in a game world was put there by a designer or developer, and as such is the product of a conscious decision. This means that each object has (or at least, should have) a defined purpose relative to the nature of the game. An enemy AI might be placed in a level with the goal of making an area difficult but not impossible to traverse. Therefore, if the player finds the area either too easy or impossible to traverse, then the enemy AI has failed to live up to its purpose. It is, in Aristotle's argument, an inferior example of its ideal form. Even aesthetic elements such as background textures have implicit goals; for instance, increasing the visual appeal of the game, or not distracting the player from their tasks.

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In many game worlds, the player can be said to be fulfilling an ideal role as well. The player's purpose is to play the game as well and as efficiently as possible. Some games encourage the player to explore one of a number of ideal forms, but most games have in their design an implicit “skilled” way to play, and encourage the player to strive for that particular ideal.

In *Intimation*, the process of enacting the most skilled performance of the game leads the player to also enact the nature of the characters they control. Each of the three playable characters has a particular ideal role and form within the context of the game. They have their positions in the ecosystem, the affordances of their “physical” bodies, and so on. In order for the player to become skilled at the game, they must enact the character's ideal self, or soul. The player literally becomes the acting force that moves the bodies of these animals toward their full potential.

Aristotle defines a hierarchy of different types of souls with different levels of awareness - the plant soul, animal soul, and human soul. The animal soul, most similar in nature to the experience of *Intimation*, he defines as: “sensitive (having sense perception, desire, and local motion).”⁴ These are the very elements around which the characters in *Intimation* are built; each character is differentiated from the others by its sensory input (sense perception), its unique movement capabilities within the world (local motion), and its explicit goals within the game's framework (desires). Through understanding and enacting these elements, the player comes to terms with—and in fact performs—the creature's

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form, its ideal self or “soul.” Each of the three elements Aristotle outlines as part of the animal soul are broken down among the different creatures in the game in the following ways:

1) *Sense Perception*

The three characters each have the following sensory experiences:

- **Defender** - the defensive creature senses the world largely through smell. Its world is dark and low to the ground, with colorful clouds of scent differentiating friend from foe from food. Scent hangs in the air around the body of other creatures, a definition that extends beyond the creature’s physical form in an outward projection of identity.
- **Swimmer** - this creature senses the world in a way most similar to human beings. Its eyes clearly define color and form. The creature’s vision is somewhat blurred, but becomes sharper and more exact the faster it is moving. This fast movement is used in avoiding rivals and capturing prey, which are the moments when the creature most needs to be alert and focused, narrowing its world down to basic, easily-interpreted shapes. The only place in which the swimmer is uncomfortable is in the darkness of caves, where its vision fails and it cannot easily navigate.
- **Cave-Dweller** - the final creature lives in dark caves, and its eyes have evolved to deal with only the barest amounts of light as input. In the brighter world outside of its cave this creature’s vision is blown-out, too dazzling to make out anything and leaving the character dazed and vulnerable. In its natural cave environment, however, tiny sparks of light make the world glittering and beautiful, and allow the creature to travel where others would be blind. Strangely skewed colors give the world an unearthly iridescence. It also sees much of the world in slightly blurred obscurity, except for its prey; its vision is such that it focuses on small, edible targets with the utmost precision and clarity.

2) *Local Motion*

Each character is capable of moving itself in a unique way:

- **Defender** - the defender can only crawl along the sandy ocean floor. Its hard, spiked carapace limits the degree to which it can look around, but also allows it the ability to raise up its shard-like spikes and ward off predators. This creature moves slowly but confidently through a dangerous world.
- **Swimmer** - compared to the defender, the swimmer's movement is much more free and open. The swimmer can move freely in all directions including vertically, and when moving in a straight line can achieve great speeds.
- **Cave-Dweller** - the cave dweller does not move forward in a straight line as the other two species do, but instead travels through leaps, jumping forward in the direction it's facing. Because the creature spends most of its time waiting in ambush for its prey, it is not built to move quickly. But it is capable of easily scaling steep rocky cave walls in nimble bounds.

3) *Desire*

Desire is represented by the goals that each character must complete:

- **Defender** - the defender lives the life of a prey creature - its goals revolve around staying close to other members of its species for safety in numbers, finding food, and defending itself from predators while it does so. The defender's life is focused around ideas of safety and caution, a plodding sort of progress that rewards awareness and staying close to friends.
- **Swimmer** - the swimmer's attitude is one of pride and joy; its goals revolve around pushing its movement capabilities to the fullest, reveling in the freedom offered by its great speed. It is also highly territorial, pushing out other members of its species with shows of dominance and aggression. This creature is something of a show-off by nature, and its goals are related to performance.
- **Cave-Dweller** - the cave-dweller is still and patient, nimble and exact. Its goals are all located within a small, safe area. In order to feed, the creature remains still and waits for its prey to approach

before lunging suddenly and devouring it. This creature becomes attached to particular locations, sometimes quite literally as it grips onto the cave walls of its home.

By combining these three elements in unique ways, we gain access to three very disparate “souls,” each of which is brought closer to reality by the actions of the player, striving to achieve the ideal form of the characters. The player experiences the nature of the character through sense perception and local motion, and is guided through the experience by the character's desires.⁵

Table 1: Aristotelian Definitions of Animal Soul vs. Intimation Counterparts

Aristotelian Definition of Animal Soul	Sense Perception	Local Motion	Desire
“Intimation” Counterpart	The visual and audio cues for the character, as different from other characters	The controls and control scheme for the character, as well as its mobility and special abilities related to movement	The explicit in-game goals that the player must complete to master the character

In addition to the three elements defined by Aristotle, creatures in the game are also defined by their relationships to one another. Though not explicitly mentioned as a formative element of the soul, the hierarchical relationship between individuals is a definitive element of other ancient ideas of self.⁶

Therefore, a fourth category of definition might be added to the three characters:

⁵ Ideally these desires could be indicated solely through the affordances of the game's mechanics (ie the sense perception and local motion), allowing the player to experiment with the range of behaviors possible for a given character before settling on those that would be most similar to the character's nature. However, playtesting has indicated that it is unfeasibly difficult to communicate to a player whether they are approaching the “ideal” behaviors for the character without some explicit indication of the player/character's goals in the game world. Thus, these goals are presented to the player up-front upon assuming each new identity.

⁶ “Dharma” and the caste system in Hinduism, the Confucian tradition of filial piety, etc.

4) *Place in Society/Ecosystem*

- **Defender** - the defender lives in groups because it is easily preyed-upon if not vigilant. It has a low position on the food chain, but can still survive if it is cautious and remains close to others of its kind. Its highly defensive nature means however that this creature may travel safely where some other creatures, such as the swimmer, cannot.
- **Swimmer** - the swimmer is territorial. As a higher-level predator, it feeds on defenders and is master of the open water domain, answering only to others of its own kind (and even then, exerting mastery whenever possible). It cannot, however, travel into the dark areas of caves; these spaces are dangerous and difficult to navigate for the swimmer.
- **Cave-Dweller** - the cave-dweller is a hermit. It is highly dangerous to the swimmer if the swimmer dares to approach its terrain, but it is also highly vulnerable outside the cave environment. The cave-dweller therefore chooses to shun the active pursuit of others. Instead, it waits quietly in its chosen domain until prey is foolish enough to wander by.

Intimation uses these four elements in concert to provide the player with strong, clear indications about the nature of each character. In Aristotelian terms, we end up with three highly-characterized “soul” templates, for which the player provides the matter.

PHILOSOPHY OF THE MIND: WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE A BAT?

Over the many years since Aristotle, as more and more philosophers (as well as great thinkers from other disciplines) investigated the nature of self and what it might mean, the question of the “soul” was joined by the concept of the “self” or “mind.” As part of its inheritance from notions of the “soul,” this new idea is irrevocably tangled in with some of the “big questions” of existence: “Who am I?” “Why am I here?” One of the most fundamental questions about the self is simply, “What is it?” Where does the thinking, conscious mind that we experience come from? The idea that this self, the mind, is a separate and distinct entity from the body was first popularized by the philosopher Descartes around the turn of the seventeenth century, and is known as the Mind-Body Problem.⁷

The Mind-Body Problem essentially boils down to this: Where is the seat of consciousness? Is it part of the physical body of a person, a side-effect of the flesh and synapse sparks of our brain? Or is it something beyond that, some artifact of our being that might live beyond us when we die, something more than the sum of our physical parts? If the mind is completely separate from the physical form, why do the things that happen to our body affect the mind and vice versa? These questions have been debated for centuries and are still very much relevant and discussed today.

Amidst much debate on this subject in 1974, Thomas Nagel, a professor of law and philosophy at New York University, wrote the article “What Is It Like To

⁷ Skirry, “René Descartes: The Mind-Body Distinction” 2006

Be A Bat?” The article was a rebuttal to several colleagues who had taken to phrasing the Mind-Body Problem as a scientific analogy to make it easier to discuss and to support the idea of physicalism (the position that the mind is a part of the physical body and no more). In “What Is It Like To Be A Bat?”, Nagel describes the difficulty of defining consciousness. He argues that in most analogies about the Mind-Body Problem, those phrasing the problem as a mere analogy of physics forget that the conscious mind has unique and subjective experiences, and that this is in fact at the core of the Mind-Body Problem and cannot be ignored.⁸

Nagel’s argument is essentially as follows: In order for something to have a mind, it must have a subjective experience of the world. This experience may include sensations and phenomena that are unique to the nature of that being, such as a bat sensing the world through sonar. In order to understand that experience, we can only think of it using the references of our own experiences and our imaginations, which in turn are also informed by our experiences. Thus, since we have no point of reference for experiencing sonar, our idea of the consciousness of a bat must inevitably be flawed, because there exist parts of the bat’s subjective experience that we are incapable of understanding.

There is an objective nature to any phenomenon, Nagel argues, but trying to describe the phenomenon objectively takes us further away from understanding the nature of a being’s experience of it, rather than closer:

In the case of experience, [...] the connection with a particular

⁸ Nagel, 1974

point of view seems much closer. It is difficult to understand what could be meant by the objective character of an experience, apart from the particular point of view from which its subject apprehends it. After all, what would be left of what it was like to be a bat if one removed the viewpoint of the bat? [...]

Certainly it appears unlikely that we will get closer to the real nature of human experience by leaving behind the particularity of our human point of view and striving for a description in terms accessible to beings that could not imagine what it was like to be us. If the subjective character of experience is fully comprehensible only from one point of view, then any shift to greater objectivity—that is, less attachment to a specific viewpoint—does not take us nearer to the real nature of the phenomenon: it takes us farther away from it.⁹

Therefore, if we are to understand the nature of the subjective experience of another being—the consciousness, the mind, the self, perhaps even the soul—we must devise a way to think about the subjective experience of that being. We must attempt to put ourselves in a position that gets as near to that subjectivity as possible. Nagel discusses the necessity of finding a way of discussing alternative experiences that gets outside the preconceptions of our own experiences, saying,

At present we are completely unequipped to think about the subjective character of experience without relying on the imagination—without taking up the point of view of the experiential subject. This should be regarded as a challenge to form new concepts and devise a new method—an objective phenomenology not dependent on empathy or the imagination. Though presumably it would not capture everything, its goal would be to describe, at least in part, the subjective character of experiences in a form comprehensible to beings incapable of having those experiences.¹⁰

9 Nagel

10 Nagel

This, in many ways, is what *Intimation* strives to do. As much as possible, the game tries to allow the player an unexpected experience; one that encourages them to see the world differently, to think about the world differently, and to question their own assumptions and their subjective experience of the world. Even as the player masters a character, the game shifts to offer the player a new, different experience, highlighting how each character in the game has its own unique subjectivity. Through understanding just a few new experiences, the player comes to realize that many such unique experiences are possible both in the game world and the real world.

Like Nagel, *Intimation* argues that there is no experience without subjectivity. While some past games have fought to remove subjectivity, to make the interface between the player and the game world as transparent as possible,¹¹ *Intimation* fights to put subjectivity back into the game. It forces the player to experience a space through a variety of lenses and to develop an understanding of those lenses as they do so.

However, in many ways this project never quite manages to wholly achieve the subjective self described in Nagel's essay. As Nagel argues, it is impossible for the subjectivity of an alien experience to be experienced by a human, because our understanding of that subjectivity is limited to the things we

¹¹ Many modern games favor an approach where the player-character is a blank slate, taking up as little mental and narrative space in the player's experience of the game as possible. This allows the player to place themselves directly into the context of the game, rather than experiencing it through a predefined character. Player-characters like this are sometimes known as "silent protagonists," and serve their own purpose in video game storytelling. This is discussed further in the section "A Brief Overview of Characterization in Games."

ourselves can experience. In the case of *Intimation*, it is reduced even further to the pieces of that experience that can be conveyed with the available hardware; “scent” must be represented visually, for example, despite the fact that the human experience has a much more direct analogue for the experience of scent.

What *Intimation* is trying to do, however, is not to provide an entirely complete subjective experience, but merely to hint at the existence of one and to take as many steps towards it as possible. The game implies the existence of experiences vastly different from each other and vastly different from our own experiences as human beings. Through the playing of *Intimation*, the player should become aware of the subjective nature of experience that Nagel describes - that there is, in fact, “something that it is like to be a bat,” or a Martian, and that while we may never be able to fully comprehend that state, we can use our imagination and our technology to approach it and to explore the concepts in and around its existence.

IDENTITY IN GAMES WITH JAMES PAUL GEE

The nature of Mind and Body becomes a more complex question in the presence of a human mind piloting a virtual body. In the realm of games and gaming, the problem of self and the subjective experience mutates yet again into the problem of identity. Instead of dealing with a single entity in the form of a person, games ask us to address an interaction: the identity or group of identities that come from the relationship between a player and an in-game character or between the player and the game system. The so-called “magic circle” of gaming¹² presents the player with a space where they can leave certain real-world aspects of themselves (such as their morality and real-world consequences) behind and become the “player,” a new, assumed identity.

One of the most rigorous breakdowns of this process and the different levels of identity involved can be found in James Paul Gee’s book, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*¹³. In his book, Gee outlines three levels of identity involved in playing games (in particular he talks about games with deep, customizable main characters, although his overview of identity does apply to other types of games as well):

- **The Real Identity (*PLAYER as Character*)** - This is a real-world identity; the person playing the game. The player is a particular person, you, or me, or James Paul Gee, playing a video game in real time. The player brings to the game their own morals, ideas about the world, interests, experiences, and so on.

12 A term first coined in 1955 by Johan Huizinga. See glossary for details.

13 Gee, *What Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. 2007

- **The Virtual Identity (Player as CHARACTER)** - This is the identity of the character in the game, as informed by the game's rule system and the game's narrative. This character might, for instance, be a marine in the US army with a certain height, top running speed, and various friends and enemies within the game.
- **The Projective Identity (Player AS Character)** - this third identity is the most complicated. It encompasses the relationship between the Real and Virtual identities and the ways in which the player intentionally forms the character. Gee describes this identity as, "The kind of person I want [my character] to be, the kind of history I want her to have, the kind of person and history I am trying to build in and through her [...]. Since these aspirations are *my* desires for [my character], the projective identity is both mine and hers, and it is a space in which I can transcend both her limitations and my own."¹⁴

The reason Gee chooses the word "projective" to describe this middle identity is because the identity encompasses both the noun and verb meanings of the word "project." In his own words,

meaning both 'to project one's values and desires onto the virtual character' [...] and 'seeing the virtual character as one's own project in the making, a creature whom I imbue with a certain trajectory through time defined by my aspirations for what I want that character to be and become (within the limitations of her capacities, of course, and within the resources the game designer has given me).'¹⁵

One interesting thing to note here is that in both senses of Gee's Projective Identity, the causal flow of the identity moves from the Real towards the Projective identity. The player forms in their head an idea of what they would like the character to be and then attempts as much as possible within the

¹⁴ Gee, p. 51

¹⁵ Gee, p. 51

confines of the game to enact that identity. By and large, this is how most games present identity: the player is presented with an explicit narrative characterization and the rules system for the game, within the confines of which they are asked to create and expand upon the character.

Only very seldom does characterization ever work in the opposite direction - hiding elements of the Virtual Identity and asking the player to uncover the pieces and form an image of the Projective Identity as they go. When this happens, the elements in question are almost always narrative elements and their uncovering is a central aspect of the game's narrative thread. One such game is *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*, by Frictional Games.¹⁶ The central character wakes up with no memory of his past or clue to his current objectives other than a note from his past self indicating that he must find a particular man and kill him. Throughout the game the player finds a series of notes that inform the character about things that occurred in the past, and help to flesh out his motivations. The player is asked to piece together the character's identity like a mystery, constructing it from the fragments offered throughout the course of the game. In this way the central identity becomes not so much the "Projective" identity as a "Deduced" or "Constructed" identity, with the game structured around the identity's revelation.

¹⁶ Frictional Games, 2010

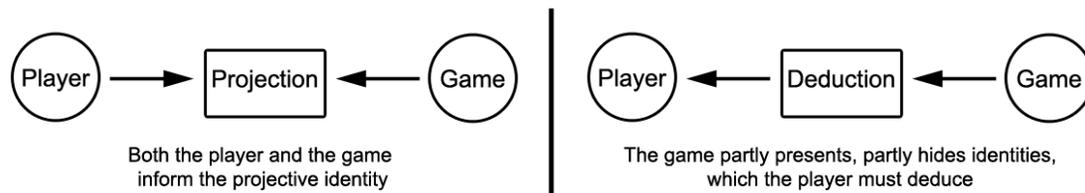


Figure 2: Projective Identity formation vs Constructed Identity formation

Intimation also attempts to operate in this backwards direction, asking the player to uncover a Constructed Identity rather than to create it from scratch, but it offers mechanical rather than narrative elements as its clues. The identity of the creature exists in the game world—there is a set of behaviors that defines the character’s role in the world—but the player must discover this identity through exploration and observation. The player may form a constructed image of what this character is like upon first taking up its form, but over time they will have to revise and re-evaluate that construction as they discover more about the character. The player is encouraged to experiment and to update mental models of the characters until their Constructed Identity begins to approach the true nature of the Virtual Identity.

This method of approaching identity in games—asking the player to deduce an identity rather than project one—is not commonly offered in modern games, even less via mechanics rather than narrative. *Intimation* hopes to offer a new way of exploring a player's self by encouraging the player to question their own identity, rather than having the game question it for them.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF CHARACTERIZATION IN GAMES

Knowing that games allow us to merge our own identities with those of the in-game characters, the question then becomes, “In what ways do games create and define their characters?” By and large, characterization of player-characters (the in-game characters inhabited by the player) is accomplished in one of three ways - explicit characterization, implicit characterization, and removal of the player character altogether.

In the first method, explicit characterization, the game strongly defines the player character through narrative elements and/or through the abilities given to a particular character. When this is done narratively, it produces games like the *Final Fantasy* series, where the character’s arc is presented in cut-scenes and dialogue, and the player has little to no ability to influence or change this arc. This method of characterization is familiar to us from non-interactive media, and follows most of the same rules and patterns as the characterization of main characters in television, film, books, etc. There are a few differences in the experience (such as the player being implicated in the character’s actions), but largely this is still the familiar standard of characterization-via-empathy.



Figure 3: (*Final Fantasy X*)

Explicit narrative characterization is often given via movie-like cut-scenes¹⁷

When explicit characterization occurs via game mechanics, we begin to see a bit more of the strengths of the medium. This characterization is usually achieved by giving different characters different abilities. Fighting games commonly use this tactic, with some fighters being faster, others stronger, etc., and each having their own unique attack moves. This helps the player to develop an internal sense of the character's nature based on the affordances of playing that character. One of the clearest examples of this method of characterization comes from *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem*, by Silicon Knights.¹⁸ In *Eternal Darkness*, the player takes on a series of twelve different characters. Each character is made unique and memorable by a combination of narrative threads and diversity of game mechanics: a young girl might have a smaller health bar

¹⁷ Square, 2001

¹⁸ Silicon Knights, 2002

than a fit adult man, a monk has greater sanity and calm than a drunkard, a youth has more stamina for running than an older individual, and so on. Each character also has unique items that help to further characterize them, such as the fear-haunted old man who carries around a flask of “liquid courage.” This method of characterization—explicitly characterizing via game mechanics—is the method explored in *Intimation*, discussed later in this section.

The second method of characterization is implicit. This occurs when there is a central player character, but the game designer removes as many narrative and other explicit characterization methods as possible from the game. This creates a sort of “blank slate” individual (often silent and sometimes with no known physical description) onto which the player is encouraged to project their own interpretation of the character, thus making it the characterization most conducive to a vibrant “projective” identity as described by James Paul Gee.¹⁹ Narratively, implicit characterization may help players empathize with characters where explicit characterization would get in the way and make the characters unlikable or unrelatable.²⁰ By allowing the player to assign their own motivations to a character’s actions, the game offloads the burden of justification for those actions from its own narrative onto the player.

This may help to explain why implicit characterization is so common in

19 I refer to this as “implicit” characterization because, in removing explicit elements of characterization, the game assumes that the player will take care of any necessary duties of characterization. The characterization is implied, rather than presented.

20 Strongly (explicitly) characterized PCs that stray too far from the player’s own morality can be detestable for a player and cause them to abandon a game they might have otherwise enjoyed. One example of this is shown in the Penny Arcade podcast “Our Crucial Pamphlet,” an excerpt of which is provided in the Appendix.

first-person shooters: because the player feels responsible for their own actions in the game, they take less time to question the morality of those actions. If, on the other hand, the player was made to feel as though their character was making these decisions, they might be more removed from the decision and thus inclined to question whether or not the action was something they would have done themselves.

Implicit characterization can also occur in game mechanics, when the game allows the player to choose mechanics, statistics, and abilities that define their character, rather than assigning them outright. This is common in MMORPGs,²¹ where the player's feeling of character ownership is very important. The player can choose a type of magic in which their character specializes, or focus on hand-to-hand combat instead. They can spend points to make their character adept at lock-picking or dodge-rolling; the game makes no judgment about which skills are "better" to take and allows the player full control over characterization and customization of the being they inhabit.

Table 2: Implicit vs. Explicit Characterization

	Narrative	Mechanical
Explicit	Narrative elements are presented in the game via text, voice-over, cut-scenes, etc., defining a character as in more traditional media	The game defines characters by giving each a different set of abilities or characteristics such as health, speed, defense, etc.
Implicit	Traditional narrative elements are conspicuously absent from the game, allowing the player to draw their own conclusions about the character's nature	The game encourages the player to define their character's abilities themselves, allowing them to choose areas of specialization, special moves, etc.

²¹ Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (see glossary)

It is worth noting that few games use entirely explicit or entirely implicit characterization. There are certainly many examples of games with explicit narrative characterization and implicit mechanics, or vice versa. (For instance, the game *Deus Ex*²² has a very explicit narrative with well-defined characters, but the gameplay revolves around choosing mechanical areas in which to specialize. In contrast, *Portal*²³ gives almost no narrative information about player-character Chel, but has a single, universal mechanic that every player must use.) Even within the mechanical or narrative areas, a game may choose to use elements of both explicit and implicit characterization.

Finally, some games remove the player character altogether. This is a general rule of several genres of games, including “god” games and “sim” games, but can occur outside of these genres as well. The question of the player’s role and pseudo-character within the game after the player character has been removed is a fascinating and deep one but is outside the scope of this paper.

Intimation seeks to experiment very specifically with what can be done using explicit characterization via mechanics rather than via narrative. It seeks to push back the boundaries of what is currently being done with this characterization in traditional video games and explore the edges of what is possible within the medium. In *Intimation*, the player is given the opportunity to see and experience the world from three vastly different perspectives. These

22 Ion Storm Inc, 2000

23 Valve Corporation, 2007

perspectives represent not just the shallow “new abilities” characterization method common to so many video games, but substantially different experiences—underscored by a presentation in the first-person perspective—which seek to immerse the player in each new identity as deeply as possible. Whereas a fighting game might give the player a new button combination for a different attack, switching characters in this game gives the player not only new abilities but also a whole new visual design of the scene, new sensory abilities, and new goals within the game.

UNIQUE EXAMPLES OF CHARACTERIZATION IN GAMES

This section provides a brief overview of two other games that have investigated many of these same issues and experimented with many of the same tools of characterization in the past. Perhaps the most similar body of work, at least in the professional sphere, is the *Aliens vs. Predator* line of games, particularly *AvP2*²⁴, which strongly characterizes the three available races (aliens, predators, and humans) using many of the same methods as *Intimation*. While *Intimation* focuses on the creatures' relationships to the environment, *Aliens vs. Predator 2* focuses largely on the three races' relationships to each other, using characterization as a method of game balance.

In *AvP2* the player undertakes three first-person-shooter-style campaigns over the course of the game, each focused on one of the three races. The narratives of the three campaigns interweave to form a single multi-threaded story, but each thread is driven by the actions of a single member of the current faction. In the paranoia-infused marine missions you attempt to rescue the survivors of a heavily overrun human facility on an alien planet, in the alien mission you progress through the stages of alien evolution and become a head-crunching monster, and in the predator missions you infiltrate a human facility to discover why your clan-mates are being kidnapped. (Interestingly, the text-based portions of these narratives, in the form of journal entries and mission logs that accompany your objectives, are always told from a human point of view, even

²⁴ Monolith Productions, Third Law Interactive, 2001

when the objectives are for another race. This underscores the foreign nature of the aliens and predators, and probably serves additional, more practical purposes such as providing narrative for the alien faction which has no written language and for whom a journal entry would be completely out of place.)

As with *Intimation*, one way in which the factions are distinguished from one another is by their relative mobility. The human faction is the most heavily-armed, but also the least mobile. They have only limited ability to see—and therefore maneuver—in dark places (the marine gets a battery-powered flashlight which runs out if used too frequently) and use only the standard FPS controls. In contrast, the aliens can run extremely fast even while moving cautiously and can traverse walls and ceilings at will. Most alien forms are very vulnerable to weapons and easily killed and don't have much long-range attack ability, but they make up for it with high speed and maneuverability. Finally there is the predator faction, which focuses heavily on stealth. The predator has a cloaking device that allows it to remain invisible around humans and is slightly more mobile than the humans as well (with the ability to do higher jumps).

A second form of characterization that *Intimation* shares with *AvP2* is varying visual styles for each character (see Figure 4). The human visual experience is a standard FPS camera. The aliens can see colored auras around members of the three factions (blue for human, green for predator, red for alien) and can switch to a negative-colored navigation vision that allows them to see in the dark. Predators can switch between a variety of differently-specialized modes

including one that highlights any humans in an environment and one that highlights aliens.

In many ways, *AvP2* and *Intimation* have similar intent - both games want the user to experience being radically different characters, and occupying those characters' subjective experiences. But while *AvP2* does this mostly in the service of combat and telling multiple sides of a single story, *Intimation* attempts to focus more on the role of each creature in its environment. In *Intimation*, the player is asked to consider the creature's—and thus their own—position in the ecosystem and its relationships to the creatures around it. This game focuses on the experience of existing as a particular creature, rather than the ways in which that creature can most effectively kill everything around it.

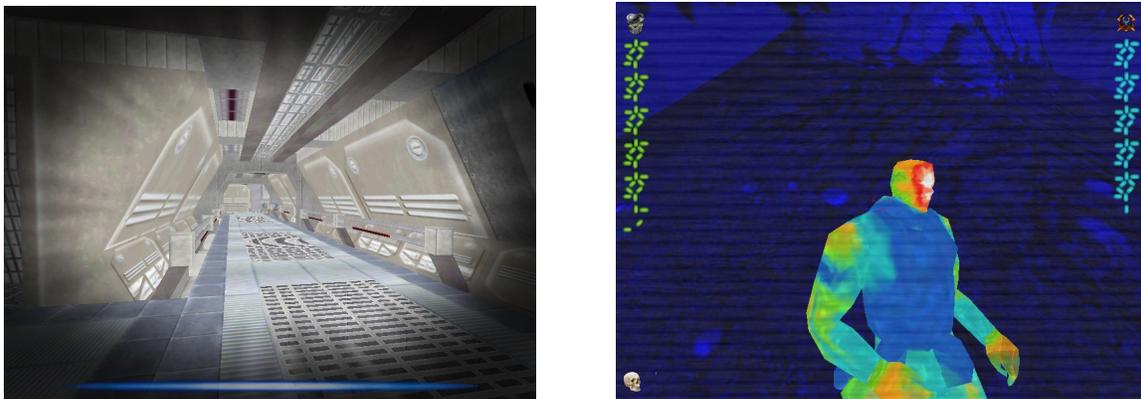


Figure 4: (*Alien vs Predator 2*) Vision Modes
Left – the alien's navigation vision mode,
Right – the predator's thermal view of a human

In a future, commercialized professional version of *Intimation*, players would experience and explore the world through more than 3 characters, perhaps as many as 30, with steadily-increasing depth and complexity. Players

would have the experience of being predators and prey, symbiotes and scavengers, learning how their role as each creature affects the complex web of life around them. With its current scope, “Intimation” can only imply a more vast and complex game, but the three species offered within it are intended as a proof of concept that such a larger experience could be created.

Another game that closely resembles *Intimation* is the student game *Reflect* by Mike Treanor, created as an MFA project at the University of California at Santa Cruz. *Reflect* is a first-person platformer/exploration game in which the player is asked to mimic a series of (earth) animals in order to gain their powers; from an inchworm to a turtle to a cat to a hawk. The stated goals of the game are,

to increase one's appreciation and awareness [of] their environment and body movements [and] to raise interest in the mundane in an effort to bring wonder to the everyday experience. Each creature perspective employs the technique of defamiliarization in order to enhance perception of the familiar. Specifically, the game attempts to bring the player to confront this or her assumptions about existing in virtual (and non-virtual) environments in order to see things that are typically obscured. [sic]²⁵

While *Reflect* focuses only on the movement and control aspects of characterization, it does share the mechanics of observation and mimicry with *Intimation*. Even more so than *Intimation*, *Reflect* is primarily about paying close attention to the world around you. It is focused entirely on the player's ability to mimic the appearance (specifically the movement) of another character and,

²⁵ Treanor, Mike (ReadMe text, *Reflect*), 2008

interestingly, never addresses the question of who or what the player entity is. Because the player inherits the power of each of the animals they successfully mimic and never loses any of these powers, the implication cannot be that the player is actually becoming these animals. The question of “Who am I?” remains unasked.



**Figure 5: (*Reflect*, by Mike Treanor)
Reflect asks the player to observe
 and mimic the movements of a series of animals**

Where *AvP2* and *Reflect* merely hint at the question of self, raising it (perhaps intentionally, perhaps not) but touching only lightly on potential answers, *Intimation* aims to address this question in a more focused manner. *Intimation* uses elements of characterization that come from mechanics, similar to the methods used in *AvP2*, as well as elements of performance as a display of understanding from games like *Reflect* to more fully investigate the nature of the self in games.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF INTIMATION AND AVENUES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Though *Intimation* still requires a great deal of further investigation and research to prove that its intentions are effective, preliminary results are promising. *Intimation* is primarily a game about experiencing alternative “selves” over the course of play, where in this case “self” is defined as a sort of performative empathy. *Intimation* can be considered successful in its attempts at evoking self if the player experiences similar mental and emotional states to those that might be expected from the creature they are controlling. For instance, one might expect a player controlling creature 1 to feel paranoid about being attacked by predators, or to develop a sense of camaraderie with their fellow nest-mates. Character 2 should evoke a feeling of antagonism towards rivals and superiority relative to character 1, and so on. Feedback for *Intimation* that indicates (either verbally or, ideally, through behavior and body language) that the player is feeling and thinking like the corresponding character can be considered a sign of success.

In playtests so far, players particularly seem to respond strongly to character 1, which has been described as “claustrophobic,” “confined,” and “plodding.” Character 2 often evokes strong antagonism towards rivals, to the point where players will make at least token attempts to chase down and further harass rivals they have already defeated. Character 3 was described by one

playtester as having a “beautiful world,” despite the fact that the physical locations within the game are the same for all three characters. Small tweaks on the nature of these experiences have been made (and will continue to be made) throughout the game's development to further encourage these sorts of reactions.

Other than this promising feedback about the game's central nature, playtesting data thus far has mostly addressed some of the more mechanical issues of the game, such as bugs, playability, etc. Making the game playable in addition to effective has been an ongoing process throughout development, and changes based on this feedback have mostly resulted in level redesign, improved controls, and similar things of a system rather than experiential nature.

When the game is complete, the ideal testing scenario for *Intimation* would be to have various players complete each of the three characters in different sequences, and to describe their experiences with each one. Some players would also be introduced to only one of the three characters, and their experience compared to that of other single-character players to see if the overall game experience is significantly changed based on what character the player assumes. Players would be monitored not only for verbal after-the-fact feedback, but also for behavior and body language that indicates the sort of performative empathy the game is seeking.

If this experiment proves successful, *Intimation* could easily be expanded into a full-scale commercial game. Ideally, a full version of *Intimation* would allow

players to explore a vast alien ecosystem and a wide variety of subjective creature experiences. A game development venture of this scale would, however, require significant financial investment.

There is significant research left to be done in games on the subject of player empathy and the power of characterization. Almost any question from any philosophical or psychological discipline about self can be explored by creating a game to test its expression. I think it would be fascinating to see a designer pair up with someone who has a great deal of knowledge in the field of, for instance, childhood developmental psychology and attempt to model these experiences to see what we can learn from them.

For example, one might choose to tackle the question, “How do we learn to differentiate ourselves from others around us?” A game world could be designed in which certain actions affect others within the world and other actions don't, and where certain characteristics of the player-character (unknown to the player at first) allow the player access to certain aspects of the world and relationships with its characters. The player would need to experiment with their control over the world to get a sense of what makes them unique, and what makes them similar to others in the world.

Another game that could be designed along these avenues of inquiry might tackle questions of base prejudices. The player-character might be treated differently from other characters in a game, and must discover what aspect of themselves the in-game characters are reacting to. Is this aspect something that

the player can attempt to hide to avoid prejudice, like sexuality? Or is the aspect something that they have no choice but to live with, such as race or gender? By allowing the player to gradually come to understand that they are being treated differently, and by giving them the opportunity to experience this treatment rather than simply hear or read about it, a game designer can lead the player towards a true empathy for the experiences of others.

Questions and experiences like these are small facets of only a few questions in the myriad fields relating to self and identity. Hopefully these examples might intimate how similar games could be designed in the fields of psychology, philosophy, sociology, and so on.

CONCLUSION

The soul, the mind, identity, character; these are all vast areas of inquiry, spanning multiple disciplines. *Intimation* is intended, in many ways, as an argument that games provide one of the most unique and expressive tools for answering some of these questions. With the empathy and experiential design central to video games, there is finally a medium that allows participants to directly experience and experiment with the self, rather than just thinking about and imagining it. Players can literally inhabit bodies in ways they never could before, and this allows an entirely unexpected new perspective on these virtual worlds. There is great potential in the future of games if game designers continue to explore these possibilities and challenge the nature of self in games. Modern games have a wealth of potential to create new and unfamiliar characters, but too many of these games are content merely to complacently recreate versions of the self we have already experienced. As *Intimation* shows, games that explore new and unique versions of the self provide an interesting and valuable alternative experience for players to enjoy.

Because the medium asks the player to participate, to become the subject of an experience, games are an unprecedented way to come to understand the nature of subjective experiences. By coming to understand subjectivity in this way, players can extrapolate about the subjective nature of real-world experiences, allowing greater understanding of the world and the great variety of

individuals who inhabit it. By knowing what it is to be someone or something else, one can imagine what it might be like to be anyone else. Such greater understanding of the world around us—of the people around us—may lead to an increase in empathy towards others, and force us to expand our worldviews.

GLOSSARY

FPS

First-Person Shooter. Games in the FPS style have a camera located roughly at the head of the player-character and usually display some small piece of the player such as arms and/or equipped weapons in front of the camera. This style is very common to realistic combat shooter games, and the first-person camera has therefore come to be very closely associated with the mechanic of shooting guns. Some examples of first-person shooters are the *Call of Duty*²⁶ series, *Far Cry*²⁷, and *Wolfenstein*.²⁸

god games

God games are a genre of game based around total control over an environment and/or the beings within it. God games generally have minimal to no player-character. Some god games include *Black and White*²⁹ and *From Dust*.³⁰ This genre often overlaps with sim games.

magic circle

The “magic circle” is a term first coined by Johan Huizinga in his 1955

26 Infinity Ward, Treyarch, Sledgehammer Games, et. Al, 2003 – 2011

27 Crytek, 2004

28 Raven Software, id Software, Pi Studios, Endrant Studios, 2009

29 Lionhead Studios, 2001

30 Ubisoft Montpellier, 2011

book, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. It describes the state of altered reality that we enter when we agree to play a game. In the magic circle, conventional rules from the outside world (such as morality) may not apply, and the rules of the game are instead enforced. (For instance, in a game of assassin, one player might “kill” another, even though in real life that person would never consider an act of murder. This action can be performed because the assassin-player's morality and what is appropriate is suspended in favor of the game rules.)³¹

MMORPG

Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game. This genre features a single persistent online space that people from all over the world can log into and access. MMORPGs are generally known for having heavily customizable characters, structured quest systems, opportunities for group play, and many game mechanics common to single-player RPGs, such as a leveling system. Perhaps the most well-known example of this genre is *World of Warcraft*.³²

player-character

Player-character, or PC, generally refers to the character or characters in game that are directly controller by the player, and through which the player expresses their will on the game. For example, in a Mario game, Mario is the

31 Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study in the Play-Element of Culture*

32 Blizzard Entertainment, 2004

player-character, unless we are currently controlling Luigi, in which case Luigi is the player-character.

sim games

Sim (short for “simulation”) games are a genre of games that focus around detailed simulations and manipulating those simulations. As in god games, there is usually limited or no player-character in the genre. Instead, the player has access to various handles that allow them to access elements of the simulation world or to provide instructions to individual characters within that world. There is a significant overlap with the god game genre, but not all sim games are god games. Some examples of sim games include *The Sims*³³ and *Game Dev Story*.³⁴

33 Maxis, 2000

34 Kairossoft, 2010

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APPENDIX: PENNY ARCADE'S "OUR CRUCIAL PAMPHLET"

Mike Krahulik and Jerry Holkins are the creative minds behind popular webcomic "Penny Arcade." The two are respected members of the gaming community (well-known comic artists, founders of the "Child's Play" charity, donors of an annual scholarship for students of game design, and more), and their opinions are highly valued among a large population of gamers. In 2008 they posted a comic on their website called "Our Crucial Pamphlet," and released an accompanying podcast of the creative process that spawned the strip. The comic and podcast were both extremely critical of a game they had been playing, *Army of Two* by EA Montreal.³⁵ As the transcript below (an excerpt from the longer podcast) shows, Holkins and Krahulik were so frustrated by the characterization of the main characters that it made them actively angry and crushed any interest they may have had in the game. Their dialogue indicates not only their disgust with the explicitly characterized PCs as presented, but also their desire for games in which they have control over the characterization of their own characters.

Mike Krahulik: I hate those two guys. And so playing as them... is... frustrating.

Jerry Holkins: Right.

MK: Every time they talk, I just, I feel shame.

JH: Yeah, I feel ashamed! For myself!

MK: Yeah.

JH: I sort of talked about this with the, um, rhythm games?

MK: Yeah...

³⁵ EA Montreal, 2008

JH: But it's like this - it isn't confined to rhythm games - this urge to... find some venue for expression or interpretation in the games that we play. Like, it's really strong in a game like WOW.

MK: Yeah.

JH: Where your characters never have any dialogue of any kind, right?

MK: And you have to put your own... stamp on them.

JH: I enjoy that. Like, that's actually like, that could be on the back of the box. That's like a bullet point for me. "Your character never says anything stupid."

MK: [laughs] Yeah.

JH: "And you can make up all the dialogue you want, right there on the spot, it doesn't matter."

MK: Yeah.

JH: But with these guys... they never shut up. And they never say anything smart or interesting.

MK: Yeah.

JH: So... there's really, like, there's no opportunity for me to have any agency in the- in the way it plays out.

MK: Well, and they establish the fact, through the dialogue, that these characters are both stupid *fucking* assholes. And so any dialogue that you would try to create for them... like, what would you *have* them say? They're idiots. ...And every- and if even for a moment you start to pretend that they're not idiots, they'll say something stupid.

[...]

JH: And all [my character] wants to do is get a new television.

MK: Yeah.

JH: He wants to murder... enough people, so that he can get a TELEVISION!

MK: Yeah. They are-

JH: They're reprehensible. They're fucking animals. And-

[...]

JH: No, um, I-I don't even want to finish that level. I don't even want to f- I-

MK: No, and, when-

JH: I'm done. I'm just, I'm done with the game. [...] No no, even that's not true. Like, I'll play through it because I feel guilty. I feel like I haven't given this game a fair shake. When it has really done nothing but insult me the entire time, but I have this fucking complex...

MK: Nah, we played f- we played three and a half levels of it? And I was done after... I was done after two.