The Debt: Removing Main Character Bias in Dialogue Writing Through Stoicism

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ludonarrative, stoicisim, dialogue, linear

Format of work
A game prototype

DESCRIPTION OF WORK

The Debt is a linear story-based game in early development, designed for PC first. Whilst being developed in another engine, the narrative segments are prototyped within Ren'Py. The story revolves around Miles as he seeks to repay his civilian parent's debt to a gang, by going undercover within the rival gang. He soon finds he is more involved in this plot than he first thought, and finds connections to both gangs within his past. In contrast to this main story, Miles finds himself in many side stories where the secondary characters are given centre stage. As a narrative focused game, primary gameplay involves talking to, assisting and performing tasks for various members of the civilian and gang communities. As a physically disabled man, Miles is not much for fighting, but instead uses his intellect and intuition to work his way out of situations, and solve problem. *The Debt* is a continuation and expansion of a previous work of mine[1], redesigned to work within the context of an interactive medium. The Ren'Py based prototype focuses on the dialogue segments of the game, and is how I write and test the storytelling in accordance with the research expressed.

RESEARCH STATEMENT
Background

When we view the medium of ludonarrative, the combination of narrative and games, we can see commonality of protagonists that follow the "Hero's Journey" archetype. Examples include Link from The Legend of Zelda (Nintendo, 1986), or Mario of Super Mario (Nintendo, 1985). We often find that hero to be an all-powerful saviour, one that is the sole character capable of suprassing the greater evil. Though in being this archetype, this depicts the hero as an unrealistic character within the narrative. When these characters take on quests within these games, they are the only characters capable of solving the problem. I wish to shift away from this form of hero-centric narratives; to create more diverse and complex storytelling, specifically within side quests for the purposes of expanding worldbuilding and secondary character development. I believe this can be achieved by viewing the main character through a lens of observer and stoic personality and perspective.

I point to Gloria Kempton for her adaption of the Enneagram Personality Types into the storytelling medium, particularly in dialogue. (Kempton 2004) This tool is useful

for developing character dialogue as it affords the writer to categorize their characters into organized personalities, and write their dialogue and interactions within a consistent framework. This method reduces the gap between knowing who your characters are, and how to express their thoughts through speech. Specifically, her adaption of the observer personality type. However to observe is not enough on its own, the added trait of action is important for storytelling in videogames. Maintaing a balance between passive and active in personality is important in a ludonarrative context; passive by means of story, active by means of gameplay. Through Marcus Aurelius's writings, translated by Robin Waterfield, *Meditations* (Marcus Aurelius and Waterfield 2021) is a set of personal diaries in which Aurelius accounts his understanding of Stoic belief whilst maintaining rule over Ancient Rome. As a leader of an expansive civilization, Aurelius possesses more power than most. But through his entries he expresses a set of traits that I believe form a strong characterization of stoicism that could be applied to narrative writing. The traits that I identify as being key to strong stoic belief, which I will further expand on in my experimentation, are; Composure/Calmness, Restraint/Passivity, and Acceptance. By using Kempton's theory of Enneagram in dialogue, and the Stoic philosophy as written by Aurelius, I will seek how to reduce the overarching bias of the main character within their interactions. The observer role, through stoic principles in the dialogue, will be explored as a way to engage with situations outside of the main character, to explore the emotional depth, complexity and understanding of secondary characters. These characters will be shown to have agency, rather than being reliant on the main character.

As part of my writing of The Debt I will introduce stoic ideals in my character Miles. Making this character an observer rather than a traditional hero. Despite his physical limitations, Miles will prove himself capable through the use of his strong mental acumen. It is this strength that sets him apart from the other criminal characters within *The Debt*; where others use their brawn, he uses his brain. Through my reasearch into this set of peronality traits, I will build a profile and set of guidelines for creating more balanced and diverse interactions between Miles and the secondary characters. With a focus on using Stoicism, I will improve the depth of side quests and secondary stories; while maintaining the narrative's overall coherence. Of the Stoic traits mentioned, Miles would regulate his emotional response, remain passive, and avoid confrontational opposition to all interactions, including with situations he may disagree with or not understand. By framing Miles in this way, I may explore these secondary characters, uninhibited by the perspective of Miles. Affording Miles growth as a character, in responding to new ideas, and the audience a new experience and viewpoint separate from Miles.

Contribution to the field

The research focus is on providing a framework for writing new secondary characters and world building, outside of the main character bias. *The Debt* is used as a tool for expressign how the framework is utiliziated in story and dialogue writing, to enrich the elements outside of the main character. Using stoic beliefs, as pursued by the main characters, the response to dialogoue affords a natural expression of feeling free from resistance and judgement. As a new way to define elements of storytelling, the field will benefit from a new lens to view their writing, and adapt it for more free flowing dialogue from characters that were previously limited to only existing inside the main character's worldview.

Significance

By providing new pathways to writing secondary characters as separate from the main character, alternate viewpoints and understanding of the game world can be expressed.

Affording characters of differeing cultures and experiences expression within a world. As Australia is a multicultural nation, Australian media is filled with diverse voices. However, individual pieces follow in the world view of the main character/s as informed by the writer/s. Video games provide the capability of extending beyond short form narrative, and can provide numerous avenues to explore numerous voices within one piece, outside of the main character/s.

EXHIBITION
An offline laptop/computer can be used to showcase the prototype. As it expresses a linear project, individual interaction isn't necessary. However, through the benefit of a lightweight engine in Ren'py, a shareable version could be made to use on other mobiles/laptops. This will be done through an accessible QR code, dependant on individual platforms requirements. (Windows/Mac/Linux and Android can be shared without platform licenses)

BIO
I am Christian Karakiklas, a Melbourne-based storyteller that has been active in the field of digital design for 9 years. I'm currently undertaking the Master's of Design at RMIT, and have worked in Graphic Design for numerous companies in branding and social media. I have prominently featured narrative across the areas of 3D animation, games design, video production, and motion graphics work. One of my works, made with a wonderful team, Through Other Eyes was accepted as a runner-up for Adobe UX Awards. Though my proudest accomplishment has been The Debt - Pilot, which I'm in the works of turning into a full release game.

ENDNOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

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ENDNOTES

[1]The Debt – Pilot, which can be found here https://christiankarakiklas.framer.website/projects/the-debt-pilot