

# Types of Fear: Using Video Game Character Design to Evoke Uncertainty, Apprehension and Disgust

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## INTRODUCTION

Effective video game character design clearly communicates, through visual elements, aspects of a character such as their personality or role in the game's story (Sloan, 2015). Ineffective or unappealing character design can become detrimental to a video game's overall reception by the public and affect a player's ability to suspend their disbelief and immerse themselves in the narrative (Sierra Rativa, 2022). What needs to be communicated visually in a character design can differ vastly depending on the video game's genre, art style, and the narrative role of the character. As a result, design approaches and illustration techniques also vastly differ depending on the intended final video game product. As well as communicating aspects of a character visually, effective character design also produces an emotional response from a player (Nieminen, 2017).

However, there is a lack of research around video game character design and how it elicits emotional responses in players (Blom, 2020). Characters play a central role in connecting different plots and stories within a video game together because they are the elements of consistency between these stories. Player characters in particular directly affect a player's experience because they serve as the player's conduit to the game world (Blom, 2020). Therefore, understanding how different design choices affect a player's emotional response to a video game character is important to consider during the character design process. This research gap is particularly important to address in the context of the horror video game genre because effective character design in horror video games should result in characters evoking fear in players (Spittle, 2011). While there are studies that explore creating fear responses through general video game design (e.g. Graja, Lopes, & Chanel, 2021), there is minimal research into how this is done through character design (e.g. Scheider, Wang & Yang, 2007) and visual concept art. There is also minimal research into how a design concept's effectiveness can be preserved during its translation into a 3D model.

To address this research gap, practice-led research (Candy, 2006) and Piggot-Irvine's (2002) Problem Resolving Action Research Model (PRAR) were utilised to identify and apply video game character design techniques to communicate and evoke specific fear responses. Three horror video game character concept artworks and one 3D model were developed using video game character design techniques adapted from relevant literature (e.g. Thon, 2019, Isbister, 2022) and existing character case studies (e.g. Pyramid Head, Konami 2001). By using both academic literature and characters

from published games, research and industry work could be combined to understand how different character design methods function from both a theoretical and practical standpoint (Klimas et al., 2025). The three video game character concept artworks focused on evoking the fear responses of uncertainty, apprehension and disgust and were developed in individual action research cycles following Piggot-Irvine's (2002) model.

The character design concept artworks were evaluated by 13 video game designers across three action research cycles in both written questionnaire and interview format. Adjustments to improve clarity of design and effectiveness of evoking desired emotional responses were made based on gathered feedback. The selected adjustments were chosen based on trends identified within the gathered feedback; if an undesired response was communicated by multiple participants, it was considered a high priority to adjust the responsible elements of the character's design. The success of the applied changes would be evaluated through participant feedback in the following research cycle.

Findings from this process were used to develop a framework for designing characters to elicit the fear responses of uncertainty, apprehension and disgust. The framework organises different character design techniques by emotional response. It also lists each technique's use of character design elements (e.g. colour and shape) and what the intended effect of the technique on the player is, with reference to applicable literature. This framework helps to condense different video game character design techniques into an efficient format by breaking them down into their different features and applications. This format of organising techniques provides a connection between academic literature and industry practice, facilitating the creation of more diverse game characters by combining different techniques. Due to smaller teams, less industry experience and smaller budgets for projects (Keogh, 2019), independent and emerging game designers need resources that are easily accessible and applicable (Freeman et al., 2020). The framework includes multiple character design techniques in a discernible format that can easily be shared and understood by a team of designers. The framework assists independent and emerging video game designers in creating effective and communicative character designs for horror games because of its accessibility and condensed format. It also highlights the need for more academic research into horror video game characters and their effects on players by only focusing on three potential emotions. Further projects could be undertaken to explore other emotions and identify other horror video game character design techniques in the future.

## **BIO**

Tiana Toussaint is an incoming PhD student in the School of Business and Creative Industries at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, Australia. Her research focuses on how video game design communicates messages, such as emotional responses and narrative context, to players. Tiana is also a university tutor in video game design and an independent character and environment concept artist.

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