

Getting Players Emotionally Invested in Procedural Characters in *Wilderness*



Presented by Nate Austin (Worldwalker Games, LLC) for GDC 2022

Uh, who are you and why do I care?

Nate Austin, lead programmer of Wildermyth

- RPG of the Year (PC Gamer)
- 87 on Metacritic (Feb. 2022)
- Overwhelmingly Positive on Steam
- Nebula Nominated for Game Writing

Wildermyth's design intent:

- Generate compelling characters
- Invite the player to care about them



Ok, so what are we going to talk about?

Creating emotional attachment to progen heroes!

What Pulls Us In

- Generating potentially interesting characters
- Designing for emergence that strengthens characters

What Pushes Us Away

- Handful of pitfalls we identified and try to avoid








Alright, so what makes a good ensemble character?

Not the same as “what makes a good character!”

Look to other forms of fiction:

- Memorable name
- Cares about something
- Personality / quirks
- Visually distinct / iconic
- Good at something
- Relatable
- Not TOO strong

Good	Bad	Why Bad
		Hero's Journey
		Chosen One
		Too weak & Hero's Journey Too strong!!
		Chosen One & too strong

So I guess let's talk about names? Is this interesting?

Names are Incredibly Important

- Pronounceable
- Interpretable gender (most of the time)
- Fit into a cultural space
- Distinct and memorable
- Hint at a story
- ~~Tell us about the character~~

Consider: Barlox Spidermusk

```

"surname": ["*_OR_", [3, "<PredefinedSurname>"], [5, "<ConstructedSurname>"]],
"constructedSurname": ["<SurnameBegin><surnameEnd>"],

"predefinedMaleFirstName": ["Ike", "Lack", "Rick", "Walsh", "Keeth", "Taroon", "Willy", "Sanar", "Yen", "Am",
"predefinedFemaleFirstName": ["Annie", "Eydaline", "Emli", "Eena", "Ema", "Em", "Emery", "Cathryn", "Lee",
"predefinedSurname": ["_Swift", "Marsh", "Laird", "Stourm", "Wills", "Root", "Guire", "West", "Rexro",

"firstNameBegin": ["Ad", "An", "Ab", "Af", "Ayr", "Agar", "Al", "Alec", "Am", "An", "Ar", "Ard", "Art", "Arth",
"maleFirstNameEnd": ["an", "ander", "ar", "ari", "aru", "as", "bear", "bane", "bar", "baron", "bard", "barn",
"femaleFirstNameEnd": ["a", "a", "a", "a", "a", "a", "a", "a", "a", "a", "a", "ala", "alia", "alina", "alla", "and",

"surnamePrefix": ["Von ", "Van ", "Dol ", "Mac ", "Vas ", "Den ", "La ", "Lo ", "Dro ", "Li ", "Dun ",
"surnameBegin": ["Tar", "Avgen", "Avlen", "Avlen", "Athen", "Amber", "Arden", "Arden", "Ardyn", "Aldyn", "Va",
"surnameEnd": ["walker", "talker", "torn", "hall", "hever", "coe", "lynn", "wright", "call", "cole",

```

Arne Rootkens
Lobbor Arrowcoil
Fione Inkish
Afjo Jasperburring
Farius Marsam
Wordin Locke
Fidun Ered
Nenglin Shag
Quidander
Yorlof Fox

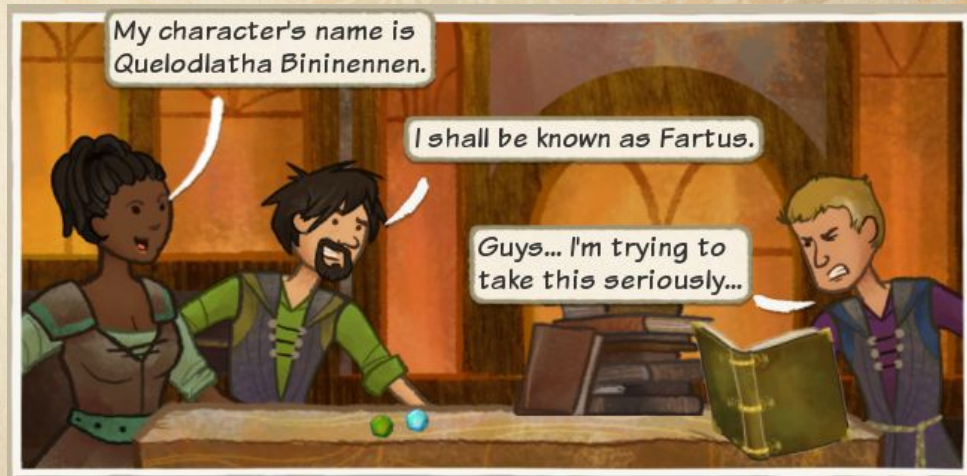
Opelia Scrayling
Junry Longfane
Rowrin Fennelpot
Isla Quick
Gergta Stack
Triss Maggorn
Rumanna Badbarrel
Dranvere Esterness
Janwaen
Afora Bearpants

Bronzod's Hove
Merdric's Loom
Send of the Wright
Calm Wrath Burrow
Iglof's Crest
Julieta's Vel
Bower of Jaym
North Ville
Ton of Zane
Weeping Wrath Creeks

What went wrong? What did you learn?

One bad name ruins ten good ones

- Consistency is more important than variety
- Weed out fragments or formulas that cause failures, even if they're rare
- Mix techniques so they don't all feel the same
- Cheat (lists of predefined first names, surnames)
- If it's on the edge, it's bad!



Ah, “history.” You know nobody reads that, right?

Good history lines are specific and personal

- Where are they coming from?
- What’s something notable to them from their past?
- What do they care about?

(Good ensemble characters need all these)

```
origin_107=<mf:son/daughter/child> of the finest <hothead/loner/greedy.smith/coop>  
origin_108=The <healer/leader/romantic:miller/woodcutter/mayor> of <Hometown> had  
origin_109=Tilling soil held a certain charm for <firstName>. So did planting seed  
origin_11=Growing up in a prosperous farming town, <firstName> enjoyed <goofball/  
origin_110=A listener by nature, <firstName> liked to sit by <mf:his father/her m  
origin_111=<firstName>'s mother taught <mf:him/her/them> swordplay while good old  
origin_112=It wasn't easy growing up the <mf:son/daughter/child> of <coward/hothe  
origin_113=Proud of <mf:his mother/her father/their parent>'s <bookish/healer/gre  
origin_114=The <mf:boy/girl/child> <firstName> turned up at <Hometown> one mornin  
origin_115=<firstName> was born at sea. The rhythm of the ship rocked <mf:him/her  
origin_116=A pair of pilgrims on the ocean named their <mf:boy/girl/child> <first  
origin_117=Orphaned at an early age, <firstName>'s sole possession by the time <  
origin_12=Despite growing up among believers, spell-weavers, and diviners of all  
origin_13=The houses of <mf:his/her/their> hometown were barely able to escape <  
origin_14=Broad skies always intimidated <mf:boyish/girlish/childish> <firstName>  
origin_15=What birds there once were all scattered with the coming of the lean ye  
origin_16=<firstName>'s first memory was of being sixteen. <mf:He/She/They> woke  
origin_17=What does happiness look like? For <firstName>, the answer was always <  
origin_18=Where <firstName> grew up, <romantic/snark:the wan winter skies/boring  
origin_19=<firstName> was a <goofball/hothead/loner:wall-hopping imp of a <mf:boy  
origin_2=Some say <firstName>'s birth was foretold by an old <hometown> sage who  
origin_20=The local peach-grower forbade children like <firstName> from picking t  
origin_21=<firstName> moved from one place to another as a <mf:boy/girl/child>. A  
origin_22=<firstName> was part of a nasty shipwreck as a <mf:boy/girl/child>. Fro  
origin_23=<firstName> would recite tales for <mf:his/her/their> friends, of <cow  
origin_24=<firstName> was found as an infant, squalling in a basket in the river  
origin_25=Adopted after the <hothead/coward:cruel/unfortunate> deaths of both <mf  
origin_26=<Leader/greedy/romantic:Mercenary bands/Merchants/Travelling performers  
origin_27=The <healer/poet/romantic:fever-struck foreigner only raved and repeate  
origin_28=<firstName> never had sweet dreams. Born to a pair of murderers who got  
origin_29=Linked by name to an ancient prophecy, <firstName> largely shrugged it  
origin_3=<firstName>'s <mf:mother/father/parent> taught <mf:him/her/them> to take
```

So what went wrong?

Hooks are a mess

- Should have been “plot” oriented instead of story-role oriented
- Are not as impactful as we wanted them to be
- Can conflict with personalities

Think about how you want to drive gameplay from history



Other lessons from history?

We did a few iterations on it!

- As the tone of the game evolved, history lines didn't quite keep up
- Showing 3 lines as 1 block was a big improvement
- Prime stat variation creates perverse incentives when rolling characters :-/



So what else is generated? Personalities? What's that mean?



But what does that mean? How do personalities work?

Oh hey, Wildermyth has kind of a lot of writing?

- Events feature heroes
- Heroes talk like themselves most of the time
- All this is written by hand
- Library of Plays!



Wait, what's the Library of Plays?

The Library of Plays

- Each event is a “play”
- Each play has a cast that it needs
- Roles have requirements and scoring functions
- Roles are matched in order (targets)
- Pick randomly from all the possible plays
- Actors bring their identities and personalities to the role (splits, dynamic writing)
- Layers make the magic work!



Can I see some examples?

name: Stories of Fire

musicOverride: Music/Comics - High Magic Enc

Targets:

self

company

Aspects: chapterNumber >= 2

overlandTile

site

party

foes

target	required	+
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> personality	HEALER	
	HOTHEAD	
	LEADER	
	ROMANTIC	
	POET	+

Score: max(HEALER, HOTHEAD, LEADER, ROMANTIC, POET) >= 80

Eligible for Theme: fire

Eligible for Theme Piece: leftArm

volunteer	required	+
<input type="checkbox"/> family with	target	
<input type="checkbox"/> any ship with	target	
Enable Editing (?)		

Score: (FAMILY_WITH.target*10)+(SHIP_WITH.target*10)

hero	required	+
<input type="checkbox"/> any ship with	target	
Enable Editing (?)		

Score: SHIP_WITH.target*10

encounter_heroesActiveSite_heroOutline

1. full: hero, volunteer, target, volunt...

They hike <overlandTile.bgtps a mulchy/the tree-covered/the tree-covered/a mulchy/the wooded> hill above <site>, making their final approach.

<overlandTile.bgtps> The trees here... actually look [i]younger[] than the wider woods. Kind of odd. /Was this woodland always here in the middle of the plains? Oddly isolated. /Woodland here... Used to be bigger? Or smaller? It's kind of set apart. /The trees here... actually look [i]younger[] than the wider woods. Kind of odd. /Nice respite from those nipping flies. High dry ground like this >

2. full: hero, volunteer, target, volunt...

<target.healer/hothead/leader/romantic/poet> [face:interested] It's happening, isn't it? I've got that feeling like a... like I'm shielding a candle from the wind, and wishing only to go inside To sleep in my bed. /Gruh-stum-dumb-gum. What's my body feeling? Laziness? Tiredness? I'm... cold inside. Cold. /face: interested] Why... do I not remember yesterday? I'm going dull out here, I swear. Feel like I need this battle. A great heat, a grind to sharpen me. /face:interested] Why do I feel like this, sometimes? The heat and happiness, the luster... go gray and cold inside me. What does that mean? /face:neutral] Here's that feeling again. Listless. Like <npc2.fullName> writes: "I'm a cinder blown across the sky of my life." > Should I say something?

3. twoThirds: target (Prompt)

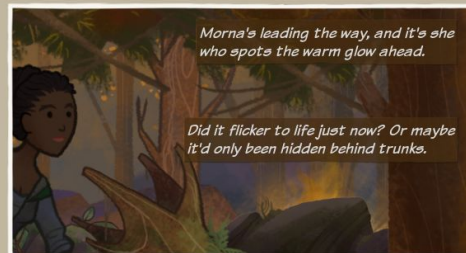
<target>'s leading the way, and it's <target.mf.he/she/they> who spots the warm glow ahead.

Did it flicker to life just now? Or maybe it'd only been hidden behind trunks.

4. full: hero, volunteer, target, volunt...

<volunteer bookish/greedy/loner/60> [face:interested] Nothing exceptional was ever recorded about this place. /Not a remarkable spot. /face:neutral] It's an otherwise quiet place. / Yeah, this place's pretty removed > <foes.cdgmt> The mudlovers seem to like it. But why? /Dravuen must have a

Back Tps: 6/20/393 Panel 1.2 (hero) > SPLIT > Broadleaf Forest > plain text



Effect > targets > 11 > promptScri

0: 1. full: hero, volunteer, -> Split Compose

panel: full: hero, volunt size: full

showNameTags: fals

bg: comicBG_forestA

bgAuto: null

bgNighttime: false

mustStartRow: false

mustEndRow: false

animation: null

allowDuplicates: false

actorSlots: <list>

+0: hero talk

+1: volunteer interest

+2: target skeptical

+3: volunteer2 intere

+4: volunteer3 grim

+5: scenery:boulderF

+6: scenery:trunk2.p

Add npc

Add Image

Add Animati

textSlots: <list>

0: narration: They h

textSource: They

maki

style: narration

pointerOwner: nu

+ details...

1: hero speech: <ove

textSource: <over

One more please?



**What does Udfor say next?
Depends on his relationship
with Arkyn!**

If they're rivals...



If they're friends...



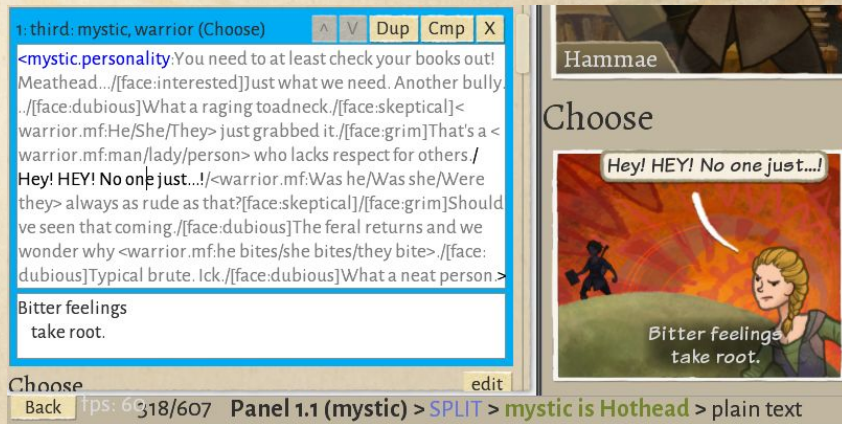
If they're lovers...



Are we still talking about personality stats? What did you learn?

So many things!

- Players only care about 1 or 2 per hero
- It's hard to be consistent, you have to be very thorough
- Need to actually write 11-way personality splits
- Need nested tags
- Need better tools!!



About those tool improvements?

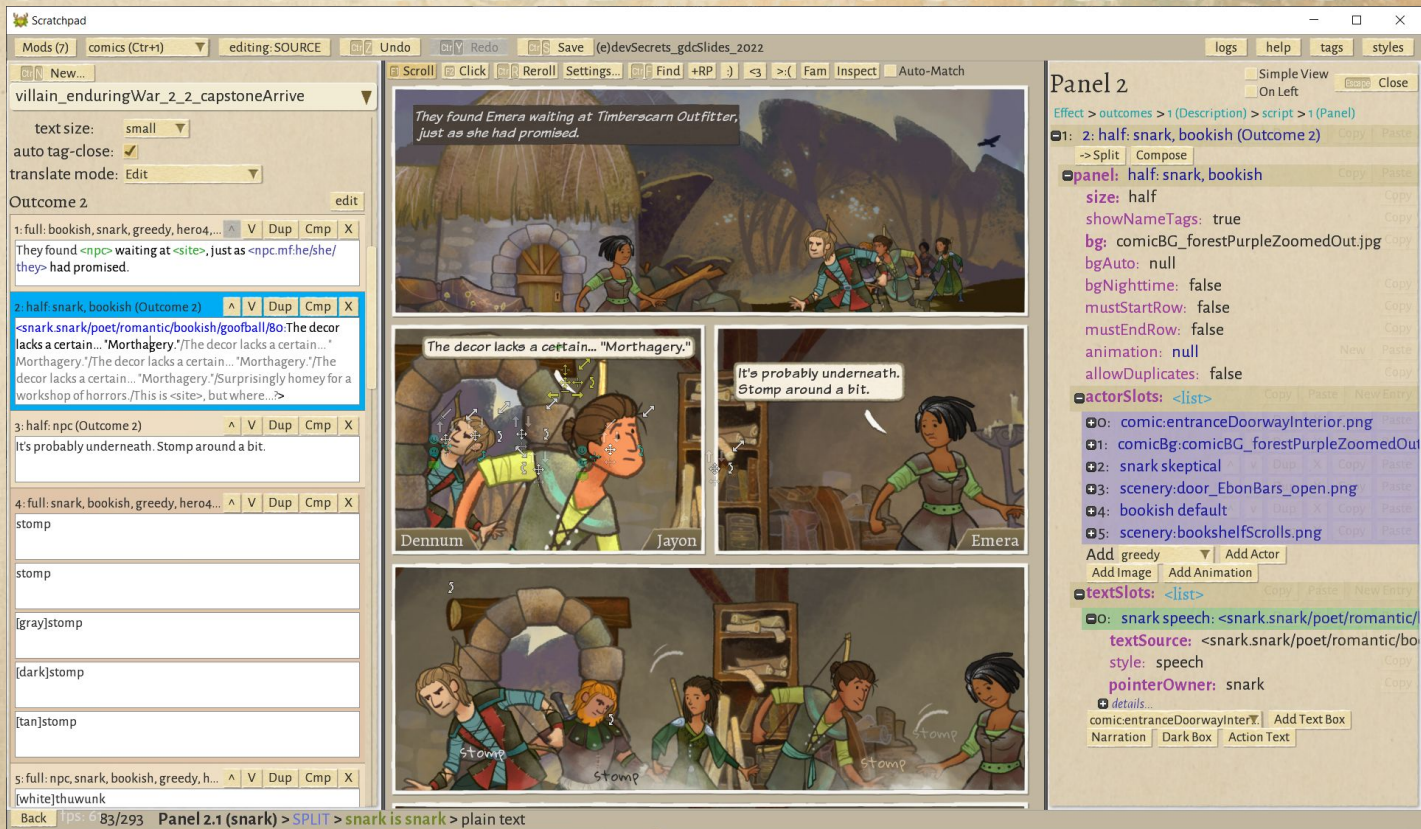
Tools got SO MUCH BETTER

- Visual Editor
- Nested Tags
- Bespoke Splits
- Error reporting
- Status Bar for cursor
- Auto-backup and crash recovery
- Syntax highlighting
- Tooltips
- Autocomplete
- Manual and Smart role matching
- Compose Panel controls (edit all actors)
- Move/Scale all with mouse



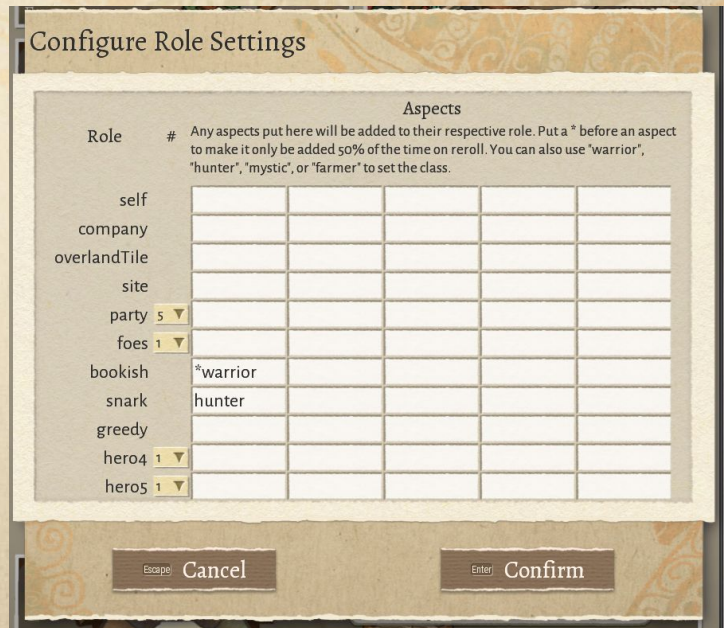
So what are we looking at here?

- Visual Editor
- Nested Tags
- Status Bar for cursor
- Syntax highlighting
- Tooltips
- Autocomplete
- Error reporting



So what are we looking at here?

- Compose Panel controls (edit all actors)
- Manual and Smart role matching



Lessons from the tools?

Invest in tools, but procrastinate

- Be sure you have a real need
- Do it the bad way for a while first so you know what you need
- Get involved in content creation, empathy is critical!
- Tools improved content quality, but generally didn't speed us up.



Ok but we're getting off track. Compelling Characters?

Let's talk about VISUALS

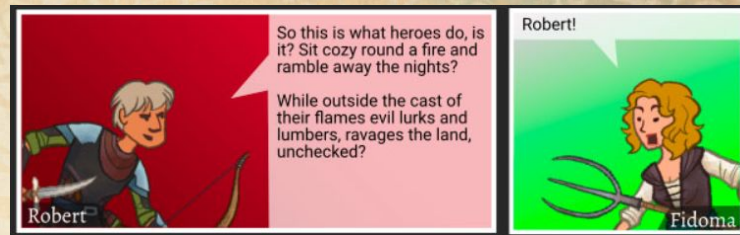


Why are facial expressions important?

Knowing how characters feel is critical in fiction

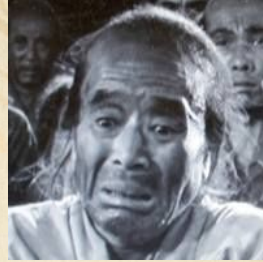
- Seeing a face is a shortcut to feeling the emotion (because mirror neurons probably?)
- We ended up with 17 expressions
- Reaction shots are great for hammering it home

Programmer-art mockup:



What did you learn?

- Lean in to “charming”
- Don’t use the sad face
- Draw more neutral faces (interested, grim)
- Subtle expressions are the most useful.
- Some personalities gravitate towards or away from certain faces



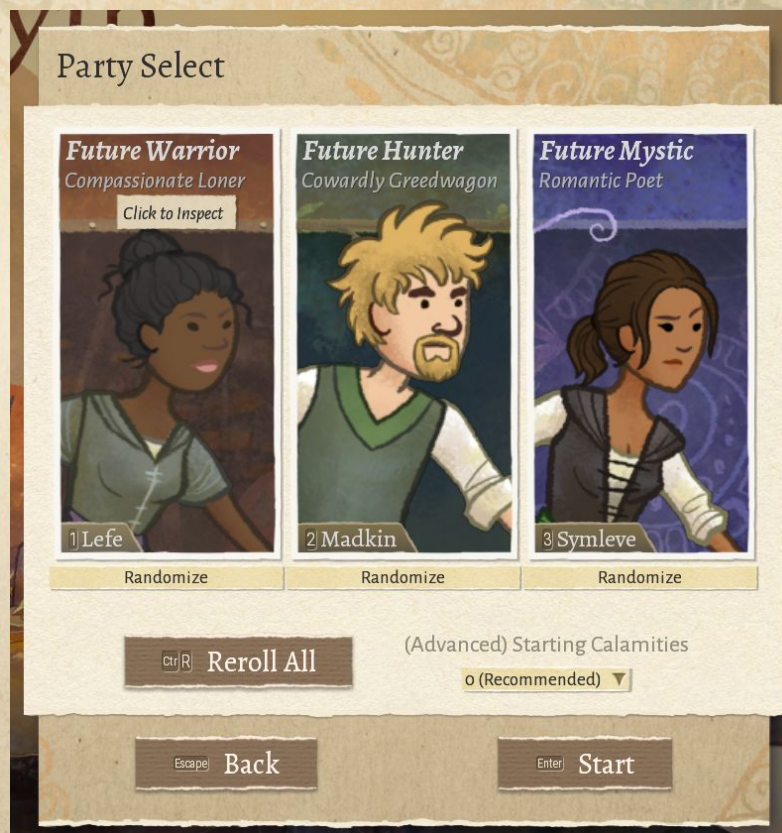
← *Nobody likes this guy.
Great movie though!*



So now what happens?

We now have characters that it's **POSSIBLE** to care about.

And this is when the player steps in,
and EMERGENCE takes over from
GENERATION.



We need to talk about our relationship.

We keep it simple

- Romance, Rivalry, Friendship
- Personality stats determine compatibility
- Pick one, it grows over time
- Player choices in events can override type
- Relationships don't go down (not fun.)



So how do relationships actually work?

There are a number of benefits!

- Combat Buffs
 - Lover's Vengeance
 - Got your Back
 - Oh Yeah, Watch This!
- Marriage!
- Kids!
- Special Events!
- Special handling in text, all over the place!



And what have you learned from all of these relationships?

Players CARE (about romance).

- Romance-related material is popular and highly requested.
- Just knowing that two heroes are dating instantly humanizes both of them, AND creates an imagined party dynamic with the third hero.
- People want love triangles, etc., but our game isn't well set up for that



Aging is a good thing?

Aging characters is **POWERFUL!**

- Not just about having some older folks around
- It makes you see the character differently
- Players don't want their PCs to age! But it's really important.
- Bittersweet



So how does it go over?

Aging works, but players don't like it

- Some players *really* hate it
- It's REALLY HARD to make retirement feel good
- Legacy system helps a lot here
- Most games don't tell stories about growing old, so it feels novel.



What's the deal with children?

We don't do very much with them TBH

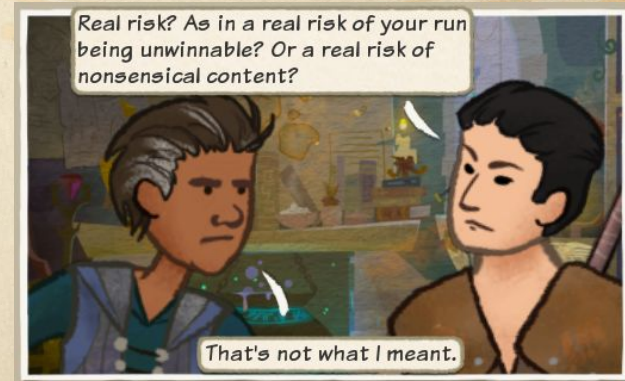
- Generate as-needed rather than at birth (unsatisfying)
- Get last name and looks from parents
- (Some) events take them into account
- Players want family trees. Maybe some day.



How can you make injuries feel good?

Real Risk is a great benefit of Procgen!

- Injuries differentiate characters
- Overcoming them feels great
- Important that it's possible to recover
- Also important not to erase the injury!
- Was hard to balance!



What are transformations?



How do transformations work?

Granularly!

- Integrates with maiming system
- Events give you themes
- Replace lost limbs
- Mix and match pieces
- Affects combat!



What did you learn about transformations?

They're a pillar of our character progression

- Always a choice
(even if a mortal choice)
- They're relevant in combat
- Perverse incentive to maim hero
-> advance during interval



What kind of basic stuff?

Gear and Abilities are driven by player choices

- All choices are permanent
- No trading gear! No inventory!
- Ability choices are randomized so you can't always build the same

Many players don't like these decisions, but they are super important to us.



Didn't we talk about storytelling earlier?

CHARACTER FOCUSED STORIES

- Players don't care about the plot, they care about the heroes.
- Show us how the HEROES care about the plot.
- Never lore dump
- Hey we can't do one big plot anyway, because remember the Library of Plays? Random events!



Do you have a rant for combat integration, too?

Players focus on power

- If it affects combat, it's important
- If players don't notice it, it's not important
- We want the stories, gear, relationships, abilities, and transformations to be important



So, is that about it for character emergence?

Emergence Summary

- Content and consequences drive character change.
- Each change is visible in the art
- Each change affects combat in visible, dramatic ways.
- Consequences are permanent
- Cross-generational stories (time drives character change)



So what pushes us away from caring?

You know this stuff:

- Breach of Trust, Loss of Control
- Acting out of character
- Unlikable protagonists
- Boring/Cliche characters
- Melodrama/Maudlin
- Fear of Heartbreak (or, rage quits)

So yeah, “bad writing” is a big part of it.



What counts as a Breach of Trust?

Respect player's expectations!

- Players create internal rules for the game in their heads
- If you break a mental rule, players will quickly discard that rule and try to form another.
- Not having internal rules you can rely on is intensely frustrating.

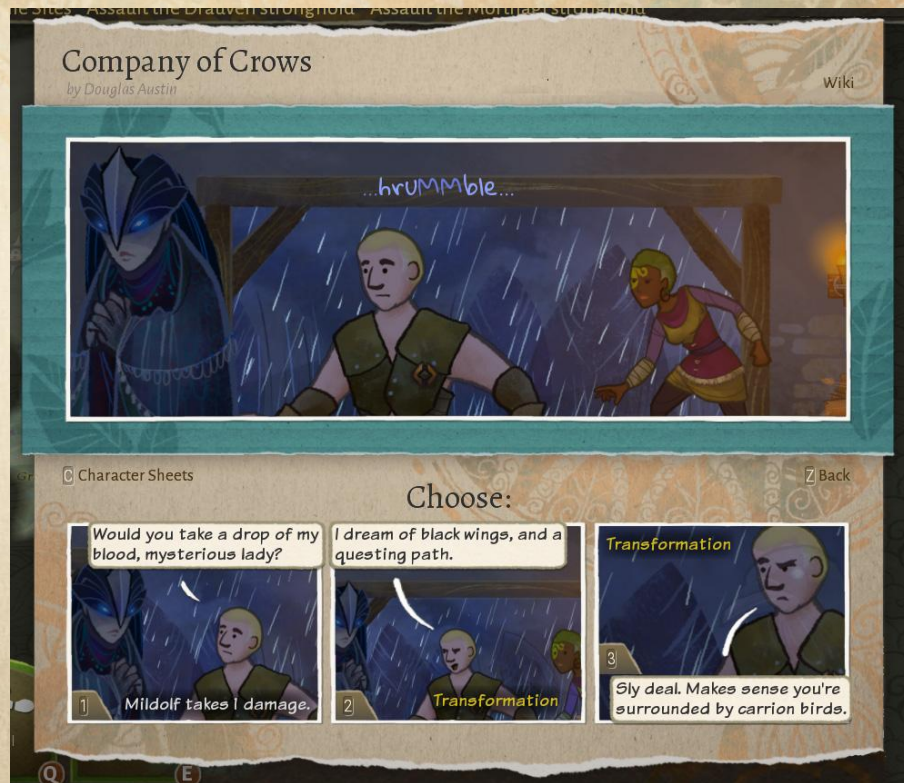
Some games that set clear expectations upfront!



So what does that mean for Wildermyth?

Here are some of our narrative rules:

- Don't have good/bad choices (have tradeoffs instead)
- Don't have consequences that are out of proportion to the choice (unless clearly marked)
- Never troll the player, even if it's really funny
- Big consequences need to be clearly telegraphed beforehand
- Show percentage chances (usually)



What about other areas of the game?

In combat, it's similar:

- Players should know what will happen before they click
- Enemy capabilities should be clearly communicated
- Hidden enemies or traps aren't fun



Ok next up is Acting out of Character! I'm excited for this one!

Be diligent about the writing.

- Remove anachronisms and idioms that don't fit in-world
- Don't break the fourth wall for a joke. Even a funny joke.
- People don't say things everyone already knows
- Take the fiction seriously (or no-one else will)



Yeah but that's just "good writing." What about procedural stuff?

Procedural content poses extra challenges:

- Personalities can't be as extreme (unless you're very thorough)
- Certain relationships (romance, family) are crucial to keep in mind.



It's important to keep track of relationships!

So how about unlikable protagonists?

Main Characters need to be at least 2 of:

- Competent
- Funny
- Well Intentioned

And at most one:

- Directionless
- Grating/Annoying
- Hostile/Aggressive



Avoid boring stuff, is what you're saying?

There's some stuff we've all seen a million times. Don't do that.

- Avoid cliches
- Don't use idioms
- Subvert tropes
- Don't pick your setting off the shelf

Make every decision!

(Also, interesting stuff has to happen!)

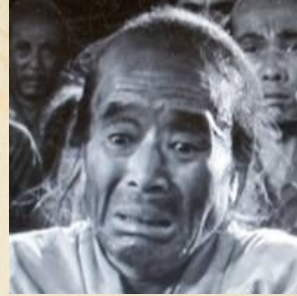


You always have a choice.

What else do we need to avoid?

Melodramatic, particularly maudlin characters are bad.

- Don't rely on tragedy to create attachment. It won't.
- Don't casually kill off villages/npcs/planets
- Don't use [face:sad] unless you just got reminded about your dog that died.



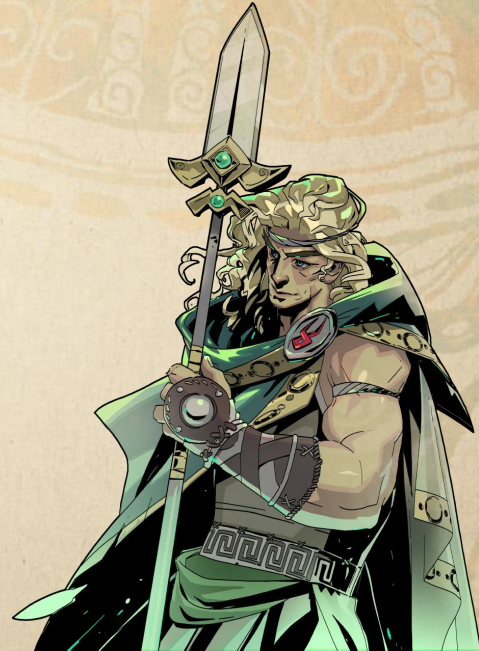
← *This guy again!
He's a great actor.*



Well but how else can I motivate the player?

Consider Achilles from Hades

- Is competent and likes you
- Has a tragic story that you can help with
- You have to drag it out of him!!
- He would ***never consider*** asking you to get involved in his personal grief!!!



Hades is really good, you guys.

Can I get one more example?

Disco Elysium is really bleak, right?

- Not that many actual deaths, but it feels like a ****ing disaster.
- Each death, including the instigating one, is **FELT** and **PROCESSED**.
- Incredibly, you come to understand and even like many of the characters
- You can be a good cop if you want, and people recognize that



Disco Elysium is really good too!

I'm about to rage quit this talk. Ha just kidding.

Death is a crucial story, but it sucks.

- Aging and retirement remind you that all heroes are mortal
- Children and new recruits arrive to take over
- Mortal choices make death feel more fair
- Legacy system promises you'll be able to use that hero again next game



Remind me how the Legacy System works?

Your Legacy makes heroes myths

- Heroes who die, retire, or win can go into your legacy.
- Legacy heroes have tiers, can be promoted
- Legacy heroes can be used in future games
- Starting level and abilities based on Legacy Tier.



And how does this help with rage quits?

Takes the sting out of death:

- Your favorite heroes aren't gone forever.
- You can advance them over multiple campaigns.
- Risks are contained to a single campaign



So, are we almost done?

Compelling Characters are Emergent

- Generate a fairly basic character, hopefully interesting and likable, but not overly specific
- Give the player as much control over the character's growth as you can
- Emphasize permanent consequences
- Carefully avoid gameplay or writing that breaks the investment.



Can you be more obscure and poetic though?

Be a sensitive soul.

- Players want to invest!
- But they don't expect to.
- Everything has to be just right.
- We are shy with our hearts.



How about a song for the road?

References

- Elan Ruskin 2012 GDC Talk
youtube.com/watch?v=tAbBID3N64A
- Emily Short's blog
- Tanya X. Short's writings
- The Aesthetic of Play - Brian Upton
- Wired for Story - Lisa Cron
- Writing Excuses Podcast
(I listened to seasons 1-8?)

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