



PURPOSE IN GAMES



AN ENDURING INTENTION TO DO SOMETHING YOU VALUE THAT IS BIGGER THAN YOURSELF.

Is there any question as compelling as “Why are we here?” There are probably as many answers as there are people, although being strongly connected to others is a common thread in what ultimately matters to us. Determining what we value and what we strive to do in the world is important for developing a consistent sense of self. It matters for health, too — adults with a strong sense of purpose tend to live longer and healthier lives. Young people shouldn’t feel pressured to “find their purpose” too early, though. Instead, they should have opportunities and encouragement to explore who they are and what they’re interested in doing. Defining a purpose is a long journey, and games can support the effort through identity exploration opportunities and exposure to a wide range of ideas, people, places, and possibilities. Purpose can be confined to the game itself, but developers also find ways to directly impact the world through gameplay. How would your game support players in shaping their identity, values, and ambitions?

ELEMENTS TO ADD

- + Awe-inspiring, open worlds prompt players to make their own meaning
- + Themes of survival, rescue, self-improvement, defeating evil
- + Characters who overcome great obstacles and persist despite difficulty
- + Opportunities for players to express themselves and try out different identities and personality characteristics
- + Elements of caregiving, which requires an investment in someone or something
- + Mysteries or puzzles to solve
- + Real-world impact [ex: Foldit]
- + Player decision points with far-reaching effects on the game world and inhabitants
- + Opportunities to cooperate towards a shared goal
- + Ways to help and share with other players or characters
- + A sense of urgency that inspires brave or dedicated action

ELEMENTS TO LEAVE OUT

- No meaningful relationships to build, nurture, or defend
- Totally competitive, player v. player-style play might impede feelings of connection, eroding purpose
- Escapist and “time killer” elements (ex: repetitive, “match 3” style) are not negative in and of themselves but have little to do with purpose, unless they are used to highlight what a lack of purpose feels like

COMMON PITFALLS

WINNING ISN'T EVERYTHING

Think how you would describe the purpose of your game without using phrases like “the purpose is to win” or “collect all the items.” Try talking about your game in terms of personal meaningfulness, or in the pursuit of a goal that is bigger than any one person.

SCOPE IT REALLY WELL

It’s great that you want to make a game that solves world hunger or saves the manatees (they’re so cute!). BUT, is your scope doable? If a player goes through your game and doesn’t achieve the purpose you set out, they may feel disappointed. When setting an altruistic purpose, be as specific, realistic, and actionable as you can!

LOST IN THE DETAILS

It’s easy to get engrossed in the details of the game, but purpose is about seeing a bigger picture. All those small decisions add up, so make sure you occasionally take a step back and consider how each small decision fits into your big-picture goal. Ensure that players’ choices matter to how the game turns out, especially if you’re not creating a primarily story-driven, linear narrative game.

A LITTLE HAND-HOLDING

If you’re making a sandbox game that’s player-directed, offer just enough tools and guidance so that the player can create their own purpose while playing. Self-direction is a great way to let players craft their own experiences, but it can’t be so completely wide open that they don’t know what to do or aren’t encouraged in some way to explore.

GAME GENRES & TYPES



Action/Adventure



Cooperative Play



Social Impact



Open World



Story



Social Stimulation

SPECIFIC MECHANICAL REFERENCES

Cooperative games like *Pandemic* or *Forbidden Island/Forbidden Desert* invite players to collaborate and use specific abilities to save everyone.

Open-world games like *Minecraft* and *The Sims* inspire players to set their own goals and explore what interests them most.

Role-playing games like *World of Warcraft* let players explore and display the skills, traits, and mindsets of many archetypes (mage, warrior, healer, etc.).

Purpose-driven characters like Link from *Legend of Zelda*, Mario from *Super Mario Bros.* and Aloy from *Horizon Zero Dawn* invite players along on a noble quest to save others and learn about themselves.

The torch-bearing avatar in *Road Not Taken* conquers increasingly bewildering puzzles to rescue children lost in a storm and reunite them with their families.

Eco lets players observe their impact on Earth's fragile ecosystem.

Abzu sparks awe by depicting in beautiful depth and color the amazing wonders worth protecting under the ocean's surface, and lets players restore health and beauty to neglected areas.

Kerbal Space Program sparks awe and curiosity about the vastness of space and encourages players to expand their minds and skills in order to travel there.

Foldit asks players to put their puzzle-solving abilities to work in the service of discovering all the myriad ways proteins can fold, a key to understanding disease processes and therapies.

Sea Hero Quest, a fun mobile navigation game, helps scientists collect huge amounts of (anonymous) data on spatial navigation skills across the lifespan to inform the diagnosis and treatment of dementia.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR PURPOSE

Stuart, P. (2012). More than just fun: Designing games with purpose. Game Developers Conference. Retrieved from: <https://www.gdcvault.com/play/1015394/More->

Mitgutch, K. & Alvarado, N. (2013). Purposeful by design? A serious game design assessment framework. In Proceedings of the International Conference on the Foundation of Digital Games, 121-128. Retrieved from: https://studio.edx.org/asset-v1:MITx+11.127x+1T2015+type@asset+block@Purposeful_by_Design.pdf

Strecher, V. (2016). Life on purpose: How living for what matters most changes everything. New York, NY: HarperOne.

Bronk, K. C. (2011). The role of purpose in life in healthy identity formation: A grounded model. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 2011(132), 31-44.

Suttie, J. (2016, May 13). How to talk with teens about purpose. Greater Good Science Center. Retrieved from http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_to_talk_with_teens_about_purpose

Character Lab (2014). Dr. Bill Damon of Stanford University talks about purpose [Video file.] Retrieved from <https://vimeo.com/98298024>