

Creating Emphatic Characters: A Method A Creative toolkit for Designing Empathic Characters in Digital Games

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FIGURE 1

Creating Emphatic Characters: a Method – Final Prototype.

FIGURE 2

Creating Emphatic Characters: a Method: detail.

FIGURE 3

Creating Emphatic Characters: a Method: detail.

Creating Emphatic Characters: A Method is an analog toolkit designed to assist game designers in the early stages of character development, supporting the creation of complex, emotionally engaging, and narratively coherent playable characters. Developed over four years of doctoral research under a grounded theory approach, the tool is structured into four themed decks of instructional cards: Life Foundation, Personality, Appearance, and Path & Conflict. Each card prompts the designer to reflect on key aspects of the character's identity, such as their psychological traits, emotional background, visual symbolism, and narrative trajectory. This structure encourages creative exploration and avoids reliance on clichés or archetypes. The tactile and visual design – featuring textured paper, folding cards, and translucent layers – further supports iterative ideation and layered storytelling.

The toolkit was awarded the Best Paper Award at the international HCI International 2024 conference, where it was recognized for its innovative approach to supporting creativity in character design and narrative development. The method has been tested in both academic and design education contexts, including an international case study at the University of Southern California, where students used the toolkit to develop characters later adapted into short films. Positive feedback from future game designers, psychologists, and HCI experts highlighted the tool's clarity, usability, and creative potential. The results suggest the toolkit is particularly effective in promoting character consistency and emotional depth – qualities

essential to creating empathic connections with players. By fostering inclusive, hands-on, and narrative-rich design practices, *Creating Emphatic Characters: A Method* offers a valuable resource for game developers, educators, and researchers. It expands the toolkit available for character design in digital games, reinforcing empathy as both a design goal and a creative process. The project's development and impact have been disseminated through several peer-reviewed international publications:

Reference

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