Game Dev Dialogs episode 4: Playing with Archetypes

Drew: Welcome to Game Dev Dialogs episode four. I'm Drew Williams, a creative writer on the Google Assistant Personality Team. Our guest today is Michael Chu. Michael Chu is a narrative director at 31st Union. Prior to 31st Union, he spent 20 years at Blizzard Entertainment, telling stories about Warcraft, Diablo, and Overwatch. Thanks for joining us, Michael. It's really great to have you.

Michael: Yeah, it's a pleasure to be talking with you today.

Drew: How did you get started in game design?

Michael: I had no idea, first of all, that working in games was an opportunity or something you could actually do. I love video games, obviously. But Chance, friend of a friend, you know, I asked him, I was like, "Hey, how do I get a job at Blizzard?" And they said, "Well, you just go to the website and apply." I started in quality assurance, and I kind of learned about the games. And it was pretty obvious that game design was the aspect that I was kind of most curious about, and especially storytelling in games, because I had grown up playing RPGs, stuff like that, adventure games. And so when we started working on World of Warcraft at Blizzard, there's an opportunity to help kind of define what we call the quest system and all of that. And so I jumped at that opportunity. And that was actually how I got into game design in the first place.

Drew: Was there anything that surprised you about it when you started in QA at a video game company?

Michael: I really had no idea how games were made, like, in terms of, like, I messed around with some of the kind of tools and the little, like, RPG makers and stuff, but like the way that an actual, you know, business entity comes together, it has processes and stuff like that to make a game, like that was really something that I hadn't been prepared for. I got to peek behind the curtain. And I was like, "Oh, wow, there's so much other stuff." So it was really interesting to kind of see that.

Drew: Were there certain game narratives or characters that made an impression on you that made you want to join the industry? Like, you saw something and said, "Hey, that's something I want to do. I want to make something like that."

Michael: I think, for me, the kind of seminal experiences were Japanese RPGs, like, Final Fantasy VI that were really, like, stories that were so big but also focused on characters in a really interesting way. So I was really fascinated by that. And then I think, you know, one of the biggest kind of light switch moments is really, you know, the experience of narrative choice in video games and the classic RPG thing where it's like, "Oh, are you gonna do the good thing or the bad thing?" Right? Like, that's–

Drew: Sure.

Michael: That was really interesting. But also just the sense that there's no person directing the camera, the sense that the player gets to choose what they're interested in and choose what they want to find out more about. I think that was the thing that really interested me. I didn't know I could be a game designer, right? And so my original idea was I was gonna be an engineer, just a computer programmer. I think sort of identifying the idea that those two things intersected, the idea of storytelling, but also this rigorous technical background to it, was really exciting to me.

Drew: When you're working on your own stories now, how do you sort of immerse yourself in the narrative you want to build? What do you look at and look for?

Michael: A lot of it, it's like, half planned and half totally serendipity in a way. I'm more interested in stuff like character relationships, character motivations, seeing how people change or don't change, when subjected to a lot of external plot.

The other thing that I'm really into–I don't know how to describe it, but it's like this story encryption, where it's like, the idea that, you know, playing off of things that you might have seen before provides you with a sort of base level of information or ideas about who a character is. And I think that was really inspired by my love of George R. R. Martin: how he played with archetypes, these very well-established archetypes of characters. He was really able to play with them in interesting ways. The other big thing now, right, is with the way that people and audiences and creators are more interested in telling these stories from diverse viewpoints.

I think archetypes are really powerful because, if you have a player who is not going to go click on townsperson number five and find out everything about the setting, relying on stuff like that, where people can sort of fill in the blanks themselves is really useful. And, you can still do the thing where you surprise them, even if they've only been slightly paying attention.

Drew: You're making a nice segue to one of the questions that I wanted to ask, which was about lore and having stories that exist outside of the game itself. For example, in Overwatch, you have a lot of that lore, it could be in the form of comic books or maybe in videos that they might watch on YouTube or something like that. So how do you think that influences the way you build your games and the way people play them?

Michael: We knew when we were making that game that we weren't going to be able to make a big involved amount of story content inside the game. And so, on Overwatch, one of the rules that we had was basically like don't create more story than you need. We were sort of trying to make the game very quickly. And so we wanted to have a big box that the members of the team could build into, right? I didn't write 300 pages of, like, this is the minutiae history of the Overwatch universe, because then, for other creators, artists, and the writers and designers, right, they're sort of hemmed in already, right? And so the idea was, hey, maybe we can learn

this in a more organic way. And we'll sort of set aside spaces intentionally in the universe so that we can explore them.

Drew: When you're building these stories, like, what role does collaboration play in that?

Michael: When you're working in these creative teams, like, it's really important to give people a lot of space to be able to bring their own ideas and bring their own creativity. Having worked at Blizzard for a long time and working in really big teams, especially, like, my first big design job was on World of Warcraft, which was, you know, easily one of the biggest teams I ever worked on, you sort of learn that, with so many people, with so many different ideas, that there are a whole bunch of good ideas or ways that you can evolve a story. And they're all affected by your own experience, your own ideas. And so ultimately, like, I think I gained this idea that it kind of doesn't have to be my idea, it can be anyone's idea. And I think we can make that great.

Drew: Is there like a set of traits that makes a character great?

Michael: We sort of imagine characters on a number of different axes. So there's like the soldier to like, you know, normal person axis. There's the humor axis, which is dry humor to, like, maniacal humor or something like that, right? And so all these characters are sort of just a collection of the different things. And, you know, there's a bunch of personality traits, there's also visual traits, there's background traits. And so I think, really, you know, the success of a lot of these characters was about finding these different elements and putting them together. Probably the ultimate secret sauce is really finding characters that really resonated with the way they played.

Two of the best examples I can think of: one is Reinhardt, who is the big German dude who carries a shield. He literally looks like a giant knight in armor. Usually he just holds his shield up, he takes damage, he protects everyone. But he has this one ability, right--and this was the one that unlocked the character for us. He has this ability where you hit the Shift button and he charges, but he can't stop until he hits a wall or he hits something and he kills it. And so the personality really came out of that. It was like, "Okay, well, what does he do? He's a defensive character. Okay, so he's a protector. He believes in shielding and protecting the innocent and people who can't defend themselves." But then every once in a while, you hit this button and he just puts the shield down and he just goes for glory. And so we really, like, then tried to figure out, like, what's a dramatic way to really explore that character. And that became the movie where you see, when he's younger, that he's really more of a glory and less of a defender and he slowly, over his life, has to have this change.

The other example I was going to give as far as like a gameplay character, right, is Junkrat. His hair is literally on fire, he throws grenades, he sets traps that are, literally, like bear traps and stuff like that. And his personality is just like, "I'm having the most fun in the world." And when you play him, you're sort of like, "Yeah, I'm just launching grenades in whatever direction. Sometimes they kill something. I didn't even notice that I fired it." And so, you know, there's a lot of synergy there between the way that they play and then the actual character. Sometimes I

take a step back and look at the entire cast of characters. And one of the observations that was made to me was that, "You really like these competent characters."

Drew: Are there any types of stories, like character stories, that you don't see much in games that you would like to see?

Michael Ooh. There is so much variety these days in big AAA games and smaller indie games. One of the things that I think we can probably use more of but is just really hard, right, is this unlikable protagonist for whatever reason. But I said that and I just realized, one of the games I've been playing recently, Disco Elysium is quite an unlikable character. But I think that there is this, like, inertia behind game stories generally, which is the idea that games are primarily kind of wish fulfillment, fantasy fulfillment vehicles. And so the idea of a character that you don't like or has these significant failings--it's not the way you go, usually, if you want to make a character who is kind of just unlikable. You'll probably get a lot of this ingrained negative reaction to it.

Drew: Like you said, it's tough when it's a playable character and you want to, like, increase engagement and all that.

Michael: I worked on this game, Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II, which was a sequel to the original, which was awesome, because it was the one that sort of gave you this whole light side, dark side choice in your Jedi character.

Drew: Yeah.

Michael: Generally, people still do the right thing. And by generally, like, the majority of people do the right thing. I remember playing the Walking Dead games. You can actually see, like, the community choices. And like, generally, the community sort of goes in, I'd say, like, broadly good, expected ways. And I think that's one of the challenges, right, which is that like, if people ultimately are gonna tend to go the right way, right, like, how much does it make sense to explore some of the other things. But I would be curious to see--and I just--I don't know the answer to this–now I'm really curious–if as the medium continues to evolve, right, do people actually start to have--and as we as creators get better at making these kind of moral choices or just different choices? Like, I wonder if that actually becomes more compelling over time? My guess is yes, actually.

Drew: You mentioned a little bit earlier talking about some of the inclusive stories that you're bringing to Overwatch and the kind of global perspective on the different characters. How did you get others to buy into that vision for the game?

Michael: You know, you find teams of people who are excited to do things like this, right? But I think that, baked into the core of what Overwatch was this idea that wanted to show an optimistic future, the idea that like a lot of popular media had shown Armageddon, dystopian futures and stuff. Like, what if we just show one where everything's right, right? And so that was one pillar of the game. So it had this ingrained kind of earnestness, this optimism about

heroism, right? Anyone can be a hero, stuff like that.

Underneath this idea of an optimistic future was this idea of, "Hey, let's make levels which are like places that people want to go." "Let's show how awesome Earth is." And I think once you start down that line, right? It's very easy to think like, "Well, we're gonna do the best version of Los Angeles that we can or the best version of like Hollywood, right, as we can," which is certainly not the way that Hollywood actually looks if you go out there. Then obviously, you want to see the people in the same light, right? And so I think that's kind of the birth of it. And then I think the other thing is, we had a diverse team with people who were sort of interested and had this opportunity, right, to show off the world and to make characters that were a little more, you know, resonant characters you hadn't seen before. I have wanted to see a movie with an Asian, you know, lead, like Asian male lead, right, or all these things. Then, like, "Well, let's do it." And that's really it. And, you know, after you do a few, it's clear that it's the right thing to do. And so it just kept building on it.

Drew: When you're building that set of characters, how does that process work?

Michael: I think it's the challenge of mixing planning and rigorous thought with emotional creativity, the creative impulse that you feel. Because the thing that we never wanted to was take the globe, divide it up, pick, point, right? If we wanted to do that, we wouldn't have two characters from Egypt, we wouldn't have two Japanese characters, right? And yet, when we were telling the stories, it became clear that we needed some of these things, right? And so it's really about being thoughtful in the way that you approach it. But I think part of it is also following the creative impulse. I think, as creators, we have to start teaching ourselves these methodologies, which is like, "Hey, I wanted to do a knight character." "Oh, I immediately thought of the German guy" or whatever, right? It's like, "Well, you know, it doesn't have to be the German guy, what else could it be?" So it's teaching us to ask these questions and to challenge ourselves.

Going back to this idea of archetypes, these characters shouldn't be defined by one specific aspect of their character, right? Reinhardt shouldn't be defined by the fact that he's German. Tracer shouldn't be defined by the fact that she's lesbian, right? We actually want the characters to be a combination of a lot of different things and so--because there's no, like, essential type of person, right? And so our actual hope, right, is that you like one character 'cause you're like, "Oh, I grew up in the same country as them. When they talk about where they lived, or, the foods they eat, I get that," right? But then, "Oh, this character is also a single parent. And so I appreciate that part of the story and something I do." Or it's like, you know, very dry humor, and this character feels like she's surrounded by idiots. And I really understand that when I'm trying to play, you know, Sombra and take care of everything, you know, flanking in the shadows and my teams off doing something that's not helpful at all, right? So I think, really, that's where making characters that are well rounded--you never know what people will really magnetically attach to.

Drew: How do you twist these archetypes? Like, how do you build on them?

Michael: When you have a character that sort of exists in this archetype, whatever archetype it is, you're trying to find the things that you can change and the things that are sort of set in stone. The really fun things to do are to find the things that are completely unexpected with a character, right? You know, I think one of the ideas was, if you take a character like Reaper, right, like, "Okay, he's a big scary guy in a mask who has a murderous desire," right? You're like, "Oh, yeah. I got it. He's a sort of like edgy bad guy. Got it." And so when we were working on the comic reflections, there's this two-page spread, and the whole idea was, okay, you sort of understand who these characters are within the scope of the game, you know just about everything you need to know about them as effective battlefield units–you know very little about who they are as people. And so, one of those is like, "Oh, wow, Reaper is staring sadly in the rain at this family." And it's like, you've never really thought of him as that kind of character before. You've really just thought of him as this, like, amorphous, you know, like, evil entity. And now this archetype of unknowable evil is actually flipped on his head, which is like, "Oh, wait. So there is a person in there who does maybe have human thoughts?" And I think kind of unearthing those aspects is really interesting.

You know, another good example is a character like D.Va, right, where everything that we've given you about the character is this idea that she is a star, she's bubbly, her neck is literally pink, right? She's doing all, you know, the hearts and everything. And so you're like, "I kind of get this character," right? It's inspired by, you know, K-pop stars and all this stuff. But it's equally inspired by this idea of the, you know, Korean mandatory service, right, and how do we take something that's so integral to everyone's experience, and how do we turn that into part of the story? And it's like, yeah, is she just like, "Yeah! GG!" all the time? No, right? But it's easy to sort of just accept and really enjoy the fantasy of that character. But ultimately, when you see how that fits into the bigger world, that's where the character, you know, becomes more interesting in ways that you didn't expect.

Michael: One of the characters that I thought was the most fun to work on was the character of Lucio. So Lucio is this Brazilian DJ who has laser skates, rides on the wall, and he heals people with music, literally, and he also speeds them up with music, which seems to make sense. But, you know, ultimately, when you're looking at that character, you don't necessarily see the archetype at first, but he's basically classic role playing game bard, right? He's the idea of a person who uses music to inspire and to heal his team. All his abilities are very flashy and very colorful. And so it was a really fun interpretation of a bard character. And I think the other thing that we are really going for with Lucio was we wanted to have an Afro-Brazilian character who really epitomizes what we felt like Brazilians--when we talked to some of the people on our team, from the office down there, you know, like, what were things that they were really proud of culturally, and this idea of music, of dance, of movement, and stuff, like that was something that we really meshed with. And so, ultimately, you know, we took that idea, these kind of cultural archetype and then this classic role playing game archetype and then put them together into one character, who I think, it’s very safe to say, a fan favorite at this point.

Drew: Yeah, I mean, who are the bards of the 21st, or the 22nd, or 23rd century, you know, but

DJs?

Drew: How do constraints help you? I mean, do you artificially put constraints around yourself to help work the edges of it and create these characters and stories? How does that play out for you?

Michael: If you look at a game like Overwatch, where you're planning to make 20 characters, and keep making them forever, it really helps to apply some constraints, and you know, the gameplay again, what the characters do, and using that to kind of define their personalities, I think that's really helpful. And then I think there's a balance between just looking at, what you're actually going to do, like, "Okay, this character is gonna be the main character in a five-hour story, which roughly takes place in this kind of location, with this kind of stuff." Like, you really want to tune the character to work for that, right? And then I think the trick, though, is: Don't make extra story that you don't need. Because, ultimately, it's not serving anything. But leave yourself an opening so that the character can continue to do stuff.

And so, in Overwatch, one of the exciting parts about that is because the story universe of Overwatch, it takes place about 50 years into the future. Because of this, there's this idea that characters come from different generations, even within the future story universe of Overwatch. And so because of that, it's hard to have these characters having big character swings in the space of a comic, in the space of a, you know, Archives Event or something like that because, you want to drop in on Jack Morrison Soldier: 76 when he is, young and part of the original Overwatch Strikeforce, and he's very optimistic and all that. And then you want to drop in when he's in charge of Overwatch, and he's just tired. And he's kind of like, "I'm over this. I don't want to do this anymore." And then drop into him, you know, ten years after that, where he's just like, "Actually, I'm now just out for revenge against the people who ruined my life," right? Andyou need all these things to make sense, right? And so it's actually helpful that your characters are experiencing changes over a longer period of time rather than really having these big lightbulb moments, because when you drop in, you're like, "Oh, interesting. Yeah, that seems like it makes sense. I don't know how he got from there to there, but clearly something happened." And then you can explore the character that way.

Drew: Yeah. And yeah, we talked about relatability. That's probably the one that I relate to the most.

Michael: I love characters who go through big character changes and mature and stuff. But I also really like characters who are obstinate and basically don't change in the face of anything. That's probably because I read a lot of--I think this is the case in a lot of, maybe specifically, shonen manga, but the journey is not that the character is going to undergo this massive transformation. The journey is that he--I guess *he* 'cause it's shonen manga–is going to just take it all in and remain unchanged and ultimately, you know, "I'm the hero of justice," right, “but I won't change.”

Drew: Yeah. Increase his power level incrementally.

Michael: That's right. Yes.

Drew: So he can fight the next bigger–

Michael: Yeah. I'm not even sure if the increase is incremental. I think in some cases it's exponential.

Drew: Yeah. Exponential each time. In the case of "Dragon Ball."

Michael: Yeah, that's what I was thinking, yes.

Drew: And also, yeah, the other shonen manga thing is that you--the character you're fighting today is your friend tomorrow and then you'll fight the next enemy, and then that enemy becomes your friend, and then you build up a giant group of frenemies behind you who fight the biggest enemy of all at the end.

Michael: As long as, in your heart, you understood that the honor of battle or of conflict was the most important thing, then you can be friends forever.

Drew: I used to be the editor of Shonen Jump, the U.S. Shonen Jump.

Michael: Oh, really? That's awesome.

Drew: Way back when. Yeah, it's funny that you brought that up.

Michael: I have the original– Somewhere in a box, I have the original four Shonen Jump antho–you know, when they were actually trying to make the--I mean, I guess it was for a while, but the bound newsprint Shonen Jumps in the U.S.

Drew: Yeah.

Michael: Yeah, I still have those. It was great. I was like, "Oh, what is this 'One Piece' thing?"

Drew: That was me.

Michael: That's awesome.

Drew: Michael, if there's one thing you wish you could see in games or in a game, what would it be?

Michael: We're starting to see it. This current movement with independent developers, AAA developers, everyone is interested in this idea of adding more voices to the people who are telling stories and the people who are making games. I'm really interested in seeing new stories

and hearing new voices who are gonna bring these new experiences to our games because I think that, technically, in terms of what we can pull off visually, our understanding of game design, the sophistication of the narratives we're trying to tell–we have all the tools now to effectively bring to life just about any story that we can and taking advantage of all this stuff that we've talked about in terms of interactive games, and player agency and all that stuff. And I ultimately believe that games are special in the fact that they're interactive, the fact that players have agency, that they really have this shortcut to the human heart and that they can change the way people think and expose people to different points of view. And I think, ultimately, having people at the controls who are telling these different stories and exposing the world to new ideas and new people and new cultures, I think that's ultimately the most powerful thing that games have. And I'm really excited to see more of that as time goes on.

Drew: Yeah, it's exciting. And game development tools are so accessible now. And it's just opening the door to so many different people who might not have been able to do it 20, 30 years ago.

Michael: Yeah. And you know, you don't have to make the AAA game, with all the amazing movies and stuff, to make an emotional experience, right? There's plenty of games that have proven that text with a few images, text with no images, all sorts of different clever game designs can be incorporated to tell these really meaningful stories.

Drew: Yeah. I mean, absolutely. So, Michael, we're out of time. But can you tell people where they might go to learn more about you and your work, a website, or maybe social media?

Michael: Sure. Yeah. So on social media, on Twitter and Instagram, I'm @westofhouse. It's a tribute to a classic, *Zork I*. And then my personal website is michael-chu.com.

Drew: Awesome. Well, thank you so much for coming, Michael. This has been Game Dev Dialogs. Thank you all for listening.