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Novigrad in the evening sun. *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt* (CD Project Red 2015)

Special Issue

Gamevironments of the Past.

by

Derek Fewster and Ylva Grufstedt

“Who Really Said What?” – Mobile Historical Situated Documentary as Liminal Learning Space.

by Owen Gottlieb, 237

report

The Indian Indie Game Development Scene - History and Cultural Heritage as Game Themes.

by Xenia Zeiler, 258

interview

Interview with Mike Laidlaw and David Gaider at *BioWare*.

by Cecilia Trenter, 264

The Adventures of Ms. Meta: Developing a Historical Superhero Video Game

Sarah Zaidan

Abstract

The Adventures of Ms. Meta (forthc.) uses a combination of brawler and puzzle game mechanics along with the narrative device of time travel to provide players with the means to become active participants in the cultural narrative of the American superhero. Although these larger than life characters are irrefutably fixtures in contemporary popular culture, they exist in constant change; reinvented time after time in accordance with each era's definition of heroism, adapted as media forms evolve. As a game designer with a background in comic book illustration and superhero art history, this article explores my process of developing an experience that engages with the ever-changing relationship between superheroes and American culture. Players assume the role of Ms. Meta, a modern female superhero, in an adventure where every level represents a different age of superhero comics, and the world that produced them. Grounded in academic research, and featuring game mechanics including puzzle-solving and collaboration, I hope to empower players to create their own definition of heroism.

Keywords: superheroes, alternate history, representation, independent games, authenticity, intertextuality, video game history, game development, developer insights, agency

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Introduction

A mainstay of contemporary popular culture, the figure of the superhero has been inextricably linked to history and the cultural climate ever since the creation of *Superman* in 1939. For over seven decades, these larger-than-life characters have existed as part of the American cultural record; engaged in a dialogue with the world beyond the pages of a comic book, inspired by their creators' perceptions of heroism, informed by the weight of their own history and cultural importance. As a game

cultural significance and impact across time in the popular consciousness.

When I look past the varying, sometimes conflicting, theoretical frameworks for studying the superhero, I see the emergence of common ground. The story of the superhero is one that speaks to American society, politics, and media; of aspirations and anxieties, with the theme of change a beating heart at its center. To paraphrase Foucault (2002), history is neither straightforward nor tidy, and the superhero genre, when viewed as a cultural record of a given time period, certainly reveals several pasts, several forms of connexion, several hierarchies of importance. As one era passes into another, superheroes change, the overarching meta-narrative that informs the structure of their stories changes, and in turn the ways in which superheroes act as agents of change in their world.

Proehl (2016) discusses the complicated space that superheroes occupy, and how their meaning transcends their individual narratives:

“There is a Captain America that exists outside of or above the stories written about him. He’s a moral guidepost. He stands apart from the political fray: a version of an America that could be. He’s better than all that. He’s super... The superhero can serve as a symbolic protector or an avatar for personal strength. Some victims of violent crimes find solace and vicarious revenge in the stories of Batman. Characters like the Hulk or the X-Men can be touchstones for people struggling with mental health issues or discrimination.”

The subject of superheroes has also been explored through the medium of comics themselves. Notable examples are Busiek and Ross’s *Marvels* (2004), that presents pivotal events in the Marvel Universe from the 1940s to the 1970s from the perspective of an ordinary citizen. Its photorealistic art style imparts a sense of reality to the proceedings, and to the text. Gaiman and Kubert (2009) deconstruct and give equal validity to Batman’s many reinventions by inviting readers to imagine the character existing in an endless cycle of death and rebirth.

The Adventures of Ms. Meta

On the surface, the game tells the story of Ms. Meta, an undergraduate engineering student who is the current protégé of MetaMan. Drawing inspiration from Marvel Comics’ use of an alternate version of New York City in many of its comics, the game’s levels take place in New York and its environs, albeit in a world where superheroes have been a fact of life since the late 1930s. Although by the time the game begins superheroes are an international phenomenon in this world, few have reached the iconic status of MetaMan, who is widely known as the first American superhero. Ms. Meta, however, is representative of a different generation of heroes: legacy characters. While superheroes have fought alongside youthful sidekicks since the Golden Age of the 1940s, the past decade has seen long-established characters pass their titles on or even share them with a diverse assortment of young people who want to follow in their footsteps without becoming their carbon copies. These characters bring different backgrounds, worldviews and experiences to their in-universe actions, but also give readers a fresh perspective on the superhero genre.ⁱ To translate the visual aspect of this individuality into the game world, future builds will implement a modular avatar creation system. This will include a variety of heights, body types, facial features and hairstyles for Ms. Meta; so that players can experience the game in the role of the superhero they have designed. The demo features a pre-designed avatar, who I designed to intentionally speak to the variety the modular system will offer.

shocked to find that Ms. Meta is capable of shrugging off the onerous "Meta" obligations, and players will be given the option to assert their identity and restore their original character design from that point forward, or to accept their situation. As part of the player's opportunity for choice and decision-making, one of the options during NPC conversations will always be what a superhero of the time might have responded with, and players can choose to proceed through the level in this manner. Ms. Meta, by virtue of the recent comic book debuts of the legacy characters she represents, and by virtue of her being a video game character whose actions are decided by the player, has the agency to choose the form her heroism takes. MetaMan, however, is unable to do the same, after more than seven decades of reinvention and with the weight of his status as a cultural icon confining him to his role as the embodiment of the All-American Hero.

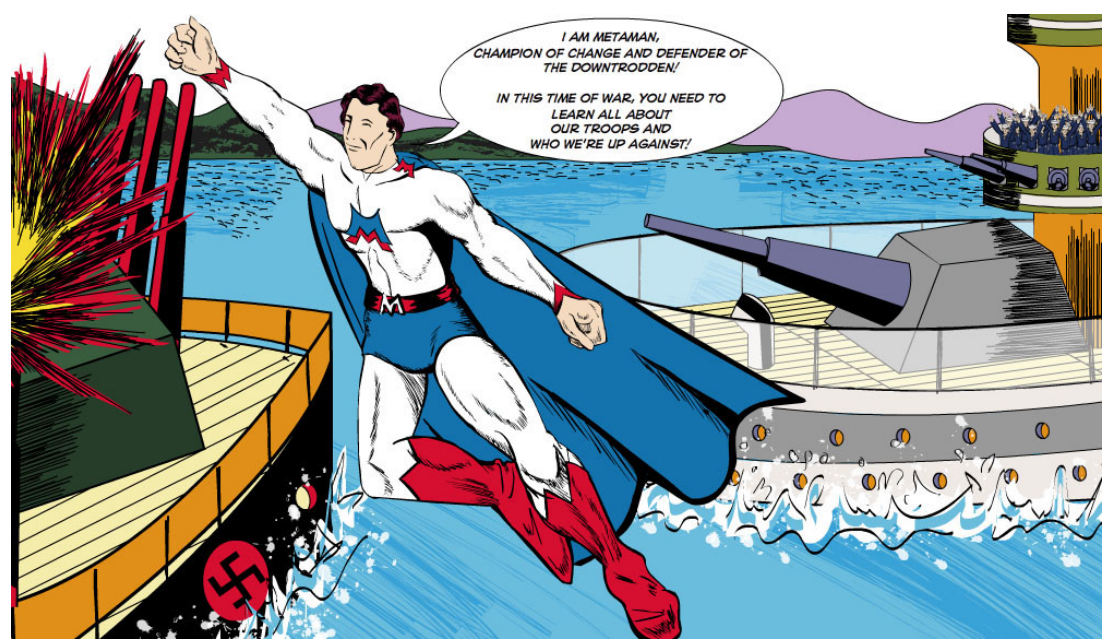


Figure 3. An image of the 1940s hub featuring a patriotic MetaMan during WWII.



Figure 4. The 1960s science-based origin story for a new iteration of MetaMan.

Many of *Ms. Meta's* aesthetic qualities and thematic concepts grew out of my doctoral dissertation, where I explored the visual and cultural representation of male superheroes from the 1940s to the present day. Through a series of interactive scenes

built in Adobe Flash, I charted the history of MetaMan, a character I created to be an amalgam of each era’s most iconic superheroes.ⁱⁱ Objects and characters in the scenes provided information on MetaMan’s world, and what would have been the average American reader’s world at that point in history.

Although the project encouraged users to draw parallels between the fictional history of superheroes and the authentic history informing it, users had no meaningful control or agency over its content. Information was presented to the user without providing them with the tools to respond. The present accessibility of game-making platforms has enabled me to evolve the project in a new direction, one that encompasses the superhero genre in all its complexity and includes game mechanics, an overarching story and – most crucially – player agency.

At the time of writing, *Ms. Meta* is still in development, with a playable demo slated for release in February 2017. Although this article focuses primarily on the demo, I will briefly include plans for levels and features I intend to implement in future builds where appropriate. The game is being made in Unity version 5.0, with 2D graphics, hand drawn sprites, assets, and backgrounds. Time travel is a frequently used plot device in superhero stories,ⁱⁱⁱ and this is why I have chosen to use it in *Ms. Meta*, albeit contextualized within the game’s storyline, I have chosen this particular way of giving the player access to multiple time periods for several reasons. Time travel offers an experience reminiscent of superhero stories featured across the media landscape, but it also draws specific attention to the societal and cultural factors behind superheroes’ characteristics in each era, and is a design choice I hope will encourage critical reflection in players through counteracting historical assumptions with historical authenticity. It also enables what is frequently the inevitable conclusion of playing with the past (and is ideally suited video games’ allowances for multiple story paths and endings): the creation of alternate timelines. Over the course of the

game, players will become active participants in the past while shaping the future. To demonstrate proof of this concept, the demo will contain one complete storyline with three possible endings, beginning with a tutorial level that is set in the present day and familiarizes players with the game's inputs. The player is then transported to 1942, where a full level will take place, after which the player returns to the present for a short epilogue which is determined by their actions in the past. I chose these two particular time periods in order to showcase the unmistakable stylistic differences between a medium in its nascence and that same medium after seven decades of evolution and innovation. In addition to proof of concept for the game's mechanics and art direction, I intend for the demo to introduce players to Ms. Meta's city, and the friends, foes, and ordinary citizens who populate it.

As this project combines video games and superhero comic books, I am taking a dualistic approach to my research and development. My decisions are informed by the unique qualities of each medium, their histories, and the parallels and overlaps that emerge between them. As players learn the actions needed to progress within the game system, gameplay creates narrative independent of any pre-designed story (Salen and Zimmerman, Anthropy and Clark). Visuals, meanwhile, have connections to both gameplay and story, facilitating level navigation, existing alongside the mechanics, and communicating pertinent information to the player about the game world.

On Creating Meaning through Superheroes and Intertextuality

In the words of Huizinga (1971), "all play means something." I am deliberately designing the game to maximize player agency through meaningful play, working from the definition Salen and Zimmerman provide in their seminal *Rules of Play* (2004). Meaningful play is described as "the goal of successful game design," (2004, 33) where meaning emerges from the relationship between players' actions and their

outcomes within the game. If the system does not respond to players' in-game decisions with discernible feedback, the relationship between the action and its result is stripped of meaning. However, if the game system fails to integrate the outcome with the larger context of the game, players are left anticipating a meaningful response that is never fully realized (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 35).

The nature of video games has the potential to add a dimension to this existing body of work that text alone cannot provide, as Gee (2007) explains:

"Plato in the *Phaedrus* famously complained that books were passive in the sense that you cannot get them to talk back to you in a real dialogue the way a person can in a face-to-face encounter. Games do talk back. In fact, nothing happens until a player acts and makes decisions."

Superheroes are informed by the era/creative team they date back to, but I am giving the player the agency to have a hand in that process also. For example, before its closure in late 2012,^{iv} the MMO *City of Heroes* (2004) featured a robust character creation system where players could customize their characters' costumes, powers and even write a unique backstory. The game's setting corresponded to a contemporary city, but its storyline took its cues from well-established superhero comic conventions to create a sense of timelessness. The ability to develop a character's personality through dialogue options is effectively demonstrated in the context of the superhero genre in *Batman – The Telltale Series* (2016). Each episode is fueled by choice, from the timed conversations that determine Bruce Wayne's behavior in a series of events that increasingly place him at the source of controversy and scandal, to the crime scene investigations and their subsequent reconstructions that are dependent on connections left up to the player to form, to the precision-based combat mechanics, and strategic pre-planning of the first episode's climactic battle. Although the player's choices conclude each episode with a single ending, the journey to reach it is filled with a variety of ways for players to make their individual

experiences as Batman unique. As the series continues, I will certainly count *Batman – The Telltale Series* among my inspirations for giving weight to *Ms. Meta's* conversation mechanics, as well as the social obstacles players will face.

The *InFAMOUS* (2009-2015) series engages with the issue of a superhero's impact on their community, albeit in a world where super powers are hated and feared. This aspect of the universe adds a heightened sense of stakes to the game's morality system. Sucker Punch Productions' creation of a Native American main character, as well as setting the game in contemporary Seattle, remain innovative design choices as well. A particularly inspirational game for *Ms. Meta's* development is *Valiant Hearts: The Great War* (2014). Its successful integration of history with engaging and meaningful gameplay presents the human cost of World War I, in addition to its use of comic book style visuals. *Valiant Hearts* is an example of optional intertextuality in that it requires no prior familiarity with World War I on the part of the player. In addition, its playable characters represent a diverse collection of experiences and nationalities in a manner that is organic and supported by its moving storyline.

On Genre: Contextualizing the Side-scrolling Brawler

I have deliberately designed the movement and combat mechanics of *Ms. Meta* to resemble those of side-scrolling brawlers, a genre that dominated the arcade scene of the late 1980s thanks to games like *Double Dragon* (1987) and *Final Fight* (1989). This section explores the rationale behind my decision, my analysis of the brawler genre through the lens of its connection to superhero-themed video games, and how this analysis has influenced the development of *Ms. Meta* in ways that extend far beyond the game's core mechanics and into elements including story, art, and level design.

Early Game Design

Thematically and mechanically, brawlers owe a great deal to Hong Kong action cinema of the 1970s and 1980s. The primary goal of these films was to showcase the martial arts prowess of their lead performers, such as Bruce Lee, whose film *Enter the Dragon* served as a primary inspiration for *Double Dragon* (Leone 2012), and Jackie Chan by pitting them against a large groups of enemy characters, who they dispatched through a combination of quick thinking and consummate skill. Often cast in the role of a rescuer or an avenger, these action heroes fought their battles against the landscape of Hong Kong, using the environment itself as a weapon, even as they favored hand to hand combat (Miller 2015).

All of these elements are present in classic brawlers, from the deluge of enemies to the urban settings and plotlines rooted in revenge. With enemies bearing down on players from both sides of the screen, or even leaping down from above or bursting out of walls in the background, brawlers achieve a palpable sense of tension and suspense. The ability to move freely along the X, Y, and Z axes, intuitive controls translating on-screen into a wide array of flashy martial arts moves, and the option for cooperative play (usually 2 to 4 players) proved to be a winning combination that coincided with the resurgence of the superhero genre in popular culture. The critical success of *Superman* (1978) left a lasting imprint on the landscape of mass media (Tye 2012, 191) by reestablishing superhero figures as mass media juggernauts, and introducing the character to a new generation--one whose definition of mass media now included video games.^v

Unsurprisingly, the 1980s saw a variety of tie-in video games starring the Man of Steel, but Taito Corporation's 1988 arcade game *Superman* was the first to apply brawler mechanics to the superhero genre. In Taito's *Superman* movement along the Z-axis combines with the character's power of flight, giving levels more verticality

uncertainty is perfectly in keeping with my intentions for *Ms. Meta*; the player may be in the role of a superhero, but that alone will not guarantee their success.

An urban setting is also fitting when applied to the theme of superheroes. However, the treatment of the urban setting and the evil forces that have beset it can appear at odds with a superhero theme. In the average brawler destroying public property is treated as advantageous, even desirable, for the player, as these objects yield useful healing items or weapons. In the player's hands, trash cans and oil drums are capable of knocking over groups of enemies in one throw. By the end of the game, the player will have mowed down hundreds of enemy characters, who vanish from the screen once their health is depleted, emphasizing their inconsequentiality to the overall narrative. This rampant destruction of public property, while clearly a nod to the Hong Kong action film roots of the brawler genre, as are the piles of enemies left in the hero's wake, creates a different sort of meaning when players take on the role of superheroes. In Marco Arnaudo's analysis of the ethical code that governs superheroes' behavior, he observes that in the present day, these characters "may never kill, for any reason or under any circumstances, not even for legitimate defense, by failure to rescue, or 'for the greater good'" (Arnaudo 2010, 78). Arnaudo traces the origins of this rule to reveal that superheroes of the late 1930s and early 1940s had no compunctions over the deaths of villains, a sign of the influence hard-boiled pulp novel heroes like *The Shadow* and *Doc Savage*, the *Man of Bronze* had on the genre before its narrative voice was fully formed (Fingerroth 2004, 40).

The Application of Non-violence as a Mechanic

It was after the 1954 establishment of the Comics Code Authority that violence in comic books was all but eliminated,^{viii} but by the Silver Age of the 1960s, "the no-kill policy...[went] from a restriction to an openly represented and debated topic, as it is today for the vast majority of Marvel and DC heroes" (Arnaudo 2013, 79). This led me

robot enemies, the exception being the licensed supervillains who appear as bosses. After each boss battle, these characters are shown in a defeated pose as the screen fades to black, followed by cutscenes that clearly state with both text and image that the boss has survived. However, when The Avengers give chase to the forces of villain Red Skull in the third level, they leave their city devastated by the giant robot boss of the second level without a second thought. *X-Men* also features a largely robotic cadre of enemies, and avoids the issue of property damage as collateral by beginning the first level with the city having already been destroyed prior to the X-Men's arrival. Given the time period, the fate of these cities is commonplace; the collateral damage caused by the conflicts of larger than life heroes and villains is an aspect of the genre that was largely taken for granted during the 1990s. Superhero media of the 21st century, however, has been addressing this topic directly, resulting in a new meta-narrative. The central conflict of recent films including *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016) and *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) is initiated by how inadvertently destructive superheroes can be, and how the enormous power they wield can disconnect them from the very communities they serve, causing them to be viewed with distrust and animosity.

I have translated this meta-narrative and sense of accountability into the gameplay in a deliberate subversion of classic brawler mechanics: Ms. Meta will be able to manipulate the environment and make tactical use of her surroundings, but cannot personally destroy them. This is not to say her attitude is a universal one. Property damage will certainly occur at the hands of other characters—not all of them enemies, and not always intentionally, but Ms. Meta's role will be one of intentionally preventing and mitigating destruction rather than personally contributing to it. I have contextualized these gameplay elements through the demo's plot; one of the game's main characters, Steel Dart, is a robotics expert who has dispatched their army of robots to the past in order to preemptively prevent a terrorist attack that occurred

aloud.

These social interactions exist in part so that the player may uncover alternate paths for navigating a level – such as finding a way over a police blockade set up on account of the aforementioned giant robots by taking to the rooftops, but they also afforded me an avenue to integrate conversation and combat. One of the greatest strengths of brawler gameplay is the allowance for multiple players cooperating toward a unified goal.^x While *Ms. Meta* does not support cooperative play at this stage, the player’s decisions throughout the game will determine whether or not a selection of NPCs, including fellow superheroes and ordinary citizens, will assist the player during boss battles. Involvement will range from distracting the boss so that the player gains a momentary advantage, to super powered team-ups. It will also be possible for two of the NPCs native to 1942, a society journalist and a munitions factory worker; to help the player gain access to particular characters and locations that would otherwise be unavailable. Proactive NPC participation is intended to provide players with a feedback metric for the conversation mechanic, and add to the player’s experience that their decisions are impactful in ways both large and small, with the goal of maximizing meaningful player engagement with the NPCs as well as the game itself. The game will also feature visual feedback whenever the player’s actions alter the timeline, but the nature of these changes will not be revealed after the level is complete.

Level design and Visual Narrative

Historical Research and Plotlines

The plotlines of each level are based on stories that are common to the time period in question. In the present day tutorial level, Dr. Entropy’s time machine is stolen by teenage robotics prodigy Steel Dart, who longs to change the past to give their

Aesthetics and Visual Cues

NPC interaction may be optional in many cases, but the player will be constantly interacting with the game's visual aspects. Each level's art is designed to form a connection in the player's mind with superhero comics of the corresponding era. I began this process in an intertextual manner by exploring the visual elements of superhero comics from the past and present. In the present day, superhero comics have begun to move away from the fixed parameters of a "house style", with many recent titles demonstrating a wide range of unique artistic approaches. There are some defined areas of commonality across an assortment of recent superhero comics: saturated color palettes (Stewart, Fletcher, and Tarr 2015, Leth, Williams, and Allegri 2016), applications of color reminiscent of watercolor painting techniques, often lushly shaded and textured (Stewart, Fletcher, and Tarr 2015, Wilson and Alphonso 2014), inked outlines that are frequently loose and sketch-like (Stewart, Fletcher, and Tarr 2015, Fraction et al. 2013), and significant attention paid to environment and clothing details. With this assessment in mind, I am designing a bright, colorful, and plausible game space, reflective of a visual medium that is entering a new stage of its evolution; one that celebrates individual self-expression.

Superhero comics of the 1940s had a more uniformly identifiable style. They employed clear, often thick outlines, and cross-hatching techniques alongside areas of solid black to convey shadow. The color palette placed heavy emphasis on red, green, yellow and orange, often resulting in an excess of non-local color.^{xi} When designing the look of 1942, I have turned to some the Golden Age's most famous characters for guidance. Joe Shuster's drawings of Superman, square-jawed and barrel-chested, established the visual conventions of what was soon to become a wildly popular genre (Siegel and Shuster 1938). Jack Kirby's cover illustration of Captain America punching Hitler in the jaw remains one of the era's most iconic images (Simon and Kirby 1940). Wonder Woman made her debut in 1941 drawn by

magazine illustrator Harry G. Peter, and has continuously remained the world’s most famous female superhero ever since (Lepore 2014). Through an amalgam of these three artists’ styles, I am creating assets that reflect a nascent medium that still retains a high artistic quality.

Ms. Meta’s story provides context for its gameplay, its visuals communicate the components of the game that result in gameplay, but its levels are “the structures within which the players will experience the gameplay” (Fullerton 2008, 362).

Locations are inspired by existing sites in the real-world New York City including Columbia University, the Brooklyn Naval Yard, and a munitions factory. Although these environments are meant to be regarded as representations and not replications, I am designing each environment based on research into the architecture and visual culture of the time in service of creating locations that reflect the cultural identity of the time. To create the sense that the game takes place across a single city, some environments are directly connected to one another, while others require the player to travel further afield, and to reflect the game’s themes of agency and choice, players will be able to navigate the world of *Ms. Meta* by moving from right to left, down to up and up to down, in addition to the classic brawler movement style of left to right. Levels allow the player freedom to explore, but are also designed to be functional, within the contexts of gameplay and a space’s intended purpose.

Valiant Hearts has been a valuable source of inspiration in this regard; its levels are designed with gameplay as their clear priority, but also make sense when examined from a story perspective. Of particular note is the besieged city of Reims where the player navigates a series of ruined buildings to rescue trapped civilians. This portion of the level is an obvious puzzle, with ladders to be climbed, platforms to be lowered into place, and switches to be flipped, but through thoughtful and layout design and intentional placement of assets such as fireplaces and armoires, the environment

consistently communicates to the player that these were once functional homes.

Valiant Hearts lacks movement along the Z-axis, but possesses an innovative visual treatment of depth. Throughout the Ms. Meta demo, the player will be traversing similar urban environments that reflect New York City's grid-based urban planning. To convey the sense that the environment has depth on multiple planes beyond the player's immediate location, I will be incorporating parallaxing backgrounds. This is a design choice that impacts atmosphere rather than gameplay, but I am also planning to use environments to act as collaborators with the gameplay and story. For example, during the first combat sequence of the tutorial level, the player must move from one end of a low-ceilinged corridor to the other as a stream of Dart Drones (small but deadly melee and ranged robots) try to impede their progression. During this sequence of events, the characters Max Entropy and Steel Dart are visible through the corridor's gallery of windows engage in aerial combat. The confined space and inability to assist Max is designed to impart a sense of pressure and urgency. The next section of the tutorial takes place in a grand library space, where the player's goal is to reach the roof. With the central staircase in pieces thanks to an errant shot from a Dart Drone, the player must find alternate methods to move consistently upward. The vertical nature of this environment hides much of the level information from the player, and serves as a parallel to the story, where the conflict and tension build to a crescendo in time with the player's arrival to the roof.

As a game designer, I "rely on the use of indirect control to guide people into having the right kind of experience" as Schell (2008, 330) counsels. Level design produces the spaces where a great deal of this guidance takes place, and as such, it is as integral a component of enabling player agency as the mechanics, gameplay, and story.

Summary and Future Challenges

The superhero genre provides a rich history and cultural record that has guided me as I develop *The Adventures of Ms. Meta*. The design process has been characterized by intertextuality, much like the source material from which I have drawn inspiration. With *Ms. Meta*, I am creating a game that both celebrates and intervenes with side-scrolling brawlers. Using this classic video game genre as a framework, I am enabling player agency within the context of a fighting game. The overall game system I am designing promotes meaningful engagement with the cultural narrative of superheroes through a combination of combat, dialogue, and puzzles, and with thoughtful treatment of the player's environment. My decision to include time travel as well as time alteration as game mechanics empower players to create meaning through immersion in an era of American history that produced many superhero characters who defined the genre for decades to come.

Based on the amount of content I have already removed or distilled, I am mindful of a tendency to over-scope. Depth of gameplay over breadth of content and level size is a more beneficial approach to the project overall. As I look forward to the next stage of development, it is clear that beta testing the demo among playtesters who represent a variety of backgrounds will be critical for evaluating the game's accessibility, meaningful play, and the success of its combination of game mechanics. This feedback will provide a concrete evaluation that I have facilitated a meaningful dialogue between the player, superheroes, and the society that led to their creation and establishment as an indelible part of American popular culture.

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