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## Silence is Golden: On Non-Speaking Heroes in Games

By - Posted Nov 15, 2004

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In the early days of gaming, heroes didn't--and couldn't--speak.

Not that it mattered much. There was really no reason for Pac-Man to toss off a one-liner every time he ate a ghost, or for Mario to mutter an expletive each time he learned the princess was in another castle.

But these days, we have the tools and the talent (not to mention the available memory) to allow every major and many of the minor characters in every console or PC game to run their mouths off practically nonstop, if the designers so choose. But sometimes, the designers choose to make their heroes silent.

### So...Talk

Every game creator who's spoken on the subject gives the same reasoning for their heroes speechlessness: the game player *is* the hero. Sure, the hero is represented onscreen by an avatar of the game designer's choosing, be it Gordon Freeman or Link. But that hero is supposed to be a stand-in for the player him- or herself.

I don't suppose that's how many game players actually see it--I think many tend to view it more from the perspective that they're inhabiting the character, and the character is playing the game. This...this is sort of the opposite. You're the character, and he is basically your agent in the game. That may sound like two slightly different versions of the same idea at first, but there's a wide stretch of difference between them--in my mind, the speechless character as your personal avatar is the more active and immersive choice from the perspective of the game player, whereas the speaking character that you inhabit is the more passive (and, consequently, less immersive) choice.

Inhabiting a character who talks and has a long, complicated backstory is probably more escapist, but video gaming itself is so escapist already, I don't think that every game needs that extra layer of fantasy. I don't need to put on a special costume when I'm playing a game, either, you know? I'm not trying to be someone else, it's enough that I can do things I normally couldn't. Most of the time I want it to be me...but then, maybe that's 'cause of my ginormous ego...and the fact that I look downright awful in overalls and jaunty caps with my first initial on the front.

And so I speak for the speechless--the game characters for whom silence is golden. And I back the game designers who give so much to their audience, who so generously allow us to take part as directly as possible in their video game vision. What follows are my reasons for what makes silent characters work--and why speaking ones sometimes don't.

### Mute Witness

Long-lived characters like Mario and Link don't really need to be dragged kicking and, more importantly, screaming into this brave new world of yakking characters. They've been around so long that it might bother people to suddenly hear them yammering on about the day's events. In the golden olden days, it was obvious that the crude but reasonably effective sprites on the screen were things you were controlling--they were in your service and weren't much of anything without you. But now that Link is starting to look like a soap star, people seem to think he should talk like one, too. But why? It's your reactions to the game that are important, not what the elvin hunk thinks. You didn't care what blocky, chunky, brunette Link had to say. But you're dying to hear from ready-for-*US Magazine*



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blond and brazen Link, apparently.

### **Read or Die**

I've read and heard complaints that people don't like reading info that could be spoken to them. Okay, that's just sad. Imagine having everything in an RPG spoken to you. Then a decent RPG goes from 40 hours to 80, easy, when you factor in all the sitting around, listening to someone less lazy than yourself read aloud something you could skim through in half--maybe even a quarter of the time. Trust me, you'd get sick of it faster than the reading.

### **Voice...Over**

Chatty characters can actually ruin the fantasy, most of all when they're voicing a beloved character for whom you had a totally different voice, cadence or accent in mind, but even when it's someone new to you. People still laugh at the bad voice acting that continues to plague games, no matter what breathless, nerds-kidding-themselves game reviews might say about how awesome v.o. in games is now--and that laughter is exactly what takes you out of the game and back to reality. Think about a book you read and loved, and then you see the movie and the casting is so not what you had in mind. Ruins it for ya, doesn't it? Heck, I didn't like the way Mario and Luigi talked to each other in the first *Paper Mario*, and those were just words I read. But it didn't feel right, them being all slangy chummy, 'cause that's not how I thought of them. I know, waaah waah, cry little baby. It didn't ruin the game for me, but it did bother me. And just think about a new character you're just meeting, and the snarky quotes and catchphrases they use over and over and over and over and over again. Yeah, that's fun.

### **Anti-talking Points**

Let's say that suddenly they decide to make Gordon Freeman talk. He's spouting pithy quips, he's wildly gesticulating, he's talking smack to aliens. And just like that, his quiet power and mystery are gone, and in its place is the faux "character development" that so many other video game characters lay claim to. Whoop-de-do. He might as well say "Yo, I'm just like every other character" while he's at it. Seriously, what would giving the man a few lines to say accomplish? "Eat crowbar, alien scum." Pointless. Adds nothing. Subtracts style, intrigue and class. Doesn't take a scientist to do that math.

### **Me, First**

It doesn't make a lot of sense for a game that uses the first-person perspective to have a lead character who speaks. Hello, first-person equals you. Go ahead, read [the definition](#). I'll wait. At any rate, if you can see only arms and weapons as you play the game, I'm pretty sure you're the one who's supposed to be doin' the deeds onscreen, whether or not you can later watch "yourself" in cutscenes. First-person stuff is compelling because, by design, it's supposed to feel like everything is happening to you. Doesn't seem right, then, for "you" to start running off at the mouth about what's going on...that's not you, that's your avatar. It's sort of like someone typing to people from your IM screenname when you walk away, without all the apologizing you have to do after the fact.

### **Putting Words in Your Mouth**

Games are a looooooong way from being able to have characters that can really, honestly speak for you, and they're even farther from having characters through which you can honestly speak for yourself. Yeah, sometimes you get to choose from a few different responses to questions or whatever. And some characters in some games have hundreds of lines they say. But even still, they're all predetermined for you and at best lead you down one of a few roads you probably would have traveled anyway in the game. You, and even they, really aren't saying much of anything. Might I change my mind if you could actually speak into a headset and it turned out that your choice of words and tone of voice truly affected game play? You bet. Will that happen in my lifetime? Uhh...it may never happen. Until then, there's little difference between the scripted mute and the scripted talker. You're talkin', but it doesn't really matter. So why give away the fun of making the character what you want him or her to be?

### **Talk Talk**

I'm not totally against a little talky walky in my games. Sometimes the voice acting really is great, the one-liners evergreen and the characters perfectly suited to babbling away non-stop. But I still think that even in this day and age, a strong, silent type is just the kind of hero I'm after...and that I want to be for a while. I may have trouble shutting up as a writer, but as Mario, I'm perfectly happy to mumble and wave.

Dont be silent! Talk back to us. [Feedback@g4media.com](mailto:Feedback@g4media.com)

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