



## Week 4

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## **Game Experience: Theme and Story**

We're more than half way through our course! Thanks to everyone that has contributed so far, we've really enjoyed the games you've uploaded, and the discussion, and hope it continues after the course concludes in week 5!

### **Kodu characters and worlds**

There are dozens of different game genres, and one of the wonderful things about Kodu is that it allows you to explore most, if not all of them! Each genre offers unique advantages and challenges to the developer and player.

I've outlined a few of the better known game genres below, and some considerations to keep in mind.

#### **Strategy**

Usually turn based, games that require a strategic approach are perhaps one of the more challenging genres to approach in Kodu. Strategy assumes either you have an intelligent opponent, which either means you'll be building a multi-player game, or you're facing a challenge set by the developer.

You can achieve turn based reactions in a number of ways. You might use points, where different scores result in a range of reactions. Alternatively, you might determine that for particular behaviors on the part of your protagonist, specific reactions result, making the game more about devising a strategy to overcome these reactions.

Developing a strategy game is a real challenge, but worth your time as the game play can be absorbing.

#### **Action**

Perhaps one of the more common game formats for Kodu games, this style of game often challenges the player's quick reaction times. One of the things to consider in this type of game, is a unique set of properties for each adversary. A weakness and a strength will enhance game play considerably. For example, you might make the bike bot super-fast, but unable to traverse particular obstacles. You might make the tug boat slow, but with superior weaponry.

Considering a strength and weakness for each character will enhance the gameplay, and encourage you to think about their placement and position in the game more carefully.

Because you can also adjust the reactions of game objects (like a ball) as well, consider what their strengths and weaknesses are as well. For example, a ball that moves quickly over one surface, but slowly over another.

## RPG and Adventure

You'll need to think about your story more carefully in this genre, as roleplaying games rely on narrative as well as some action to draw the player through the game. Good RPG games can strongly resemble interactive fiction.

In simplest terms, think about your character as the hero in the story. You might even write down some basic story structure to help you create an absorbing narrative. A simple three act story structure is the easiest approach, and you can find supporting material on [Lightning Bug](#).

Another important point when considering the story you intend to structure your game around, is the concept of emergent narratives. This is when the story that evolves is one that occurs because of what the player themselves brings to the game. For example, if the player ignores your suggested path, and takes an unintended shortcut across the river.

You might wish to tightly control the experience of the player in the game in order that they follow your story as you've prescribed it, but keep in mind that the player may have other ideas, and play in ways you may not have predicted. Providing some side quests is one way of approaching this, accepting that the player may never conclude your story, and prefer to take their own path.

Another challenge when developing a significant world and storyline can be that Kodu Game Lab struggles to cope with the scale of your game. In many of the RPG game examples I've come across, the usage meter is often near or in the red zone. To avoid this, consider what you can leave out of your game up front. This might be simplifying your approach to the topography and relying on moody lighting instead. Or it could be using one adversary with a unique strength and weakness rather than five that just point and shoot.

## Construction and management

Games like these rely predominantly on collecting resources and building structures. You'll likely be using the factory bot in this type of game. Though the bots can't create other buildings, they can create large objects like rocks that can be used for all manner of creations. For example. Your player might be tasked with filling a space with rocks to get across it.

## New gaming

Your game doesn't necessarily have to have a definitive end resulting in a win or loss. Take a look at the work of [Tale of Tales](#) for example. Their games are built for atmosphere and the experience rather than a focus on reaching an evident end goal.

This may be a little harder to achieve with the Game Lab, but you can definitely experiment with some alternate game structures ... just ask my 6yo daughter who is obsessed with Kodu at present. Her worlds are an end in themselves. She simply likes placing things in the world that will respond to her. She stands by the lake, she wanders through the forest, and she chases the clouds. You don't 'win', there are no points to collect, and she just revels in wandering about a space of her own creation.

There are no hard and fast rules about how games must be developed. One of the great things about Kodu, is that you can experiment with combinations of different genres to create unique experiences that you wouldn't encounter anywhere else!

Of course, Kodu has some restrictions, like any development tool, but there's plenty of room for a creative approach once you know what those restrictions are. Getting to know Kodu just that little bit better however, is the best way try something completely different. After all, you need to know the rules before you can figure out how to break them!

## **Building atmosphere in your Kodu games**

Building atmosphere in your game might seem easy on the surface. A little dramatic music here, a dark forest there, and bingo! Instant atmosphere!

To achieve it with some success however, you'll need to develop a holistic approach to building your game, and not rely on one or two single elements to achieve it for you. There are many ways in which you can build atmosphere, and I've outlined a few ideas get you thinking about your own approach.

### **Character size**

Given that you can adjust your characters size, and the size of the objects around them, this presents a wonderful opportunity for introducing atmosphere. Size is inevitably (no jokes here please) linked to power and the level of threat a character is confronted by, or holds over the environment around them.

A small character in a large dark wood immediately introduces the impression of vulnerability for example. Experimenting with your characters size and strength is one way of building atmosphere ... without all the dramatic music and dark lighting.

### **Dramatic music and dark lighting**

Of course, you can't go wrong with dramatic music and lighting ... as they make a substantial impact on your game experience. Don't consider them an end in themselves however, think of them as simply another layer of atmosphere. It's worth noting that music in particular can be used to great effect if you position it carefully in the game.

Heading off to meet the big Boss? Dramatic music! Wandering over a bridge? Perhaps something a little lighter. You'll be the best judge of how to most effectively use these effects. Just remember that if you use them sparingly, but effectively, they'll have far more impact. Constant music of any kind can wear thin after a while.

### **Delayed gratification**

No, this isn't another paragraph about size, it's about the completely absorbing nature of video games. Of all the forms of entertainment we indulge in, playing computer games demands (and gets!) the most

attention from us. Numerous studies have suggested that we're far more likely to remain absorbed, despite distractions, in a good game than we are in TV or even a book!

Delaying gratification in the game is a great way of slowly increasing the stakes, building tension, and keeping your players hooked. Providing just the right amount of challenge to keep the player just out of reach of their goal. Just be careful to allow your audience some wins along the way or they'll eventually get frustrated, and move on to something else.

## Color use

Effective color use will influence the mood considerably. Think about your best use of color however, after you've chosen your lighting. If it's a dark night, dark ground won't show up to best effect. Similarly, a dark bot will be hard to see, but then, perhaps that's what you're after? Just consider your lighting first, and then take the color of everything else into account.

## POV

The point of view you take in the game can have a considerable influence over the atmosphere and tension in the game. Take for example, a space invaders style shooter like the one that Richard designed a few weeks ago. (Kodu Invader)

A fixed camera angle removes the distraction of a wandering point of view, and introduces the feeling that you can't back away from the action! It also allows you to see the entire playing field, and as you can more easily see the growing number of opponents you're faced with, increases the tension.

A first person perspective on the other hand, is a far more personal point of view, and perfect for RPG games where you want the player investing themselves in the outcome of their characters journey.



## Video: Game Design with HaloX

HaloX has created a number of fantastic Kodu Game Lab games on the Xbox. [In this interview](#) he shares his game design process and rules for engaging play.

[Videos of haloX's games are available on You Tube.](#)

- **Dual** – [Gameplay Video](#)
- **Kodu: Portal** – [Gameplay Video](#)
- **Kodu or Die** – [Gameplay Video](#)
- **Take 'Em Out** – [Gameplay Video](#)

## The Game Space

Games occur in a physical space. The space defines the playing field both in determining how the game is played and the feel of the game.

Open spaces can allow the player to explore and/or use strategy, while linear games have set paths that players must travel in order to progress in the game. Open spaces usually require secrets to be discovered or tasks accomplished sometimes the order of the tasks matters sometimes they don't.

Obstacles in the game space can be used to allow player to shield or hide from enemies. Barriers and walls can be used to direct players along certain paths, as can raising or lowering the terrain.

Special Spaces, indicated by color or texture, can alter game play by changing the rules or effecting game play (e.g. the player moves slower in snow)

The camera, also affects the game space. A fixed camera above or to the side of the game space creates a 2 dimensional field but is often useful when creating multiplayer games. First person cameras are useful when creating games with mazes and surprises and much of the game space is often unseen by the player.

## Levels

A simple way to give a sense of progression is to have levels in your game. It should be clear to the player that a level has been completed and that a new level has started. Typically a player is unable to return to the previous level once the next level has been started. Usually, a Boss Level is encountered in order to complete the game.

## Characters

In Kodu Game Lab, the different bots do not all have the same abilities. Some can fly, some can swim and some can jump. The speed in which the characters can move is also different, our friend Kodu is much slower than the Biker Bot. In some games changing character mid game may be required, when the player boards a boat to cross water.

Interesting games tend to have the characters develop during the game. They might gain additional skills or abilities in order to complete more complex game play. Increasing the skills over time will not only add to the sense of progression within the game but also makes it easier for the player to learn how to play the game. Sometimes these skills will be automatically added to character and sometimes the player might purchase extra skills or tools, predicting what will be needed for the upcoming tasks.

### What happens when the characters die?

How many lives does a character get, does the character return to the start of the game or re-spawn at a previous checkpoint? Having a limited number of lives and forcing the player who has "lost" to re-start the game and then re-do easy parts of the game can make a game feel tedious. If completing the game, rather than say getting a high score, is the main objective then letting the player re-spawn an infinite number of times may be desirable to maximize fun.

## **Week 4 Task**

Create a game that features a Bot that you haven't yet used before in a Kodu Game Lab game.

We encourage you to use the official Kodu Game Lab site to share links, write blog posts and give updates on your progress (of course you can use your own blog, so.cl and twitter if you like). The Kodu client and Kodu Game Labs site use [so.cl](#) for authentication, so there is only one username and password required.