A character’s surroundings are an important consideration for a game’s visual composition because the environment takes up much of the image within the picture frame. For our purposes, the environment also includes secondary characters (both friendly and hostile nonplayable characters) and props. Environment objects collectively serve as narrative obstacles and constraints that act in harmony or in opposition to the playable character. Because of this close relationship between characters and the environment, it is beneficial to study the two elements side-by-side to determine character-environment relationships.

Harmony and Dissonance

The illustrations in Figure 3.1 represent characters placed in various environments. A circular character in a circular environment (Figure 3.1a) creates a sense of harmony because the character’s shape concept is echoed in its surroundings. We also get a sense of harmony if both the character and environment are square, or triangular (Figure 3.1b). A character appears to be at home whenever its shape concept is echoed in the surrounding environment because the two elements share the same visual DNA.

We get a sense of dissonance when character and environment shapes contrast each other. A circular character appears threatened when placed in an edgy, triangular environment (Figure 3.1c), while a triangular character appears to be the threatening element in a soft and circular environment (Figure 3.1d).

The *Super Mario Galaxy* series of games by Nintendo is a great example of how this character-environment relationship works in practice. In Chapter 1, we studied Mario’s circular character design concept. In *Super Mario Galaxy*, his
Environment Shapes

Mario's home planet in *Super Mario Galaxy* (2007), by Nintendo, echoes the circular shapes of his character design—creating character-environment harmony and a distinct sense of home and belonging.

Figure 3.1 A character appears to be at home when its visual DNA is echoed in its surroundings (a and b), and a sense of dissonance or threat is created when the surrounding environment has a different visual theme (c and d).

Mario appears out of place, in foreign territory, the instant he transitions to an environment that is not aligned to his circular theme (Figure 3.2). The shape contrast also applies to Mario's enemies who, like Wario, always feature elements that align with the triangle shape concept. *Super Mario Galaxy*’s character-environment shape design is so clear and distinct that we can reduce the games implied narrative...
Harmony and Dissonance

to a dramatic clash of shapes in which a spherical Mario lives in a spherical universe overrun with triangular enemies that create a sense of dissonance. It's the player's role to clear the galaxy of triangles in order to restore harmony between circular Mario and his circular home environment.

Character-Centric Design
Blizzard Entertainment's design process also exemplifies the importance of strong character-environment shape concepts. With so many character races in the *World of Warcraft* (2004) universe, it is imperative that each new addition is visually distinct from others. For this reason, Blizzard uses a character-centric approach to developing each new race, which starts with the design of lead characters whose silhouettes must be easily distinguishable—even when viewed as black and white silhouettes, void of details. Work on the environment commences only once the race's character designs are finalized. Rather than start the design process anew, artists copy elements from characters and paste them into the environment—such as the triangular motifs seen in the environments belonging to the Warlords of Draenor (Figure 3.4). The shared shape concept for the warlords and their environment ensures that players instantly recognize the race's respective territory. To create a sense of dissonance, a character from a rival race with a different shape concept need only enter the territory and it will instantly be recognized as an outsider.

A similar sense of harmony and dissonance can be elicited by varying the relationship between a character's design (see Chapter 1, Character Shapes and Poses) and its lines of movement (see Chapter 2). Characters with a circular appearance and flowing lines of movement will be perceived as harmonious, while a
Figure 3.4 Environments belonging to the Warlords of Draenor in World of Warcraft (2004), by Blizzard Entertainment, were created by echoing elements of the triangular aesthetic of character designs in associated buildings to clearly convey the race’s territory.

Figure 3.5 The skull motif of the Gears of War logo, by Epic Games, is echoed throughout the game in the chest armor of Marcus Fenix and the COG troops; in the faces of enemies; and level designs (notice the abstract eye sockets, nose, and mouth of the Trenches multiplayer map).

character with the same friendly appearance but with edgy lines of movement will create an unsettling, dissonant feeling.

Image Systems
A highly sophisticated example of character-environment shape relationships is illustrated by the image system embedded in the design of the Gears of War series by Epic Games (Figure 3.5). Filmmaker, Gustavo Mercado, defines image systems as “the use of recurrent images and compositions […] that add layers of meaning to a narrative.” The image system used in Gears of War starts with the franchise’s logo that—as every well-designed logo should—summarizes the essence and values of the experience in one poignant, visual statement that serves to subliminally reiterate the overarching theme of annihilation.

The Architectural Value of Secondary Characters
The reason that secondary characters are conceptually grouped together with environment shapes is illustrated in the screenshot from Grand Theft Auto V
Character-Environment Scale

Consider that the vehicles are driven by artificial intelligence (AI) characters and are usually on the move. When vehicles become stationary, as in the traffic pileup, it becomes easier to understand their architectural value as they define the boundaries of the player's environment like a wall or building. Increasing or decreasing the amount of secondary characters or vehicles can therefore serve to modulate the intensity of navigating an environment by creating free, open spaces contrasted by tight, angular corridors. Additionally, if secondary characters move with gentle, curving motions, then the player's interaction will consequently be gentler. Enemy characters will naturally elicit more aggressive movements from the player.

Another aesthetic effect derived from character-environment relationships is the manipulation of relative scale. This happens throughout Alice: Madness Returns (2011)—a game in which the player feels vulnerable when Alice shrinks to a small size and powerful when she towers above the environment (Figure 3.7). A similar concept can be found in Respawn Entertainment’s, Titanfall (2014), in which gameplay constantly shifts between fighting as a foot soldier, and piloting giant mechs.

The amount of space between the playable character, and secondary characters and props can also be modulated to create feelings of closeness or loneliness. Small spaces will naturally feel more intimate, although they can also feel claustrophobic if they become too small in relation to the playable character. The technique of varying spatial scale is used to great effect in The Beginner’s Guide.

Figure 3.6 The above car pileup in Grand Theft Auto V (2013), by Rockstar Games, illustrates the architectural value of secondary characters, and the reason why they are grouped together with environments in dynamic composition.
Smaller environments have a comforting human scale, which is juxtaposed by big open spaces that verge on the sublime—giving players a sense of tragic loneliness, isolation, or of being exposed. 

*Journey,* by thatgamecompany, also uses the sense of detachment in large open spaces to make encounters with secondary players feel more meaningful and welcome.

(2015), by Davey Wreden at Everything Unlimited Ltd. Smaller environments have a comforting human scale, which is juxtaposed by big open spaces that verge on the sublime—giving players a sense of tragic loneliness, isolation, or of being exposed. (Figure 3.7, *Journey,* by thatgamecompany, also uses the sense of detachment in large open spaces to make encounters with secondary players feel more meaningful and welcome.

*Figure 3.7* *Alice: Madness Returns* (2011), by Spicy Horse, features a game mechanic that allows Alice to change her size relative to the environment, which makes the player feel vulnerable when Alice is small, and empowered when she is big.

*Figure 3.8* *The Beginner’s Guide* (2015), by Davey Wreden at Everything Unlimited Ltd., contrasts environments that go from small and intimate to large and inhospitable.

Replay


*The Beginner’s Guide* is a revolutionary game and a masterclass in interactive storytelling. It can be completed in around 90 minutes, so even the most time-strapped readers should find a moment to play through. While playing, note how small spaces make you feel compared to wide-open environments.
Deductive Reasoning through Changing Locations

In addition to varying the environment scale for aesthetic effect, *The Beginner’s Guide* demonstrates the importance of varying aesthetics between locations (Figure 3.9). The game’s narrator guides players through a sequence of short video game vignettes—offering his personal interpretation as to their meaning and inviting players to draw their own conclusions. A series of varied environments will automatically prompt players to construct their own story and search for meaning in the sequence even if no explicit narrative is communicated. If we were to take the same environments but order them in a different sequence, a different interpretation would be generated. In the words of film director Stanley Kubrick, “A film [or video game] is—or should be—more like music than like fiction. It should be a progression of moods and feelings. The theme, what’s behind the emotion, the meaning, all that comes later.”

Figure 3.9 Changing the setting of a narrative automatically leads the player-audience to extract a personal interpretation of the narrative—which is an engaging phenomenon central to *The Beginner’s Guide*, by Everything Unlimited Ltd.

**Environment Shapes Notation**

A straightforward city silhouette or mountain range can be used for environment shape notation. Refer to the notation for character shapes and poses in Chapter 1 for indicating secondary characters.
Summary

The three elements of dynamic composition that we’ve explored thus far—character shapes and poses, lines of movement, and environment shapes—already demonstrate how a player’s aesthetic experience can be altered using the shape spectrum. Our analysis uses the emotionally charged primary shapes—the circle, square, and triangle—as a comparative analysis tool to make sense of a wide variety of artistic styles and interactions. In practice, the simpler the shape concepts the easier it is for the player-audience to immerse themselves in a story.

We’re about a third of the way to having a complete overview of dynamic composition, which will allow us to make snapshots of dynamic composition at any one moment of a game. In the next section, we will explore how pathways within a video game can shape the flow of player movement and influence the emotional experience of the player-audience in the context of a narrative.