Definition of the game atmosphere

Previous compulsory steps / Prior students' knowledge	Definition of the game genre
Learning objectives	To learn to define the tone and the representation of game elements.
Subjects	Literature, Art, Writing
Recommended Age (10 – 14) or (15 - 18)	15 - 18
Material needed	Computers with Internet connection and access to image, video and text archives
Expected duration	30 minutes
Skills developed (after learning objectives)	Critical thinking, Creativity, Collaboration & teamwork
Points of attention for inclusion / Inclusion best practices	Setting the mood can lead to a long discussion among the learners and there is a possibility that it can be difficult for some learners to focus during the entire discussion that may take place. It is important that the teacher/educator is able to synthesize all the information and opinions of the students and lead the group to ensure that all students follow this dynamic.
Individual or group activity	Group activity
Extension / differentiation activities (at the end of the sequence)	Creation of the story (all steps), creation of graphic design, creation of the animation, creation of sound.

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Project code: 2020-1-FR01-KA201-080669

Similar games to use with the approach of the sequence	A central part in the process of atmosphere definition consists in establishing the relationship between the genre of the game and its tone. For example, 2D **platformers** are often considered a more straightforward, colourful type of game, like the classic **Super Mario Bros**, the **Kirby** series or indie games like **Freedom Planet.** On the other hand, you can find 2D platformers like **Limbo**, which is tricky to navigate, very ominous in tone, and with a horror pace that pulls you completely away from more lighthearted productions in the same genre.

Step by step: how to implement the sequence

- **Step 1 – Research process: look up similar games**

In this first phase, it is necessary to investigate how other video games of the same or similar genres have created their atmospheres. With this objective in mind, the teacher should invite the students to look for graphic material (images and videos) of various video games in order to analyze them and define which examples they can use as inspiration for their game.

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- **Step 2 – Understand the basic concepts of atmosphere**

For each example they have found, students should describe the atmosphere by analyzing two concepts: **theme and tone**. As we have already mentioned, it is also important to identify the genre of the game here, but since it has been worked on in a previous activity, students will likely start this activity with their genre already defined. This is why students may already begin to search for games within the same genre as their own during Step 1 of this activity.

On the other hand, theme and tone are important literary concepts that also are applied to video games:

- **Theme**: The central idea or message of the game. For example: love, friendship, betrayal, survival, revenge, or conquest, among many others.
- **Tone**: The attitude the creators have towards the game. For example: joyful, ironic, dramatic, playful, tragic, humorous, etc. There is a video game that helps to understand the concept of tone: **The Stanley Parable**. It is a narrative game that changes its narrative to completely different tones, depending on the player's progress.

In general, the better these two concepts are combined, the more immersive the atmosphere will be in the game. For further explanation and examples of atmosphere in video games, see these videos:

- Setting Atmosphere in Video Games
- How Do We Define Atmosphere in Video Games?

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- **Step 3 – Determine the atmosphere**

With the inspiration and understanding of the concepts identified in Step 2 solidified, the students can begin to determine the atmosphere of their games. They should first come up with a theme and tone for their games. This atmosphere will be described in words, though they may (optionally) complement this with sketches that give a visual idea of what the atmosphere of the game will look like. (Important note: This would be a visual explanation for better understanding the look of the atmosphere, not a sample of what the video game's graphics will look like.)

Exemplifying atmospheres through different elements

As we may see in the following images, the use of different elements that are coherent with the genre, theme, and tone of the game are critical for setting an appropriate and believable atmosphere in the game.

Take a look at this first image, from the game **Plants Vs. Zombies**. How would you describe its atmosphere? Which elements contribute to this atmosphere?

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Now compare it to the following image from the game **The Last of Us**, below:

Both games share the same theme: survival, specifically surviving a zombie apocalypse. However, nearly everything else is different between these two games! While the former is of the **tower defense** genre, using simple graphics and a more childlike comic book aesthetic, the latter is a 3D **shooter** game with realistic graphics and a very dark, apocalyptic aesthetic.

Furthermore, the storyline and the relationships between the characters in Plants vs. Zombies are completely secondary to other aspects, while they are a key factor in The Last of Us. All of these elements converge to make the atmosphere work in both games, although in very different ways: Plants vs. Zombies' lighthearted gameplay, cartoonish designs, light humour and shallow storyline offer a simple, fun and effective experience for the whole family. The Last of Us, on the other hand, takes the player through an intense **survival horror** journey in which the characters, with their varied conflicts and insecurities, make up the dramatic core of the overall gaming experience.

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Resources

Donnellan, Jimmy. (2017, July 17). *The Last of Us' Grounded Mode is A Sobering Experience* [Image from article]. Culturedvultures.com. https://culturedvultures.com/the-last-of-us-grounded-mode/

Macgregor, Jody. (2019, May 6). *Plants vs. Zombies turns 10, creator shows original designs* [Image from article]. Pcgamer.com. https://www.pcgamer.com/plants-vs-zombies-turns-10-creator-shows-original-designs/

User davo_. (2019, August 30). *Setting Atmosphere in Video Games* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MzERA9AqeE0

User MrHammers. (2021, January 23). *How Do We Define Atmosphere in Video Games?* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9MPNxY2Zs6Y

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