

Creating Emotional Involvement in Interactive Entertainment

by

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Attendance

For the first two days attendance was on par with previous years, then it dropped off significantly on the third day. Although I have no data to support this conclusion, my suspicion is that this was the result of being scheduled against both Brian Moriarty's talk (which might better be termed an 'experience') and the Doug Church/Warren Spector gab at the auditorium.

As usual there was a broad mix of disciplines in attendance at each session, with no particular job title claiming any real dominance. Also in keeping with last year there seemed to be less and less inter-departmental squabbling, and a general sense that everyone needs to be a part of any real solutions to creating emotional involvement in our industry. This has firmly convinced me that we have, at least for the time being, entered a more mature phase of development in the industry.

Instead of arguing over who should lead, we now seem to be talking about how everyone can and must contribute. I not only think that's a very healthy sign, I think it's essential to reaching our goal.

Key Points

This year I took a minimalist approach to the launch of each session, although the small size of the group on the final day necessitated more involvement on my part. Given that the subject under discussion could reasonably be inferred from the session title, my goal was to focus first on making sure that anyone with something to contribute got a chance to do so, and in that I think I was largely successful. Happily, obstacles I'd encountered in previous years - such as the tendency to support theoretical arguments with sales data or marketing spin - were absent, and the attendee-driven debates stayed quite effortlessly on topic. I cannot remember a single instance of having to change the subject to get the discussion back on track.

While there was still an understandable tendency to assume that the creation of emotional involvement in interactive works was synonymous with the subject of storytelling, this assumption was significantly less apparent than it had been even a year ago. On those

few occasions when participants made the mistake of substituting storytelling for the more open question of driving emotional involvement with interactivity, simple observation of that fact seemed to preclude it from happening again. As in previous years there were still discussions about the efficacy of user-defined stories versus author-defined stories, but there seemed to be a willingness to see these different approaches as design choices relevant to particular markets and genres instead of competing design philosophies.

Day One

Total attendance: 45+

In true minimalist fashion I offered no opening remarks, took no attendance by profession as I had in previous years, and simply assumed that people knew what they were there for. While my brevity clearly surprised those in attendance, the lag between my throwing the floor open to debate and the start of genuine discourse was all of thirty seconds. In moments a variety of subjects were broached, including:

- How can we generate pathos?

Pathos was proposed as an analogue of emotional involvement, as were empathy and sympathy, and there seemed to be general agreement that engineering these states in the user was a good goal. While the consensus was that these terms were somewhat interchangeable, interchanging them didn't really seem to generate new solutions about how to create such states. However, it should be noted that this kind of agreement on terminology is not trivial, particularly given the relatively brief history of the industry. The fact that we may all be using different words, but are learning to recognize the commonalities behind those words, is important.

- How can and must language be used?

The issue of language as the most direct way to create emotional involvement came up early, but so did a general recognition of the negative aspects of commonly implemented language-based solutions such as branching dialogues and non-interactive cutscenes. There seemed to be a general consensus that attendees did not really enjoy cutscenes, texts, or other language-based attempts to generate involvement in the narrative of a story, but there was little consensus about how similar emotional effects might otherwise be achieved. Still, while the attendees discussed these problems by making reference to many techniques from passive mediums (particularly film), there seemed to be an understanding that these techniques were not directly portable to interactive works except at the most basic level, such as individual shot composition, etc. There was no discussion or mention made of interactive movies, interactive fiction, or other attempts to apply interactivity to mature passive mediums.

- How can the consequences of player actions be used to positive effect?

I was pleased when one of the attendees broached the subject of generating emotional involvement through the consequences of player actions in the game world, and for a short while there was a solid discussion of how this might be accomplished. Approaches mentioned often involved using language in ways we had just discounted, but there was a strong consensus that not only was it important to show the player how their decisions were affecting the game world, it was equally important to design that potential into the game. I took this opportunity to introduce the idea that real interactivity is driven by choices that determine outcomes instead of simply revealing them, and the definition seemed to be generally accepted.

- How can we generate and take advantage of the player's investment in a game?

I was also pleased when another attendee quickly followed up with the idea of getting the player to invest their time and thought processes in gameplay, at which point I added that investment can be not only be an important design goal but also a way in which we can cause emotional involvement. Getting the player to care about other characters, items in the game, locations, accomplishments - in fact any aspect of a game world - provides the opportunity for us to impact that relationship, thereby generating emotional involvement in the player. One key that was noted here was not destroying the relationship outright, particularly to the point of requiring the reloading of a saved game, because that causes a disconnect.

As the conversation on these subjects came to a close, I took the opportunity to point out that perhaps some of the disagreements and uncertainties we'd just wrestled with might actually be a sign of a broader range of craft choices instead of an uncertainty of craft. For example, while it had been generally agreed that cutscenes and other language-based attempts to generate emotional involvement were often intrusive, it was acknowledged that some games (I offered up *Chrono Trigger* as an example) actually seem to achieve results using that same methodology. I proposed that this might mean that it was the editorial sensibility of the people putting the product together, and not the technique itself, that was determinative of success.

One game that had been mentioned earlier in the day, that was again pointed to, was *Ico*, which was nominated for five Game Developers Choice Awards to be given out later that evening. Positive mention of the game was made by a number of other attendees who had played it, and it was highly praised for generating emotional involvement.

When I asked for examples of other games that had given people an emotional jolt, one of the first attendees to comment mentioned *Planetfall*, which has become a perennial nominee in this category. One of the best of the old Infocom text adventures, *Planetfall's* undeniably powerful climax centers on the unexpected sacrifice made by a loyal NPC. Somewhat problematic is the fact that none of the game-play is truly interactive, but I think it would be unwise to ignore the success of the game for that reason alone. Given the number of times this gaming moment has been mentioned as a high point, it seems there must be something there, even if the power comes from implied interactivity.

Following up I noted that a number of issues which had been broached - including whether first-person or third-person point of view was better at establishing emotional involvement in a character or game, and how backstory should be handled - again seemed to signal that we had a palette of techniques available to us, some of which would be better for one genre (or game) than another. Again the attendees seemed willing to accept this point, where in years past such an observation would have probably led to greater factionalism.

The next issue we confronted turned out to be both surprising and familiar. One of the attendees pointed out that the game industry as a whole needed to be more aware of and make better use of writers - particularly those coming from the film and television industry. This observation precipitated a discussion which I hadn't seen take place for several years, which centered around the degree to which Hollywood could or could not provide any salvation to the game industry, both in terms of generating mass-market success and deeper emotional involvement.

My suspicion is that the pro-Hollywood attendee was unaware of the dark history of failed collaboration between the two industries, as well as the divisive nature of any insinuation that the game business cannot truly succeed without Hollywood talent. In any case, this subject proved to be the most contentious and unresolved discussion of the day, with the sides drawing further apart as the debate progressed. (When the debate finally moved on I was again reminded why we used to call the gulf between the gaming crowd and the storytelling crowd 'The Chasm'.)

Out of the dispute about the relevance of Hollywood talent to the interactive industry came a discussion about the degree to which storytelling in general gets in the way of gameplay. Previous points about intrusive implementations of backstory and boring cutscenes again resurfaced, this time with renewed vigor. After the attendees wrestled with the problem for a while, I made the point that victory conditions often threaten any accrued player investment, because once a battle (or contest) has been lost the player must often reload a save or replay a mission. In so doing, any attachment the player may have had to various elements in the game is forfeit, which means that perhaps the relationships between emotional involvement, game-play, and narrative elements are more complicated than we think.

Toward the end of the session one of the attendees asked point blank if the medium of interactivity is really ready to provide emotional involvement. Because we were running short on time I offered my own answer, which was that while many of the techniques we needed had indeed been discovered, we were still a ways off from a time when the industry as a whole understood what the possibilities were, and how those possibilities could be achieved. I added that in my opinion there was currently a gap between what was understood and what was being implemented during the design process, and that this related as much to limitations imposed by traditional methods of game design as anything else.

I concluded the session by making mention of the fact that multiplayer gaming, and in particularly persistent massively multiplayer games, had not come up at all as an answer to the question of creating emotional involvement. Given the degree to which massively multiplayer games had been proposed as a panacea for all things ailing the industry only a year or two earlier, I found this to be an amazing shift in focus.

Day Two

Total attendance: 35+

Artists (graphics, sound and writing): 6

Programmers: 4

Designers: 11

Producers: 6

Other: 8

Probably because of the nine a.m. scheduling, the second day's session was a bit smaller and a bit more subdued. The fact that there was no clash of agendas, however, was most likely the result of a more homogenous group of attendees, none of whom seemed to have a polarized view of what ailed the industry. Overall the discussion was again substantive, and again more collegial than in years past.

Feeling that my minimalist approach on the first day had been a bit too brief, I reverted to a short introduction and the gathering of basic stats on the make-up of the session. (Note that I insisted that attendees choose only one of the above job titles.)

To open the day's discussion, and in light of the previous day's mention of the game *Ico*, I asked what people were playing that was having an emotional impact on them. Among the games mentioned were:

- *Pikmin*

This game was mentioned not only during the session, but also in several conversations I had with individuals at the convention. Noted both for its ability to make you care about the little Pikmin that are your allies in the game, and for the way in which the flocking algorithm keeps your little friends swarming nearby, the game was almost always praised for being able to create emotional involvement.

- *Alien vs. Predator (AvP)*

This game was mentioned as being particularly frightening. When I asked the attendee who'd suggested the title if he'd been playing as the marine (you can play as a marine, an alien, or a predator), he said yes, which jibed with what I'd heard from others. What interested me most about the game was that while you could play any of three races, it was while in the role of the human character that players seemed to feel the greatest emotional involvement. While this might be due only to the greater lethality of the foes or other game-tuning factors, I couldn't help but wonder if

perhaps there was more to it than that. Perhaps the human point of view was simply more involving because we brought more of our own experiences to that point of view. If so, that held implications not only for designing characters, but also worlds.

- *Grand Theft Auto III*

Whatever you want to say about this game's depiction of violence, it seems to get universal respect for creating a role and then fleshing that role out as completely as possible. Treating as moot the issue of whether the role should have been created in the first place, I'll simply point out that almost everyone who's played it thinks it's great and emotionally involving. (The previous night *GTA3* won the Game Developers Choice Award for Game of the Year.)

- *Silent Hill*

Along with *AvP*, this game was mentioned as creating a great deal of fear, primarily through the excellent use of sound. There was some debate about whether the ending worked or not, but no debate about whether a compelling mood had been created.

- *Ico*

Ico was again mentioned numerous times during the session, and not simply because it won three of the five awards it had been up for at the GDC awards the night before. There was again mention of the fact that *Ico* is deeply involving on an emotional level, partly because of its aesthetics, but primarily because of the player's need to care for another character (Yolda - a girl you rescue early in the game). It was this relationship - both in terms of story and gameplay - that seemed to foster the greatest sense of emotional involvement.

- *Planetfall*

On the heels of *Ico*, *Planetfall* was again mentioned as a game that generates a great deal of emotional involvement through a partner NPC. For those who weren't familiar with the game I gave a brief synopsis of how a loyal ally sacrifices himself at the end of the game so that the player-character may live.

One topic that ran throughout the discussion of these games was the question of whether some emotions - particularly fear - weren't easier to generate than others. Implicit in this was the question of whether there shouldn't be more emphasis on trying to generate more difficult emotions, such as guilt, love, grief, etc. One attendee made the point that there were good and bad emotions, and that perhaps as game designers we tended to take the easy road and wallow in negative emotions (fear, anger, aggression, etc.), but there was no consensus taken on this idea.

Shortly after discussing the above titles, one of the attendees brought up the degree to which aesthetics and visuals can create emotional involvement themselves. The point

was made that beauty and ‘cool’ imagery can connect on a fairly deep level, and there was little debate about the validity of this point. To the extent that all things remained equal, it was agreed that the more aesthetically pleasing or evocative works would probably achieve a greater degree of emotional involvement.

The next issue that was brought up was the way in which some games - and in particular sports games like baseball - generate emotional involvement because of associations with teams, the desire for performance (from the NPC athletes) and the context of the game. This point quickly broadened into a more general discussion of simulated experiences, including products ranging from flight sims to *The Sims*. As this thread ended I took the opportunity to advance the notion of interactive storytelling as being the sum of a player’s experiences in a simulated environment when looked at in retrospect. I.e., the player’s story unfolds as they make decisions during play, and only when play is completed is the story finished.

One attendee made the point - at least partly in response to the earlier point about aesthetics and graphics - that sound is not only key to emotional involvement, it’s a relatively cheap way to dramatically improve a game. Another attendee chimed in and agreed, also noting the distinction between music and sound effects (SFX). I added my personal belief that sound is probably the most important thing to get really right in a game, and encouraged everyone to experiment with compelling moments in gameplay by thinking about how sounds had been used to help create those effects.

For the first time this year the value of massively multiplayer gaming was raised, but again I was surprised. Instead of proposing that multiplayer gaming would resolve all of the weaknesses of single-player games (poor opponent AI, canned language interaction, etc.), as was often the case in previous years, this year the point was made that people who play massively multiplayer games get their emotional involvement not out of the play experience itself, but from the community of the play experience. I.e., it’s not the game itself that has meaning, but the relationship the player has with other players outside the game-play experience (for example in a chat room, a guild forum, or via written documentation of play experiences) where players feel a connection.

Day Three

Total attendance: 12

As I had anticipated, attendance on the third day was way down, almost certainly due to two high-profile sessions taking place at the same time. (I personally told four people who were intending to come to my roundtable to skip it and go see either of the other two sessions.) When we actually kicked off the discussion there were only six people in attendance, although another six arrived in short order.

After giving those in attendance the opportunity to cancel the session and run off to see other things (which was unanimously turned down) I made the decision to speed up the debate process by contributing more myself. Given the small size of the group it seemed likely that everyone would be able to have their say on any given subject while still

leaving me time to expand on points made, and that indeed turned out to be the case. Once a topic had been responded to, I added my two cents (at times significantly more), hopefully making up in depth of content what the small size of the group lost in terms of breadth of discussion. While this worked well enough, one unfortunate result was that I had little time to jot down notes about the subjects we discussed, so this day's report is a bit thin on highlights.

I threw open the discussion by asking the attendees if there was anything they'd seen or been thinking about during the first two days of the convention that they thought might help solve the problem of creating emotional involvement. When I didn't get a single response I next threw out the notion - taken from the previous two days - that perhaps the industry was maturing in its outlook. I noted the almost complete lack of reference to massively multiplayer games, and the general tolerance of those approaches that seemed able to bear fruit repeatedly, and wondered aloud if that wasn't a good sign.

There seemed to be general agreement that the industry was not as polarized as it had been in the past, but soon enough some of the old debates reared their heads. The first of these was a good argument put forth that allowing the player to save at any point in a game eliminates emotional involvement because the player always knows they're safe. Almost immediately someone mentioned the traditional counterpoint, which is that if you're frustrating the player or making them angry they're not going to like much about your game. In short order we were at a standoff.

To move us beyond this deadlock I simply gave a short lecture on how victory conditions - and in particular sudden death - are at the heart of the problem when the question of save games comes up. If games allowed the player character to become injured or even incapacitated in some way, yet didn't kill them (thus *requiring* restoring a saved game), the player could stay involved with the game *and* have a reasonable chance of staying alive. It's because the lethality of many games is so high that not allowing a save seems unfair.

This discussion segued into the question of whether first-person or third-person characters are better for creating emotional involvement, and again the debate fell pretty much along party lines. People in favor of third-person characters felt that without an on-screen character there was little opportunity for the player to empathize with the consequences of events and decisions in the game. By seeing the effect of decisions on their player character, these attendees felt it was easier to become emotionally involved. On the other side of the issue, those favoring first-person characters felt that third-person characters often did not actually reflect how they, the player felt. This created a disconnect for them, where they didn't feel the player character was acting like they would have acted. Those in favor of third-person characters said that first-person characters often left them flat precisely because too little information about the character was presented.

My contribution was to first point out that I have a general bias toward first-person games because they simply produce more emotionally compelling experiences for me.

Although I have enjoyed playing third-person games, I don't seem to actually inhabit the imaginary world of a third-person game the way I do a first-person game. To highlight one of these experiences I recounted that during the designing of missions for a WWII flight sim (*Fighter Squadron*) I had a number of experiences that to this day evoke goose-bumps because they were so 'real'. (Admittedly this was a function not only of point of view, but also of the detailed damage model which allowed me to keep flying even after I'd been badly shot up. This latter point dovetailed nicely with the earlier debate about save games vs. no save games.)

One of the attendees expressed surprise that I preferred first-person characters, but I quickly clarified that I had not said I preferred first-person characters, but instead first-person *experiences*. I then took a moment to stress the fact that both the confusion on that point and the reason for the confusion were important. Unlike all passive mediums, our interactive medium not only often provides a player with a character to 'be' (in either first or third person), it also uniquely provides a player with a role. In the interactive medium, although it's not talked about much, there is no more basic and important design consideration than the role the player is going to fulfill while playing a game, and it is the first-person role, not the first-person character, that seems most compelling to me.

As we were running short on time I moved the discussion to the question of how role is differentiated from character, and whether or not, when we're talking about character, we're really talking about something that has less importance to the player's overall experience than we seem to give it. At this point one of the attendees made the legitimate point - which comes up regularly - that perhaps it's unfair to call films and books and other mediums passive, because the audience really does participate on an emotional level.

I responded that from the point of view of the audience all mediums were indeed alive, but that from the point of view of the designers most mediums were not. The designer of a book does not need to take into account the choices of the reader in order for the book to work, but the designer of a computer game (or non-game simulation) certainly does. As the session ended I emphasized that we, as designers, need to make sure we understand this difference in all aspects of design.

Conclusion

I came into the roundtables this year more curious than anything, because I wasn't sure where the industry was in terms of motivation or maturity. I came away from the roundtables feeling very good about the state of the industry, and about the objectives that we still collectively have for our maturing medium. The openness with which attendees greeted each other's perspectives - notwithstanding the still-divisive subject of Hollywood - was heartening.