Emotion and Video Games

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May 2008

DMST4200
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1. Emotions and Video Games

Video games have become a mainstream topic in our society. While most of the focus is on the effect video games have on children, many people miss the fact that video games aren’t just for kids anymore. What effect do video games have on any of us? Are all video games just polygons per second and blatant escapism? Is there something inherent to video games that doesn’t allow for deeper meanings? Can a video game evoke strong emotions in people, the way that books and movies do? And more than that, can the interactivity inherent in a video game be used to create an experience beyond that of a linear and pre-defined book or movie?

This paper will attempt to determine if video games can tell meaningful stories that evoke emotions, what the challenges for creating emotional involvement in video games are, and speculate on how video games can overcome these challenges. To start, I will describe video games, and discuss how video games stand in today’s society. Then, I will outline some of the challenges specific to creating emotionally rich video games. Next, I will analyze Shadow of the Colossus (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2005), a game noted for telling a meaningful story through gameplay as well as cut-scenes. Lastly, I will speculate about the future of emotion in video games.
2. History of Emotions and Video Games

2.1. A Brief Description of Video Games

Games have been around for a long, long time. Ancient civilizations and even modern day animals play games. Video games, on the other hand, are a relatively new development, beginning within the last 40-50 years. Pong, designed by Ralph Baer in 1972, is one of the earliest videogames; and Pong still exists today in its original and modified forms (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p. xviii).

Salen and Zimmerman define games as “a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 83)”. They further clarify that “[r]ole-playing games (RPGs) do not clearly possess a quantifiable outcome...[they] have emergent goals but usually no single overriding outcome (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 83)”. RPGs, among other “play activities”, border on the definition of “game” (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 82). The definition of RPGs is particularly important, since 78% of gamers find RPGs emotionally powerful (Bowen, 2007). Digital games (including not only games for the computer, but consoles, PDA’s, cell phones, etc.) are a subcategory of games that take advantage of digital media.

Although video games are often compared to books and movies, games have their own heritage. Will Wright believes that “games have a very different
evolutionary heritage from…linear storytelling media. …Games are rooted as far back, if not further, than the printed word, and sports as well, then the idea of toys and general play (Elliot, 2007).”  Video games are a descendent of games, and should not be treated or viewed in the same way as linear storytelling media. Linear storytelling is about empathy, while games are about agency (Elliot, 2007).

2.2. Video Games as a Mature Medium

Video games, at the present moment, seem to fall into the same cultural importance category as comic books and animation. All three are considered to be immature mediums, suitable for children but not for serious cultural importance. Some of this mentality is changing, as we see kids who grew up with video games becoming parents, but videogames are still considered to be an immature field. Some people believe “that video games will never become a significant form of cultural discourse the way that novels and film have…fifty years from now they'll be just as mature and well-respected as comic books are today (Gaynor, 2008)”.

While current video games may not be as culturally significant as books or film, the video game industry is much younger than either of these. Will Wright believes that the video game industry is at and “apprentice level”. There isn’t a lot of quality theory, so video games designers are still using “failure-based learning” (Elliot, 2007). Recent games, such as Ico (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2001),
Shadow of the Colossus (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2005), Rez (Sega, 2001), and Portal (Valve Corporation, 2007) “approximate the mood, texture, emotion, astonishment, mystery and ineffability that generally signal the presence of genuine art (Croal, 2008)”. Whether video games are “art”, is different angle to the same question, but video game designers believe the answer is “yes” (Ochalla, 2007).

2.3. The Watershed Moment

The path of video games is often compared with the path of movies. They share several obvious similarities, as both are visual entertainment. The key difference is that movies are passive entertainment, while video games are interactive. At present, movies have passed their watershed moment and video games have yet too. Movies have become an accepted as a “significant form of cultural discourse (Gaynor, 2008)”, while games are still considered immature and lacking in cultural importance. For the movie industry, the watershed moment came with a movie called Citizen Kane (RKO Pictures, 1941). Although it may be hard to define what makes a watershed moment, “[a] lot of people would say it would be the point where a game makes you cry and that you feel a real emotional connection with a virtual character” (Gaudiosi, 2008).

Many gamers, and game analysts have pinpointed a similar moment in recent video game history with a game called Final Fantasy VII (Square Company, 1997).
A cut-scene in the game depicts the murder of a young, female protagonist named Aerith (or Aeris, depending on the version). Previous to her murder, Aerith had been the love interest of the main protagonist. Many gamers specifically single out this scene as the first time they ever cried while playing a videogame. Some gamers were so distraught they stopped playing for weeks (Bowen, 2007). Whether or not *Final Fantasy VII* is indeed a watershed moment, or merely a step in that direction depends on the individual.

3. **Difficulties Creating Emotion in Games**

3.1. **Linear Narrative vs. Self-Created Story**

Video games present some unique challenges for evoking emotions in players. Linear storytelling (common in books, movies, and other forms of passive media) create emotional experiences by telling the story in a specific sequence (Freeman, 2004, p. 19). Story-driven games, such as *Final Fantasy VII* (Square Company, 1997), lead the player through a predetermined order of events in order to evoke the desired emotion. While this technique does create emotion, the game is not much different from watching a movie. Given the interaction a video game allows, the player should be able to make choices that affect the outcome of the game. “Gamers want to feel they’re playing a game, not being played by it (Freeman, 2004, p. 19)”.
Video games give players the opportunity to create their own story. Some games, such as *Final Fantasy VII* (Square Company, 1997), give the player very little freedom to create a unique story. Other video games, such as *The Sims* (Electronic Arts, 2000), give the player complete control over the story. *The Sims* has absolutely no narrative story; players often create their own, self-created stories as they play (Freeman, 2004, PP.328-329). Self-created stories can have a deeper meaning to the player, because of the fact that they are self-created. Creating emotional responses using narrative is often much easier to design in than a non-narrative game. A non-narrative game is more likely to evoke wildly different emotions in different players, while in a narrative game different players are likely to experience similar emotions.

### 3.2. Receptive Audience

Over the years, few games have been released that evoke strong emotional reactions from players. The reasoning for this seems to be that gamers are not interested in emotional experiences. Games that are emotionally rich don’t usually sell as well as games that are popular. It should be noted that this same trend occurs in movies (action movies outsell emotionally compelling art films), and literature (popular fiction outsells the classics). (Croal, 2008) The reality is that players play video games for many different reasons, just like readers read and moviegoers watch for many different reasons. Different players may even play the same video game for different reasons (Yee, 2007, pp. 7-8).
4. Case Study: *Shadow of the Colossus*

4.1. Defining the Analysis

In order to better illustrate how video games can be used to evoke strong emotions in player, I will analyze a specific game *Shadow of the Colossus* (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2005). *Shadow of the Colossus* will be abbreviated at “SotC” for the remainder of this section. I will use a similar format to the analysis of *Silent Hill – Restless Dreams* (Konami, 2001) done by Doris Rusch (Rusch, ????). I will first discuss how the game creates verisimilitude, the appearance of being real. Next I will discuss how *SotC* addresses source concerns, the motivation behind the protagonist and player’s desire to accomplish something. After that, I will discuss how *SotC* maintains player interest, how the game keeps the player playing. I will conclude with some remarks about the overall experience of playing *SotC*.

For clarities sake, I’ll briefly introduce the characters. The main protagonist is Wander, a teenaged boy with a horse, a bow, and a sword. The girl Wander has come so far to save is Mono, and not much more is known about her. Wander’s horse is called Agro, and he is Wander’s most frequent companion throughout the game. The Dormin, who could be considered either antagonist or facilitator, are a powerful entity who were sealed long ago. Lord Emon, who shows up near the end, is a protagonist.
who tries to keep Wander from reaching his goals. The area in which *SotC* takes place is called the Forbidden Lands.

4.2. **Verisimilitude in *Shadow of the Colossus***

The visual aspects of *SotC* are not the only parts of the game that convince us that the Forbidden Lands are real. The beautifully rendered terrain and characters are only the beginning. The lifelike movement and behavior of Agro and the colossi help to convince us that this virtual world does contain life. Borders to the Forbidden Lands are steep cliffs or oceans, giving us a realistic boundary to our virtual playground. The motivations of the major characters, both Wander and Dormin, is accessible to the player. *SotC* seems simple at the surface level, but is a very deep and meaningful experience. One could elaborate at length on how *SotC* creates verisimilitude, but I’m going to focus on just a few highlights.

Agro, the horse, is one of the most believable characters in the game. Not only does Agro look good, he behaves like a living animal. When Wander is riding Agro, the player is in control of the reins, not the actual direction of the horse. Agro will usually respond predictably to the reins, but may refuse to turn particularly if something is in his way. When the player is not riding Agro, the horse doesn’t just stand around waiting. Argo will run around (sometimes right over Wander), graze, drink, flick his tail, and if Wander just stands around for too long Agro will nudge at
Wander with his nose. Although not listed as actions in the booklet, the player can have Wander pat and praise Agro. Agro’s behavior does a lot to add believability to the game. Because Agro behaves like a living animal, the player begins to think of him that way, which gives him and the game the appearance of being real.

The colossi themselves also move and behave in believable ways, which adds to the verisimilitude of the game. Each of the colossi is unique, and each has their own abilities and behaviors. Some colossi are very aggressive, and will viciously attack Wander. Other colossi are passive, and will only attack if provoked or not at all. Once could fill volumes with the specific qualities of each colossus, and their individuality also add believability to the game. However, one overall behavior that really adds to immersion of the game is that they all try to shake you off. To defeat each colossus, Wander must climb their bodies and locate the “weak spots”. Once Wander has grabbed onto a colossus, that colossus will stop doing everything else and try to shake Wander off. The look and feel of the colossi trying to scrape or shake Wander off is incredibly lifelike. The player can almost see the instinctual desire of the colossus to dislodge the pesky parasite from its’ hide. This one behavior, and the beautiful way in which it was executed, gives the colossi the appearance of being real, living beings.
4.3. **Source Concerns in *Shadow of the Colossus***

The major emotional concern in *SotC* is the desire to bring a loved one back from the dead. Mono, the girl, has been killed for, what the player assumes are unjust reasons. The only reason ever given by the game is that “[s]he was sacrificed for she has a cursed fate” (whether being killed was itself the cursed fate is left up to the player). Wander desperately wants to restore her to life; although his exact motives are unclear, Wander seems to be acting out of immense love or immense guilt (Sinclair & Rodoy, 2006). In the opening cut scene, Wander is told by the Dormin, “the price you pay may be heavy indeed”. His response is “It doesn’t matter”. Wander’s steadfast dedication to his goal is almost heartbreaking. Any human being can empathize with the desire to bring a loved one back from the dead. The lengths that Wander is willing to go to for Mono convey very, very strong emotions.

Throughout the course of *SotC* the concerns of the player are pretty simple. First off, survive. Wander must survive so that he can defeat all of the colossi. The second concern is to defeat the colossus who is the current challenge. Both of these are secondary concerns, survival and the defeat of the colossi are requirements of the main goal: bringing Mono back to life.
4.4. Player Interest in *Shadow of the Colossus*

Player interest is maintained by a combination of mystery, puzzles and awe in *SotC*. The over-riding mystery of why was Mono killed, and why is she so important to Wander provides a background motivation that keeps the player playing. The smaller mystery of who, or what, is Dormin and why he was sealed, is another question that the player keeps in the back of their mind. On top of this is the curiosity of what the next colossus will look like, and what the “trick” to defeating it will be. Each colossus is beautifully designed, and seeing each for the first time is an experience in itself. That’s the real motivation for playing through *SotC*, to continue the experience. David Roboy sums it up nicely:

“*Shadow of the Colossus* is more than just a video game. It is a spiritual experience, and that is very much the point. A game which is so totally about immersion and atmosphere to the point where it doesn't require much of anything to happen.

Or, more precisely, it's a work of art. In a way few games could hope to or would want to be.” (Sinclair & Rodoy, 2006).

4.5. Concluding Thoughts on *Shadow of the Colossus*

*SotC* creates an experience that occurs through the gameplay, instead of cut-scenes. This isn’t to say there aren’t cut-scenes in *SotC*, the cut-scenes just don’t
dictate the experience. The longest and most narrative of the cut-scenes occur at the very beginning and very end of the game. During the course of the game, cut-scenes are very short, and are usually either to show the player a path or the introduction of a colossus. The majority of the “story” in SotC is left to the player’s imagination. We’re never told who Mono is, or why she has a “cursed fate”. We never find out why reviving her was so important to Wander that he was more than willing to die for her. The end of the game leaves us wondering if we, and Wander, did the right thing by destroying the colossi and releasing the Dormin. And really, this is ok. We, as the player, can reconcile these things within our self.

The experience of playing through the game, of seeking out and defeating each colossus, is really the point. We watch Wander’s body deteriorate over the course of the game, and still he presses onward. We watch colossi, some of which never or barely attacked Wander, fall and turn to stone and moss. We are shown a world where the sun always shines, and the ruins of some ancient society crumble to dust. We are given a loyal companion, who then sacrifices himself so that we can complete our task. And each person who plays creates his or her own reasons for all of this. We create our own story, and this is more satisfying then being told all the answers. The player empowered to create a story that rings true and feels right.
5. Speculation on Emotion in Video Games

5.1. Emotion Sensing Games

An interesting, and recent advancement in video games, is the ability for a game to react to, or be controlled by a person’s thoughts and emotions. Emotiv has created a headset that can read brainwaves and facial expressions and interpret different emotions (Waters, 2008). With the ability to use and respond to a player’s thoughts and emotions, video games can move in many new directions. Gameplay may become more natural for a player, for example “[g]amers are able to move objects in the world just by thinking of the action (Waters, 2008)”. The game could also respond to emotions by changing the way non-player characters react towards the player based on the player’s mood. One could even create a game in which gameplay is controlled and directed only with the player’s emotions.

5.2. Transmedia Storytelling

Transmedia storytelling may provide interesting ways of creating emotionally evocative video games, that aren’t dependant on linear storytelling. “A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole (Jenkins, 2006, pp.95-96).” A video game that was part of a transmedia story would be only one of several different
media formats related to the overall world or story. The narrative aspects of the story could be played out in books, movies, comics, or any other form of linear storytelling, leaving the video game to provide the player with an interactive experience. The empathy and emotional heavy lifting can be handled by mediums that create empathy well, and these emotions will carry over to the video game. “[E]ach medium does what it does best (Jenkins, 2006, p. 96)”, and the overall experience is deepened.

6. The Future of Emotion in Video Games

Video games clearly can evoke strong emotions, but are different from movies and books. Literature and film depend on linear narrative to create empathy, while video games are about agency and interaction. Because video games are still early in their development, the full potential of video games as culturally important media has not yet been realized. Video games such as Shadow of the Colossus (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2005) show us that the experience can be as important as the story. Development in hardware input devices, such as the Emotiv EPOC, may change the way that emotions relate to gameplay by using emotions to effect the game. There is defiantly room for more experimentation to see just what can be accomplished with video games.

The future of video games is a major area of interest, both for entertainment and research purposes. Various breeds of games with a purpose have sprung up all over. We now have Games for Learning, Games for Health, and Socially Conscious Games, just to
name a few. Games are being used to teach children, and to raise awareness of social concerns. One wonders if a game could not only evoke emotions in players, but help the player manage them as well.
Bibliography for Emotion in Games


