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GAMES & GADGETS

Bringing emotions to video games

Can games inspire feelings as well as fun?



Maxis

Will players ever fall in love with a game character? The soon-to-be-released 'Sims 2' ratchets up the chemistry by allowing players to follow their sim from birth through death.

By **Tom Loftus**

Columnist

MSNBC

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NEW YORK - Imagine this video game scenario: Assigned to rescue the embattled squad you've fought with for the past 10 hours, you fail miserably. You have nothing to show save for a torn piece of clothing, bloody at the edges. As the soundtrack reaches its crescendo and the words "Game Over" materialize over the mists of Planet X, it's not frustration you feel, but regret, sadness, even, for those brave soldiers you left behind.

Sound familiar?

Probably not. When it comes to emotions, most games touch our simpler instincts: Keypad-throwing anger at missing a jump in "Ratchet and Clank" or an "I-Feel-Good-Uh" triumph of scoring a touchdown in "Madden 2004."

A game that can evoke complex emotions -- longing, despair, empathy -- is the holy grail for some in the industry. Not only would it open gaming to a true mass audience, but it would confirm their vision of interactive entertainment as the greatest story-telling medium since the invention of film.

Finding that magical balance

Before film became art -- no 'Gigli' jokes, please -- it was spectacle. It took decades for filmmakers to mine their medium for a library of techniques capable of evoking emotion and telling a good story; techniques like camera angles, editing and acting to the camera.

"When you think about where our medium is and if you could apply it to film, then games are still in the pre-'Citizen Kane' era," said Neil Young, vice president at game publishing power house Electronic Arts.

"We are just beginning to understand the pace," said Young. "When we started the pace was 'Space Invaders.' Then came CD-ROMs and everything was start and stop. We're only now getting comfortable."

Although, to push the film theme a little further, the industry has



Tom Loftus
Columnist

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experienced several "Birth of a Nation" moments with titles like the Japanese sci-fi series "Final Fantasy," "The Sims" and a little known, but influential, game for Playstation 2 called "Ico."

While "Final Fantasy" relied on linear storytelling akin to that in films to evoke emotion, "The Sims" was an anomaly. It had no "story." In fact, the digital dollhouse where players led their sims through a number of real-world scenarios was barely a game. But the act of controlling the life of a sim allowed players to insert their own emotional story. Its interactivity made it emotional.

"Ico" was something different: a traditional jump and puzzle game where the player controls a boy condemned to death by his village for being born with tiny horns. The game play itself was repetitive, but it managed to weave an emotional subplot with a skill rarely seen in the genre. When you discover that the boy's mortal enemies are actually the ghosts of other little horned boys killed by villagers the surprise carries an emotional punch. The hero is fighting his own kind.

Give 'em someone to root for

Games like "Ico" where interactivity and emotion are deftly melded gives hope to Warren Spector, the legendary game designer whose credits include "Ultima Underworld," "Wing Commander" and "Deus Ex."

"We almost never get at joy, sorrow, ambivalence, caring. I hate that," Spector said. "If I can get away with not putting a virtual gun — commercially speaking — in a game I would do it in a heartbeat."

While "Deus Ex" is loaded with more weaponry than an NRA picnic, it also forces players to make decisions that then have serious repercussions on game play. Deciding what groups to fight on the verge of the apocalypse can be emotionally gripping.

That kind of experience is the future of emotion-laden games, according to game consultant David Freeman. "It will be no more an option than it is now of becoming emotionally involved than with a film like 'The Lord of the Rings.'"

An evangelist of sorts for making games emotionally resonant, Freeman thinks he has the answer. It's called "[Emotioneering](#)," several hundred writing techniques that he has devised and taken on the road to clients like Atari, Vivendi and Ubisoft.

"Most game designers started as programmers, testers and sometimes visual artists," said Freeman. "So none of these people have a background in sophisticated story telling."

Freeman, who also lectures about screenwriting, incorporates standard film advice (avoid cliches, use symbols, create complex characters) with tips specific to the interactive experience: How to inspire players to root for non-player characters and how and when to let the game be "saved" without interrupting its flow.

"It's not just a matter of having a compelling story, it's a matter of having characters that you can identify with," he said. "It's a matter of having the player go on the emotional journey."

Life: The game

But writing, no matter how emotionally evocative, only goes so far, according to Michael Mateas, a professor of artificial intelligence and entertainment at the Georgia Institute of Technology. When games introduce an emotionally poignant moment, technology should be ready to back it up.



Mateas / Stern

Grace and Trip from "Facade." The bickering couple pulls the player into their hell.

For example, Mateas said, take the "Grand Theft Auto" episode where the player is asked by a crime boss to kill his wife. What would happen if the player decided not to carry out the mission and maybe befriend the wife? "Though the game suggests this possibility," he said, "there's no way for you to act on it. No way to have complex interactions with characters."

A game that attempts to evoke complex emotions, must eventually utilize "some serious advances in game AI," he said.

For the last four years Mateas and Andrew Stern, a veteran of the early artificial intelligence hit 'Petz,' have been working on "Facade," an "interactive drama" that uses natural speech recognition and a level of artificial intelligence never seen in gaming. The player interacts, via natural speech, with an arguing couple.

To deliver realism, Mateas and Stern had to literally break the story down

into what they call "beats" or specific behaviors built for a particular situation. "Facade" serves up these beats based on moment-by-moment interactions as well as what happened before so that the unfolding actions and dialogue forms a dramatic story arc. The end result is an experience that's much more open-ended than that found in games hardwired with the typical design tree approach. "We've blown up the tree," said Stern.

"Facade" could represent a new step in gaming. Its artificial intelligence could be adapted by other genres, bringing a new realism to games. And as the technology improves, what's to stop what Stern calls, "new genres of interactive experiences, such as interactive love stories, family dramas and virtual friends."

Making games cry

Or perhaps the emotional games of the future will involve players' emotions affecting the game and not the other way around.

Jon Sykes, a lecturer in Computer Game Design and Human-Computer Interaction at Glasgow Caledonian University, has been studying how digital recreations of real-life spots reputed to be haunted can have an emotional effect on people. What if, Sykes asked, the emotions some of his test subjects felt could be channeled back into the simulation? A haunted house game, for example, could trigger the appearance of ghosts based not on what the player does, but how he or she feels.

Some of his colleagues have rigged up a crude experiment: A fighting game called 'Zen Warrior' where the finishing move must be executed in what Sykes calls a "Zen-like state of inner calm." The "inner calm" is measured simply by the pressure applied to a keypad button, but the implications are endless.

"We may look back at this time of video gaming and see it as very primitive," said Sykes. "You don't know about the benefits until you have it."

The future

So what will these new games look like? A first-person shooter with "Mystic River"-like performances? Interactive dramas where it's possible to form deep, friendships with virtual characters? Will consoles of the future come shrink-wrapped with emotional biofeedback devices?

It's still hard to say. But Spector, at least, is ready to make an ultimatum.

"Finding ways to broaden range of emotions you can experience and express in games is the future of games as far as I'm concerned," Spector said. "If it turns out I'm wrong, I'm going to open a bookstore."

When not babbling about computer games, Tom Loftus produces interactives for MSNBC.com

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