

Freeman, D. (2003). NPC and Dialogue Techniques & Dialogue Interesting Techniques & Dialogue Deepening Techniques. *Creating Emotion in Games: The Craft and Art of Emotioneering* (pp. 62-70; 71-88). Indianapolis, Indiana: New Riders.

Emotioneering Techniques Category #2

NPC Deepening Techniques

Giving your NPCs
heart and soul.

This chapter

focuses on techniques that give major NPCs emotional depth and complexity.

They say children usually drown in the shallow end and I believe it. The word “shallow” itself has a cold breeze blowing through it, as in “shallow grave.” Try diving into the shallow end of a pool, and there’s nowhere to go. All that comes of it is an opportunity to get to know your local head-trauma specialist on a first-name basis.

note

For either major or minor NPCs, it's not a requirement that they have emotional depth. If your game is comedic in tone, you might not have a single NPC with depth. This would be completely fine.

That having been said, you'll find that most comedic characters are enriched by a little depth. Think of *The Simpsons*, for example. Each one of them, at times, expresses deep, genuine emotions.

No one comes to the defense of “shallow.”

What about your NPCs? Are they shallow? If so, perhaps it's time to give them a shallow-ectomy.

In the last chapter, we looked at ways to make major NPCs interesting. There are also ways to give major NPCs emotional depth. I call these techniques *NPC Deepening Techniques*.

If you want your NPCs to have some depth, open an Emotioneering tool chest. Let's take a look at a few techniques you'll find.

Emotional Pain

Pain, whether expressed or held in, gives an NPC depth.

Please take a look at the art. In this hypothetical game, you're a captain on a distant planet—a space outpost—accompanied by your Lieutenant. In this moment of the game, just before you arrived, an alien ship landed. The Lieutenant panicked and blasted the ship, killing the two innocent and peaceful aliens on board who were merely trying to escape. There's one survivor, a female alien.

You and your Lieutenant didn't expect to encounter an alien ship on this outpost. He's still freaked out and is about to kill the woman. So now find yourself in a potential firefight with your own partner.

The female alien is devastated. Those closest to her have just been murdered by your right-hand man.

Her pain gives her depth.



An Example of Technique Stacking¹

Because a number of other Emotioneering techniques are used, this scene is also a good example of Technique Stacking.

For instance, here you find yourself siding with an alien you don't know and fighting someone you considered a friend. Defending a being you know nothing about, and turning on someone you know and care about, is an Emotionally Complex Situation (see Chapter 2.15).

It's also a big plot twist: A friend becomes an enemy, and a stranger becomes a friend. Plot twists can be valuable tools in eliciting a player's emotional involvement in a game (see Chapter 2.16).

If your lieutenant insists he's going to shoot the female alien, you've got to make tough a choice: Let him do it, or kill him. The two of you bonded due to earlier use of Player Toward NPC Chemistry Techniques (see Chapter 2.11). Because you care about him, the decision is even more difficult. Tough choices cause a player to reach inside himself or herself. This choice is a First-Person Deepening Technique (see Chapter 2.21).

Although there are many ways to create emotional immersion in games, if you want to begin to emulate the immersive qualities of life itself, one way is to carefully start layering Emotioneering techniques. In artful Emotioneering, techniques and layers of emotion are stacked like the crossing instrumental melodies and harmonies of a symphony.

Regret—and Hiding a Secret

In a hypothetical game, you're a commander of a platoon in WWII. War is a gritty business, and you've seen too much blood and lost too many men.

Of the men in your platoon, one, Riggs, is the most mysterious. His speech and behavior reveals an intriguing "Character Diamond." (Remember that we stressed in Chapter 2.1 that *major* NPCs without "Diamonds" are likely to be uninteresting.) Riggs' "Diamond" has five corners. He is:

1. **Emotionally Distant.** To the degree you can get a read on him, he's got a grim sadness about him.

¹. *Technique Stacking* means layering several Emotioneering techniques on top of each other simultaneously, or utilizing them very close to each other in time, to create complex emotional impacts.

2. **Beyond Brave; Almost Suicidal.** He's the first to volunteer for any mission.
3. **A Superlative Warrior**—both in terms of tactical strategy and in terms of his fighting ability. Bullets seem never to find him. He's instinctually one step ahead of the enemy.
4. **Altruistic to a Fault.** He's always helping the other men.
5. **Obsessive Over Each Comrade's Death.** He reveals strong emotion only when one of the men in the platoon is lost. He obsesses almost more than any of the other men.

If the person writing Riggs' dialogue is a wordsmith with a hotline to the muses, and if the actor doing the voice over is gifted, and if the animation is expressive enough, then, as we play the game, we'll sense that something doesn't make sense about this character. His "Diamond" is too weird. Why is he so distant, so suicidally brave, and so preoccupied with each new death of a fellow warrior?

He's hiding a secret. No one has to say it; the player will deduce this because his "Diamond" is like a jigsaw puzzle that doesn't quite come together. It seems to contain inherent inconsistencies. Why would he be distant on one hand, yet be so distressed when one of the men in the squad is killed? How could he be so caring about others, yet be almost suicidal in his own behavior?

Finally, about three-quarters through the game, we learn the secret he's been hiding: He used to be a commander with a platoon of his own. In fact, he once even outranked you. But he caused a friendly fire accident and killed some of his own men. He was demoted to his current rank—a punishment that, obviously, he doesn't feel was harsh enough because he's full of guilt and self-loathing. This is why he has a taste for suicidal missions.

And so, all the corners of his "Diamond" now make sense. We see why he's such a good warrior: He has tons of battle experience. We see why he's emotionally distant. We see why he's suicidal. And we see why he obsesses over each man's death.

In this example of Riggs, we see two NPC Character Deepening techniques at work: Hiding a Secret and Shame or Regret.

Appreciation—and Wisdom

Appreciation for a friend, for nature, for a group...all these give an NPC depth as well.

Let's see an example of this in connection with another technique, Wisdom.

Here's the game scenario: You've been fighting slimy beasts on an alien outpost. The last one almost did you in. Your "health points" are just about down to zero.

You reenter the base. The Medic (male) looks you over, sizes up your beat-up condition, and digs a key out of a drawer. He hands it to you and says sincerely, "Want some privacy for a while? Here's the key to my quarters. Whatever you were doing out there, thanks."²

In a small way, the Medic has exhibited insight (he's noticed your condition and deduced you were doing something heroic for the benefit of the group, which includes him). Insight is one of many forms of wisdom. It gives him depth. His statement also includes appreciation, another NPC Deepening Technique.

In more than one game, I've seen wisdom is dispensed by a "wise old man," usually a Gandalf type.

But having a "wise old man" who gives advice to the player can be a cliché. Thus, hopefully, if you do have someone old and wise, and they're a major and recurring NPC, you'll construct an original Diamond for them.

A perfect example was done a number of years ago in the first installment of *The Matrix*. The wise Oracle was spellbinding, because she had a great Diamond. In the movie, she is:

1. **Secretive.** She likes to tease a bit with the knowledge she's holding back. And of course the biggest secret of all is, how'd she become the Oracle?
2. **Mystical.** She's endowed with prophetic powers, and we don't know how she got them.

² In a game, this scenario makes sense only if there is something in that room that factors into game play. For instance, there could be a weapon in there, or a secret underground passage out of the base that could be used later. Or this could be a hiding place if the base was later overrun. Perhaps, in that room, you'd learn a new piece of information that changes the entire direction of the plot.

3. **Calmly Powerful.** She seems untouchable by the agents of the Matrix, or they would have gotten her long ago.
4. **Maternal in a Mildly Cheerful, Amused Way.** She bakes cookies and, in some ways, treats Neo and the apprentices in her living room as if they are her own kids. Going to see her is a bit like visiting "Auntie Oracle."
5. **Profoundly Committed to a Noble Cause.** She's got a cause: overthrowing the Matrix.

We see that she actually has *four* NPC Deepening Techniques placed among her five Traits:

1. **Secretive** (hiding secrets)
2. **Mystical**
3. **Profoundly Committed to a Noble Cause**³
4. **She Takes Responsibility for Others.** That is, part of being maternal is the extension of her sense of responsibility to encompass the well-being over those toward whom she feels maternal.

Had she just been "deep" without having an interesting Diamond, she would have been a cliché and a bore. As mentioned before, "deep" is an option; "interesting" rarely is.

Although this book doesn't nearly have room for all the ways to give depth to an NPC, let's look at a few more.

Cover a Real Emotion with a False Emotion

In the previous chapter, I alluded to the fact that there were many types of Masks—false fronts that can cover up an NPC's deep fear, shame, emotional wound, or problem.

Sometimes, however, a person puts up a false front for just a minute or two—a temporary false front. Consider an example: The hypothetical game is staged in a modern-day war located in a third-world country. You fight your way to the base, encountering one enemy after another. When you arrive, the Base Commander is there, waiting.

³ The Oracle from *The Matrix* has a strong Character Diamond, with three Deepening Techniques layered in. Her character construction is a great example of Technique Stacking.

He seems cheerful that reinforcements are coming, and says thank God the worst is over.

You go to check in with whomever is going to give you your next mission. But on the way out, using Eavesdrop Mode,⁴ you overhear the Base Commander telling another officer how worried he is about the situation. Even with reinforcements, he thinks the group is doomed.

note

The emotion being covered up doesn't always have to be negative. For instance, an NPC could cover up love with feigned indifference.

The reason he hasn't told you or the other soldiers is that he didn't want to lessen morale. He presented you with a false emotion, covering a darker one. This gives him depth.

Combining NPC Deepening Techniques

In the last chapter, I mentioned that it's very hard to give a major NPC more than five Traits without that character becoming vague.

There is virtually no limit, however, as to how many Deepening Techniques can be used with a character, a plot, or in a "emotionally complex moment." (Deepening Techniques for each of these will be discussed a bit later in this book.)

Let's reconsider the female alien whose crew was killed by your partner (the one in the picture), and see how she could be given even greater depth than merely by using the "emotional pain" we've given her. We'll do this by combining NPC Deepening Techniques.

1. **She has a secret.** As you and she proceed through the game, you sense that she's hiding information. You're not sure what, but it's clear that she's holding something back. For instance, not all of her stories about her past add up. Time lines she describes don't quite match. She sometimes describes past events in different orders.
2. **A false emotion covers a darker, real emotion.** After her initial bout of grief, she gets herself together and admits that her two crewmen who perished didn't matter much to her. She claims that she was just recently assigned to their ship. This was their first mission as a team.

⁴. *Eavesdrop Mode* is my term for when you "overhear" two or more NPCs talking to each other. Some games use this as a way to get information to the player or to enhance the emotion of the moment. For instance, in *Star Trek Voyager: Elite Force*, you overhear a character talking to another express his fear about the upcoming mission. It has the effect of making that mission seem much more frightening.

Then, halfway through the game, you learn this is a big lie. In fact, she was engaged to one of those crewmen. She's emotionally devastated, and has been so since the time he died. Her indifference to their deaths has been total pretense.

3. **Emotional pain.** Of course, now we know the secret she's been hiding. We now see that she's got a tremendous amount of emotional pain.
4. **Fear.** The reason she hasn't told you all of this is because she's actually been afraid of you from the start. She saw what your partner did to her fiancé and fellow crewman, and she's come to the conclusion that humans are violent and erratic. She's been worried all along that you might flip out and kill her.

And so, this one NPC has four NPC Deepening Techniques. Trust me, she'll be an emotionally deep character.

This example shows why "Emotioneering" is a more useful word than "writing." We haven't even begun to write any of her dialogue, but we've already given her numerous NPC Deepening Techniques. How would you even know what dialogue to write for her if you haven't done this kind of Emotioneering first?

Having Emotion Relate to Player Actions and Decisions

I believe that simply creating emotional experiences in a game is its own reward, in the sense that it makes the game more engaging and rich.

It's even better, however, if the emotion can be used to influence the player's actions and decisions within a game.

Take the previous example. If you find that the female alien is actually terrified of you—and you need her help on an important quest but are afraid she might desert you out of fear—then you might need to take some kind of action in the game (go off on some mission) against an evil and dangerous enemy of hers to prove she need not fear you.

Perhaps, for instance, the technology in her ship is of great interest to your military superiors. They want to do a raid on her planet to capture some of this technology. Only by stopping them do you regain the woman's trust. She, in turn, is now willing to help you, which forwards the game.

The point is that the emotions you feel for her trigger action. They triggered your defending her from your partner, and they can trigger other actions as well. Emotion thus feeds into plot and gameplay.

Final Thoughts

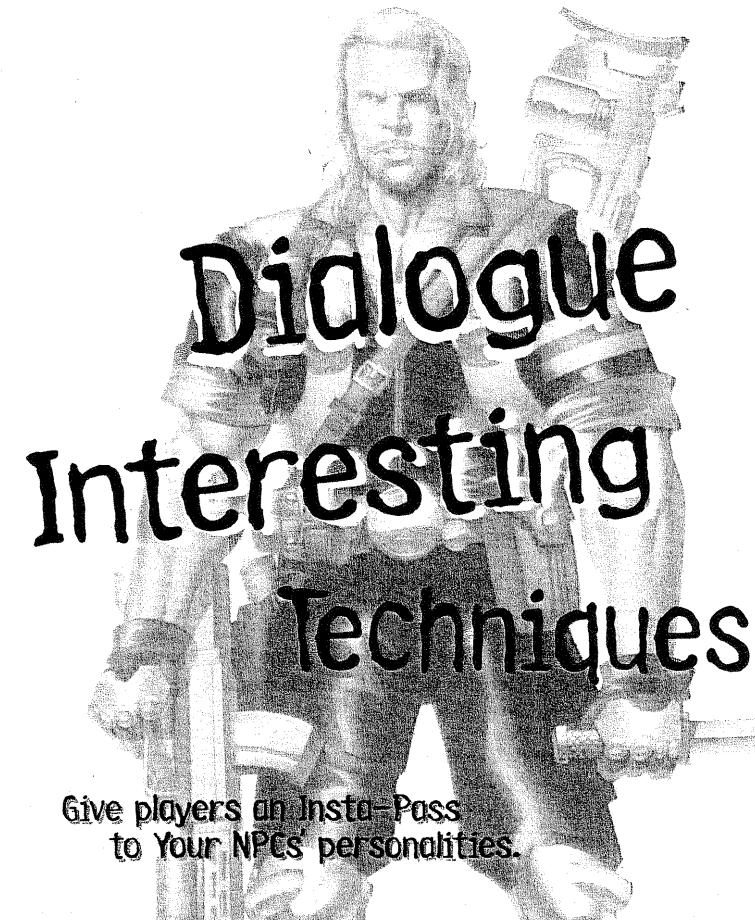
This chapter has discussed ways of making NPCs seem more alive by giving them emotional depth—which the player only feels because his or her own emotions are triggered in turn.

Making any element of storytelling, including characters, interesting is different than adding emotional depth to that element. You can have deep characters who are still uninteresting, either because they lack enough corners in their Diamond or because the corners of their Diamond form a cliché combination.

There are a vast number of ways to give depth to characters. I encourage all of you to embark on the same Emotioneering training mission: When you see a scene in a movie or TV show where one of the character comes off as emotionally “deep,” try to figure out what’s going on to create that emotional effect. Then ask yourself, “Would it work in a game?”

Up until now we’ve been examining major NPCs. In the next two chapters, we’ll see what can be done with *minor* NPCs, who may have only one or two lines of dialogue in the entire game. How do you make them interesting? How do you make them emotionally deep?

Emotioneering Techniques Category #3



This chapter

focuses on making single lines of dialogue by minor NPCs interesting.

NPC dialogue often prompts action, sometimes gives crucial information, sometimes adds color,¹ and sometimes, of course, it performs two or three of these functions at once.

No matter what the function of the dialogue, giving the speaker one or two Traits can make that dialogue a lot more interesting.

Let's see this concept applied to different types NPC dialogue.

NPC Dialogue to Add Color

Say you're playing a game set in WWII. You and the troops have been battling your way across Europe. The going has been rough. To get health points, you've got to eat the slop that passes for food in your rag-tag regiment. (The war's been dragging on, and both the tent lodgings and the food look progressively less appealing.)

Let's look at some the dialogue of the Cook, a minor NPC. First we'll critique a weak example, and then consider how it could be made interesting.

An Example of Weak Dialogue

You approach the Cook, who's serving food. He says:

COOK: Here's your food.

You might say that you'd never write a line like that. Maybe not. To my ears, however, far too much NPC dialogue hovers at that level of artistry.

How can you lure people who have become accustomed to hearing writing in films and television into your game, if they're going to have to suffer through lines like this?

I call this kind of writing "robo-speak," because the dialogue might as well have been spoken by a robot. It *reveals no discernable personality* by the speaker. Have you ever met someone who has no detectable personality? Probably not. Thus, robo-speak breaks emotional immersion, because it's not realistic.

Believe it or not, I have actually encountered such a person. She's an elderly member of my extended family. In my entire life, I have never once

¹ By dialogue that adds color, I mean dialogue that gives flavor to a scene or a person, and that possibly evokes emotion, but the dialogue doesn't prompt the player to take any specific action.

heard her offer an opinion on any subject or color a sentence with any kind of opinion or slant. If you told me that she was a Pod Person, I'd probably feel relieved to finally have an explanation.

The bottom line, though, is that she's hard to be around, because there's no "there" there.

So NPCs who only talk in "robo-speak":

- ♦ Won't appeal to people raised on the better writing often found in films and television.
- ♦ Seem unrealistic and, therefore, break the flow of emotional immersion.
- ♦ Aren't likeable. No one wants to hang around a lifeless person.

Let's see if the Cook's dialogue can be improved upon.

Better Dialogue

You walk up to the Cook to get your meal.

COOK (concerned): They said you were dead.

At least he has some emotion; he expressed concern for you.

Or:

COOK (re: the food): Eat it -- before it eats you.

He's sarcastic.

He has now shown at least one Trait. Let's see if we can give the Cook two Traits:

COOK (pleasant): It's probably chicken.

Here he's both Pleasant and Ironic. Another example:

COOK (apologetic): It's bad, I know. But hey, at least you're alive to eat it.

In this example, he has two different Traits. He's Caring with a sincere desire to feed the men well, and he's a bit Cynical.

You probably noticed that I needed to extend the length of the dialogue in the last example, possibly to an unacceptable degree, to get in the second Trait. The more Emotioneering you cram into a single line of dialogue, in general, the harder it is to keep that line brief.

Things get more complicated when the dialogue needs to not only add color, but to also *prompt the player to take action*. Most NPC dialogue prompts player action or gives the player important information.

NPC Dialogue to Prompt Action

Let's return to our Cook. First we'll feed him some weak dialogue, then add some technique to it.

An Example of Weak Dialogue

You walk up to the Cook.

COOK: I heard the Captain wants to see you.

True, you know you need to seek out the Captain, perhaps to get your next mission, but the dialogue is amateur.

Better Dialogue

Approach that Cook again.

COOK: Captain says go see him so he can kill you.

Or:

COOK: Captain's been by four times. Looking for you.

Or, after you've done something heroic:

COOK (in an admiring tone): Captain's says go see him. Pick up a medal or two.

Again, you notice that keeping better dialogue short is tough when it needs to provide the double function of prompting action and staying interesting.

These are the kinds of tradeoffs the game writer must weigh. In a game, short dialogue is almost always preferable to longer pieces of dialogue.

Splitting Up the Information

Often NPCs provide the function of supplying information. This dialogue can be quite dry and wooden. Of course, making the dialogue interesting is key.

One way is to "split up" the information so that, to understand what's needed to be known, the player must talk to more than one NPC.

This could be made even more natural if the player isn't just wandering around in a room or other environment, talking to one NPC after another. Instead, pieces of the needed information can be seeded into the game beginning earlier on, with the final NPC supplying the last piece.

Of course, this kind of detective work has several additional advantages:

- It might allow the player to hear different points of view on the same subject. These multiple points of view make the game's world richer and is a World Induction Technique (see Chapter 2.18).
- It means that the dialogue from the NPCs doesn't have to simply convey all the information, thus leaving more room for color. This adds to the atmospheric emotions in the game.
- It can be used to create plot twists and missions. For example, the player might learn that he or she needs to go to a different location where the rest of the required information can be found. Or the player might need to go on a mission to retrieve an item he or she must trade with a particular NPC to get critical information. Or the player might realize that another, more urgent task must be handled immediately, interrupting the task he or she thought needed attention.
- And of course, ideally, information will also be given out in all sorts of nonverbal ways as well. If the hospital is regularly being robbed of its medicines, you don't need to discover this from an NPC. You could turn the corner at night to see two men coming out a back door with boxes in their hands, and tail them.

A Cautionary Note

There's a danger to splitting information. Executing this technique poorly can drastically increase player frustration, if the players can't perform the detective work necessary to intuit what they are supposed to do next. This could happen because they can't find all the information, or they're just not clever enough to solve your "puzzles." Remember, a puzzle that might seem clear to the designer might not seem easy enough at all to the players. Sometimes only game testing reveals if you've gotten it right.

Combining these kinds of approaches with interesting NPC dialogue can contribute to a rich game experience and a feeling that the player is both discovering the plot and moving it forward amidst a world of life-like characters.

Some Common Fallacies and Problems

Some game designers and writers justify their poor NPC dialogue by claiming that most games have weak dialogue and, therefore, gamers won't object.

Sometimes, doing the writing is considered the "fun part," and those in the game studio don't want to turn it over to someone who might do a more professional job. This would be fine if they took the time to study and master the art of writing themselves—but the state of game writing lets us know this has rarely been the case.

Sometimes the justification is that weak doesn't matter, because the voice actors will add the emotion in the way they pronounce the lines. The truth is, there's only a limited amount a talented actor can do with poor dialogue.²

People who hold fast to these beliefs and behaviors are hurting the chances for good buzz and good press, and thus are restricting game sales and costing their publisher money.

Final Thoughts

It would be almost impossible to make every line of NPC dialogue interesting, especially when it needs to prompt player action. Sometimes it's okay, and even quite necessary, to have the NPC say colorless such lines as: "Over there!" or "Duck!" or "Drop the gun!" or "Back again?" In such situations, you just have to let the voice actor bring as much life as he or she can to the line. After all, in times of emergency or in urgent situations, people speak much less colorfully.

In other, less danger-packed situations, the ideal to strive for is to make NPC dialogue interesting, even when the NPC is giving crucial information to or prompting action by the player.

Now that this chapter has shown some of the challenges in writing NPC dialogue, and hopefully some of the solutions, let's complicate matters more (in a good way) in the next chapter, where we'll look at Dialogue Deepening Techniques.

2. Even still, what a good actor can do with weak—or well-written—dialogue shouldn't be minimized. Poor voice acting can annihilate emotional immersion by the player. Most developers have finally conceded that it's worth spending the money to hire pros.

Dialogue Deepening Techniques

Simple
ways to create
complexity.

In Chapter 2.2,

we looked at seven ways to add emotional depth to an NPC. For most of the examples, however, the sense of emotional complexity—the emotional or psychological layers—in an NPC couldn't be accomplished quickly. Those techniques required getting to know an NPC over time, as in the case with the female alien whom your partner almost killed (in Chapter 2.2, "NPC Deepening Techniques").

Can you give an NPC depth if he or she has only two lines or only one line of dialogue in the entire game?

Give Your NPC Some Depth

Yes, you can pull this off. To demonstrate a few of the ways, we'll return to Chapter 2.3's Cook who serves you after your return from battle in our hypothetical WWII game. He doesn't see his friend Tom in line for the grub.

Dialogue Deepening Techniques can add depth to the Cook, even though he speaks just one line of dialogue.

Worries

COOK (worried): You seen Tom? Just don't tell me he took a bullet too.

Remember that just because a character—or even a line of dialogue—conveys a sense of emotional depth, that doesn't make the character or the dialogue interesting. Techniques to make characters, dialogue, relationships, moments, or stories *deep* are completely separate from those that make these same components of Emotioneering *interesting*.

If you made the Cook's worried line "deep" but not interesting, it would be weak dialogue. For example:

COOK (worried): I don't see Tom. Was he hit?

The two lines are very similar. They both convey the Cook's worry, but the first one is more interesting.

Sure, it's more interesting in that it picks up more of the flavor of spoken speech, but, as explained in Chapter 2.3, what truly makes it more interesting is that we sense a personality in the first example. The second offers no such glimpse of a definable personality. In the first example, we can at least gather that the Cook feels close to Tom, that he hates hearing bad news, and that he hears a lot of it. All three of these qualities are missing in the second example.

Thus, when it comes to any kind of Deepening Technique, including Dialogue Deepening, it's not a matter of making an element deep or making it interesting. Rather, when you choose to make an element deep, you almost always need to *also* make it interesting. The side effect of trying to do these two things (make the dialogue both interesting *and* deep) is that keeping the lines short is harder.

Remember, although making NPC dialogue *interesting* is worth striving for in *almost every case* where it's possible, making NPC dialogue "deep" is *optional*—a tool to be used *when appropriate*.

Let's try out a few other NPC Dialogue Deepening Techniques on our Cook.

Deep Doubts

COOK (looking over the battered and weary men; cynical): How's "the cause"?

Regret

COOK (regretful): Tom was still limping. I shoulda' stopped him from going.

Self-Sacrifice

COOK: Sorry about the slop. Up all night with the wounded.

Wisdom or Insight

COOK (downcast): You know, our kids won't even care about this war.

The Cook's wisdom is a Dialogue Deepening Technique. In the next example, I've given an NPC Wisdom, in addition to a second Trait, Bitterness, in order to make him more interesting.

The Hypothetical Game

You and your platoon just entered a German town. It's in ruins. You find an old man and, using Self Auto-Talk,¹ ask him which direction the Nazis retreated.

The Old Man points to some of the bodies of young German soldiers:

OLD MAN (cynical): They couldn't wait to die. Your men have been of great assistance.

¹. "Self Auto-Talk" is my term for when you're playing a character and you hear that character speak.

Once again, we see that the more Traits we stick in one NPC's speech (here, Wisdom and Bitterness), the more difficult it is to keep the dialogue short. Of course, the positive trade-off is that the NPC with two Traits is more interesting than the NPC with just one, assuming the two Traits make a colorful grouping.

You might have noticed that the Old Man *didn't answer the question*. That was intentional on my part. In life, people often don't answer questions. You might have to ask him again, or you might have to aim your rifle at him to get him to answer, or he may never answer the question and you might have to ask or threaten another NPC.

Combining Emotioneering Techniques

If he doesn't answer the question, even if you point your rifle at him, will you kill him? Well, maybe most gamers would. However, if the game designer:

- Dressed the old man in rags
- Placed his dead wife in the scene, behind him in his ruined house (we'd have to ensure the player knows it's his wife)

then you, the player, might both feel annoyed with him *and* feel sorry for him.

An Example of Technique Stacking

In one fell swoop, the previous example with the Old Man exhibits four separate Emotioneering techniques at the same time:

1. His dialogue is interesting; thus, it's a Dialogue Interesting Technique. It's even more interesting than usual, because he has two Traits instead of one: Bitterness and Wisdom.
2. He has depth, because he displays Wisdom or Insight. This is one of the Dialogue Deepening Techniques discussed in this chapter.
3. As mentioned earlier, you feel two separate emotions toward him. On one hand, you're annoyed or angry at him because he won't answer the question. On the other hand, you feel sorry for him. Having two different feelings simultaneously toward an NPC is a Player Toward NPC Relationship Deepening Technique (see Chapter 2.13).

4. You then will decide to kill him or not. Because of what he's been through, it's not an easy decision. Giving the player tough decisions is a First-Person Deepening Technique (see Chapter 2.21)—a technique that causes the player to reach inside to a deeper place within himself or herself.²

So far, we've focused on Dialogue Deepening, which is a tool to enrich dialogue, but we've left aside the idea of using NPC dialogue to prompt an action by the player—which is usually its key function.

So let's return to our Cook and up the Emotioneering challenge even more. Let's see if we can make the NPCs dialogue prompt player action *and* be interesting *and* be deep. Let's do *three things* with a single line of dialogue.

The Cook needs to direct the player to see the Captain. His example lines will use some Dialogue Deepening Techniques you've already seen, and introduce some new ones as well.³

Worries

COOK (worried for you): Captain wants you for an assignment. The kind you don't come back from.

2. You may read this and say, "No one would put that much thought into a single line of dialogue. Nor would anyone playing the game notice the subtle differences between a line like this and a less artful one." This kind of thinking, when it occurs, demonstrates a real naïveté about the art of writing and of Emotioneering. There's nothing wrong with being naïve, but this kind of naïveté is responsible for much of what amounts to little more than hack writing in games.

The professional writers I know—the good ones—often rewrite heavily to make their dialogue perform several functions at the same time. To them, writing has more in common with a composer creating a complex and layered musical score than it does with what most game designers consider "writing."

If you were to look at any one of many stunning television shows that have come and gone over the years—the better episodes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel*, various episodes of the different *Star Trek* series, *Smallville*, *The Practice*, *The West Wing*, *The Sopranos*, *Six Feet Under*, and so very many others—you'd see techniques like these layered on top of each other in almost every single scene.

3. To see an example of writing with 35 Emotioneering Techniques stacked on top of each other in one three-minute scene, see Chapter 2.31, "Pre-Rendered and In-Game Cinematics."

An Example of Technique Stacking

This (long by game standards) piece of NPC dialogue by the Cook exhibits Technique Stacking by simultaneously accomplishing *four* things:

1. It's interesting. (He has two Traits: concern for you and a gallows sense of humor.)
2. It conveys depth via worry.
3. It prompts action.
4. It also creates suspense, because we're setting up the idea that something horrible is going to occur. Suspense helps make plots interesting, and it is a Plot Interesting Technique (see Chapter 2.16).

Let's take a look at a few more Dialogue Deepening Techniques.

The NPC Has Emotions Beneath the Surface

"Showing what a character feels beneath the surface" is a Dialogue Deepening Technique that perhaps deserves an entire book in its own right, but here's the short version.

Quite often, when someone feels a strong (and sometimes even a weak) emotion, they don't mention it. Rather, they hint at it through the words they speak, even if those words seem to be about something else. Or they hint at the emotion through their actions.

One example of this was given at the start of this chapter. Consider another from a hypothetical fantasy game:

You return, barely alive, from a fierce battle with an ancient, evil deity who has vowed to destroy a town that stopped worshipping him. He's a powerful boss.⁴

Your female companion (an NPC) has been waiting for you, not knowing if you were dead or alive. When you return to her, she *wants* to say that she loves you and missed you. But such direct statements of emotion are considered "on the nose"⁵ and tend to be weak dialogue. Because such statements don't let the player "solve the mystery" of what the character feels, they don't draw the player in. Rather, they block player immersion. As a general guideline, avoid on-the-nose dialogue.

⁴. In games, a *boss* is a villainous or monstrous person or beast of some importance whom you fight, and who is difficult to defeat or kill.

⁵. "On the nose" dialogue is a film term that means a statement that is too direct or too obvious.

So, instead of stating her feelings directly, she expresses her love by saying:

WOMAN (angry): You go and fight that thing and don't even tell me?

Or, she presents you with a cool gun, saying:

WOMAN: Took a couple hours to clean it but...thought it'd look good with that shirt.

Or, she acts cold, and with Self Auto-Talk you say:

PLAYER'S CHARACTER: Why the freeze-out?

WOMAN (icy): I never aspired to be a widow.

In all of these variations, she means the same thing: "I love you."

Let's take a look at another example of the same technique.

The Hypothetical Game

Welcome to Russia, comrade. The game takes place in the present day, outside of Petrozavodsk, in Northwest Russia. The terrain is rugged. You and your Navy Seal squad, along with some Russian commandos, are trying to recapture a nuclear facility that has been taken over by terrorists.

INT. TENT - DAY

In a large, makeshift tent, a mile from the nuclear facility, an ironic Russian NPC named Nikolai is slow to heft his gear and get moving. You just saved his butt in the last mission. You play Carter. Calling him the feminine name "Nikki" is how you good-naturedly taunt him.

Outside, the rain pours down.

(gameplay)

You pick up various pieces of gear. You head out of the tent. Nikolai isn't there beside you. You turn to him. This triggers a...

(in-game cinematic)

Carter (using Self Auto-Talk): Hey Nikki, aren't you coming?

Nikolai (Russian accent; ironic): I was going to wait here. But if you're going, then I better protect you.

He picks up his gear and heads toward the tent entrance. In the game, this triggers: A LOUD EXPLOSION GOES OFF OUTSIDE, FOLLOWED BY GUN-FIRE. SCREAMS of wounded Navy SEALs and Russian commandos are heard.

(resume gameplay)

You rush outside, followed by Nikolai...

Deconstructing the Dialogue

Let's take a look at Nikolai's lines:

Nikolai (Russian accent; ironic): I was going to wait here. But if you're going, then I better protect you.

What he means is that:

- He says he was going to wait in the tent, but of course, as a commando on a mission, that's not an option. He's being ironic. So *beneath the surface* he's saying he has no choice but to go.
- He's saying that he better go because otherwise you'll probably get killed if he's not there to protect you. Thus, he's taunting you in return for you calling him "Nikki." *Beneath the surface*, this taunting shows that he considers you a friend.
- He may be saying he needs to protect you, but *beneath the surface*, he's trying to "save face" and deny that he needed to be rescued by you in the last mission.

So, in two sentences, *beneath the surface of the words*—underneath their literal meanings—Nikolai is saying three distinct things. Meanings and emotions beneath the surface of dialogue are one way to make even a single line or two of dialogue "deep."

Ambivalence

If I was to ask you how you feel about your father or mother, or your brother or sister, you might say, "That's complicated."

Most people feel ambivalent⁶ about many of the people and situations in their lives. Ambivalence in dialogue is always a "Dialogue Deepening Technique." Let's look at one of the ways it can be done. This particular technique is called NPC's "Words are Neither Positive Nor Negative."

Here's the game set-up: You've been driving a tank, and are now getting out of your tank to attack the enemy on foot. With Self Auto-Talk, you ask the gunner in the tank if he'll join you.

GUNNER (wry): Last driver asked me the same thing.

His answer is neither positive nor negative. It reveals ambivalence. Or he could say:

GUNNER: No way. (Pause) On the other hand, I do owe you one.

That technique is called "The NPC is First Negative, and then Positive."

In both examples, because he's ambivalent, we can generate some suspense. You jump from the tank and launch into a fight with the enemy. Will that gunner later appear by your side? Maybe yes, maybe no. With his ambivalent answer, either one is possible.

Here's another Dialogue Deepening Technique:

Let's say that woman we discussed earlier truly is angry at you after you return from fighting the evil deity. She says:

WOMAN (dryly): Weather turned cold while you were away.

note

The sentence has two meanings: both a literal meaning and an emotional one beneath the surface.

6. Ambivalence means feeling, simultaneously, both positive and negative about a person or situation.

Now, assuming the weather really *had* turned cold, she'd be talking both about the weather *and* her feelings about you.

Final Thoughts

It's been stated before but bears repeating: When I offer tools like the ones here, I'm not necessarily implying that each tool (such as Dialogue Deepening Techniques) always *should* be used. I'm simply supplying some of the tools of Emotioneering.

While adding *depth* to characters, dialogue, plots, relationships, and game moments might often be an attractive *option*, making all these facets *interesting*, including NPC dialogue (whenever possible), is not an option but instead is something to strive for, unless there's a good reason not to do so.⁷

Because so much NPC dialogue either conveys information or prompts player action, the challenge is to make this dialogue interesting and, if appropriate, deep. As we'll see later in this book, by doing Technique Stacking, it's sometimes possible to layer into NPC even more functions, such as having the dialogue tie into a theme in the game or serve symbolic value.

It's also worth noting that the way a character speaks can, obviously, change as the game progresses. This could relate to a change in the character's Traits, a shift of allegiances, emotional growth, attainment of depth, or other kinds of change.

7. For instance, in a battle, a commander might yell out "Take cover!" It might be a line of dialogue without any discernable personality behind it (and thus not interesting), and it might be cliché, but it could still be the right line of dialogue for that character in that situation.