

CREATING EMOTION IN GAMES: THE CRAFT AND ART OF EMOTIONEERING™¹

DAVID FREEMAN, Freeman Games

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WHY PUT EMOTION INTO GAMES?

Why put emotion into games?

The answers are art and money. Sure, it's an unholy alliance, but so are pineapple and pizza, windmills and tiny golf courses, the military and intelligence, and canned fruit and gelatin molds.

Don't get me wrong. I think of myself as an artist first and a businessman second. But game companies that don't make a profit aren't game companies for very long.

There are at least nine reasons that putting emotion in games can lead to greater profits, and it's worth taking a few minutes to mention them.

Reason 1: To Expand the Demographics

I asked a close friend of mine if he ever played video games.

"No," he said. "If I'm going to invest my time in entertainment, I want it to have meaning. There's no meaning to games."

Upon further questioning, I learned that he wanted entertainment experiences that also contributed to or enriched his life in some way; experiences that weren't just diversionary fun.

My friend speaks for a vast group. There are many more people who watch films and television than play games. Many will never be lured into playing games until games begin to offer the emotional range and depth of the entertainment these people are used to enjoying.

Author's address: www.freemangames.com; email: freeman@dfreeman.com

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¹ "Emotioneering"™ is my trademarked term for a body of techniques to evoke a breadth and depth of emotion in games, as well as immerse a player in a role or in a game's world

Reason 2: For Better Buzz

A more involving game experience leads to better word-of-mouth or "buzz." The game business depends on buzz just as much as the movie business does.

Reason 3: For Better Press

The press likes to write about games that find new ways to immerse their players. More press means more sales. (If you were around back then, think of all the free press the first *Max Payne* got.)

Reason 4: For Less Amateurish-Seeming Games

The better game visuals get and the more games look like films, especially with the next generation of consoles, the more we will instinctively compare them to films. Weak writing and shallow emotional affect will become increasingly apparent in games featuring stories and characters. Although publishers and developers will (and do) have games that look like films, most games don't have nearly the emotional sophistication of films.

Reason 5: For an Inspired and Dedicated Creative Team

When a game has emotional complexity, combined with fun game-play, the creative team becomes inspired; they know they're creating something that has depth, meaning, and impact, and not just superficial entertainment.

Please don't feel I'm knocking superficial entertainment. To me, giving people fun and exciting entertainment, from games to roller coasters to river raft rides, is extremely worthwhile. But many creative teams find additional inspiration when creating experiences that enrich the interactive participant.

Reason 6: For Consumer Loyalty to the Brand, which is Worth a Fortune

People seek out experiences that have previously touched them emotionally. *The Lord of the Rings* film series and the *Spiderman* movie helped ignite game sales because people wanted to continue to be involved in the emotional experience of those films.

Reason 7: So You Don't Burn Millions in Potential Profits

Metal Gear Solid II was an eagerly awaited game. Did it satisfy people's hunger for great game-play? Many gamers said yes, but complained that the story was unengaging, even trite and silly. The game, despite its polished look, sold a million fewer units in the United States than did its predecessor.

How many millions of dollars more could the game have made if it had been more emotionally involving, and how much damage was done to the brand? How much will the next sequel *not* make due to the diminished enthusiasm that US game players felt for *Metal Gear Solid II*?

Reason 8: For Competitive Advantage

Once upon a time, the speed of technological evolution was so dramatic that games could trump one another in sales just by having a better look or slightly more fun game-play.

Today, lots of games look great, and consumers have no shortage of truly fun games to choose from.

Reason 9: So You Don't Come in Last

Some game developers are working hard to increase the emotional component in gaming. Game designers and publishers who create games with stories and characters but no emotion will find themselves less and less able to compete. Their games will be eclipsed.

A Little Baring of the Soul

Games that involve a player emotionally will gain a competitive advantage. (It goes without saying that they'll still need to look good and be fun to play.)

My greatest personal motivation for putting emotion into the games I design and write isn't any of the nine reasons above. I add emotion because, as an artist, it's what I need to do.

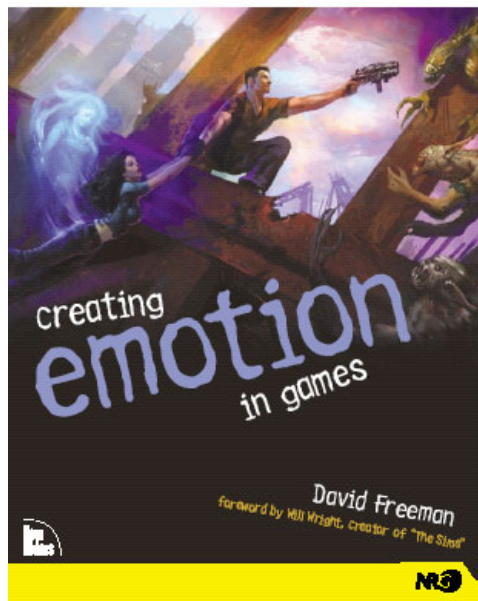
When we think of ancient Greece, we remember its temples, its statues, its plays, literature, and mythology. We think of its art.

So although the primary reason for putting emotion in games might be to make money, it's not what fuels my greatest passion, nor that of many other game designers I know. The fuel is the desire to create entertainment and art.

If we can accept tiny Dutch windmills taking up residence on small golf courses upholstered in green indoor-outdoor carpeting, then we should be able to survive money interwoven with art. When breadth and depth of emotion are added to games, profits increase and art is enhanced.

Q: ARE THERE TECHNIQUES FOR PUTTING EMOTION INTO GAMES?

A: YES, OVER FIFTEEN HUNDRED



As mentioned earlier, Emotioneering refers to the expansive body of techniques for evoking emotional breadth and depth in games, as well as immersing a player in a role or in a game's world. The techniques fall into 32 categories. This article refers to the picture by Jason Manley on the cover of my new book, *Creating Emotion in Games* (with a forward by Will Wright, creator of "The Sims"). The book details 300 techniques, representing all the Emotioneering categories.

The cover depicts a hypothetical game, and demonstrates 10 Emotioneering techniques drawn from 7 of the 32 categories.



Take a look at the hero with the gun. He's the character you will play. When the hero you play fights for the survival of another (in this case, the young woman), and not just for his or her own survival, the hero's likeability is heightened and willingness to step into that role is increased. It's a "role-induction technique."

Willingness to take responsibility or even sacrifice for another character gives the player depth, just as taking responsibility for someone else gives a person depth in real life. It's a "first-person deepening technique."

Taking responsibility for an NPC (a non-player character) has another function as well -- it makes you bond with the character you are helping. Helping the young woman increases your closeness, or "chemistry" with her -- as does the fact that the two of you are going through this harrowing ordeal together. Both are "player toward NPC chemistry techniques."

Turn your attention to the young woman you're rescuing. Is she actually human?



For the first time in the game, you can see that her spirit can separate from her body. Thus we have a mystery. Intriguing mysteries motivate the player to continue moving forward; hence a *“motivation technique.”*

Earlier in the game, the young woman gave away the location of your stronghold to the creatures, thinking (at that time) that you were evil and the creatures were good. As a result, a friend of yours (an NPC) was injured, and then changed into one of the hideous creatures you’re now fighting.

Even though earlier the young woman had simply been misled, it’s still not emotionally easy to rescue her, considering what happened to your friend. You’ll have some mixed feelings about saving her; this is an *“emotionally complex situation.”*

Let’s take a closer look at her and at her spirit, in blue, which is separating from her body, having already “reconciled” to the idea that she is about to die.

The young woman is terrified, but her “spirit” is serene and not at all afraid of her impending death. In short, she’s ambivalent about dying. Ambivalence is one of many ways to give emotional depth to an NPC; it’s an *“NPC deepening technique.”*

You, the player, are in a terrible situation. Your greatest chance for survival, slim at best, is to let the woman drop to her death and use your (now) free hand to fire an additional weapon.

Putting the player where he or she must make tough choices -- and where these choices have real consequences (like the hero’s or the woman’s possible deaths) --



creates emotional depth in the player. It's similar to how, in real life, we grow emotionally by confronting difficult choices; it's a "*first-person deepening technique*."

(Game designers know that branching story-lines cause plot nightmares and can be expensive to build. However, there's a way to give the player the decision to save the young woman or not that doesn't require two entirely separate story-lines to be built into the game: (1) If you let her fall, you think she's dead, but it turns out that she hasn't died. (2) If you save her, she leaves this level shortly afterward for some reason dictated by the story. Thus, in either case, most of the level is played without her, and few new assets need to be built. In both cases she'll be back in the next level, though she'll be angry and distrustful of you if you didn't protect her here. Since at this point in the game (depicted in the picture), you don't know that she will survive the fall, you experience the emotional power of a terrible choice: to save her or save yourself.

Back to our hypothetical game...

Your best friend has been changed into one of the creatures, the one at whom you're pointing your gun. You'll need to kill him if you are to survive. This is another "*emotionally complex situation*."



I'd like to talk about the bridge for a moment; it will end up a source of emotion as well.

You rescue the young woman on the bridge. Later in the game, she'll rescue you on this very same bridge. In the final level, when all hope seems lost, she'll try to jump

off this bridge to her death because she feels so guilty, having endangered earth by letting the aliens get a foothold in our world, even though she did so unknowingly. This time, you can't save her by catching her -- you can only do so by showing her that there's still hope by performing the following actions:

In an insanely brave move, you leap off the bridge and grab onto a hurtling alien craft piloted by the creatures' leader. The craft crashes, but you and the alien commander survive. The final fight begins. Your act of courage inspires the young woman. Her hope is reignited and she rejoins the fight. This time you have rescued her not physically, but emotionally.

The bridge is the setting of all these quite stirring rescues, and thus gradually becomes a location that is saturated with emotion.

The bridge becomes a symbol of rescuing and being rescued. It isn't the kind of symbol the player "figures out" intellectually, but one that affects the player emotionally whether he or she is consciously aware of it or not. This is just one of many ways to create symbols that have emotional impact but which also have a role in game-play. I call them "*usable symbols*."

The example discussed so far shows how Emotioneering can be used to enrich games.

I'd like to go into a bit more detail now, listing all the different Emotioneering categories -- that is, all the techniques that can be used to make games emotionally engaging.

Before I do, however, I'd like to offer this thought:

Advances in game visuals and programming have not been matched by advances in creating emotional immersion. If games are to continue their evolution from mere entertainment to becoming, like the best films, a combination of entertainment and art,



they must begin to offer meaningful and emotionally rich experiences. When they do, there's a large film and television audience that will finally find its way to games.

THE 32 CATEGORIES OF EMOTIONEERING™ TECHNIQUES

1. NPC INTERESTING TECHNIQUES

Techniques which make major NPCs (non-player characters) dimensional and fresh, and thus interesting.

2. NPC DEEPENING TECHNIQUES

Techniques which give major NPCs emotional depth and complexity.

3. DIALOGUE INTERESTING TECHNIQUES

Techniques which make single lines of dialogue by minor NPCs interesting.

4. DIALOGUE DEEPENING TECHNIQUES

Techniques which make single lines of dialogue by minor NPCs convey a sense that the NPC has emotional depth.

5. GROUP INTERESTING TECHNIQUES

Techniques for making groups -- groups as small as a squad or as large as a tribe or even a culture or a race -- fascinating and intriguing to the player.

By "group" we're not talking about a few friends who might know each other, but instead about any collection of people who have, to some degree, their own distinct, collective identity. For example, "the Celts" or "the Marines."

6. GROUP DEEPENING TECHNIQUES

Techniques which make groups -- groups as small as a platoon or as large as a tribe or even a race or culture -- embody a feeling of emotional depth.

7. NPC TOWARD NPC CHEMISTRY TECHNIQUES

Techniques which, with very little reliance on dialogue, make it feel like two NPCs have “chemistry” -- that is, that they belong together as friends or lovers.

8. NPC TOWARD NPC RELATIONSHIP DEEPENING TECHNIQUES

Techniques which, with very little reliance on dialogue, make it feel like two NPCs have a rich and complex relationship.

9. NPC CHARACTER ARC* TECHNIQUES

Definition: A “Character Arc” is the rocky path of growth a character undergoes in a story, usually unwillingly, during which the character wrestles with and eventually overcomes some or all of a serious emotional fear, limitation, block or wound. Examples: a character overcoming a lack of courage, or a lack of ethics, or learning to love, or learning to take responsibility for others, or overcoming guilt, etc.

10. NPC ROOTING INTEREST* TECHNIQUES

*Definition: “Rooting Interest Techniques” are techniques that make us “root for” -- or, more precisely, identify with (empathize with) a character. The term sounds like it means we cheer the character on who has Rooting Interest. We do, but that’s just a byproduct our identifying with him or her. Thus a character with Rooting Interest is one with whom we empathize. This term, and “Character Arc” (discussed the previously) are the only two phrases in the book that come from the film industry.

11. PLAYER TOWARD NPC CHEMISTRY TECHNIQUES

Techniques which make the player feel “chemistry” with an NPC -- that is, these techniques make the player feel close to an NPC, either romantically or non-romantically.

12. NPC TOWARD PLAYER RELATIONSHIP DEEPENING

Ways to make it feel as if major NPCs have an emotionally complex relationships with the player.

13. PLAYER TOWARD NPC RELATIONSHIP DEEPENING

Ways to give the player emotionally complex relationships with major NPCs.

14. GROUP BONDING TECHNIQUES

Techniques which make a group (such as a platoon) feel bonded, and if the player is part of that group, the player will feel bonded to the group as well.

15. EMOTIONALLY COMPLEX MOMENTS & SITUATIONS TECHNIQUES

Ways to put the player in the middle of emotionally complex moments and situations.

16. PLOT INTERESTING TECHNIQUES

Ways of making game plots interesting, taking into account many different kinds of story structures -- linear, nonlinear, and multi-path -- unique to games.

17. PLOT DEEPENING TECHNIQUES

Ways to give game stories emotional depth and resonance, the way some recent or classic films do (such as “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon,” “The Matrix,” “Lord of the Rings,” “American Beauty,” “Casablanca,” or “Bladerunner”).

18. WORLD INDUCTION TECHNIQUES

*Definition: “World Induction Techniques” are techniques other than realism which cause a player to become emotionally immersed in the world of the game. It doesn’t mean the teaching of skills and weapons. It refers instead to techniques for making a player want to spend time in the world of the game.

19. ROLE INDUCTION TECHNIQUES

Definition: “Role Induction Techniques” are techniques that make a player willing to identify with the character he or she is playing.

20. FIRST-PERSON CHARACTER ARC TECHNIQUES

Techniques which actually make the player go through an emotional transformation by the end of the game.

21. FIRST-PERSON DEEPENING TECHNIQUES

Techniques which actually give the player more emotional depth by the end of the game.

22. REVEALING COMPLEX CHARACTERS THROUGH THEIR ACTIONS

Techniques for creating complex characters, even if they don’t speak a single word.

23. ENHANCING EMOTIONAL DEPTH THROUGH SYMBOLS

Film and television writers have learned methods of using symbols to give characters, scenes, and stories emotional depth and resonance. In games, the ideal is to go one step further and create “Usable Symbols” – symbols which have emotional power, but which are also useful in gameplay. This chapter will show a few ways of accomplishing this.

24. SELF-CREATED STORY TECHNIQUES (a.k.a. Agency Techniques)

A game, to a greater or lesser degree, helps guide the player’s choices and determines the possible consequences of his or her actions. However, it’s important to make the player feel like he or she is impacting, if not shaping the story. This is sometimes called “giving the player a sense of agency,” or simply “giving the player agency.”

This chapter focuses on ways to accomplish this -- i.e. to help the player feel that he is she is playing the game, rather than simply being taken along on a ride.

25. MOTIVATION TECHNIQUES

Techniques to make the player want to keep on going and make it through the game.

26. COHESIVENESS TECHNIQUES

Techniques to make various parts of the game which are distant in (apparent) space and time feel connected.

27. “TRUE-TO-LIFE” PRINCIPALS

Principals about adding a sense of realism to the NPCs emotional actions and reactions.

28. CROSS-DEMOGRAPHIC TECHNIQUES

Techniques to make games appeal to both kids (or young teens) and adults.

29. INJECTING EMOTION INTO A GAME’S STORY ELEMENTS

What constitutes a “story?” Each element opens up possibilities for emotion.

30. TYING STORY TO GAMEPLAY AND MECHANICS

In some games, the story and the game-play seem to be unrelated. Even if the story is great and people enjoy the gameplay, the ideal is to link the two. This chapter addresses this issue.

31. PRE-RENDERED AND IN-GAME CINEMATICS*

35 techniques for making pre-rendered and in-game cinematics more artful, and thus more emotionally powerful.

32. THE OPENING CINEMATIC

For games which utilize an opening pre-rendered cinematic or game-engine cinematic, this chapter shows ways of using that cinematic to suck the player into the game.

A LITTLE SOMETHING EXTRA: TECHNIQUES FOR CREATING FUN

Trying to understand all the different ways a game can be fun, and then using these elements to create imaginative new games.

FINAL THOUGHTS

People go to films, watch TV shows, and listen to music that moves them. Emotion will be one of the keys to the mass market in games as well. Thus, from the point of view of economics, Emotioneering in games is good business.

But speaking as a game designer and writer...

Everyone wants his or her life to be meaningful. The techniques of Emotioneering in games can take players through experiences that aren't just fun but are also meaningful and emotional.

But making such games is also meaningful to those who create them, from designers to programmers to character artists, and to the whole team.

I hope that, in offering my fellow game creators tools that enhance the lives of those who play their games, their own professional work might become more fulfilling as well.

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