Research – Creating Emotional Responses In Players

Humans have developed the ability to infer emotion from visual cues over millions of years of evolution. This ability is primal and innate; research suggests it comes from the need to know if your surroundings are safe of dangerous immediately. Such as entering a creepy building – you’re fight or flight response kicks in immediately to flood adrenalin to your body ready for any possible threat.

The colour red, artist’s lines in disarray, smiling children and furrowed eyebrows are all called “cognitive antecedents”, and by including them in visual art said artist may encourage an emotional state for the viewer. However these emotions are often individually and culturally specific.

The way that Games evoke these kinds of responses is a culmination of film and art techniques:

**Atmosphere:** suggestive images, sounds and music.

**Subject Matter:** certain subjects will evoke a response, but these topics must be handles cautiously to avoid offense and critique.

**Gameplay Challenges:** mechanics are vital to evoking emotional responses. If the game is a journey into madness for the protagonist, then matching that narrative with a platformer is going to present all kinds of challenges that a first person exploration game wouldn’t.

**Other characters emotions:** by getting your players to empathize with other characters you can encourage desired emotions and specific times.

Player roles during gameplay are a key component to emotions that the player feels. These roles are in two categories: observer-participant who engages with an artwork but doesn’t change the material form of it. In this role engagement in video games is similar to films and books – you are merely an observer of this world watching events unfold without changing anything. The images and sounds cannot be changed by the player and the players response to these aspects are based on their observation.

When engaging with an artwork as well as observing it you cognitively process the images into meaningful representations. The inputs from the game are interpreted differently by each player, but the player cannot change the inputs themselves.

The second category, actor-participant, does change the material form of the artwork. As you play the game the character will do things, you input is directly affecting the character. This is the most common role in video games. In this role a players emotions are directly related to what they do, rather than just what they see.

Emotion types are classified by aspects of the video game to which the player might respond. So game, and narrative are the two obvious choices. Artefact emotions are emotions of aesthetic evaluation (e.g. anger that Superman Returns (EA, 2006) could be completed in just 6 hours).Ecological emotions are generated when a player responds to the game in the same way they would the real world, commonly used in horror games as “jump scare” mechanics. The use of the environment to create an emotional response to what the video game represents, and respond as if it were real.

e.g. Tom Clancys Splinter Cell has a sequence where the player must jump between platforms on a sheer cliff face. If the camera is rotated to see down the cliff, they may get a sense of vertigo.

The below table demonstrates the Inputs to emotion within games:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Audience Roles** | **Audience Roles** |
| **Types OF Emotion** | Observer-participant | Actor-Participant |
| Ecological | Sensory environment | Proprioception |
| Narrative | Narrative situations | Role play |
| Game | Game events | Gameplay |
| Artifact | Design | Artistry |

Another way to evoke emotional responses in video games is by using Pavlovs Classical Conditioning techniques: In which you associate a emotion or behaviour with a specific stimulus (e.g. experiment in which dogs were conditioned to associate a bell with food, or pigeons pecking a button to receive food(rewards)).

References

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