

The Empathic Puzzler - Revisited

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ABSTRACT

Based on Heron & Belford's framework on the computer game genre *empathic puzzler*, this paper revises the genre by looking at the proximity between player and game, to create a greater sense of the emotion empathy. Upon the revised genre a superficial game concept is developed, utilized by the MDA (Mechanics, Dynamics & Aesthetics) framework. This should result in a greater understanding of what this non-acclaimed genre is capable of, and a tool for further research and development of game concepts within this particular and important genre.

Keywords

Empathy; empathic puzzler; narrative games; First-Person Perspective; Virtual Reality

1. Introduction – Empathy & Games

Empathy is the ability to share someone else's feelings or experiences, by imagining what it would be like to be in that person's situation*, or said differently; to put oneself in another's shoes and understanding how he or she feels. Computer games has, even though it to someone seems unlikely, the power to utilize the emotion empathy, by the use of well developed narratives and characters, high fidelity virtual environment and gameplay mechanics - it is something, we will see a lot more of in the future.

“Art can train us to be more empathetic and understanding” [1] By experiencing art in its many forms, we can train our imagination and create context of ideas and beliefs of cultures and communities, and it is something that empathetic computer games can train us to do in meaningful ways.

Wilcox [1] states, that empathy prevents us from de-contextualizing or re-contextualizing the knowledge and experiences of other people and argues that computer games can fulfil these requirements and train us to create new contexts, allowing the player to discover new knowledge in the context. These types of computer games give us time to emotionally reflect over others fortune or misfortune and as empathy is a human trainable skill, though not all people tend to exercise this skill given their innate quality, hence the very meaningfulness of utilizing empathy in computer games.

* The word “empathy” on Cambridge Dictionary: <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/empathy>

When we look at games, commonly termed within the exploration genre, such as Dear Esther [2], Gone Home [3], The Beginner's Guide [4] and Firewatch [5] (see figure 1), these games with their casualness, let us dwell and reflect over stories with strong themes, the characters within and emotional resonant environments. They do not stress us with time limits, competition, monsters or shooting, they merely try to narrate a story in which you, as player, are the main character and where the only element stressing you is the comprehension of the story presented. In Heron & Belford's journal [6], they argue for an encompassing definition of such a games, which through engineered narrative structures present exploring issues as choice, agency and emotion, one they have termed the *empathic puzzler* genre.



Fig. 1. In-game screenshot of Firewatch

In this paper I embrace the empathic puzzler genre and I will elaborate the genre in the following section. Though the genre has not yet been lauded for its of empathetic skills, I see a necessity for revising the empathic puzzler by looking at the proximity between player and gameworld to create a greater sense of the emotion empathy. In the end of this paper I will create a suiting, but superficial game concept to empathise the revised game genre. It is thought as a help to game designers and to future research of this particular and most important genre.

2. The Empathic Puzzler Explained

I will start by extending the main points from the empathic puzzler's framework [6]. It relies on predetermined narrative structure in either a branching or freeform narrative structures, both gives the players a casualness to progress and comprehend the story in their own pace. Whereas the branching structure create the illusion of choice, giving the player multiple paths and endings to explore, the freeform allows the player to freely roam the environment gathering story pieces, which can be encountered

differently in each playthrough. Secondly, a short and manageable story with strong themes, usually set in an emotional resonant environment, such as islands, forests or even dreamscapes. Thirdly the games contain no formal ludic conventions, here the player gets awarded with pieces of story and/or events, which slowly as progressing through the game, form a holistic understanding of the story's substance. Fourth and last in the framework is the limited agency, player can only move within the predetermined storyworld, giving designers more control and assuring that the story is comprehended as intended.

With the genres points presented, I see a necessity to revise to the genre. First of all because I want to create more attention to the genre, and with the aforementioned games in mind, I want to create more proximity between player and the storyworld. In addition I want to underline the importance of how story, character and environment affects the genre.

3. Revising the Genre

A game utilizing First-Person Perspective view (see figure 2) is very commonly used and well developed in standard computer games today. The First-Person Perspective literally puts the player in the shoes of the character, thus placing the player as humanly and as virtually possible to the character within the virtual environment. To emphasize this, Kallinen et al's [7] studies of players in First-Person Perspective versus Third-Person Perspective revealed a greater sense of presence and emotional response in First-Person Perspective, than the other. Though it is not said that a third person perspective of the character could induce empathy, on the contrary, the player sees the character and can relate critically, hence judging the character and thereby endangers the proximity of being in the shoes of that character, and this is something that we do not want. Therefore I argue for adding the First-Person Perspective to the framework of the genre, thus creating more proximity between player and character.



Fig. 2 In-game First-Person Perspective screenshot of Dear Esther.

By applying the option to use Virtual Reality (VR) in the genre, will also enhance proximity, as it utilizes Sensorymotor Contingencies (SCs), which are the actions, that we as humans know to carry out in order to perceive [8], e.g. the ability to control, via a Head Mounted Display, the First-Person Perspective view. VR is great at creating presence, the feeling of 'being there' in the place, as of the high fidelity modalities of vision and audition the technology provides. Though we must remember that it is the coherence of narrative elements (story, characters and environment), that must be balanced and well designed to create and maintain immersion, which is the difficult art of making good

narrative games. Another thing is the short stories these games provide with less conventional gameplay elements, which is ideal for a VR experience. VR is still at an infant phase and the SCs and interactive intuition may not always function to perfection, it can create nausea or non-intuitive interactions. Therefore by using short stories and limited gameplay elements, there is a greater possibility for a complete and successful VR experience.

When looking at the characters of the aforementioned games, they are not physically (virtually) present. A reason for this could be the complexity of model animation, and as most of these games are made by independent developers with limited budgets, they choose to save it and prioritize the budget in alternative ways to present characters. In the mentioned games it is through voice narration, mostly told as an autodiegetic narrator, which are a character in, and the protagonist of the story and "hidden" (only the voice is heard) behind the First Person Perspective view of the player. With the lack of a physical character it requires effort from the player to mentally imagine the characters through the narrated story, thus good descriptive passages of characters in the narrative is important. Furthermore regarding the narrative, there is repeatedly strong emotional themes that recur in the mentioned games, some of these are solitude, loss and depression, all implemented into a mysterious and emotional resonant environment, that reflect and enhance these themes very well.

As the genre has eschewed most of the conventional ludic gameplay elements, it is important to keep the player activated. It happens that the narrator embarks on some long monologue pieces, which can allow the player to drift and not listen to vital narrative information, hence missing parts of the story. Game creator Tim Schafer [9], have talked about the importance of motivations in players and characters, as the character will care about things, that the player necessarily will not, it is therefore important to use gameplay bribes to motivate the player to follow the motivation of the character. In *Gone Home* and *Firewatch* this problem is solved by keeping the player occupied by interacting with the environment such as picking up and examining objects. These bribes, that Schafer talks of, can be narrative related interactions such as cause and effect action, like pushing a button will trigger a narrative slideshow. Alas, interaction at such a state must be kept subtle, as the ludic elements must not affect the importance of the narrative.

In the revised empathic puzzler genre I have added First-Person Perspective and optional VR, which provide presence and immersion between player and characters in the storyworld. With only voice narration and no physical character figures presented, it gives the developers more focus on the narrative, than modelling complex character animations. Emotional story themes and appropriate virtual environment, are vital in coherence with the narrative to reflect over a given story piece. Finally by adding more, but subtle, ludic gameplay elements to the genre, that is in relation to the narrative context, seems as a suitable way to keep the player from drifting and thereby more motivated in the story narration. Again, it is vital not to exaggerate the ludic gameplay element, as it can affect the importance of the narrative.

4. The Empathic Puzzler Revisited at Work

To make it clear how the revisited empathic puzzler genre could be used in a game design, I will elaborate the revisited genre as a superficial game concept, using the MDA framework [10] consisting of Mechanics, Dynamics and Aesthetics (MDA). The framework will be presented from the designers point of view (see figure 3), starting with the Mechanics of the game first, followed by Dynamics and Aesthetics.

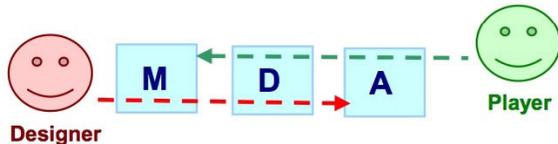


Fig. 3 MDA model from designer and player perspective.

In the game mechanics an intuitive Narrative System should be applied to keep structure of the story narrated. Secondly an Environmental System, which should consist of a high fidelity and dynamical changing visual environment, containing a day and night cycle, weather system etc. Additionally an Interactive System that ensures the function of triggers, i.e. trigger to the story pieces, both by walk-into triggers and button-pressed triggers and also objects examination. A Physical System that ensures objects reacts relatively to the Environmental System. Lastly adding the option of VR, which is easily implemented in 3D game engines like Unity3D, Unreal or similar.

Describing how the *dynamics* work, how the players use the rules, or “run-time behavior” in programming terms, the game should urge the player to explore and collect pieces of the predetermined story to create a holistic comprehension. It is the story that is the core of this game, so by letting the player progress in his own pace, giving time to emotionally reflect over story, characters and environment, will provide the player with the ability to understand the characters, thus creating empathy.

The *aesthetics*, which is how the game should make the player feel, use a limited directed vocabulary of eight component to describe the aesthetics of the game. This game uses three of these components, starting with the most vital, the *Narrative*, the game as drama, with a strong themed story that creates suspense and curiosity to drive the player forward. Secondly, *Sensation*, a game of sense-pleasure as the player “inhales” the unfamiliar and original virtual environment and soundscape. Thirdly and last, the game as *Discovery*, which urges the player to explore the unknown environment of the storyworld. These considered components should intrigue the player to keep wanting to come back to the game world.

It is intended that the MDA framework of the genre should function as a tool for designers, on which they can base their empathic puzzler game concept upon. Hopefully this will create more games within this particular genre specifying the genre even more.

5. Conclusion

Computer games are more than competition, mindless shooting and achieving goals, they can teach us to be more empathic. The empathic puzzler is an important genre and is here to stay, as it is capable of creating emotional reflections and train the player creating new layers to the context of feeling empathy, i.e. if the designer is capable of creating a strong themed narratives with an equal strong narrative structure. In this paper I have sought to give the genre more proximity between the player and the characters within the storyworld, by adding additional component to the framework. To create a greater sense of presence and immersion the First-Person Perspective view together with optional VR, seems as an appropriate choice, which does not put a tremendous amount of work on the designer. Also by writing descriptive character passages in the narration, limits the amount of animation work on the designer, and by doing so, the player actively has to imagine the characters presented. This brings us to our final conclusion on adding subtle and non-exaggerated ludic gameplay elements to the genre, which keep the player from drifting, causing that vital story pieces will be neglected.

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