10-1-2004

Horror as a Catalyst for Change

Chris Pruett

Follow this and additional works at: http://commons.pacificu.edu/inter04

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Interface: The Journal of Education, Community and Values at CommonKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in Volume 4 (2004) by an authorized administrator of CommonKnowledge. For more information, please contact CommonKnowledge@pacificu.edu.
Horror as a Catalyst for Change

Rights
Terms of use for work posted in CommonKnowledge.

This article is available at CommonKnowledge: http://commons.pacificu.edu/inter04/34
Horror as a Catalyst for Change

By Chris Pruett <c_pruett@efn.org>

As video game technology improves and the number of game players increases, video game developers are searching for ways to make game playing a more substantive experience. While classic video games of the 1980s typically relied on quick reflexes and raw skill, recently developers have been experimenting with games that place a heavier focus on narrative, character development, and emotional impact. Many recent innovations in these areas have come from a surprising source: horror games. To understand how horror is helping to push the game industry in new directions, it is first necessary to examine the history of modern horror game design.

Game design is a highly iterative process. Game developers often start out with ideas that they think may be fun, but nobody can really tell if a concept will work until it is actually tested out. Since building the software necessary to test every concept is far too difficult, game designers typically look to previous games for cues about mechanics that people find enjoyable. Consequently, most modern games are like rock chipped from a seabed quarry: close examination reveals layer upon layer of cumulative game design, dating all the way back to the birth of video games in the late 1970s.

One of the best examples of interesting game design geology is the Survival Horror genre. Survival Horror games typically put a strong emphasis on story, require the player to traverse dangerous and confusing places, and prioritize puzzle solving over combat. The setting is always grim, and themes of isolation and the struggle of everyman are frequently employed. Survival Horror is particularly interesting because it is not only the product of years of cumulative game design, it is also a prototype for the direction that video games of other genres may take in the future.

Survival Horror has its roots in the Adventure genre (which was originally the Text Adventure genre). Adventure games like Cyan’s Myst, LucasArt’s The Secret of Monkey Island, and Sierra’s Kings Quest series were very popular in the PC market in the late 1980s and early
1990s. Like Survival Horror today, classic Adventure games valued cognitive reasoning over quick reflexes, and placed far more emphasis on narrative than most other genres. LucasArt’s 1992 hit Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis is a typical Adventure game, requiring the player to guide Indy by clicking on special hot spots in the game environment. Like most Adventure games, the pace of the game is up to the player, and most problems must be solved through investigation and critical thinking.

The same year that Fate of Atlantis hit store shelves, Interplay released Alone in the Dark. In keeping with the norms of the Adventure genre, Alone in the Dark focused heavily on puzzle solving and required the player to scrutinize their environment looking for clues. However, Alone in the Dark differed dramatically from the classic Adventure mold in three important ways: it employed cinematic camera angles (using shot composition techniques borrowed from film), it allowed the player to take direct control over the protagonist (using the keyboard to drive him around, rather than pointing and clicking on hot spots), and it was filled with horrific H.P. Lovecraft-inspired themes and motifs.

Though Alone in the Dark received critical acclaim for its innovations, its model was not revisited by other developers until the 1996 release of Resident Evil for Sony’s then-new TV-based game console, the Playstation. Developed by an Osaka-based development firm named Capcom, Resident Evil was Alone in the Dark for the masses. Just like Alone in the Dark, Resident Evil focused heavily on item collection and puzzle solving, and over the course of the game a complex (if cliché-ridden) plot was developed. Capcom borrowed Alone in the Dark’s mechanics almost verbatim, using a similar technique of fixed camera angles, direct control over the protagonist, and combat as a method of diversifying the types of interaction provided to the player. The game was so successful that it spawned a number of sequels (the seventh title is due out in January 2005) and coined the term ‘Survival Horror.’

Despite Resident Evil’s success, by 1998 the Adventure genre was clearly in decline. Many critics who saw Resident Evil as a one-trick pony were skeptical that the Survival Horror genre would survive. Konami’s 1998 release of Silent Hill for the Sony Playstation proved them wrong, and showed that the genre was rife with innovation.

On the surface, the mechanics of Silent Hill seemed to follow Capcom’s lead: most of the game is spent exploring rooms, collecting items, and solving puzzles, and combat was a secondary goal to exploration. This format had been proven by Resident Evil, and Silent Hill also had the advantage of employing state of the art of video game graphics technology. But the real innovations brought forth by Konami had little to do with technology or mechanics.

The developers at Konami realized that people enjoy scary movies because horror can produce a strong emotional response in the viewer. While Resident Evil borrowed many of its scares from gore-fests like Night of the Living Dead, the developers of Silent Hill intended the game to have more in common with the psychological terror invoked by The Shining. To this end, Konami carefully designed their game to maximize fear in the player by employing a vulnerable
protagonist, a creepy Jacob’s Ladder-inspired story, and locales that were disturbingly common place. While Resident Evil expertly captured the feeling of a B horror movie, Silent Hill was truly a terrifying experience.

Konami’s key innovation with Silent Hill was to create an experience that provokes an emotional response in the player, and the title is a clear demonstration that games as a medium have the potential to be intelligent and emotionally substantive. The second game in the series, Silent Hill 2, is widely regarded as one of the most interesting and literate games ever produced. But in creating a compelling narrative, Konami’s developers were careful not to throw the baby out with the bath water: Silent Hill is built upon tried-and-true Adventure game mechanics, and much attention was spent on making sure that the low-level interaction between the player and the game was enjoyable even without the narrative context.

Since Resident Evil and Silent Hill lay the groundwork in the late 1990s, the Survival Horror video game genre has grown to include a wide variety of titles. Unlike most video game genres, Survival Horror has proven itself a genre defined by theme rather than game mechanics, and consequently developers have enjoyed a wide degree of flexibility when implementing game designs under the Survival Horror banner. Many recent horror games have also been showcases of game design innovation, challenging conventional wisdom of game pacing, the role of combat, and the balance between interaction and narrative.

The Survival Horror genre works because it is able to combine compelling game mechanics with themes that carry emotional weight. Though horror is not held in particularly high regard in the literary world [1], it provides an excellent starting point for literate games. In order to be a serious medium, video games must be able to affect the way the player thinks and feels. While fear may be a simple emotion to create (compared to say, love or despair), it is still a few steps above what most games are currently able to accomplish. If game developers are able to understand how to create and manipulate emotions in the player, much more powerful and meaningful (not to mention enjoyable) games will be possible. The lesson of Survival Horror is that games can be literate and challenging while continuing to incorporate years of game design theory.

Developers like Capcom and Konami have shown us that emotionally substantive games are possible, and that they can be built upon game mechanics that already exist. This concept is already at work in other areas: Sony’s ICO showed that the platforming genre, traditionally one of the most narrative-thin game genres, can be turned into a gripping and emotionally challenging experience. Survival Horror is a model for the future, a catalyst capable of fusing traditional game mechanics with literate and meaningful narratives. Game developers should look long and hard at the genre, because the work going in the area of horror may ultimately be the foundation upon which games that tackle real emotional issues will be based. [2]

Footnotes:

[1] This is in part because once works are established in the literary canon, they are no longer
thought of as Horror. This could be said of the works of Poe, Washington Irving, and Mary
Shelly's *Frankenstein*, and, some might argue, Henry James' *Turn of the Screw*.

[2] Please note that because some of the games referenced here are older ones, there are no
longer "official" sites on the web for them. We therefore tried to find sites with related reviews,
sometimes for later titles in the same series. For sites which give a visual sense of some of the
games referenced here see:

- Myst:
  http://mystworlds.ubi.com/us/
- The Secret of Monkey Island:
  http://www.rpgfan.com/reviews/monkeyisland/Monkey_Island.html
- King’s Quest:
  http://www.vintage-sierra.com/kingsquest.html
- Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis:
  http://www.mobygames.com/game/sheet/gameId,316/
- Alone in the Dark:
  http://pc.ign.com/articles/087/087191p1.html
- Resident Evil:
  http://www.capcom.com/ResidentEvil/
- Silent Hill:
  http://www.silenthill.ru/
- ICO:
  http://www.gamingmaxx.com/reviews/ps2/icomh.htm

This entry was posted in Uncategorized by Editor. Bookmark the permalink
[http://bcis.pacificu.edu/interface/?p=2994].

5 THOUGHTS ON “HORROR AS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE”

**Virtual Router**

on *January 30, 2014 at 4:40 AM* said:

I have found that I use each in very different ways, and sometimes
in similar ways. When a router advertises a poised route
to its neighbors, its neighbors break the rule of
split horizon and send back to the originator the
same poisoned route, called a poison reverse. STP ensures
the loop free transportation of packets from source
to destination.
3ds emulator
on January 31, 2014 at 11:09 PM said:

running along a wall & the goal was to aim your shot to
hit enemies & collect coins. Have you had any modern console horror stories of your
own.
Genuine R4i SDHC 3DS card contains all functions of r4i
sdhc v1.

latest computer tips and tricks
on February 4, 2014 at 12:47 PM said:

Simply want to say your article is as surprising. The clarity on your post is just spectacular
and that i could
think you’re a professional in this subject. Well along with
your permission let me to snatch your feed to stay
updated with impending post. Thanks a million and please
continue the gratifying work.

android hack tool Download
on February 5, 2014 at 7:10 AM said:

It is actually a nice and useful piece of information.
I’m glad that you simply shared this helpful info with us.
Please keep us informed like this. Thanks for
sharing.

ez cash creator review
on February 5, 2014 at 8:14 AM said:

Ez Cash Creator is really a strong new software program that’s supposed to assist you
generate huge bucks on the net.

EZ Cash Creator is ideal and is largely specific to beginner to intermediate on the web entrepreneurs. If you’re already owning accomplishment of earning $200+ each day from on the web advertising, then you really never really have to use this technique.