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The Great Internet Quandary or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Blog

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A couple of years ago I decided to embark on a research project to improve my understanding of video game design. I chose to study horror games because I was impressed with the agility with which several horror titles were able to manipulate the emotions of the player. As I’ve written before, creating games that are emotionally relevant to the player is a hard thing to do, and there seemed to be a high concentration of such titles within the “survival horror” genre. But after completing a few horror games I realized that there was a lot of variation from one title to the next, and that I was going to have to sample a wide range of games in order to draw conclusions about the genre as a whole.

So I did what any geeky website programmer would do: I started a blog. I had big plans for my blog: I would catalog all the horror games I could find, play through them one by one, and post my notes to the world as I went. Eventually I would build up a small base of avid readers who shared my interest in horror game design, and maybe together we could get some interesting discussion going about control schemes, the virtues of puzzles, the effectiveness of off-kilter shot composition, the role of music in horror games, or even how horror games related to horrific literature and film. This kind of focused, detailed discussion about such a specific topic is a hard thing to find even on the Internet, so my aim was to create such an environment from scratch.

Everything started out well; I built the blog, created a database of games, and recorded my progress once a week. Little by little my readership increased, and eventually I was able to maintain a few regular readers by creating places for commentary and discussion. Once Google decided I was the most relevant link for the keyword “survival horror,” my readership increased dramatically. A few of my readers even donated their old horror games to me in an effort to aid my research.
However, now that I've been running the project for a little over two years, I can see that my plan was flawed from its inception. As time passed I realized that the project was turning out to be very different than I had envisioned. The fatal flaw in my plan was my assumption that others interested in horror game design would be attracted to my blog; as it turned out, most of the people visiting my web site were regular game players looking for information and discussion about their favorite game. I was attracting gamers, not game designers, and their influence was affecting the way I approached the site. I found myself blogging about survival horror gaming news much more often than about actual game design, and though I did feel that my research was beginning to pay off, my blog had failed to attract the type of people who were interested in the nitty-gritty discussion I was hoping for.

To be fair, there is a fairly significant overlap between being a person who enjoys games and a person who is interested in game design. A few of my regular users have turned out to be invaluable resources for discussion, and I have made a couple of connections through the blog that have proved quite enlightening. However, such users are represent a small minority; most of the people who visit my site are interested only in leaving comments about the merits of specific games they have played. At their worst, my user’s comments are simply designed to slander some other user’s opinion. The amount of constructive, intelligent, and balanced conversation can be hideously low. I have found that I only garner a few muted responses when I post my thoughts on horror game design, but posting a critique of a popular horror game usually results in a firestorm of replies. In fact, the number one hot topic among my users is the definition of the term “survival horror,” which has spawned innumerable arguments about which games should be included in my project and which should not. Clearly, I’m reaching a group that is far different than my intended audience.

Ultimately, the conclusion that I am forced to draw is that I cannot choose my readers. While this may seem like common sense, I think it is a large part of what I refer to as the Great Internet Quandary. The Great Internet Quandary is, in a nutshell, the problem of maintaining high quality information when everybody in the world has equal access to it. The Internet allows us unprecedented access to information, but it also exposes that information to the commentary of every other person on the web.

The extremely successful on-line user-moderated encyclopedia Wikipedia [1] is an example of the Quandary: since anybody can edit the Wikipedia content, how is it possible to keep factual information from being lost in the noise of millions of opinions? Wikipedia works because it attracts people who are willing to moderate and maintain articles that cover their topic of interest, and it provides them with tools to help combat vandalism and opinion from ruining the content of the site.

But Wikipedia (along with a few other successful discussion centers like Slashdot [2] and Something Awful [3]) is an exception to the rule. Most blogs, forums, and other web sites that are designed for discussion suffer from being universally accessible in one way or another; some sites are so overrun by so-called “trolls” that they are forced to shut down. A common approach to
balancing content with conversation is to restrict access to a small number of users who have been deemed worthy of participating in the discussion, but the success of such schemes varies widely.

My humble blog, despite its relative obscurity and tiny readership, suffers from a form of the Great Internet Quandary: by posting my thoughts on the Internet, I am implicitly inviting anyone and everyone to comment. I cannot pick and choose my readers, nor can I control what they will say; there’s no way to coerce them into discussing the things that appeal to me. I may be disappointed that my readers do not share my interest in horror game design, but on the other hand there is not much that I can do about it. The best I can do is to encourage my readers to contribute the type of content that I am interested in.

So, I have decided to quit worrying about it. Despite attracting a different audience than the one I intended, my research project has been successful. I have indeed learned a great deal about horror game design, which was my original goal after all. I have also learned a lot about the social dynamics of the Internet, which may actually prove more valuable than any game design insights I may achieve. As a communications tool, the Internet is simultaneously amazingly powerful and impossible to control. I think that in the future, the web sites that are most successful at maintaining high quality discussions will be those that encourage their users to act with maturity and intellect. As for me, the Great Internet Quandary will remain a quandary for the foreseeable future, but I have decided not to let that stop me from publishing my research; eventually I will complete my project despite my users, or I will succeed in attracting the types of people who share my interests. Either way, the experience has proven to be far more educational than I could have imagined.

Wikipedia’s content is entirely created and maintained by its users. Anyone can edit any article. I think that it is one of the few dramatic examples of the power of the Internet.

Slashdot is “news for nerds,” and is one of the oldest blogs on the net. Its readership is estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands. Slashdot maintains its discussion boards by allowing every user the ability to rate quality of the comments of other users. Posters that consistently post highly-rated comments are able to accumulate good “karma,” and the site is designed to highlight the posts that are highly rated or are written by users with high karma ratings.

Something Awful is a comedy site that is heavy on cynicism. It is one of the few for-pay forums on the Internet, and it boasts over 60,000 forum members. Something Awful enforces strict rules on its posters, and since one must pay for access, the threat of being banned from the site carries more weight than other forums. Also, the Something Awful community perpetuates a high standard for posts, and users who make simple mistakes are often berated by other users.
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