Chapter 12

This Drives Me Nuts!
How Gaming Technologies Can Elicit Positive Experiences by Means of Negative Emotions

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ABSTRACT

Video games are an interesting example of technologies/media able to generate complex emotions. Indeed, part of the emotions commonly arising in the experience of video gamers are quite negative. On the one hand, video gamers may feel frustration and anger due to the difficulty of the gameplay. On the other hand, they may experience sadness, anxiety and fear due to the immersion into emotionally rich narratives. Yet, video gamers seem to appreciate gaming technologies generating negative emotions, and the research on media frequently highlights a counterintuitive positive relation between negative affect and enjoinment/well-being outcomes. Starting from these premises, the present chapter is aimed to review the negative emotions typical of video games, in order to understand in what ways they can concur in generating an overall positive experience. Then, the chapter discusses implications for research on video games as positive technologies, namely technologies able to promote well-being in their users.

INTRODUCTION

You are a flower. Well, sort of. You have small feet to move and big cartoon-like eyes. Your main goal, after an adventurous journey, is to rescue a princess from prison. In order to do this, you jump from one platform to another, avoiding obstacles and beating enemies by means of jumps on their heads. This is the actual first-part of the storyline (and gameplay) of *Eversion*, a video game developed and produced by Zaratustra Productions in 2008. Judging the video game by this brief description, it appears as a quite typical example of a Super Mario-style 2-D platform game. But if you proceed through the game, something weird happens. While the flower-like protagonist remains unvaried, the environment around him gradually changes. During the first levels of the game, it is funny, colorful, cheerful, and accompanied by cute music. As the game progresses, the environments gradually become darker, creepy if not disturbing; the music becomes cacophonous and unsettling; as the difficulty increases, the enemies become

horrendous in their appearance and clearly express evil intentions towards the protagonist. Moreover, the very end of the game, when the protagonist succeeds in saving the princess, is notably cruel and unexpected, implying that nothing, even the princess herself, is what it seems to be.

Among others, *Eversion* is an interesting example of a video game with peculiar features. Although it is not a horror game in an absolute sense, it generates a bad feeling because a game genre typically characterized by nice and inoffensive properties is suddenly filled with horrific, tragic, and cynical contents. A not really positive ending is provided to the player, who has to be satisfied with a bitter smile at most. In the end, it is possible to say that *Eversion* elicits negative emotions and an unpleasant experience in its users.

Despite this, the game generated quite positive reactions. At the moment the present chapter is been writing, *Eversion* has 669 user reviews on the *Steam* video game platform and 627 of them (93.7%) are labeled as "positive/recommended." How is this possible? How can a video game generate a positive experience and a consequential positive evaluation, if it has been created with the purpose of generating a disturbing sensation? Actually, this question relies on a very classic problem for the human sciences applied to the study of media: understanding the "pleasures" associated with tragedy, horror, and catastrophic elements in media content has been a topic of interest from Aristotle to our times. Probably, this problem can be even more complex for what is regarded as an interactive medium such as the video game. Indeed, first of all, a video game entails the possibility of failure, and as such it possibly represents a continuous occasion for the player to confront his own inadequacy; secondly, the horrific and tragic elements may be even stronger in their emotional effects than traditional media. Indeed, the interactive narration of the video game can be not only more immersive than the ones of other media but it also involves the possibility for the user to feel *first-person responsibility* for what happens.

Yet, video gamers still evaluate horrific and tragic video games as positive experiences, so that they commonly tend to be considered as good products worth trying and recommending to friends. This implies that a video game may be a positive technology, that is, a technology/means able to guarantee positive experiences to its users. Surprisingly, in some cases this happens independently of the actual emotional content of the video game, which can be substantially negative.

Starting from these premises, the purpose of this chapter is to analyze video games as positive technologies, taking into account the inherent complexity of their abilities in promoting hedonic experiences among their users. Precisely, as this introduction already touched on, video games are able to elicit emotions, both positive and negative. Actually, as will be explained in the following sections, negative emotions are a fundamental component of video game playing, which deserve to be properly analyzed. Indeed, negative emotions are: (a) a potential component of any game instance which is characterized by difficulty, challenge and the possibility of continuous failure for the player; and (b) a fundamental feature of some precise video games and video game genres. However, the present chapter will argue that negative emotions are not an obstacle to the use of video games to promote well-being. On the contrary, they potentially constitute an innovative resource, which should be properly mastered instead of opposed, in order to discover the true potentialities of video games as positive media.

POSITIVE TECHNOLOGY

Technology is often referred to as negative in terms of user experience. Numerous philosophers and social scientists have studied technology as a risk for social life, because use of technology can contrib-

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