
Crying Games: Let Players Break into Tears

Julia Ayumi Bopp

Center for Cognitive Psychology
& Methodology
University of Basel
4055 Basel, Switzerland
j.bopp@unibas.ch

Abstract

Interest in emotionally challenging digital games has been growing, both among HCI researchers and players. In this paper, I introduce the Japanese "Crying Game" (泣きゲー) genre, discuss how its narrative structure is purposefully designed to elicit crying in players, and relate it to previous HCI and games research.

Author Keywords

Games; Emotion; Game Design

ACM Classification Keywords

K.8.0 [Personal Computing]: Games

Introduction

Digital games that evoke sadness can make for intensely positive player experiences [2, 3]. A fact that is also showcased in the recent popularity of games known for their emotionally charged narrative and gameplay, such as *The Walking Dead* [11], or *CLANNAD* [17], which ranked third on the Steam sales charts when its English localization was launched in 2015 [7]. While many players value *experiencing* negative emotions such as sadness in games [2, 3], it is arguably oftentimes not their main reason for playing these games. It currently remains unclear whether (and if so, why) players actively *seek* such experiences.

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Figure 1: Screenshot of the visual novel game *Steins;Gate*

In Japan, however, *CLANNAD* [17] is considered a so-called "Crying Game" (泣きゲー, *naki-ge*), or "Depressing Game" (鬱ゲー, *utsu-ge*), – a game specifically designed with the intent of making players cry [10]. Indeed, publishers often explicitly market such games for their capacity to elicit crying in players. For example, the advertisement for the Role Playing game *Mother 3* [4] features a teary-eyed player (a Japanese TV actress) confessing how "heartrending" the game is. In short, it seems that some players do intentionally seek such "crying experiences".

Seeing how crying games are specifically designed to let players break into tears, and seeing how this in itself seems to be desired by players, – I argue that examining the game aspects and game design techniques employed in crying games may provide further insights on when and how (negative) emotions can make for positive player experiences, and in turn provide a better understanding of emotional complexity in games.

Game Mechanics of Crying Games

In terms of gameplay mechanics, "crying games" are not delimited to one type of game genre, but can fit into different genres, such as adventure or role-playing games. However, crying games commonly come in the form of visual novels (e.g., *CLANNAD* [17], *Steins;Gate* [18]). A visual novel's narrative is typically progressed through extensive conversations with different characters that are displayed in a text box [5] (Figure 1). Additionally, they are accompanied by generic backgrounds and portrayal of the conversation partner, and sometimes also feature voice acting and sparse animations. Interactivity in visual novels often comes in the form of decisions and dialogue option choices players have to take. At certain points in the narrative, players usually have to make decisions that will influence the narrative and often also the ending of the story [5], thereby making

players feel responsible for their choices and potentially evoking emotions such as guilt or sadness [3].

However, there are also examples of crying games in which the designers intentionally removed interactivity at a certain moment in the narrative. In the third part of *AIR* [15], for instance, players assume the role of an observer (a crow), unable to interfere with the narrative. This absence of interactivity matches the situation of the main character (a tragic event caused by the absence of the character's father). In this case, the absence of the character's father is represented by the absence of the player's ability to directly shape the narrative, which serves to increase players' engagement with the game characters and further draw them into the game.

How Crying Games Make Players Cry

In his book about how to write narratives for visual novel games [19], Yuuichi Suzumoto, one of the scenario writers of *AIR* and *CLANNAD*, describes design techniques often used in crying games. In a first step, players experience everyday events with a main NPC, which serves to better get to know and build a connection to the NPC. Then, in a second step, a tragic event separates the player character and the NPC, leaving players alone with their memories of the past happy events. This, according to Suzumoto, is what ultimately makes players cry [19]. This sequence of events recalls Freytag's five-act performance structure [9], which Benford et al. [1] employed in their discussion of uncomfortable interactions. In the following, I outline this structure as it pertains to crying games in more detail (see also Figure 2).

Exposition

According to Benford et al. [1], in this phase the initial framing of the experience, such as marketing or briefings, is of

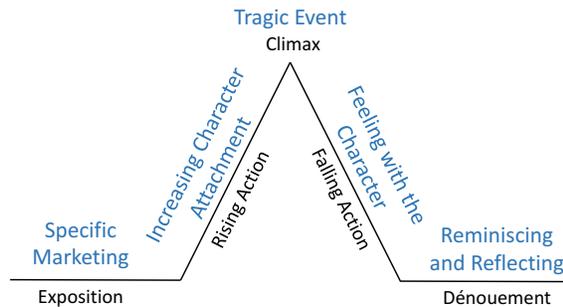


Figure 2: The five-act performance structure of crying games. Figure adapted from Benford et al.

importance. Therefore, the intentional marketing of crying games as “tearjerkers” may be considered as a form of exposition, informing and preparing players about the types of experience to be had.

Rising Action: Character Attachment

Character attachment is a common theme for emotionally moving game experiences [2, 3], as it affords players with feelings of responsibility and relatedness [14], and this is no different for crying games. In the first phase of the game, players get to know the NPC and spend their (in-game) daily life with them, with the NPC commonly falling in love with the player avatar. Such everyday events can, for example, consist of shopping together, or searching for a lost object in *KANON* [16]. Particularly important, according to Suzumoto [19], is to provide players with enough time to interact and form a bond with the main NPC, thereby positioning the NPC as an important person that players will want to care for. Isbister [13] outlines several further recommendations for designing character that players feels emotionally attached to, which also apply to the first phase

in crying games. These are, for instance, including characters’ backstory, humor, and writing characters with specific personality trait(s), such as being determined or loyal.

Climax: Tragic event

In crying games the previously everyday life of the player character is then interrupted by a sudden and tragic plot twist, which serves as a sort of climax of the narrative [1]. One such tragic event may be, for example, learning that the player’s NPC “girlfriend” has passed away in *Doukyousei 2* [6]. As outlined by Benford et al. [1], the tragic climax itself is usually transitory. In *Doukyousei 2*, for instance, the act of receiving the bad news is climactic but brief, but in itself not the cause for crying. The loss, however, is experienced as particularly affecting, because it often occurs relatively late in the game when players have had enough time to get to know and empathize with the character [12].

Falling Action

Rather than ending with a tragic climax, the narrative of crying games usually continues in the aftermath of the tragic event and follows the player character coping with the loss of the NPC, such as the absence of the player character’s father in *AIR* [15]. Of key importance is the sudden and stark contrast of the happy everyday life prior to the climax, and the tragic presence thereafter. According to Suzumoto [19], players break into tears when playing crying games, because they vicariously experience the player character’s grief at the suffering or death of a beloved person.

Dénouement

As mentioned above, Suzumoto [19] remarks that the trigger of players’ tears is not forcibly the tragic event itself, but rather players’ memories of the previously happy everyday life spent with the NPC, as well as fully realizing the NPC’s significance by empathizing with the player character. Benford et al. [1] describe this last phase – the dénouement,

– as the “critical importance of reflection afterwards” (p. 2011). Indeed, emotionally moving game experiences may also prompt players to reflect on the personal significance of real life aspects [3, 2], such as the importance of family or friends in the narrative of *MOTHER 3* [8]. Similarly, many players thought that *CLANNAD* taught them important life lessons [8].

Conclusion

Crying games are specifically designed and sought for their capability to make players break into tears, and are therefore of particular interest when learning about how to design for emotional complexity in games. While offering anecdotal evidence only, this paper provides a first introduction to the narrative design of crying games, as well as a basis for further discussion and empirical research.

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About the Author

Julia Ayumi Bopp is a PhD student in psychology at the University of Basel HCI research group. Her research interests include emotions, in particular negative emotions, in digital games.