
Braving the Emotional Challenge of Frightening Game Experiences

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Abstract

In this position paper I discuss the concept of emotional challenges derived from frightening game experiences gained from interviewing eight players. Additionally I address suggestions on how emotional challenges can be implemented in digital games. Furthermore possible benefits of designing for emotional challenges are discussed.

Author Keywords

Games; emotion; gratification; player experience

ACM Classification Keywords

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Introduction

Digital games offer players a broad spectrum of emotional experiences [1] and considering the growing popularity of survival horror games [8], players also seem drawn towards experiencing negative emotions, such as fear and tension in games. But despite horror games' popularity, fright reactions have remained relatively underexplored and it has remained largely unclear why people enjoy frightening games. One such reason is that frightening game experiences afford players the opportunity to confront and overcome emotional challenges [4].

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In this position paper, I draw from my ongoing research on the gratifications players derive from frightening game experiences [4] to describe what constitutes emotional challenge, as well as discuss how it emerges from the design of horror games. Examining how players experience and overcome emotional challenges not only adds to our knowledge of the interplay of positive and negative affect in games, but may also contribute to a better understanding of how frightening game experiences may be employed to study emotion regulation, as well as train players to react calmly in a stressful situation [7].

Emotional Challenge

Challenge has been repeatedly identified as a key factor for positive player experiences (e.g., [6, 9]), and has largely been associated with the mastery of skill-based 'functional' (i.e., game play) challenges [2, 6, 9]. Cole et al. [2], however, introduced the notion of 'emotional challenge', whereby enjoyment arises from the resolution of tension within the game narrative, emotional exploration or identification with characters.

A common theme that emerged in my interviews about players' frightening game experiences was that emotional challenge rather than functional challenge was a fundamental aspect of players' enjoyment of horror games: *"in terms of skills, (horror games are) not challenging, but in terms of tension very much so"* (P8, *Dead Space 1*).

Players reported liking the thrill of when a game provoked strong fright reactions *"like an adrenalin junkie who goes bungee jumping, that's what horror games are for me"* (P6, *Evil Within*). Specifically, horror games were particularly valued for evoking emotions uncommon and undesired in everyday life, e.g. *"(my) life is more shaped by joy [...] and horror games provide me with feelings of*

fear. I think that's what makes those games special" (P6, *Evil Within*).

These strong feelings presented players with an emotional challenge in a safe environment and enabled them to push themselves to their limits, e.g., *"I pushed myself, I played with my nerves and if it would be too much I could stop"* (P6, *Evil Within*), which resulted in positive feelings once players had confronted their fear, e.g. *"I felt joy because the situation I was in was a challenge"* (P7, *Resident Evil 1*).

How Emotional Challenge Emerges in Horror Games

Not only was emotional challenge a common theme in players' accounts of their frightening game experiences, but a similar emotional trajectory was reported by most players. Emotional challenge in horror games was often initiated by a rising feeling of tension and foreboding, e.g. *"you try and prepare yourself, but I still got frightened"* (P3, *Half Life 2*). Players emphasized the music and sound effects as source of their tension and indicators that something might happen soon, e.g. *"you heard strange sounds common for such games, but you don't see it (the monster)"* P1, (*Evil Within*).

With the sudden appearance of enemy monsters e.g. *"() then a boss opponent jumped at me"* (P8, *Dead Space 1*), the tension then gave way to emotions of fright and shock, e.g. *"terrifying, frightening"* (P1, *Evil Within*). The interval between the rising tension (e.g. strange sounds) and the trigger (e.g. monster) varied in length depending on the described experience, e.g. *"[...] I could be completely wrong but it was maybe 10min till the first fright situation occurred"* (P3, *Half Life 2*) and another player noted: *"It (the monster) was suddenly there*

because it was midnight and I honestly didn't notice it" (P2, The Witcher).

After the monster was defeated or avoided, players reported that the tension rapidly decreased and that they felt *"relieved and happy that nothing happened"* (P5, *Until Dawn*). After successfully overcoming the fright experience players felt proud and satisfied afterwards *"I was proud and it was nice that it was over!"* (P2, *The Witcher*).

Experiencing and confronting an emotionally challenging game experience often resulted in players feeling *"more tired afterwards"* (P1, *Evil Within*) and players frequently needed to take a break afterwards to cope with the emotional challenge afforded by such experiences, e.g. *"[...] I had to control my breathing again. I was gasping and I held my breath because it was so thrilling and afterwards I started breathing again"* (P1, *Evil Within*). Some players even indicated that the game actually felt dull after the frightening experience: *"It was a really intense moment and because of that the game was a little less intense. It was a really grueling situation and then suddenly the world was normal again"* (P2, *The Witcher*).

Discussion

Participants reported enjoying the thrill of experiencing typically negative emotions, such as fright, fear or anger. Horror games and other frightening game fare may provide players with the opportunity to safely explore emotionally challenging situations covering typically negative and unpleasant emotions. This lends further support to the potential of frightening game experiences being a promising avenue for research on emotion regulation [5, 7]. Using biofeedback could further reinforce this effect and positively affect engagement and

enjoyment of horror games [3].

Biofeedback as a new design opportunity may also create a deeper personal experience by linking players' physiological state to the game-play and visualizing the emotional challenge. This could then help train emotion regulation by challenging players to react calmly in stressful situations [7]. Technological advancements regarding new input devices for biofeedback further provide an opportunity to integrate this method into commercially available games. Webcams or heart rate chest straps biofeedback can be implemented without expensive special devices. The game *Nevermind* stands as an example for a commercially available horror game which uses this method (for more information see [7]).

Next, given that music and sounds were often mentioned in relation to emotional challenges, this could be an interesting opportunity to design for deeper emotional experiences in digital games as well. Lastly, emotional challenge may facilitate greater identification with the avatar, as the player becomes more emotionally invested and engrossed in the game narrative [2, 4], thereby receiving a greater emotional pay-off through digital games and arrange for more intense fright reactions and possibly enjoyment.

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Sarah I. Endress is a masters student in psychology at the University of Basel HCI research group. For her master thesis, she examines why many people enjoy playing horror games.