MAKING *MORI*: EMOTIONAL DEPTH
AND THE ART OF VIDEO GAMES

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The evolution of video game content is at a point where developers are beginning to explore the untapped narrative possibilities in video games. As technology advances, more developers bring unique concepts and goals to the games industry. In the ever-changing landscape of the video game medium, game creators constantly try to reach new heights. Independent game developers have spearheaded this movement with games that challenge the users’ perspectives and emotions. Critical acclaim has moved from the games with the most action and biggest budget to the games with the most personality and heart. I, like many game developers, am more interested in the emotional impact of games versus their “fun” value.

The goal of my thesis paper and my game project, Mori, is to create an emotionally provocative video game through research and execution. I will begin with a brief history of narrative in video games, and then explore current dialogue of game narrative and an analysis of several narrative techniques. Following that, I will explain dynamic composition and finish by relating everything that I have learned back to the production of Mori, my video game project.
Chapter 2: History of Narrative in Video Games

When video games were in their early stages, representations of narrative and emotion were so limited it was rare that a game would even attempt to portray meaningful character interactions. The only available representations were several colors of pixels on a black background and music composed of only several pitches of beeps. It was rare for a character to be visually represented let alone emote. Due to technological constraints a vast majority of the games of the time were either space themed or had abstract settings.

Perhaps one of the earliest attempts to portray emoting characters, Donkey Kong Arcade illustrates the creative constraints of the early 1980s. A game released in a market saturated by spaceship shooting games, Donkey Kong was a game that actually featured primitively rendered characters, Donkey Kong, Jumpman, and Pauline. The narrative is shown briefly before play, Jumpman and Pauline face each other and a heart appears between them, Donkey Kong kidnaps her and the heart breaks in two (Nintendo, 1981). The technique portrays little emotion and simple narrative, but in a time when this was technically advanced, the simplified love story stands as a milestone.

When the industry made the jump to 3D, the ability to render on screen action became far more advanced. One of the most commonly cited emotional games of early 3D, Final Fantasy VII was able to combine the technology afforded by 3D characters and complex music files to create a game with drama from character interactions.
Even with the few polygons that could be rendered at one time, the characters were created in a way that enabled them to show emotions. Despite being cartoon-like in nature, the characters were able to portray sadness, anger, and frustration in a way that had not been achieved before (see figure 2.1). Underscored by the Playstation’s ability to play more complex audio, *Final Fantasy VII* presented a story with an unexpected emotionality. Despite having been a primitive attempt, *Final Fantasy VII* was one of the first games to craft an emotional narrative.

In the current generation of games technology, narrative and emotion have become common goals of many game titles. The current technology allows for high fidelity sound, complex animation and compelling visuals. The ability to portray happiness or sadness within characters has reached a point of realism so high that roles in games are being played by actors on set using motion capture and facial capture technology.
The animation in *Heavy Rain* was captured from real actors performing the scene on set. While performing, the actors wore motion capture suits that recorded their every action. To supplement the suits they also wore helmets rigged with cameras to detect facial deformations. After the director has a cut he likes, the raw data and video is sent to the animation team who adds finer details seen in the face but not registered by the motion capture technology (see figure 2.2).

*Heavy Rain* was one of the first games to be performed by actors rather than animated by hand and voice acted. The game is praised for presenting an interactive crime drama that utilizes narrative as the core play mechanic rather than as a complementary element to play. This is supported by recent technology that not only allows the capture of acted performance but also computer-generated characters complex enough to receive every facet of the actors’ performances.

The character rigs (digital puppets) are set up to be comprehensive of any action the character would need to do. Actions like eye dilation, brow furrowing, and
skin stretching are all possible with the character rig. These and other complex
movements create the ability of characters to show every twitch, blink and breadth of
the actor’s performance. To create rigs this way requires highly detailed digital
sculptures and cutting edge rendering techniques.
Chapter 3: Contemporary Narrative in Video Games

Several opposing research paradigms found in the emotionality in games scholarship must be synthesized for a complete understanding of the literature. While psychological analysts of games seek to understand them from a behavioral perspective, game scholars emphasize theoretical structures and models for play. Game psychology papers breakdown emotional engagement as a series of recorded player reactions (Ravaja 347). Game studies scholar Olli Leino claims that emotions need to be assessed as structured relationships rather than as a set of reactions (113). Structured relationships are theoretical systems that are designed by ludologists to explain the nature of play. In direct contradiction, game psychologist Ravaja and his colleagues claim that psychophysiological data are more objective and therefore superior to subjective reports (346).

Psychological method yields scientifically accurate measurements of player feeling, but this approach decontextualizes emotion. Without context, the observation of these emotional game events loses meaning and intentionality (Leino 114). Game scholar Jonathan Frome insists that scholarship and psychology regarding games needs to be integrated to avoid overlooking important elements to the emotions that games create (831). A consolidation of the varied disciplines would yield a more helpful insight because it would provide a more complete understanding of how users experience video games than any one discipline alone.

Emotionally complex games are the next big step in the evolution of the increasingly ubiquitous medium. The current scholarship on games reflects the more
limited past of their emotional capabilities, but as game technology advances so does the potential for depth. As game designers and game scholars become more invested in the idea of the emotional video game, emotional engagement in games will reach a new level of sophistication.

**Game Emotion**

The typical emotions associated with gaming are those of winning and losing. Frome defines “game emotions” as “emotions of competition; they are emotions generated due to winning, losing, accomplishment, and frustration. When you are playing a video game, game emotions are directly related to your performance” (832). Game emotions are the most common in games, even before characters could emote or complex narrative could be established, games have always generated a tension between success and failure.

Game emotion is a straightforward type of user involvement in video games. In the classic game *Super Mario Bros* there are a number of factors that determine the user’s success. The user must control Mario to the end of the level, avoiding monsters and bottomless pits (see figure 3.1). If Mario falls or hits an enemy, he dies and must restart. The player must navigate these obstacles within the time limit.

**Fig. 3.1** – Mario in World 1-1 (*Super Mario Bros., 1985*).
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to win. The suspense of winning followed by the excitement of victory or
disappointment of failure are the components of game emotion. Success/Failure
emotions have been with games since the beginning, but a deeper emotional
connection has only become available with recent technological advances.

Ecological Emotion

Ecological emotions “are generated when a player responds to a video game
much in the same way they react to the real world” (Frome 833). It is a phenomenon
that is created when a player is immersed in a believable simulation that features
visual and auditory representations that trigger real world emotions within the player.
Real world emotion requires a subject to perceive an object, the focus of an emotion,
in a certain way. For games the subject is the active player, and the object is an
element within the fiction of the game.

To compare ecological emotions and game emotions, consider the dynamic of
*The Last of Us*. The game primarily follows the struggle of two apocalypse survivors,
the hardened father, Joel, and his adopted companion, 14-year-old Ellie. The actors for
these and other characters create a lifelike simulation of what it means to survive in a
chaotic and cruel world. The depth in performance presents the user with characters
who seem less like avatars and more like people (see figure 3.2). In *The Last of Us*, the
developers have created an experience that gives the user a reason, a person to protect.
As the story in *The Last of Us* progresses, the player forges a relationship to the game’s characters. The emphasis shifts from a win/loss user interaction to an emotional interaction. As the narrative unfolds there is less attention to whether or not the user fails a particular sequence and more towards what will become of Joel and Ellie. Instead of finishing with a glorious victory, the game ends with a morally challenging scenario. Is the survival of the human race more important than the survival of Ellie? Joel selfishly chooses to save Ellie in spite of humanity’s survival. The ending left most players angry and dissatisfied, but made a poignant statement about the true nature of a violent male protagonist. Anger, worry, dissatisfaction, more complex emotions presented in games are ecological emotions.

The idea of ecological emotion in games asserts that fictitious elements of simulations can elicit real emotional response. It is a substantial step forward in depth and complexity of game design. Many developers and scholars view “games that make
players cry” as the next big frontier in digital games.

**Games As Personal Experiences**

Structuralist narrative, found in literature and film, lacks a level of personal intimacy that can be crafted in active media like performance and games. As Gordon Calleja postulates: “When we identify with a character in a movie or in a book, or imagine we are in the same room as the protagonist, we have no way of altering the course of events”(88). While such narrative can contain compelling characters and meaningful events, the audience is barred in the position of observer “the environments and characters represented in these media have no way of reacting to our presence, no matter how strongly we identify with them” (88). Narratologist Tuen Dubbelman categorizes this as a “representological” narrative, a story told as a series of fixed events (163). The strength of the video game medium is that it can break away from this structure and offer a reactive narrative that the user becomes a part of.

In contrast to representological narratives, video games offer a platform to create a narrative that involves the audience as a participant. In presentological media the action happens in the here-and-now as opposed to the then-and-there. Dubbelman elaborates, “events seem to happen in the perceptual field of our direct, first-hand experience… The moment performers acknowledge our presence, make eye contact and start interacting with us, we change from being an invisible observer to an active participant” (165). The inclusory nature of representological media presents a unique storytelling opportunity of allowing the audience into the narrative.

The key is that as an active participant, the narrative unfolds like a personal
experience. The story is no longer a matter of what the hero did and how the hero felt, it is now a story about the user and how she reacted to the text. This first-hand experience is the potential of the video game narrative; story not as something retold but as something lived.

**Personal Experience As Personal Growth**

The true potential of games as a storytelling medium is that they are not about the struggles and motivations of a character; they are stories about the struggles and motivations of the player. It is a form of story in which the audience fulfills a role of action. In this evolving medium, a compelling story is not just about the personal growth of the protagonist, but also about the personal growth of the user.

If you look at the Game Developer’s Choice game of the year candidates from 2012, *Bastion* and *The Walking Dead*, the evolution of game narratives becomes clear ("Game Developer’s Choice Archive"). In *The Walking Dead*, violence takes a backseat to ethics, morality, and decision-making when there are no right answers.

“In *The Walking Dead*, the designers emphasize player choice by providing feedback on how one’s choices compare with those of other players… illuminating the player’s own personality by showing which of his decisions go with or go against society at large.” (Johnsen 60). *Bastion* offers a mostly didactic narrative until the climax, wherein the user is offered a choice. After the choice is made, the credits roll in this way, “the player learns about herself through the act of making a choice, not from seeing what some designer thinks should be the result.” (Johnsen 60). These games are not entertainment that ends when you shut the game off, they challenge the audience’s
assumptions about themselves, and their perspectives on life. These games were not only critically acclaimed but designed in a way which uses the experience to teach the player about themselves.

As games become a more mature medium, many developers are finding ways to leverage the user experience to more intimately convey the game’s themes. Looking toward the future of video games, developer Jenova Chen asserts,

> [Games] need to have intellectual stimulation, something that’s related to real life. Playing poker teaches you how to deceive people, and that’s relevant to real life. A headshot with a sniper rifle is not relevant to real life. Games have to be relevant intellectually. You also need depth. You have the adventure -- the thrill of the adventure -- but you want the goosebumps too. The new frontier in game development is not an exciting adrenaline filled experience, but one that is emotionally and intellectually challenging (Smith 2).

Chen is calling for game developers to find more meaningful pursuits than to make games that are “fun.” He believes there are more important themes games can use to impact the player.

**Emotional Games As Next Frontier**

Emotionally complex games have become a common goal in the game industry. The new cutting edge is not in graphics or motion control, it’s sophistication in content. Game scholars have been writing about it for the last few years, as games mature they can use presentology to create meaningful emotional experiences.

According to Frome, “Almost all game scholars are interested in video games’ ability to generate emotions. Developers want to make video games that make people cry, educators want to engage students in learning, and psychologists want to understand people’s motivations to play” (831). Other game scholars reflect his assertions. Leino
says, “more emotional games are often dubbed as the next milestone in the development of computer games” (113). The scholarship seems to agree on the next step in the maturation of the medium.

Game developers also see complexity and emotion as part of the evolution of the medium. Adam Saltsman believes that “[developers] are doing totally amazing things with storytelling and systematizing storytelling mechanics in a way that’s really meaningful… there will be more complexity. It doesn’t necessarily need to be artificial intelligence or anything like that” (Dilks, 5) Chen puts it well, saying, “Games have to be emotional. People need to experience a powerful range of feelings”(Smith 2). The game creators on the cutting edge of design have a shared vision of depth for video game experiences.

**Games As Configurative Versus Passive Media**

Unlike traditional mediums, games are a configurative activity. Jasper van Vught and Gareth Schott define a “configurative activity,” as a form of media that engages the audience both mentally and physically (95). It engages physically as functional input, button pressing or controller waving, and it engages mentally in terms interpreting the action of the text. In a medium such as games, the meaning of the narrative hinges upon the way the player interacts with the text.

The way narrative works in games is fundamentally different from how it functions in literature or film. Film and literature operate on a set of rigid plot points, so even a story in present tense occurs as if it had already happened. It is an essentially deterministic way of storytelling. According to Dubbleman, game narratives need to
be understood less like a fixed flow of events in presentological media and more like an active performance in which the audience takes part (157). In a player-influenced text, the audience is presented with an unfolding story versus being shown one that has already been decided.

Many critics of video game narrative see the player’s participation as a hindrance to the ability to tell a good story. Designer Steve Theodore states, “We don’t have the kind of compositional control and framing that make movie stills so appealing, but it’s also worth remembering that we have all sorts of powers that can compensate” (43). I will be looking at the “powers” of player agency, obtuse storytelling, and fictional reality. It is by use of these techniques and others that one can effectively tell a story in a configurative medium.

**Player Agency**

In a novel or script the author has carefully crafted a tale with precise character interactions and plot, but games require a slightly different approach to writing. Soren Johnson, creator of the *Civilization* series, believes that “the actual narrative of a game - meaning the series of events which determines the plot - is the hardest element to reconcile with the essential interactivity of games. For this reason, narrative cannot be handled as it is with books or movies, in which the story is the core element that everything else must support” (Johnson 58). It is because of this quality of games that narrative must be collaboration between the created work and the player who engages with it.
In some video games, the player’s influence on the story is more apparent. In games like *Mass Effect*, the player is clearly presented with options that will affect the outcome of the scene. This approach features a branching storyline, but often labels decisions as “good” or “evil” (see figure 3.3). Having a branching story like this can give some agency to the player but is limited by production constraints and narrative finesse. Johnson asserts that, “this potential is unrealized as the player’s choices are usually limited to selecting between a few preset branches. Although there may be more than one ending, as long as the outcomes are finite, interactivity only promises a difference in degree, not in kind” (60). Traditional interactive fiction has its inherent limits, which is often the subject of criticism from the literary world, as it offers alternate but perhaps less meaningful plot points. But in many other cases, the player’s presence is established without compromising the authenticity of the plot.
Some games present choices to the player to give them a sense of action in the story, but are structured so that the player doesn’t simply choose her preferred plot. In *The Walking Dead*, players are given similar influence over the game narrative. At certain points they are given choices of dialogue and how to react to specific scenarios. While these choices offer the player a part to play, the consequences aren’t clearly defined and don’t necessarily change to plot development. The key difference is that unlike *Mass Effect*, *The Walking Dead* offers these choices to the player as a reflection of their decision making process without giving a “good” and “evil” outcome (see figure 3.4). Giving players choices without them changing the ending moves the emphasis not on the outcome but on the choice itself. The choice becomes a meditation on the morality of the player (Johnson 60). This way instead of offering several, less well-constructed stories, the game has a powerful story arc in which the player feels connected.

Fig. 3.4 – Lee Everret negotiates with violent bandits with unclear intentions (*The Walking Dead*, 2012).
Obtuse Storytelling

Intentionally having the audience imagine parts of the story goes against conventions but is a powerful device within games. In a book, it is common that the story be told in rich detail to place the reader’s mind within the scene, but in games a story needs to be adaptable and leave more work for the audience. Adam Saltsman, indie developer and creator of Canabalt, believes that game stories can be more effectively told with the “iceberg theory,” giving players pieces of a narrative and allowing them to fill in the blanks with their imagination (Dilks 3). This concept of cooperative story building, with writers and players contributing, is becoming a more common approach to game narrative. Johnson resonates with this concept, saying “the role of narrative in games is more akin to the role of lyrics in music. A song’s words give the piece its context, its mood, and it’s setting while still leaving a suggestive gap for the listener’s imagination” (58). The role of an author in games is not as controlled as a novel writer, but is vastly complex and requires comprehension of participatory media.

When trying to tell a story there is a dissonance between delivering a meaning and leaving the story to interpretation. “The solution is to use a light touch, to suggest rather than to dictate, to let go of the very idea of plot. Let the player explore the world and then assemble the final story in her own head” (Johnson 58). Canabalt is a minimalistic game, which contains no action beyond controlling a man running and leaping along rooftops but is rich with narrative subtext. Instead of didactically establishing the fiction, the game offers visual cues as bits and pieces of the unfolding story. As you run across rooftops, you see moving objects, large shadows inhabiting a
cityscape, and aircraft whiz by in the background (see figure 3.5). The more you play,

Fig. 3.5 – The unnamed protagonist flees through a minimalist cityscape (Canabalt, 2009).

the more a rich backstory and lore is revealed, but it is done so with almost no
dialogue or exposition. Simply by what the player sees and hears, the story can come
through in bits and pieces that do not necessarily explain one single interpretation.

**Structuring Illusion**

Dream sequences exist across storytelling mediums, but can be more effective
as the medium becomes less expository and more experiential. Film often takes
advantage of dreams and hallucinations as a way of portraying emotions or thoughts.
As a visual medium it is far more effective to show what it feels like in the mind of a
character visually than to narrate, “John felt anxious” as one would in literature. As
game artist Steve Theodore notes, due to their visual nature and audience familiarity,
hallucinations are a powerful and efficient storytelling mechanic (43). Games take this
tool to a new degree, not only depicting a character’s perceptual experiences but also creating a dynamic reality for them.

The language of games is generally suited more toward action than consciousness. According to Van Vught, games primarily feature active characters because it is hard to design gameplay around contemplative or emotional protagonists (98). Much like how dreams are effective within the visual realm of film versus literature, they are a particularly strong plot device in a more action-oriented medium. Dream sequences work well within the medium because they create a situation in which participatory action is paralleled to more internal conflict.

*Far Cry 3*, a game lauded for its storytelling, makes heavy use of dream sequences. The main character, Jason Brody, goes through several warrior tribe rituals.
throughout the course of the game. These often include hallucinogenic trips that let the player into the psyche of the character (see figure 3.6). Much like in film, fears, worries and memories of the character are represented through symbolic imagery and action. The added potential from the participatory nature of these sequences is that the dreams can utilize a whole different set of simulated rules than the reality of traditional action, allowing the player to literally defeat inner demons of the character through methods which represent an internal conflict through metaphor.

**Conclusion**

When approaching a narrative in video games there are many considerations and methods to take into account. Differing types of emotion need to be taken into account. Game emotions and ecological emotions are neither inferior nor superior to one another, but are used in different ways. In a well-told story both types of emotions should play a functional role in communicating feeling to the player.

Unlike traditional media, games rely on a play between simulation and player input that creates complexities in exposition while affording an array of new storytelling techniques. The way a player reacts to the text can be used to give the player agency with the fiction. The audience can influence the world through their will and feel the connection of being an active participant.

In a configurative medium, story needs to be approached in a fluid way. In lieu of a completely defined or fixed narrative, games rely more heavily on player interpretation of what is being represented. The experiential nature of games creates a unique narrative landscape that requires an approach unlike passive media.
Chapter 4: Classical Composition and Dynamic Composition

In traditional art, composition is the visual arrangement through line and shape. It has long been considered the artist’s implicit technique of manipulating the viewer’s emotions about the piece. The principles of composition reach far beyond the realm of traditional art. Classical composition techniques have translated to modern mediums. Photography and film borrow heavily from compositional concepts of the early masters. "The content of a work of art finds its expression in the composition [...] in the sum of the tensions inwardly organized for the work” (Kandinsky 33). While composition is still the language of emotional engagement, classical composition doesn’t fully translate to game art. Composition in an interactive, constantly changing artwork can be understood through dynamic composition.

According to artist Chris Solarski, dynamic composition is a combination of elements found pervasively in games; those that the player is always aware of. He goes on to describe these elements as character shape, environment shape, character animation, and pathways. “Dynamic composition should be the topmost consideration for developers wishing to shape the emotional experience of their video games” (Solarski 1). For the purposes of my analysis I will simplify these areas into shape and movement, and the contrast between different aesthetic moods.

Character Shape

In both classical composition and dynamic composition, shapes are strongly associated with aesthetic concepts. In simplistic terms, round and circular shapes are
associated with innocence, youth and energy; squared shapes are associated with stability, order, and maturity; angular shapes are associated with aggression and force. Slorski asserts “these psychological associations with primary shapes allow us to orient them along a shape spectrum of emotions, against which characters and objects can be measured” (Solarski 1). These shapes have been used in games to give the user instant impressions of both characters and environments.

Different character designs can elicit a range of audience feelings based solely on this concept. Take, for example Link from The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker. He is a rounded character, who has vibrant colors and a short stature (see figure 4.1).

![Fig. 4.1 – Link stands on a dock at Windfall Island (The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker, 2002).](image)

Large–eyed and childish, he comes off as immediately friendly and innocent. His childish appearance lets the user immediately understand that he is friendly and youthful. As the narrative of the game unfolds Link reveals himself to be a strong warrior, but his design remains innocent and cute. Unlike the unchanging appearance
of Link, more technically advanced games use dynamic character design to illustrate the protagonist’s growth.

A consideration of specifically changing mediums like games and film is the concept of dynamic character design. As the French artist Eugene Delacroix wrote, “There may be ten different people in one [person], and sometimes all ten appear within a single hour” (Solarski 3). In a static piece, the shape of each entity remains the same but if a character exists over time, we start to see changes in personality and often parallel changes in physical appearance.

A dynamically evolving character is an effective way for games to show the personal growth of heroes in their physical appearance. One excellent example of a game with a dynamically changing protagonist is *Tomb Raider*. The game features a story about a group of scientists and sailors who are stranded on an island full of

Fig. 4.2 – Lara Croft seen before and after she has survived on the island (*Tomb Raider*, 2013).
hostile mercenaries. When the player starts the game the protagonist, Lara Croft is a normal archeologist, but as the game progresses she gradually grows into a hardened survivor (see figure 4.2). The shift also illustrates a stronger connection to her environment.

The dynamic protagonist aesthetic has become more common in recent years and makes a big difference in the relationship between aesthetic and narrative. Having a visual evolution for dynamic characters is a big step forward or games. It represents the difference between a character growing into a stronger person and a character simply exclaiming, “I am stronger and more confident now!” Dynamic character design is a leap forward in narrative subtlety and coherence.

**Character Movement**

In classical composition, we observe line and form, but in a dynamic composition line becomes an agent of movement. While traditional line still plays a part in the composition, the way the characters move in and around the environment is constantly in the player’s awareness. Movement occurs in two ways in games, through animation and through pathways. The pathway is how the characters move about the scene, their speed and direction, whereas the characters animation is how their body moves.

Animation of a character can be used to communicate internal mood and energy the posture of the characters can be used much like shape, to communicate energy, mood and even intent. A character with strong posture indicates that they are confident and energetic. A character that is stumbling or slouching indicates fatigue
and a weaker resolve.

A recent and controversial example of dynamic character animation is the desert sequence from the game *Uncharted 3: Drake’s Deception*. The protagonist, Nathan Drake, gets lost in the desert for several days and deteriorates as time goes on.

Instead of showing a video clip of Drake’s decay, the player maintains full control of the avatar. As the sequence goes on the character slows down, stumbles, and gradually starts failing to get anywhere (see figure 4.3). This presentation really puts the player in Drake’s shoes, feeling lost and helpless as they lose control of the character and can’t make him go on.

The other type of movement is pathway. While a character may have the same posture, the character will have a very different feel if their direction changes in smooth arcs or rigid angles. A character that travels at sharp angles and rigid speeds will feel more intense and aggressive whereas one who floats around the scene gracefully will seem innocent and welcoming.
Differences in pathway design can be illustrated by contrasting the game characters of *Journey* versus *Gears of War*. Thematically, *Journey* is a calm and meditative experience. To create a feeling of flow and ease the characters move around the scene in gradual arcing motions as if under water. The movement is slow and deliberate.

In stark contrast with the mood of *Journey*, *Gears of War* is a game about the brutality and psychological wear of being a soldier at war (see figure 4.5). The characters zigzag around the scene accelerating and decelerating rapidly, changing direction on sharp angles. The speed and chaotic nature of their avatars’ pathways create a mood of anxiety, restlessness and intensity. Combined with the exaggerated impacts of the animation style, the dynamic composition of *Gears of War* lends a strong and edgy mood to the game.

Both animation and pathway movements are an integral part of dynamic composition. Motion is to video games as a pose is to a painting; it tells the audience...
who the characters are and how we relate to them. The strength of this dynamic compositional technique is that the mood is directly related to the user input and responds to how you interact with it.

**Affinity and Dissonance**

Using basic composition, game developers can create characters and scenes that the user relates to in specific way. The juxtaposition of characters and scenes underscores the associative feelings and begins to create the narrative. Simply put, a round character in a round environment has affinity; the place is safe, familiar and known to that character. Conversely a round character in an angular environment exhibits dissonance; the place is dangerous, foreboding and scary. This same concept applies to characters and environments, as well as both shape and motion.

In the game *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons*, affinity and dissonance is used to show how the protagonists relate to their environment. At the outset of their journey,
the brothers start in their home village. In this environment, their warm hues resonate with the colorful backdrop. This shows the unity of the characters and their environment, making it a familiar and safe place. As the journey continues, the brothers find themselves in an increasingly desaturated world as they get further from home, further from safety and comfort (see figure 4.6). The resulting emotion is uneasiness, and even suspense for what will become of the duo as they venture into more dangerous regions. Affinity can also be used to relate characters to one another.

*The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker*, cited in a previous example, utilizes character design and dissonance to visually establish friend and foe. As mentioned before, the protagonist has childlike rounded features. In fact, most the characters in the entire story are based on a round, colorful aesthetic. The one exception is the
antagonist, Ganondorf. While the other characters come across as friendly and innocent, Ganondorf is angular and square (see figure 4.7). His appearance implies he is aggressive, authoritative and volatile. His strong dissonance to the rest of the cast emphasizes his character; he is immediately recognizable as the villain when he is first introduced. Even when the user doesn’t notice the many aesthetic decisions of the developers, all these factors influence how she will feel while playing and how she relates to the narrative.

**Conclusion**

In any visual artistic medium, composition is used as a way to communicate emotions to the audience; video games rely on dynamic composition. Dynamic composition is the combination of the elements of shape and movement, and how these elements interact and contrast each other. The placement of similar and dissimilar dynamic elements creates the emotional narrative.

In any visual media, shape communicates character and mood to the audience. With games or film, shape can be used as a changing compositional component that parallels the narrative experience. Unique to games, is the dynamic composition of movement. Dynamic movement needs to be designed to actively to react to the input of the player and provide consistent visual feedback.

With shape and movement combined, dynamic composition can be used to create affinities and separations of content to create conflict, empathy, and other feelings. The combination of classical design concepts and configurative media creates a composition that retains meaning as the audience collaborates to create the
experience. A strong composition creates a powerful work, utilizing new and old
techniques can create a reactive composition that works with the player to create a
personalized experience.
Chapter 5: Making Mori: A Postmortem

The final section of my thesis is a reflection on the effectiveness of creative decisions in my project, Mori, and how these choices relate to my research.

**Summary**

*Mori* is an interactive experience about a boy who finds himself in a surreal land and must interact with the creatures that inhabit it to find his way home. The game takes place in a dark dreamscape that is allegorical to the experience of a child losing a loved one. The characters within the game are personifications of emotions: denial, despair, and anger; the player must confront these emotions in order to achieve closure and reveal the true meanings of the story.

**Game Emotion and Ecological Emotion**

Creating *Mori*, I tried to experiment with the idea of emotion in user experience. Breaking away from conventions, I designed a game that uses almost exclusively ecological emotion. This does away with the long held conventions of game emotions, there is no winning or losing. The game is about the experience and focuses more on the ecological emotional feeling of the game rather than goals or objectives.

The lack of game emotion, and therein the lack of traditional “play,” was simultaneously one of the most criticized design decisions and one of the most important. When play testing, a typical player response was along the lines of “this is not a game” or “you don’t do anything”. While some players responded to this by quitting, those open to the idea of a game without objectives seemed to have a personal experience with the game. Although polarizing, I feel it was an important
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design choice to minimize play in order for the more subtle ecological emotion to take the stage.

Narrative Techniques in Mori

The majority of Mori takes place in a dream-like exploration of a character’s mind. Because it is more interesting to fill the role of a physically active protagonist in games, the character Mori actively pursues a physical journey as a metaphor for an internal journey. From an interactivity perspective, it creates a more connected experience for players to perform physical tasks than to watch characters verbally grapple with intellectual conflicts.

In the initial design for Mori, I wanted to include a player choice as part of the experience. Due to complications in development the idea was cut in favor of a more linear storyline. In the end player agency wasn’t so much a mechanic as it was a facade. Despite not having direct consequences of decision-making, the simple act of user input adds a connection to Mori as a character. While not elaborate or unique, the minimal player agency serves as a way to engage the player. Player agency is an design area that I was unable to experiment with in Mori, but I was able to focus on other concepts as a result.

Obtuse storytelling is a major narrative device in Mori that I utilized as an efficient method of crafting mystery. In the game, the user is given no reason for the fantasy world, no explanation of the father’s disappearance, and hardly any exposition at all. Instead of telling the user that this area is sad, this character is lost, or the statues
represent a superficial ideal of masculinity, *Mori* simply shows cryptic imagery and allows the user to form her own interpretation.

Not unlike the lack of game emotion, the obtuse narrative perplexed some players but intrigued others. Some open-minded playtesters resonated strongly with the notion that the symbols come with no concrete meaning and were able to collaborate with the text to create their own personal meanings for the game. It was extremely exciting to see users reacting in this way to the game I created. In a way, the cryptic storytelling made the game seem like a work of art, to be appreciated for personal interpretation rather than a complex plot structure.

With *Mori*, I took an experimental approach to narrative, the result was an abstract and elusive story told through symbolic illusions. While this enables the user to interact with a more interesting external character it also gives room for brevity and minimalism of asset design. The narrative development of *Mori* is experimental in nature and was met with mixed reactions, but the visual composition and aesthetic of the game is largely more successful.

**Dynamic Visual Composition in Mori**

The visuals of *Mori* received more universal praise than the narrative of the game. In regard to art, I have always felt that technique and skill are tools to lend credibility to the theme of a work. In crafting the visuals of *Mori* I held my work to the highest standard. The final product of this effort is a game that is visually stunning and impressive artistically. The most successful component to the game is not just visual
fidelity but an ever present, plot driven, dynamism to the composition. The research I did on dynamic composition is on full display in the aesthetics of *Mori*.

**Character Design Affinity and Shape**

The characters of *Mori* were designed using shape and color to create specific relationships between one another. Like the character designs in *Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker*, the characters of *Mori* use shape and features to define their relationship to one another. There are two groups of characters, Mori and his dad, and the creatures. If you look at the two human characters, they have complimentary designs (see figure 5.1). Jeans, tennis shoes, and hair color are all common attributes. They also feature similar colors and smooth contours of their silhouette. Conceptually, Mori and his dad fulfill the roles of reality characters, somewhat believable and ordinary. The human characters’ affinity for one another makes it easy to see a connection between the two and is useful for staging their relationship.
In order to make creatures that were likeable, I used shape to define personality. Each of the characters in *Mori* features proportions reminiscent of their personality; the exaggeratedly emaciated the Nomad and the bulkiness of the Beast instantly define who the characters are (see figure 5.2). The large sympathetic eyes of the Nomad give him a humanity that counter balances his scary face and body. The creature design mainly hinged on being scary at first encounter, but becoming friendly characters over time. While the main shapes of the creatures communicate their character type, the secondary shapes have roundness and no sharp edges. No matter how strange the creature design is, each has a soft side created by the round silhouette. The affinity between Mori and the creatures allowed space for a relationship to be created. Using motion I was able to gradually create that relationship.

**Dynamic Movement**

The motion and animation design of *Mori* centers around the idea of a calm pace and meditative experience. In *Journey*, the characters move about the scene in
flowing graceful motions to create a calm serenity in the composition. In *Mori* the player’s avatar is programmed to run in a smooth line at a slower pace. Whenever a creature befriends Mori, they too take on a slow, calm motion. The overarching motion design is deliberately slow paced to allow emphasis on enjoying the view and thinking about what is being represented. While motion is used to set the tone of the overall experience, changes in movement type are also used to show a change in character.

Due to production constraints, I was not able to have dynamic character designs that changed to reflect the growth of the protagonist like in *Tomb Raider*. Through clever use of motion the relationship of Mori and the creatures is defined and grows over time (see figure 5.3). For example, the Nomad and Mori have a relationship that changes as they venture through the desert. As the two characters journey, their movement and animation degrade, they slow down and become tired as the player continues the journey. This motion design was inspired by the sequence from *Uncharted 3*, but I reimagined the concept to incorporate a companion. As the

![Fig. 5.3 – Mori and the Nomad wander a desert, changing motion style to portray fatigue (*Mori, 2014*)](image-url)
motion slows, the characters become physically closer to one another. The changing movement style illustrates increasing fatigue but also a stronger bond between the characters.

**Affinity and Environment**

Using a combination of character design and environment, I created a world that became more fantastical and foreign as the narrative moves forward. Much like in *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons*, the protagonist’s affinity to the environment gradually shifts. As Mori gets further away from home, he gets further from reality. Mori starts his journey in the real world to provide a foundation contrasting the later fantasy worlds (see figure 5.4). As the journey continues, the dissonance between the player character and the environment increases, showing just how far Mori has come from reality. Mori acts as an anchor to reality, in these strange settings the player identifies with Mori. The otherworldliness creates a sense of simultaneous awe and fear, which enforces the idea of a childlike worldview (see figure 5.5). Using the character’s
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Fig. 5.5 – In the dream world, Mori contrasts with the surrealism (Mori, 2014).

affinity for the environment contextualizes the surrealism in a threatening but imaginative way and serves the emotion and final experience.

**Personal Experience**

In the beginning, Mori, and this paper, were meant to explore the emerging frontier that is emotional video games. I studied psychologists, ludologists and masters on the cutting edge of the video game art form. I learned about powerful constructs within the nature of play and techniques of creating meaning through interactivity. Seeking out keys to create an emotional video game, I dissected articles that meticulously deconstructed artworks into rules and theories. What I learned is that there is no step-by-step guide to making an emotional video game. To make an emotional experience you must make an experience that is personal.

In order to make Mori personal, I had to utilize everything I had learned and put part of myself into the game. I told an abstract story, which gave the player a mystery to solve and open-ended ideas to interpret in her own way. I filled the story with striking visuals, full of imagination and imagery. The interpretive narrative and
player participation created an experience that was unique and personal to the player. But I had to give the game a personal part of myself to really make an emotional connection. At the core of this experience: a simple story of a boy who lost his father. This story is mine. I put it in the game to give the player something true, something personal. With all efforts combined, Mori becomes a game that is personal, an emotional game.

At the Ohio University Student Expo, Mori received two awards; it connected with the players in a unique and powerful way. I believe, what sets Mori apart from mainstream video games is the emotionality in the heart of the game. The look and feel of the game, the calm pace, the contemplative narrative, the metaphor of the struggle, all serve to uphold the emotion at the center. It is this strong emotional core and the shared personal experience of creator and player that makes Mori what it is: a fundamentally emotional video game.
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