Feeling-centric game mechanic design

By Jose Striedinger

Even though the video game industry can be considered still pretty young, the last 20 years have been significant for the evolution of games as storytelling devices. Today high-end game development studios are pushing the industry forward in terms of graphic fidelity, 3D animation, music, and sound design to the point that even Hollywood stars are appearing more and more in video games. And not only actors but all kinds of professionals from the film industry can easily transition to the game industry; we are talking about cinematographers, lighting experts, voice actors, and more. And if you would need more convincing that the gap between film and games as storytelling devices is getting smaller, one only needs to look at the current business strategy that PlayStation is engaged in. In a world of streaming wars, Sony and PlayStation are taking their IP to the big screens: God of War coming to Amazon Prime, Twisted Metal coming to Peacock, Gran Turismo, and Horizon Zero Dawn coming to Netflix, and of course, The Last of Us on HBO Max setting worldwide records.

Long gone is the time when video games were only a “nerd hobby” for some of us, today more and more brands born on video games are finding their way to film and TV in very successful ways.

Just like movies, games like God of War Ragnarok and The Last of Us Part 2 are almost universally acclaimed for having stories, characters, and conflicts that take the players through rich emotional journeys. But, unfortunately, most of these big triple-A games do not use interactivity to drive the emotional journey of the player, they actually rely on cutscenes and other noninteractive parts of what is an interactive medium to drive the emotion of the player.

In this essay, I want to examine how video game mechanics themselves can be designed to drive, evoke and enhance the emotional journey of the player, instead of relying on noninteractive tactics like cutscenes. We will discuss how the current triple-A industry treats game mechanics mainly as logic and reflex challenges for the player. We then will dig into examples of games that use mechanics to drive emotion and do not represent a mental challenge for the player, breaking the mechanical way we categorize video games. Lastly, I will finish by inviting a new way to design video game mechanics that I believe could help push the industry forward.

First, let's discuss what I mean by logic and reflexes challenges as game mechanics. Ernst Adams define game mechanics as “the rules, processes, and data at the heart of a game. They define how play progresses, what happens when, and what conditions determine victory or defeat.”. Game mechanics usually need input from the player, and through those rules, processes, and data, we get an output. The player then reacts to that output and adds another input.

Every video game challenges the player to accomplish something and the mechanics are the toolset the player has to overcome that challenge. In most cases, those challenges can be divided into two simple but important categories: logic challenges and reflex challenges.

Logical challenges are asking the player: *can you figure out what to do here?* Examples of logical challenges are environmental puzzles in most 3D adventure games. For example in most entries of the Uncharted series for the PlayStation, there are multiple scenarios where you are challenged to get to a specific point of the level. You may have to pull a lever here and rotate an object there to be able to achieve that point. In this scenario, the game is asking the player to sit down and think what are the connection between all the elements on the screen and how to use them to get to that point. The game must give you hints of some sort, otherwise is not a challenge but a guessing exercise. The player must feel the game is telling them how to overcome the obstacles, but they are the ones that haven't figured it out yet.

Now, reflex challenges pose a different question: *are you physically fast and/or precise enough to achieve this?* An example of a reflex challenge is something we see in pretty much every video game with a shooting mechanic: shoot the enemy's head while they are still moving for an instakill. Here the game is asking you to think fast and be precise on the game's input device.

These kinds of challenges can live together in harmony. Let's take TLOU2 as an example. In most encounters with enemies, the player starts in a hidden position and NPC enemies have a movement pattern that the player can identify, these are logical challenges: do not let them spot you, stay hidden, and learn their movements. The player is challenged to take their time and think. But if the player is discovered the game leans more towards reflex challenges: kill the enemy before it alerts the others, dodge their attacks, etc. The player is challenged to think fast. Is really hard to find a game that does not use both reflex and logic challenges for a balanced gameplay. First Person Shooters may rely more on reflex challenges, while a Real Time Strategy game may rely way more on logical challenges, but at some time, they will use the other category as well.

We've been talking a lot about mental challenges for the player. But, where is the emotional journey in games like TLOU2? Well, I would argue that in most big-budget games the emotional journey is the reward for completing those mental challenges. And usually, that reward is presented in a cutscene, the most non-interactive storytelling tactic for a video game.

The illustration above represents what I argue is the general relationship between mental challenges and emotional journeys on most big-budget video games. The emotional journey of the players will mostly come as a reward for successfully accomplishing multiple mental challenges. YouTube can even help us verify this. On the site, you can easily find videos titled “The Last of Us Part 2 the movie” or “Red Dead Redemption 2 the movie” which are nothing more than the recollection of all cutscenes one after the other.

One could argue, then, that not a single second of interactivity is needed for a person to go through the emotional journey the game wants you to have. For the most part, the game mechanics in games like these are not designed to drive any emotional challenge to the player, their main job is to challenge your brain, not your heart. But what if we designed them with a focus on emotional challenges and not mental ones?

Some Independent game designers have already done this. Let’s examine three games with game mechanics around feelings and emotions: ICO, Florence, and What Remains of Edith Finch.

In Famito Ueda’s 2001 **ICO** you controlled a child who has been left to die in a castle for the crime of having been born with horns. When you are finally able to escape your imprisonment,

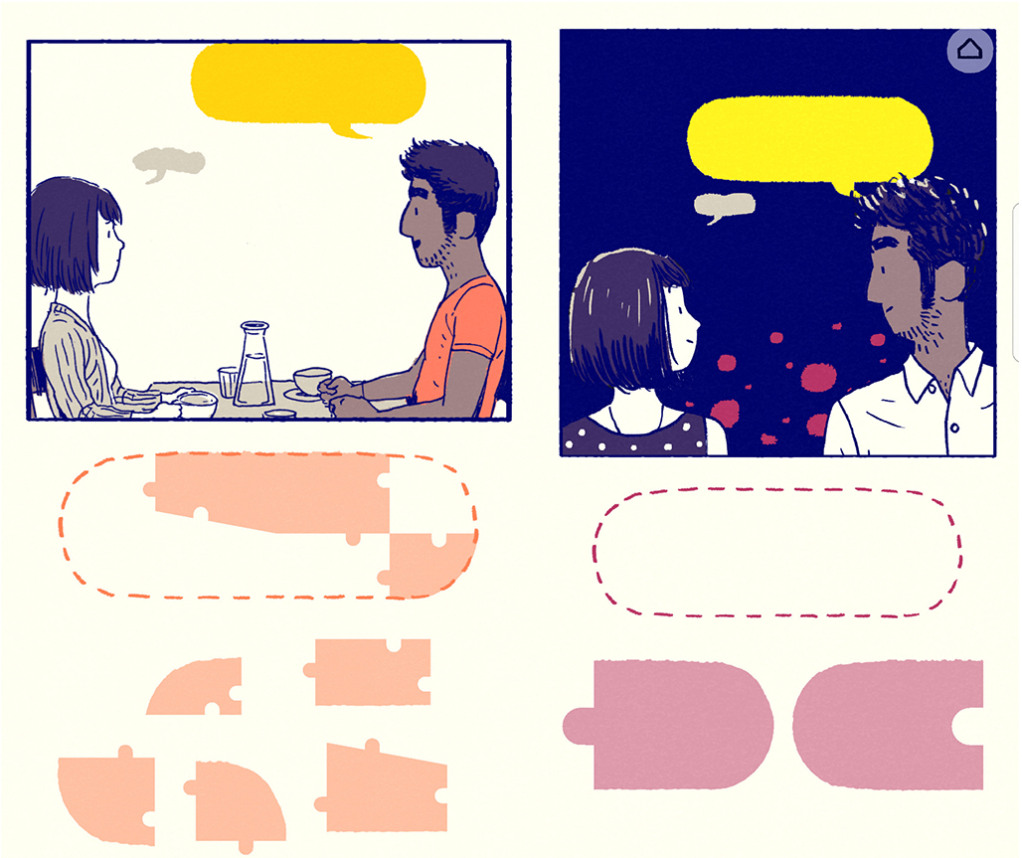
you eventually find a girl named Yorda, whose mother is trying to cheat death by possessing her body. Gameplay-wise ICO is a 3D platformer; you jump, press buttons, move crates and occasionally fight enemies with a stick. But behind those simple mental challenges are other mechanics designed to drive the theme and the emotion forward, let's talk about three of them. First, there's no life bar, rather your "life" is attached to Yorda's well-being; if she gets kidnapped by the shadow demons you lose. Second, Yorda does not follow you like most AI companions, you have to press a button to hold her hand and guide her. Finally, you can only save your game if you sit with her on some special chairs.

Ico holding hands with Yorda to move along

All these game mechanics were designed to enhance a theme and a feeling of companionship and, more importantly, empathy. The player's well-being is connected to Yorda. Without her you can't save your game, if she gets captured you lose and you must go out of your way to make her go where you want her to go. Because of that, ICO became critically acclaimed and is now a cult classic as a game designed with a theme and emotion at the core behind most of the game mechanics. ICO in 2001 became an example of how you can use interactivity to convey and enhance emotions (in this case empathy, by making us act selfless towards Yorda) even at the expense of player agency.

Another beautiful example of game mechanics designed around emotions can be found in **Florence**. Florence is an interactive story developed by the studio Mountains and published by Annapurna in 2018. In it, you follow Florence Yeoh through multiple chapters in her life where every single game mechanic is designed as a way to convey her emotions. The main story follows Florence falling in love with a man and during that initial phase, the game presents us with game mechanics that help convey their relationship. At first, when Florence and the man are talking you are presented with a series of simple puzzles and as the conversation progresses something interesting happens: the puzzles become easier. This is done in purpose to convey how the two of them are understanding each other. Without the need for text or voice, a simple puzzle game mechanic is enough to convey the emotion of two people in a scene. Likewise, when the unfortunate breakup starts to happen the game presents those puzzle mechanics again and the puzzle starts to get harder. Finally, another beautiful small mechanic is during a particular scene. Florence and the player find out the man's dream is to become a

musician and in a scene, we are forced to press a button multiple times to help Florence, literally, push her boyfriend to enter the music academy he wants to join. Simple game mechanics like these ones represent almost no mental challenge whatsoever, yet they convey so much meaning and drive the emotional journey of the player.



A view of Florence puzzle mechanic to convey how both characters are getting along

Last but not least, let's take a look into 2018's What Remains of Edith Finch developed by Giant Sparrow, founded by USC grad Ian Dallas, and published by Annapurna as well. In this first-person narrative adventure game, you play as Edith as you "*explore the colossal Finch house, searching for stories as she explores her family history and tries to figure out why she's the last one in her family left alive. Each story you find lets you experience the life of a new family member on the day of their death, with stories ranging from the distant past to the present day.*", as the official game description states.

What makes this game unique is that as it acts as a recollection of interactive short stories, in each one you will find a completely different mechanism than the last one. On of those stories is about Lewis, a man with a monotone industrial job, under treatment for substance abuse and

with issues about constant daydreaming that left him apathetic, depressed, and, in the end, suicidal. The main mechanic in Lewis's story is grabbing a fish and chopping it. Then, at a certain point, he starts to daydream again and the new scene starts to develop as the player performs Lewis's tedious job.

Lewis daydreaming in his job

As the game progresses, you move the tiny characters as well as perform the tedious job. The fantasy starts to take over and ends with a coronation in a guillotine, implying that Lewis killed himself. The mechanics here are extremely simple, yet effective. You use the right stick to grab and move the fish to the guillotine, and you use the left stick to move daydreaming Lewis in his imaginary world. That's all the game asks you to do. These simple mechanics are there to help convey the tediousness that was Lewis's job and the freedom the felt in his imaginary world that little by little was consuming him.

What we've seen here are multiple examples of amazing independent video games and interactive stories that use game mechanics to challenge us emotionally instead of mentally, game mechanics that care about our emotions rather than our brains.

But our brains love challenges. And games that employ mechanics based on mental challenges can, if their logic and reflex challenges are well balanced, enjoy big longevity which is a major necessity for video games developed with millions of dollars behind them. It is my personal experience that video games with emotional game mechanics at their core have a stronger and more impactful first-time impression in exchange for longevity. Because of that, the field of

emotional game mechanics is been driven more by independent designers and developers that have more artistic freedom and fewer commercial demands so to speak.

ICO, Florence and What Remains of Edith Finch are examples of how we can leverage interactivity to be used as a crucial part of the emotional journey of the player, instead of thinking of the emotional journey being the reward after pushing boxes or fighting monsters. I invite more game developers to design their game mechanics around themes and feelings, a feeling-centric game design process if you will. It is my belief that we are only touching the surface of what interactivity can do to touch people's hearts.