Conceptualizing Player-Side Emergence in Interactive Games: Between Hardcoded Software and the Human Mind in Papers, Please and Gone Home

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ABSTRACT

The concept of emergence exists in many fields such as Philosophy, Information Science, and Biology. With respect to the modern video game, emergence can potentially manifest as emergent narrative and/or gameplay. In this paper, the authors engage in a critical discussion about what it means for an interactive video game to have emergence. The authors frame the discussion of emergence as a close critical look at the games Papers, Please and Gone Home. From these analyses, the authors propose a concept of “Player-side emergence in games,” in which emergence in the form of narrative is expressible and observable in games which rely not on the game software itself, but also upon the complex system of the human mind for reconstruction of the game experience and a subsequent expression of emergence. The authors contend that such an emergent design consideration is potentially useful for designers who are trying to address the trade-off of Ludo-Narrative Dissonance.

Keywords: Emergence, Game Design, Game Studies, Indie Games, Ludo-Narrative Dissonance

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of emergence—that a certain thing may emerge from several distinct (and not necessarily related) parts, which is different, larger in scope, and mostly originally unintended or expected—exists in many fields such as Philosophy, Information Science, and Biology. With respect to the modern video game, emergence can potentially manifest as emergent narrative and/or emergent gameplay. Furthermore, emergence in games can potentially manifest through true technological, procedurally-generated gameplay and/or a game design which encourages emergence from the game elements within the mind of the player.

In this paper, we engage in a critical discussion about what it means for an interactive video game to have emergence. Firstly, we will be briefly discussing what emergence means to other scientific disciplines, and in doing so delineate specifically how we will be using the term “Emergent” in reference to interactive video games. We then frame the discussion of Emergence in games by considering a range of recent video game examples, and a close critical look at the critically-acclaimed indie games Papers, Please and Gone Home. From these analyses, we propose a concept of “Player-side emergence in games,” in which emergence in the form of narrative is expressible and observable in games as the result of the current technological capabilities of games, which relies not on the game software itself, but rather upon the complex system of the human mind for reconstruction of the game experience and a subsequent expression of emergence. In this proposed concept, the constituent narrative pieces offered by a game can be expressed emergently as a unified, overall game narrative experience by the player mind. Based on this concept, we propose that emergence in a game need not wait or rely upon the advent of a truly, technology-based procedurally-generated platform, but rather can be an expression of player-side experiential reconstruction. We conclude that emergent narrative between video game and player can manifest so long as a human player can be encouraged via the game’s mechanics towards an overall narrative reconstruction whose blueprint does not wholly originate from the source game, and we also contend that such an emergent design consideration can be potentially useful for designers who are trying to address the trade-off of Ludo-Narrative Dissonance in their games.

WHAT IS EMERGENCE?

In order to understand how emergence could potentially manifest in video games, it is firstly important to understand what it is in terms of how it has been used prior in other fields. From there, it can be seen just how apt a medium the video game is for encouraging emergence in terms of both gameplay and narrative, and how we might be able to identify and address emergence in other games for future study.
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