
Musical Embrace: Facilitating Engaging Play Experiences through Social Awkwardness

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ABSTRACT

Socially awkward experiences are often looked upon as something to be avoided. However, examples from the traditional games domain suggest that social awkwardness can facilitate engaging experiences. Yet so far, there has been little research into social awkwardness and digital games. In acknowledgement of this, we present Musical Embrace, a digital game that promotes close physical contact between two strangers, through the use of a novel pillow-like controller, in order to navigate a virtual soundscape. Through our observations from demonstrating Musical Embrace at a number of events, we have procured a set of strategies intend on engaging players by "facilitating" social awkwardness, allowing players to "transform" while also letting players take "control" of social awkwardness. With our work we hope to inspire game designers to consider the potential of social awkwardness and guide them when using it for engaging playful experiences.

Author Keywords

Social awkwardness; digital play; body contact; tangibles; uncomfortable interactions; exertion.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.2. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Note to reviewers: The game component of this submission has previously been submitted at the Fun and Games student game competition, however, it has not been shown at CHI nor appeared in any publications yet.

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Figure 1. Musical Embrace setup: the laptop is for our analysis; players interact with the pillow-like controller with the option of watching the large screen.

General Terms

Human Factors; Design

INTRODUCTION

In digital games, themes that are of socially awkward nature are often expelled, since they can involve stress and lead to mental and physical suffering due to fear and anxiety [1]. Interestingly, research suggests that uncomfortable interactions, such as those facilitated by social awkwardness could help enhance the entertainment experience as opposed to diminishing it [1]. This is explained with human's fundamental need for stimulation, arousal and excitement citing desires for thrill that often arises from a combination of fearful anticipation, followed by an extreme physical sensation, and then euphoria of relief at having survived [1]. We are excited by this and therefore present an exploration of uncomfortable interactions that aim to enhance the digital game experience. In particular we are interested in social awkwardness arising from physical proximity and therefore look to the traditional games domain for ways in which games can benefit from social awkwardness arising from physical proximity. For example, in the game Twister, players climb over each other in an effort to put hands and feet on certain parts of the floor, creating awkward physical contact between players. Similarly in Spin-the-Bottle, teenagers challenge each other to socially uncomfortable actions as part of playing the game. In both of these games players deliberately engage in socially awkward situations in order to experience engaging play. Inspired by these investigations on uncomfortable experiences, we present Musical Embrace (Fig. 1), a novel digital game that promotes close physical proximity by calling its players to collaboratively apply pressure to a suspended pillow-like control (using only their torsos) as a means to moving through a virtual world and associated soundscape.

RELATED WORK

A number of existing digital games have provided us with inspiration. One game that employs bodily contact whilst inducing social awkwardness is the iPad game Fingle [3]. Although Fingle demonstrates that bodily interaction can be encouraged through collaborative game elements, and utilizes social awkwardness to create engaging play, it falls short in providing an understanding of how social awkwardness creates an engaging experience. Since the existing relationship between players is an intrinsic aspect of social awkwardness, a system that was taken into consideration included the Mediated Body. This system involves touching a stranger, which is assumed to be socially awkward, but can yet lead to "performative and behavioral" immersion between the participants [4]. From it, we draw insights into how digital systems and bodily interactions can alter the social dynamics between strangers. In summary, although interactive systems have supported bodily interactions and created social awkwardness amongst players, there is a lack of knowledge of how digital games can engage social awkwardness, in particular when facilitated by close physical proximity.

MUSICAL EMBRACE

In Musical Embrace, two players enter the game space, which includes a pillow-size controller hanging from the ceiling and a large screen which accommodates the virtual component of the game. The controller is made up of four pressure points which both players must apply pressure to, collaboratively and using only their torsos, in order to traverse the virtual world that is devised of awkward sound bytes. Although no hand contact is permitted, players are encouraged to embrace each other as means of intensifying the pressure that in turn will determine the speed at which they travel through the virtual world. The objective of Musical embrace is to collect all the items in



Figure 2. Two players experimenting with socially awkward interactions in order to navigate a virtual world located on a screen.

the virtual world, whilst interacting in this manner, before a minute passes and the game ends.

EXPERIENCING MUSICAL EMBRACE

Musical Embrace has been presented at an open house event, a game design industry conference and a research conference, where a total of 95 participated and provided feedback of their experiences. Those that participated were in the game design field or shared related interests.

A journey of social awkwardness

Benford et al. suggest that discomfort is usually not the overall goal but rather a momentary point on a journey through a digital experience [1]. The authors refer to Freytag's five-act performance structure consisting of 1) exposition, 2) rising action, 3) climax, 4) falling action, and 5) denouement. Most of our participants also experienced this structure and we therefore use it to articulate the player experience.

EXPOSITION: For our players, the exposition stage involved the initial framing of what to expect if participating in the game. Due to the suspended nature of the game controller, the curiosity of those who entered the game space was piqued. Participants seemed curious, but unsure of the sorts of player interactions that were to occur, however the existence of the screen (with its depiction of the virtual world) appeared to reassure the participants, since it resembled the digital games that they are accustomed to playing.

RISING ACTION: The second stage corresponded with the player's decision to participate and play alongside a stranger. The different levels of awkwardness and hesitancy that arose was dependent on players gender, height and relationship to each other and was heightened in the earlier stages as players found themselves unsure of the interactions that their partner would engage in and permit. On occasions when players did opt to play

alongside a familiar partner, many still found the game to be awkward due to the interactions that it entailed. The musical element prevalent also was accountable for heightening the awkwardness felt by participants of Musical Embrace.

CLIMAX: The climax stage occurred when the players began playing, when "anticipation turn[ed] into actual experience" [1]. Players began to act upon the pillow in order to navigate the virtual space. We observed many players laughing, yet often nervously, when they discovered bodily actions together that resulted in positive outcomes in the game (i.e. triggered a sound destination).

FALLING ACTION: Players accepted the unorthodox interactions as a tool for navigating the virtual world and started to explore new and interesting ways of interacting, such as bending their torsos back or circling the physical game space, whilst embracing their partner, as means of navigating the virtual world (Fig. 2).

DENOUEMENT: This stage saw much reflection from players and also paved the way for feedback, resulting in many suggestions on how the game could make a contribution beyond entertainment.

STRATEGIES FOR SOCIAL AWKWARDNESS

Poremba states that "the act of playing provides players with an excuse and an alibi to do things that break social norms and push the social boundary as a means of exploring concepts and their benefits, values or worth" [6]. This explains why our players wanted to engage in a game around social awkwardness and take part in forbidden play. However, forbidden play is merely play that is "free within the limits set by the rules" [7]. The rules that the game adheres to prevents players from overstepping societal boundaries, whilst the social contract within the game ensure that play spaces are "safe" spaces with fewer risks [8]. However, playing is a voluntary activity [5], and our players can always choose to exit the game at any time; hence restoring pre existing social boundaries. As

means of maintaining player engrossment, a set of game strategies have been identified that facilitate social awkwardness, allow players to transform while also let players take control of social awkwardness.

Strategy 1: Facilitate social awkwardness

The setup of our pillow controller (i.e it hanging off a rope) and the game rule prohibiting players from touching the board with their hands, made it clear to participants that a partner was required for both players to collaboratively apply pressure from both sides and progress through the game. As such, the hardware was used to setup the socially awkward bodily situation of being physically very close to a stranger, and hence *facilitating* social awkwardness.

Strategy 2: Allow players to transform social awkwardness

During the falling action state, participants had moved from awkwardly pressing actions to engaging in gestures that were reminiscent to an embrace, ultimately resulting in a hug. In turn their actions evolved into ones that were more socially acceptable. In addition, the public setup of the game enabled extrovert participants to perform to the audience and, eventually, turn social awkwardness into a public performance.

Strategy 3: Let players take control of social awkwardness

The existence of the screen not only served as a display for the game, but also became a social sanctuary for when the experience became too awkward. Players found that they could take control of social awkwardness by redirecting their attention from the uncomfortable interaction and focusing, instead, on traversing the virtual world.

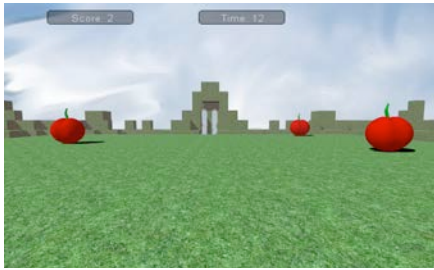


Figure 3. Virtual world, presented on the screen, served as a sanctuary to retreat from social awkwardness.

CONCLUSION

We presented Musical Embrace, a novel digital game around social awkwardness facilitated by close physical proximity and bodily interactions. By engaging with participants at a number of conferences and workshops, we have established a set of game strategies for designers that enable players to *facilitate*, *transform* and, furthermore, take *control* of social awkwardness. With our work we hope to inspire game designers to consider the potential of social awkwardness and guide them when using it for engaging playful experiences.

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