

# The Eighth Annual Game Design Think Tank

## Project Horseshoe 2013



### Group Report: Mr. Cow Presents: Techniques for Designing Spontaneous Shared Moments, in glorious Technicolor

**Participants:** A.K.A. "*Spontaneous Shared Experiences*"

Toiya Kristen Finley, Schnoodle Media

Lisa Brown, Insomniac Games

Nikki Graham, DeVry University

Rowan Belden-Clifford, Insomniac Games

Nick Weihs, Insomniac Games

**Facilitator:** Jenna Hoffstein, Little Worlds Interactive

## Brief Problem Statement

One of our workgroup members recently witnessed a conversation among friends about spontaneous shared experiences that happened in public transportation. Her brother told a story about riding on a bus, all the passengers minding their own business, when a bright yellow maple leaf floated through the window of the moving bus. Everyone immediately stopped what they were doing and watched the leaf together. Then, realizing that they had just shared a moment, the strangers smiled and acknowledged one another, and her brother said that he felt he had shared a connection with these people as a result. Many stories followed (a man enters a train with a bag of potatoes, which splits and spills, and suddenly every passenger is scrambling around, laughing and chasing potatoes). These moments were special because they created a human connection between strangers.

These moments also happen in games, often with a similar result – a moment of shared connection with the other players that feels special. Our group wanted to explore these moments in games, what makes them significant, and see if we as designers could enable them to happen more often in our own games.

There were several potential paths we considered when discussing this topic. On one end of the spectrum was the idea of creating games from the ground up with dynamic, organic systems that could make moments like this more likely to occur. On the other end was finding methods of artificially manufacturing experiences and creating the illusion of spontaneity. We chose the latter path because we felt it had broader application across many types of games.

Another place the path diverged was the difference between truly spontaneous, undesigned moments (or the illusion thereof) and planned shared experiences. While planned shared experiences, like players participating in a designed event, have many positive qualities, we chose to focus on moments that felt spontaneous, and wanted to explore the path of the designs being mostly invisible or very rare to the player.

The workgroup goal was to come up with three or more techniques for creating the illusion of spontaneous shared moments in a game that can be applied across many game types.

## Brief Solution Statement

While exploring ways to create illusions of spontaneous shared moments, we reached two broader categories of how the designer can artificially create these situations:

1. For moments that happen as a result of the game world, the designer can detect if the conditions are good (it's at a time when it can be shared, it's a rare moment) and then artificially insert or execute something in the game.
2. For moments that happen as a result of player agency (players performing actions that create weird results in rare circumstances), the designer can enable those moments to occur (things that might seem like bugs).

We also found that an important element to making these manufactured moments that create a connection is to give players tools to be able to acknowledge what has happened. Player chat is a common example of this kind of tool.

Lastly, we came up with a list of questions that designers can use to analyze their own games and look for places or systems that they can manipulate to create shared-moment opportunities.

## Expanded Problem Statement

### *Definition*

A spontaneous shared moment is an experience between a human being and a game entity that creates surprise and a sense of wonder.

### *Genre Expectations*

During gameplay, the spontaneous shared moment may be against genre expectations. Players are used to certain experiences that are unique to certain genres. A moment that goes against genre expectations is unusual or foreign during gameplay. For example, in *Everquest*, players killed St. Nick, a special NPC, because the rules of the world enabled them to do so.

### *Known vs. Unknown Mechanics*

A shared spontaneous moment may also occur when there's an intersection of mechanics players didn't know were possible, or there is an intersection of mechanics that seem to go against the gameplay's norm. In *League of Legends*, Warwick teleported to Shen at the exact same moment Shen used *his* teleport, creating a situation where Warwick teleported into the middle of the opposing team. This allowed Shen and his team to kill Warwick when Shen was almost dead. Players on both teams enjoyed the moment, typing "lol" after "lol" in chat.

### *Conditions for Creating Spontaneous Shared Moments*

Players must share the experience with at least one other entity, whether that entity is a human player or an AI. In that moment, players have a shared emotion, or they perceive to share an emotion with an AI. Players understand that they've shared a moment and a brief emotional connection. This is an internally consistent reaction; all players involved may find the moment hilarious, terrifying, ridiculous, etc.

### *Spaces Where Shared Moments May Take Place*

- 1) A group of players competing and/or cooperating in a multiplayer
- 2) A group of players in an MMO who aren't playing together but who are in the same space
- 3) A player encountering an AI the player believes to be human or who the player perceives to be human in the moment of the emotional connection
- 4) One or more players and spectators in the same room
- 5) A group of co-workers sharing their experiences playing the same game and trying to create each

other's experiences

6) An AI reacting to a bug and acknowledging strange things are happening

7) The player-character reacting to the player with a "God bless you!" when the player sneezes (Kinect recognition)

**Note:** The shared spontaneous moment needs to be put into a context for everyone who experiences it. The moment should be acknowledged by players, the developer, or the game itself.

### Importance:

Creating shared moments is a reliable way to make players love your game. These moments have the effect of bonding players to the game. Players who bond to a game will have the urge to play again. The more shared moments experienced, the stronger the players' fondness is for the game and the feelings they get by virtue of playing. In these shared moments, players may experience a similar bonding to the other players present, particularly when they can commiserate and/or reflect on the experience as it happens and after the fact. This level of connection to a game and its community can turn your players into your most important marketing/community-building asset; players who feel a loving connection to the game they play (and the others they play it with) will be more loyal to the brand and developer, and will be more active in promoting the game to friends, in hopes that their friends will take away the same experiences they did.

Players feel empathy for whichever entity they are sharing the moment with:

- Explanation of the "wake up" moment: In acknowledging that a spontaneous shared experience is happening or just happened, people acknowledge each other. In this case, we start to see the inhuman – the anonymous people on a bus, in a multiplayer match, or an AI character – as human. This is empathy.
- Player empathy for other players can help turn a purely competitive community into a more cooperative one; veteran players in a community seek to help newer players find the amazing moments. (ex. *Journey*)
- Player empathy for AI can likely provide players with not necessarily a sense of immersion, but a sense of wonder that the game itself is responding to something outside of the normally accepted possibility space of what a game (or an AI character) is aware of. It actually results in a breaking of immersion from the experience: a sense of wonder *at the game* and its possibility space likely has a high tendency for players to look at the game from the outside.
- The moment forms lasting connections with the entities you shared it with.

Creates stories that are shared between many players:

- These stories create a sort of shared history of your world/game, far more potent than any lore or background a designer writes. These stories happen to your players directly, and they are therefore talked about for a while to come.
- Emergent, shared stories have a much larger potential to reach larger groups than emergent stories in single-player experiences: more witnesses, more mouths to spread the story.

Negative shared moments:

- Frustrating moments are more easily weathered when they are shared. This isn't to say designers should be *trying* to create negative moments, but that they should recognize when their game invariably *has* these moments, and then take steps to enable players to commiserate with each other

instantly/in the moment about those frustrating moments.

- For example, in an online multiplayer game without dedicated servers, every so often the host will leave, halting or even restarting the current match. This fits the criteria for a spontaneous shared moment, but is no doubt negative to the players affected. However, giving players a means of communication with each other (chat window, voice chat, and even avatar emotes) can turn isolated frustration (likely targeted at the game and developer) to shared commiseration between players (likely targeted at the host who left).

### Concrete Advantages:

- Increases player retention and desire to play. More play means more opportunities for monetization, data-mining and advertising.
- Adds word-of-mouth marketing. Players will talk about these experiences to their friends and potentially recruit new people.
- Strengthens player community and connectedness of players. This creates the desire/effect to “play for the community,” an indebtedness to fellow players.
- Creates positive associations (fondness/nostalgia). Increased fondness means increased interest in brand merchandise.
- Builds on itself – each moment experienced increases these factors.

## Expanded Solution Description

Since many of the techniques we discuss rely on players perceiving the experience as spontaneous versus a designed event, the workgroup discussed qualities that might break players out of the illusion we are trying to create. When using these techniques to create moments, be cautious about the following qualities:

1. The moment is not rare enough, too repeatable, or too predictable. When the players are able to recognize that something is a repeated event or something that happens frequently, it tips them off that it is a pre-designed element and the nature of the experience changes. It is no longer perceived as spontaneous.
2. Too much production value (elaborate and very specific dialog) can tip a player off that something is pre-designed.
3. Be careful with how the game acknowledges moments – if it does so at all. If something outrageous happens that the players connect over, and the game awards them an official achievement for it, it can feel contrived and lose some impact.

### Techniques:

#### *Conditions*

One or more highly artificial conditions can be created to trigger a moment. These conditions mask that the moment has been designed. The more difficult it is to meet the conditions, the more difficult it will be for players to predict them. For example, three players must all get kill streaks within 15 seconds of each other.

#### *Randomness*

Designed shared spontaneous moments can have random chances. Applying an extremely low percentage to random chances ensures players will be less likely to trigger the moment. For example, an extremely rare monster has a low chance of spawning on a map.

## *Developer Brute Force*

The developer takes normal control of the game system away from the game and manually operates the game, with the effect that players believe the game is acting in a way that the game does not normally act. This can often take the form of the developer actually masquerading as the game itself or an AI character in the game. For example, a dev sends a message to a player from the game's automated message system acknowledging something unique about that player, like "The system has detected your name is SUPER AWESOME!!!!"

## *Withholding Information from Players*

Withholding information about how large your game's possibility space is can go a long way to creating surprising moments for the player. If players don't know that you can kill an enemy in your game by chopping a tree down and having it fall on them (because you never taught it), when it happens, it's a surprise to the players.

## *Game Detection and Self-Awareness*

Your game detects that something unusual in your game has just happened, and your game reacts to it (easier said than done). Examples: Having an AI character comment on a bug or wild moment that just happened, having the announcer in an MP game change their response to a ridiculous kill-streak every so often.

## *Rarity*

All of these techniques can be combined to make triggering a moment even more rare. It's difficult to detect something that's rare. The rarer the moment, the harder it will be for players to recognize that the moment has been designed. It will be harder for them to predict it or determine the conditions for triggering it.

## *Questions for Identifying Potential Spontaneous Shared Moments in Your Game's Design*

How can I give players the ability to express to others their reaction to the moment (chat, emotes, etc.)?  
How can I use the chaos of the system to generate the possibility of the moment?  
How can I take advantage of the player's assumptions about mechanics to create the actual moment?  
How can I take advantage of pre-existing meta issues affecting the community?

## **Examples:**

*KingsRoad* launched on Facebook with no female avatars. Both male and female players in the community wondered why they couldn't choose between male and female avatars and wondered if they'd ever be released. The only female enemy NPCs were changed to male by switching the female voice actors to male voice actors with deep voices. This change was noted by the community, and it brought more negative attention to the lack of female presence in the game. A potential brute force technique would be to switch the voices of these NPCs back to female.

In a Multiplayer shooter with deathcams (*Counterstrike*, etc), say there are random environmental elements to the map, such as leaves that drift around and can be shot. If a player happens to shoot through a leaf and kill a player, set the deathcam from the perspective of the leaf (taking advantage of moments of chaos).

Another multiplayer shooter example would be any that uses rocket launchers as a weapon. If the game could detect when two opposing rockets were fired close to each other, and that the event had not occurred in some time, it could cheat the rockets to collide with one another to create a spectacle (taking advantage of player assumptions about how the mechanics work and intersect).

## Conclusion:

While players may have shared moments with each other or with a game entity, for those moments to be spontaneous, players must have a perceived emotional connection with at least one other player or a game entity. These moments can be designed so that they have the illusion of being spontaneous; the rarer it is to trigger an event, the more likely it is to appear spontaneous and unplanned. Randomness, any number of conditions, withholding information from players, developer brute force, and the game's own self-awareness can create the illusion of spontaneity. Such techniques may be especially beneficial for developers looking to strengthen their player communities, increase player retention, increase brand loyalty, or offer unexpected gameplay.