

Acting for Animators
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What is Emotion?

The best definition for emotion I've heard is that it's an automatic value response. The connection between thinking and emotion is really interesting. Thinking is going to tend lead to conclusions, emotion is what tends to lead to action. Now let me explain this. A good example, an example that I really like to use is this: Let's say that you're out walking on the street at night, it's dark, late. And you hear footsteps behind you, okay? Now first thing is, you've got to decide what that is. Is it an airplane? Is it a person? What is that? Once you decide what it is... Now there's no emotion connected with that. So, you decide okay, that's a person. Is it an old person? A young person? A male person? Is that the sound of stiletto heels? Is it the sound of boots? Is it getting further away, or is it getting closer? You decide that that's the sound of a young person, male, getting closer. Based upon this, you're likely to have an emotional response. Let's say your response is fear. Your response is going to be based upon your value system. Now if you've been raised in a place like Singapore, or China, where they've got very little street crime, you might say "cool, a friend." But let's say you feel fear. Now once you feel fear, you're going to tend to do something about it. You guys are animators. We're talking here about moving characters. What you want to find behind the movement is the emotion that they're doing something about.

Based upon the emotion, let's say fear, you may, the character may: pick up the pace and move faster, may spin around and confront who's there, reach into a pocket and get pepper spray, may hunt for a cop. All of this movement, and it's coming from the emotion. Your player, your audience always... we deal in an arena of emotion, we're connected with emotion, okay? An automatic value response, that's what emotion is, right there. It's funny, we deal in emotion all the time. When I go to the companies, the number one thing I hear is: we want to create a deeper, more complex emotional response in the player. Number one thing, okay. I start a class and I say "let's define emotion" and everybody sits there, nine people out of ten just sits there. It's really funny, we deal with it, we know what it is, we sorta see it, but we don't know how it works, and yet this is the audience, this is your player.

Empathy vs Sympathy

Thinking tends to lead to conclusions, emotion leads to actions.

Empathy. Now, you guys have... you guys are pioneers, this is for sure. You have a problem that feature film people don't have when it comes to empathy, because a requirement of empathy is distance. And so, when you go to a movie, when you go see a Harrison Ford movie, you sit back and Harrison is making it with somebody, you're goin' "yeah, cool" You're sorta empathizing with this, you're feeling all this. But, if you were

controlling Harrison's movements, you couldn't experience empathy in the same way. Now I didn't make this up, this stuff goes back to Greece, ancient Greece. Now this is a real problem in the game world, and this is sort of to me, like the Holy Grail. Trying to figure out how to crack this baby. I've seen different people trying it different ways, you know that game ICO, you know how they do, doing it indirectly. Causing the player to get involved with somebody else and put that person under threat or whatever. So you begin to feel a complex emotional response. Sort of like indirect by indirect. And that kind of device is cool, that works. Cut scenes. But you know the people who play the games don't like to watch too many cut scenes, so you're all the time doing that balancing thing with that. During the time I've been doing this, I've seen cut scenes go up in popularity, down in popularity, change, move around, companies come and go, we got cut scenes.

Empathy literally means "feeling into." The word was invented back about 1925-26. It comes out of German aesthetics. Sympathy means feeling for, empathy means feeling into. It's perfectly possible to feel sorry for someone but not particularly to empathize with them. We empathize only with emotion. We do not empathize with thinking. We empathize only with emotion. If I were to take a razor blade and cut my hand. Everybody in here would go "ohh". It would not be because of the razor blade, the flesh or the blood. Those are just things. The reason we would gasp is because everybody knows what it means to be cut. And you would empathize with my feelings. Empathy is the key. It's just that in games, you've got issues to deal with and you're pioneers dealing with it. All of this stuff is roughly equivalent to where live-action filmmaking was in 1920. I really believe that. There must have been a time back there, somebody said "how about we try a close-up?" Naahh. Won't work, it'll confuse them.

Regular Reality vs. Theatrical Reality

Theatrical reality is not the same as regular reality. Regular reality is what we've got in this room right now. Regular reality is 100% of everything. Regular reality is what you get at the shopping mall and McDonalds. Theatrical reality is compressed in time and space.

Action, objective, obstacle

This here is a paradigm for acting: you plan an action, in pursuit of an objective, overcoming and obstacle. This is a recipe for involving your player on an emotional level. Now, I want to talk about obstacles.

Conflict

Obstacle equals conflict equals negotiation. Conflict in a theatrical sense does not mean a fistfight. It could, but it doesn't have to. You could be in conflict about good things.

You could be in conflict about whether to vacation in Rome or Paris. There are only three kinds of conflict:

1. Conflict with self
2. With the situation
3. With another character

The more that you can do this, the more you can fit this paradigm, the better off you'll be. Let me give you an example of this. I like this example. You've got a person who wants to rob a bank. You take your character and put him outside the bank. He's trying to decide whether to rob the bank. So they're out there under the street light and they're saying "should I do it?" No, what am I talking about. They've got guards in there, he's got a gun, I might get killed. No, I'm not going to rob the bank, but I need the money. Okay, I'm going to rob one bank, but I'll give the money back. Because I'm not really a bank robber, but I've got to get the money. What you've got here is a person who's in conflict with himself. Yes, I will. No, I won't. Yes, I will. Like a light switch.

So he decides, okay I'm going to do it. He walks into the bank and up to the island with the deposit slips. He starts writing on a deposit slip. It looks like what he's doing is filling out a deposit slip. But what he's really doing is seeing where the video camera's are, is there Plexiglas in between me and the tellers. Where's the guard. Is there more than one guard? Where's the door? How can I get out of here? What he's got now is conflict with the environment. Does he still have conflict with himself? Yes, kind of. He could still decide not to do it, but basically he's committed to doing it, so now he's got conflict with the situation. Make sense? So, he takes his note to the teller, who's just getting off a coffee break, and says here. The note says: "Fill up my bag with money. I've got a gun." Now what we have is conflict with another character. The trick is to have as many situations as you can that fit this paradigm. Whenever you have a character just standing around or travelling, you drop that. That's the problem. And in games, that's a real problem.

Acting note: you play an action until something happens to make you play a different action.

Stanislavsky talked about it as "beads in a necklace." One bead being connected to the next bead. In a bead necklace, you can't have three beads over here, a space and then a bead, a space, two beads over here. The beads have to be one up against each other. So, the challenge that you have is, as much as possible, to get those beads next to one another. And by the way, when Stanislavsky and his people came over to the United States, they were misunderstood because of their Russian accents. And when he talked about the beads in a necklace, they thought he was saying "beats." And to this very day in acting classes, you'll hear them talk about beats. If you want to understand the concept of a beat, just remember the bead necklace. A beat is really just a kind of a transition. That's really all it is. The key here is to have seamless transitions, to have one that connects up to the next, and up to the next, that you don't spend too much time with your character just running around. The more that they just run around, if you want to keep

your audience in an emotional way, you need to be fulfilling these kinds of formulas. Action, obstacle, objective. Okay, play an action until something happens to make you play a different action.

Q: Pavlov's influence on Stanislavsky; was he talking about actors or the audiences?

A: Remember, he was talking about stage actors. Was Stanislavsky talking about Pavlovian response in the actor or in the audience? Remember, the audience gets their reaction through empathy. He was talking about the response in actors. He was making a distinction between that and what you guys would know as pose to pose. Just striking poses. The goal back then is that they would strike this pose, and the audience would know what that was. He thought that actors ought to be able to not do that. There was an actress, if you're into some summer reading, named Eleanora Duse. You know the term doozy (e.g. that's a doozy)? That came from the mispronunciation of her name. She was a self-taught Italian actress of the time of Stanislavsky. Stanislavsky saw her work when he was twenty-five years old in Moscow. Eleanora Duse did not wear a corset and also did not wear makeup, and when she acted, she actually blushed. She was an international sensation but was very cryptic about how she did what she did. Part of the reason why the Moscow Art Theatre was formed was because Stanislavsky wanted to analyze and figure out how Eleanora Duse was doing what she was doing. So, there's a biography of Eleanora Duse, it's a new one, it's probably out in paperback by now. But just look for it under Eleanora Duse. The thing about the crying, for example, animators, I could get you up here, and I could teach you how to cry, but you couldn't see to animate. Animators just don't need to feel that emotion in the present moment like actors.

You know what the roots of acting are, you know where acting came from? It might surprise you. Acting, games, it's all hooked together. It's all part of the same family tree. The roots of acting are in shamanism. It goes back 7,000 years when you had these small, nomadic tribes that were wandering around in Mesopotamia following the herds. And they would get into trouble, the herd would get thinned, it would be a rough winter, or some kind of sickness. And what they'd do is call out their shamans. And their shamans, they would have these guys that would step out, they'd have these masks, paint themselves blue, and chant to the animal gods or chant to the weather gods or something. The tribe would gather 'round. This was pre-Christian, so the point of it all was to give cohesiveness and hope to the tribe that they would get through the winter. So that they would survive, so that they could literally survive. In acting schools, they'll teach you that acting goes back to ancient Greece. Ancient Greece was still shamanistic. Ancient Greece had five tribes, and they had ten members of each tribe assembled into a chorus. By the time it got to ancient Greece, it was more formalized. They would chant the dithyramb, and mainly they were praying to Dionysius, the god of life. Divine god, love god, you had a chorus of fifty. One day, one of the people in the chorus stepped out, put a mask on, and said "I'll pretend to be the god." That person who stepped out, was Thespis. That's where the word 'thespian' came from. He talked back. Over the next 150 years or so, you had more people step out, Sophocles, Escylus, they stepped out, and slowly, the relationship between the actors out here and the chorus shifted so the actors stopped being a support to the chorus, and the chorus became a support to the actors. And that today is the form of the modern day musical. Then, when Christianity came

along, the dialog stopped being about mans relationship with the gods, and shifted to become about mans relationship with man. That's where we got into things like lust and greed and hatred and wars and all of this is the fact that man is fallible. If man wasn't fallible, we wouldn't have the drama. If the drama was about the gods, it would be something else again. But the roots of acting go back to shamanism.

You're going to find... this is an important thing. Your audience will empathize mainly with emotions. This is so simplistic, so self-evident, you're going to think... we act to survive. But in terms of acting theory, this is a really important thing. People will tend to empathize with emotions that come out of a survival mechanism. This is a test in here, just for yourself. Everybody in here has a friend who's got problems. Your friend, he's got problems. He doesn't have any money, he can't pay the rent, he doesn't feel good. So, what do you do? You're a friend, you go, you have coffee, you have a bottle of wine, maybe they shed some tears, you give them a shoulder, you say "you know, it's gonna be okay." That's what a friend does. Two weeks later, they're still upset, you go back, you take a walk, you help them out. But now, be honest. If at a certain point, they don't get their stuff together, don't you begin to pull back? Because, at a certain point, people have to act to survive. Everybody has bad luck, everybody has bad things happen, but we act to survive. The first thing that a baby does when the baby is born, is the baby acts to survive; tries to live. The last thing a person does before they die, is they try to live. Even a person who commits suicide. I know there's eight people in here going "what about suicide?" He's still going to act to survive, even if he's trying to commit suicide. You can't help it, you're hardwired this way. Nature's got you hardwired.

If you have someone who will not get their stuff together, really what they're doing is pursuing death. Ultimately, there's death down that road. They say, in evolutionary psychology, that emotions are nature's executioners. Emotions are nature's executioners. You're hardwired by nature to respond favorably to things that are good for our propagation and to respond negative to things that are bad for us. Everybody in here will respond favorably to the concept of sex, because that's good for our propagation. However, everybody in here will respond badly to the concept of incest. If I talk about incest too much, some people will get sick to their stomach from it. Nature says "don't go there." You have three-legged children if you go there. You see that Abercrombie & Fitch has got themselves in trouble over that tee-shirt? That West Virginia tee-shirt? "Everything is relative in West Virginia." I wanna get one before they stop.

So, what I'm getting at here, is that we act to survive. Emotion that springs from the survival mechanism, people are gonna empathize with that. Sympathize with things that pursue death perhaps. What you're looking to get, your Holy Grail.

You know, I've heard people say, game theorists say that we'll know we've arrived when we make a game that will make people cry. You heard that? What I'm telling you now, is the key to it. You make people cry by tapping into the survival mechanism and the emotion behind it. I can't tell you how to do it, but I can tell you that's the key. I'm holding that. You've got the lock. But I'm sure that that's how you're going to make people cry.

We act to survive. It's all shamanistic. If you want to appeal to people, that's how you do it.

Adrenaline Moment

I read an article in New England Journal of Medicine about why it is that we remember things in our life and don't remember other things. Everybody will remember the first time they had sex, but they're not likely to remember the thirteenth time.

The principle here is that when something important to our survival, whether it's good or bad, our brain becomes bathed in adrenaline, and nature says "remember this, it's important." Everyone will remember where they were on 9/11. Everyone remembers the first time they had sex. I define an "adrenaline moment" as one that the (game) character will remember when the character turns 85 years old and looks back on their life. The same as everybody in here has certain events in life. This is a defining thing.

Now an adrenaline moment doesn't have to be 9/11. It doesn't have to be a big deal. You know in the Disney cartoon Pluto, Pluto when he gets the flypaper stuck on his nose, you know that animation, it's a really wonderful thing. He's sniffing around and he gets it on his nose. And so he gets it off on his paw, and then it get stuck on there, and then he gets it on the bottom paw, and then it's on this paw, and after a while he goes up in the air and goes "wuff" and sits down. Of course he sits on it, so now it's on his ass. And then we start all over again. Well that, for the dog, that's an adrenaline moment. That dog will never forget the day he mixed it up with the flypaper. And you just know, when that dog turns 85, and he's talking to his great-grandpuppies, that he's going to say, "go out and find lots of fire hydrants, and enjoy life. But you know what? If you ever come across a piece of paper like this on one side, stay away from it." Now by the way, that particular scene fits this paradigm. Pluto is playing an action, in pursuit of an objective, while overcoming an obstacle. You play an action, the objective is what? The objective is to have the flypaper gone, right? The action is pushing it off, getting it off there, then getting it off there. What's the obstacle? Does he conflict with himself? No, because he knows he wants it off. Does he have conflict with the situation? Yeah. That's what he's got. The situation is that the flypaper is sticky. That's what the obstacle. He doesn't have conflict with another character because he's the only one there. That little bitty scene fits the acting paradigm that I'm talking about, plus it's an adrenaline moment. And it doesn't surprise me at all that it's a classic bit of animation. It's the emotion that you're empathizing with. He's acting to survive.

I believe that good storytelling involves the assembling of adrenaline moments in one way or another. Probably my biggest problem with games and movies is it's not worthwhile. It's not worth the time. We have so many things we can do in life. And the thing is, that you guys, as shamans, if you will. You put a circle in the dirt and people will come. The tribe will come. But you gotta have something more to tell them than "look how good I can make water" Look at how the hair goes here. It's got to have more

than just marvelous graphics. You gotta have it if you're going to move them. You have to keep growing.

I want to touch just briefly on character analysis. When you're working on characters in your games, you gotta remember that it's like an iceberg. Only 15% shows up above the waterline. 85% is below the waterline. But if you don't create that other 85%, you don't have an iceberg. So, a character analysis doesn't require that you show or demonstrate 100% of the character elements. It only requires that you understand them. You can show what you want.

You ever studied that just to study it? It's interesting because it's like monkeys that pick bugs off each other. Like "I'm ok, you're ok." That's what laugh tracks on sitcoms are about. By the way, if you want to make somebody laugh, if you want to setup a gag. Remember that drama deals with human beings potential, and comedy deals with human beings limitations. So, if you've got, remember in "Titanic", you've got that guy diCaprio standing up there "I'm king of the world" Remember that? That dealt with man's abilities and potentials. But if at that very moment his pants had snapped, and ended up around his ankles, we would have had humor. Because it's nature's way of saying he may be king of the world, but you still got to hold your pants up. So if you've got him in a game, if you're trying to setup a gag, that's how to do it. That's the formula you have to use. Remember you're dealing with limitations.

Charlie Chaplin brought empathy to comedy. Before Chaplin, it was all Keystone Cops, pratfalls, banging into trees, slipping on banana peels. Chaplin understood that the joke was not in the slipping on the banana peel, but in the emotional reaction to it after the fact. You understand that? Okay. He used to get his foot caught in a bucket. There was a gag in the old silent movies where you'd get your foot caught in the bucket, and you'd hear the music... And they bucket and they're kicking it off, kicking it off. Chaplin got his foot caught in that same bucket. But instead of trying to kick it off, he'd try to hide it while he was getting it off. He'd try and maintain his dignity while he got himself unentangled from the bucket. All the while, there'd be girls watching. He understood that quality about embarrassment, that quality about empathy. I think that watching Charlie Chaplin movies is one of the best things you can do. If you're only going to watch three Charlie Chaplin movies, watch "Goldrush", "City Lights" and "Modern Times". There's a wonderful new collection out now. They've digitally re-mastered several of Chaplin's classic movies, documentaries. I recommend it. But don't watch it as if it was made in the 1930's, watch it as if it was made last year. He was a genius. He would still be a genius if he was around today.

As long as I'm giving you lists of things, people ask me about books to read. Books on acting. Books I think are essential. Michael Chekov's book "Lessons for the Actor", I think Keith Johnstone's book "Impro" is very good. If you want to understand the theories of Stanislavsky, the best book that I've seen on this is called "Stanislavsky in Focus" written by Sharon M. Carnicke. She's associate dean of drama at University of Southern California. She's bilingual, she teaches Russian and she's made her life study the work of Stanislavsky. I think it's a really excellent book. It will explain how he came

to his theories, how he came to the United States, how it turned into what we know of as “Method Acting.” What the differences are between Strassberg’s method and Stanislavsky’s original thoughts.

Walter Kerr wrote a wonderful book called “Tragedy and Comedy”, and that book, I think you can find it still. It’s out of print now, but it’s a wonderful book. And in there he says, he’s talking about laughter and comedy, he says. Everybody knows the story of Oedipus. So, it was prophesized that he was going to kill his own father and marry his mother. And so in an effort to get away from this prophecy, he moved to another place. And he did all this. Then it turned out that he did fulfill that prophecy. He wound up killing his father and marrying his mother. And when he found out that he;d done this. He stabbed out his eyes and banished himself from town; he was so ashamed. Walter Kerr says in his book, that for sure is drama. But if on the way out of town, he’s going on, he’s got his staff, blood streaming down his face, on his way out of town through the town gates, he were to pass someone else coming into town who had also killed his father, married his mother, and had blood streaming down his face, we would have comedy. One Oedipus is drama; two Oedipus’ is comedy.

In the character, anxiety is a high and petty power center. The higher the power center, the more anxious the character is. The lower the power center, the more confident the character. That’s the reason why it’s so hard to have a character with a high power center that’s a villain.

Q: Can you elaborate on power centers?

Yes, come on up here. When we walk around in life, our power center is two inches below our navel. The Japanese call it our “hara.”

Power Center Exercise

Exercise with two volunteers passing each other and saying “hello.”

Then the power center is something you can see like a balloon. The power center is where you lead from. The power center goes first and the rest of your body follows. Also, with a higher power center, the rhythm is faster.

Exercise where he moves each power center and they repeat passing and saying “Hello.”

John Wayne’s power center was in his left hip. He would walk like a crab half the time. He would swing that hip out there.

Don’t put too much context on this. Remember that emotion is an automatic value response. We don’t really have anything to respond to in this exercise. This is a pure power center exercise. A physical placement within the body, a rhythm.

Status Transaction exercise

Master/slave status transaction. One is king, one is slave. Pass each other in castle hallway and greet one another.

Same thing, but give yourself someplace you're going. The purpose of movement is destination.

Mentions article he wrote for Game Developer Magazine on Mocap. December 2003.

When they had destination, it changed their movement. It makes a difference to the movement or the capture of a movement, if you have a reason for the movement.

Slave tends to throw power center to floor. Saying in effect "I won't compete with you".

Slave tends to give space to the higher status. Space is negotiable. When you invade a person's space, they have a measurable physical reaction.

Notice avoidance of eye contact. Eye contact is negotiable. It's also a status transaction. In stage acting, they say if you make eye contact for more than 10 seconds, you're either going to fight or make love. They say it in a cruder fashion. If you make too much eye contact, it becomes a status transaction in itself.

I remember reading about Janet Jackson, it was in her contract that the people working backstage couldn't make eye contact with her. What this is is unearned high status.

My goal is to get his connection between thinking and emotion. Emotion leads to action. Action, objective, obstacle.

Q: What to do if you can't act it out and there's no one else to act it out?

Video reference is more useful than a mirror for acting it out. Mirrors are good for poses. With a video camera, you can commit to the performance 100%, and then when you play it back you can just watch 100%. A lot of the time the eyes, when you do mirror reference, the eyes have to watch the mirror. The truth is that in life we only make eye contact 20% of the time. 80% of the time, we glance away, we scan the horizon looking for predators. So, when you're working with a mirror, it sometimes gives you good stuff, sometimes it gives you misleading eye-line. So I like video reference. The answer to your question, Stella Adler, who was a famous acting teacher said All you have to do is be able to imagine it. If you can imagine it, you can play it. And animators, some of the best animators I've ever met aren't people who are eager to get up in front of people, but they empathize. They feel with the characters and the characters come to life. I did a talk at Disney not long ago, and sitting right there was Rueben Aquino who did Ursula in "Little Mermaid". I tried all day to get that man up to do something, and he was not going to get up. He's a quiet, shy man, and I can't imagine him doing Ursula up in his office... Glen Keane is the same kind of deal. It's not necessary for you to be a great "in the present moment" actor in order to get your characters to act, but it is necessary for

you to allow your imagination and to empathize. A lot of characters will speak to you with emotion. Did that help at all?

Q: Actors you'd recommend studying for action or emotion?

Acting is acting, there's great actors. I'm a great fan of Robert Duval, Anthony Hopkins, Judy Dench, these are people I like. A man called Artonin Artaud pointed out that "Actors are athletes of the heart" and I come again to the thing about games that so bothers me when I play them is that characters are so often driven by thought rather than by emotion. And you look at them, and there's something that's not quite right about the way they're moving around. And as a player, you cut them some slack because it's a game. But if somebody walked past you on the street like that, it would set off an alarm. And to me this is where games have to go. You have to do it with purpose.

There's a guy by the name of Don Graham who lectured on at the Disney studios on the difference between force and form. And computer animation tends to invite the animation of form. An arm goes from here to there. But you need force, you need to be trying to catch something. You need what's underneath. Brad Bird who's working on "The Incredibles" told me that was the hardest for him to get a hold of when he cross trained from 2D to 3D was this. Was trying to get the computer to capture force. And I understand, by all accounts, they've done it.

You can only do one thing at a time. I remember in "The Iron Giant", there's a sequence where the giant is eating a car, and the alarm goes off. And Hogarth is telling him "Shh", and so he takes the thing and he hits it this way, and he sits on it, and it still is beeping, and he looks over here, and here, and finally he throws it way out to sea. That sequence is fifteen seconds long. And I counted seventeen specific thoughts in that sequence.

Q: Do people change their power centers?

All the time. You take someone, just an extreme example, someone like Woody Allen who occasionally has sex, with a power center way up high. There's going to be times when it drops down.