

"Zombie Yoga" – Designing for Emotional Empowerment

Doris C. Rusch

DePaul University, School for Cinema and Interactive Media

Extended Abstract

“Zombie Yoga” is a single player, third-person Kinect game in which the player does Yoga poses to fight Zombies, heal emotional wounds and liberate the inner child. While utilizing Yoga poses to interact with the gameworld, “Zombie Yoga” is not mainly an exercise game. The game’s goal is to engage and empower the player *emotionally* by leveraging the body to positively stimulate mind and soul. The emotional and mental potential of Yoga poses (e.g. to heal, guard, foster the feeling of inner strength, determination and inner balance) is being reinforced, by embedding the poses into a fictional and highly metaphorical environment, in which their performance through the player takes on specific, empowering meaning. In other words: the intended inner effect of a pose (e.g. to guard) is made visible on screen, its power in the gameworld becomes visually and experientially tangible.

This paper describes “Zombie Yoga’s” iterative design process that was at first purely fueled by my intuition and imagination (in a Jungian sense, see Chodorow 1997) but went on to be heavily inspired by psychological and spiritual theories and practices as encountered first and foremost in my work with Dr. Dorothea Zillich. I visited her therapy group for one year in Vienna, Austria, in order to come to terms with the painful end of a 12-year relationship. Dr. Zillich’s approach included methods from integrative gestalt therapy, Jungian Psychodrama, creative practices as well as healing rituals and energy work. While everybody had a different reason to be in the group, there were universal themes that were repeatedly the center of our work: recovery of an authentic self, inner child work and healing light meditations. These themes resonated so strongly that they eventually became core elements in “Zombie Yoga’s” design. As the idea for “Zombie Yoga” evolved, further research, mainly into the mind-body connection from various disciplinary perspectives (movement and dance therapy: Halprin 2003; Levine & Levine 1999; Feldenkrais 1972; philosophy and cognitive science: Gallagher 2006; Noe 2006; Varela, Thompson, Rosch

1993), its metaphorical potential and implications (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Johnson 1987), the emotional impact of physical game interfaces (Santiago 2001; Isbister, DiMauro 2011), symbolic modeling and image work (Chodorow 1997; Levine and Levin 1999; Lawley & Tompkins 2000), inner child work (Capacchione 1991), positive psychology (Peterson 2006) and research on play (Brown 2009) proved to be valuable sources of insight that helped guide and shape the final design. The connections between these sources and concrete design decisions will be elaborated on in the full paper.

By providing an account of “Zombie Yoga’s” two-year design process I hope to encourage fellow designers to make games that are fed by a deep engagement with their own life experiences, because this can foster authentic and unusual game concepts that bear much potential for “meaningful play” for others. As filmmaker Mira Nair puts it: “When you make a thing personal, it somehow speaks to people and the truth of it is felt.” (Andresen & Burstein 2011).

The paper is structured in four parts, each dealing with a major iteration of the design from initial concept to final game. Each part explores the interconnected iterations of the game’s four main design components or “layers” – mechanics, themes, narrative and metaphors – and investigates why and how they were iterated upon. The discussion of iterations takes into account technological hurdles (Kinect’s struggle with depth perception), team input, peer feedback and playtesting results, influences from afore mentioned research on the design layers mechanics, themes, narrative and metaphors, as well as my process of embracing the personal origins of this game and being emboldened to create a truly authentic experience. The paper traces the process from initial pitch to Microsoft Game Studios at Game Connection San Francisco in 2011, to the development of a tech demo to be presented to Microsoft again at GDC San Francisco in February 2012, a radical change in direction afterwards that included a shift to personal themes, to the latest design of what is now the

game I refer to as "Zombie Yoga". This current version is the most personal and original of them all and received very positive feedback at Games 4 Health conference in Boston, as well as at the Games 4 Change 2012 Game Demo Spotlight in New York. The paper concludes with a criticism of "Zombie Yoga's" design in the light of my continued research on movement and dance therapy and an outlook on future work.

References:

Andresen & Burstein 2011: Spark

Capacchione 1991: Recovery of Your Inner Child. The highly acclaimed method for liberating your inner self.

Chodorow 1997: Encountering Jung on Active Imagination

Isbister & DiMauro 2011: Wagging the Form Baton: Analyzing Body-Movement-Based Design Patterns in Nintendo Wii Games, Towards Innovation of New Possibilities for Social and Emotional Experience. http://www.katherineinterface.com/WBI_chapter.pdf)

Lawley & Tompkins 2000: Metaphors in Mind. Transformation Through Symbolic Modeling.

Levine and Levin 1999: Foundations of Expressive Arts Therapy: Theoretical and Clinical Perspectives.

Moore 2009: The Harmonic Structure of Movement, Music, and Dance According to Rudolf Laban: An Examination of His Unpublished Writings and Drawings

Santiago 2001: I Am More Than My Thumb