

*Emotioneering Techniques Category #15*

# Emotionally Complex Moments and Situations Techniques

Get your player into an emotional mess.

**This chapter discusses**

ways to put the player in the middle of emotionally complex moments and situations.

You just got a promotion. You call your best friend to share the news flash on your upwardly mobile ecstasy—but before you can even squeak out one gleeful, artificially modest yet subtly self-congratulatory news flash, he hits you with a bombshell: His wife is leaving him.

You can't share your good news. It would be insensitive, and maybe even cruel.

This is an emotionally complex moment. Life is full of such moments. Movies are full of them. Television shows are full of them. Even the best comic books are full of them.

They are far too scarce in games.

When it comes to emotionally complex moments and situations, if these other art and entertainment forms are giant redwoods, games are still bonsai trees. Isn't it time for these interactive, emotional shrubs to gain a little altitude so they can go one-on-one with the giant Sequoias of film and television?

While there are a vast number of potentially emotionally complex moments and situations, let's focus in on a few choice techniques.

## **You Are Forced to Do Potential Evil**

For this example, first take a look at the color illustration on page 2.

In this game example, you're the leader of a rebel force, fighting against a tyrannical, planetary government. Your forces have been decimated. Your only hope for survival is to resurrect an ancient and banned practice—using a disturbing mixture of sorcery and mechanics to build and bring to life a monster that can save you and your band of rebels.

However, there's no predicting the monster's actions. You know the creature will also be capable of great harm, yet you have no choice. The creature is your only chance for survival, and the only chance for the survival of your fellow rebels.

Yes, as the game progresses, the monster will save you. But later it will establish its own agenda—just as such monsters did in a previous era, which is why they were banned. When the monster turns on some innocents, to protect them you'll be forced to fight it. This new foe, which you have created, is much worse than the enemies you built it to destroy.

Even as you were building the mechanical beast, you knew this was likely to happen. That's why creating it was an Emotionally Complex Situation.



## You Are Forced to See Through the Eyes of Someone You Don't Like or Are Ambivalent About

Consider the hypothetical game illustrated on the preceding page.

The game is set in a strange, undefined land. There is a woman (an NPC) who was the spiritual leader of her people. You (the man in this picture) and she have mutual enemies, but there are many personality conflicts between the two of you. Because you don't share her mystical religion, she treats you as unimportant, and even with pity.

What I'm doing here is flipping upside down some of the Rooting Interest Techniques to make her somewhat unlikable. In this case, we'd make her extremely arrogant and dismissive toward you. Also, she cares about her own people, but no one else (such as humans like you). Additionally, there's an instance where you could use her help and she doesn't come to your aid—not because she hates you, but because she could care less.

I wouldn't flip so many Rooting Interest Techniques, however, that I'd make her loathsome. The idea is to make the player highly ambivalent about her.

She is killed by your mutual enemy, but her spirit can survive for a short time—inside of you. If you can take her spirit through enemy terrain, you can reach the Shaman of the Mountain Pass, who can then conjure up a new body for her. But if you don't make it in time, her spirit will die, and she'll never be able to take corporeal form again.

Even though you might not like her, her own people completely depend on her. They're in grave danger if you fail. In fact, without her leadership, they'll all be slaughtered by your mutual enemy.

Furthermore, some of these people have helped save you in the past, so you feel you owe them your support.

Thus, you bear her essence inside you as you travel across a hostile land. However, things get even stranger—for her spirit is strong, and at any given time, with no predictability, you *change into her*.

When you become her, your weapons change. Your way of moving changes. Your abilities and skills change.



This is emotionally complex for several reasons:

- ◆ You have to rescue her (for the good of her people), even though you don't like her or are ambivalent about her.
- ◆ Even though you are ambivalent about her, you *become* her.

Now, becoming this woman would be simply an interesting way to swap one set of skills for another, but the emotion of the situation can be beefed up in a number of ways:

- ◆ **Even though she's without a body, she can still talk to you.** You learn that she has great insight and kindness. Past trials of her people, and her own past hardships, forced her to become calloused. But that outer shell isn't reflective of who she truly is. Your opinion gradually changes until you see her not as strange and snobby, but as strong and wise.
- ◆ **She occasionally manifests in a sort of beautiful, translucent form, to plead for your continued help.** (These manifestations happen during times when you're in your own body, not hers.) This makes her easier to relate to because you can see her.
- ◆ **The longer she's "out of body," the more her spirit fades.** She's dying, and thus there's a ticking clock (a limited time). After a certain point, she'll no longer be able to be given human form again. The increased jeopardy will make you care for her even more.
- ◆ **She begins to go through an NPC Character Arc in that she starts to appreciate you.** However, this wouldn't be overdone—she'd just *begin* to change.

Because of all these techniques, you'll increasingly feel close to her.

You'll also increasingly be willing to "be" her (feel like her) when you take her form. That's because, when you're in her form, her people defer to you, admire you, and fight to protect you. They tell you of all the great things she did for them at great risk to herself, and you realize that she's been quite a hero.

Of course, the skills you possess when she takes over will ultimately prove important in your accomplishing tasks that are necessary to fighting your way to the Shaman—the man who will make her whole.

Here's another game example, set in a contemporary, realistic setting:

A villain has gotten hold of a terrible biological weapon. He's the one you're after.

Along the way, however, you come across the scientist who created the weapon. He's not sane. Sometimes he's rational, but sometimes he's delusional. Sometimes he doesn't remember what he's done, but at other times he remembers and is filled with regret. These emotions flit through him at a rapid rate.

He begs you not to kill him. You know that he's nuts, but not evil. Yet you also realize that if you don't kill him, he could create the biological weapon all over again, during one of his crazy fits, and once again give it to someone with evil intentions.

You'll kill him; you really have no choice. But the act won't sit well with your sympathy for him. It will be an emotionally complex situation.

## **Ambivalence Toward a “Friend”**

Imagine a game in which you are given telepathy. Suddenly you can hear the thoughts of the people around you. You learn that your best “friend” is jealous of your success.

You still like him and respect him—you two have been through a lot together and he's come to your assistance many a time—but now things are more emotionally complex between you.

## **Ambivalence Toward an “Enemy”**

Many writers I know seem to have minds that blossom late at night. The mysterious realm of darkest night is a unique time for many reasons, but where I live, there's an especially enticing aspect to the depths of night: It's when a local TV channel shows reruns of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

According to the show's mythology, at any given time in the world, there's usually only one woman, with superhuman strength and skill, destined to be the vampire slayer. At this time in history, Buffy's the one.

In an episode I recently re-watched, Spike, an often-evil vampire who's nonetheless capable of doing some very loving things, tries to instruct Buffy on ways of killing vampires. He tells Buffy how he has killed other



vampire slayers over the last several hundred years. These were vampire slayers who came before her. Spike wants her to learn from the mistakes made by her predecessors.

Spike's teaching Buffy how to avoid getting killed takes a strange turn, and ends by his confessing that he's in love with her. She rejects him coldly and treats him like dirt.

He goes back to his lair (lair is apparently de rigeur if you're a vampire). He grabs a shotgun and marches to her house, intent on killing her. But when he arrives, she's crying on her porch. It takes the wind out of the big confrontation he had envisaged. Spike puts down the gun and comforts her.

What if we transported this general idea of a villain with some good qualities (like Spike) into a game? What if your enemy is evil, but is also occasionally capable of great good? What if he is dying a terrible death, and only you can save him. Will you?

Or what if you go to kill him and find that his wife has just been brutally murdered, and he is beside himself with grief—and he even begs you to kill him so his misery will end. How will you feel? What will you do?

Whatever action you take in the above scenarios, one thing is likely: You'll find yourself in an emotionally complex moment.

Let's take a look at a similar instance, from the Top Cow comic, *Witchblade*, illustrated on the following page.

Sara, through destiny—a destiny she doesn't want—is the bearer of the Witchblade. It's a magical, organic bracelet with a long history. It can metamorphose into different forms of armor and weapons that turn her into an awesome warrior.

Nottingham is both her foe and friend. Their relationship is difficult to characterize, much like Spike's and Buffy's.

Here he's gotten possession of the Witchblade. Owning it has been his life-long ambition, but it's not his destiny to wield it. It begins growing across his body and face, strangling him and killing him. Only Sara can save him.

If this was a game and you were playing Sara, it would be an emotionally complex moment due to your ambivalence toward Nottingham.





But it would also be emotionally complex if you were playing Nottingham. You'd need to give away the powerful weapon you'd fought so long to get, and you'd need to rely for help on someone toward whom you felt ambivalent.

Game players don't particularly desire to lose power and forfeit their favorite weapon. And, to be honest, some men might not want to rely on a woman they don't like to save them. If you designed the game for players to play the role of Nottingham, and if you wanted to hedge your commercial bets, then you could flip the plot at some point. That is, you could later give the player an even cooler weapon than the Witchblade (which the player wanted, worked for, and finally got, but was forced to abandon), and you could even have a plot turn-around where the player gets to rescue Sara at some point.

Consider another hypothetical game example, pictured on the following page.

Every time your health points get low, you actually see Death. She's a beautiful, melancholy, but cruel woman. (We'd use NPC Interesting Techniques and NPC Deepening Techniques to make sure she's dimensional and intriguing.)

As you come to know her, however, she starts having mixed feelings toward you. As Death, she wants to claim you. However, she also begins to admire and like you. After all, you've heroically faced and overcome death many times. You're not like the others whom she has so easily snatched. (Because she feels conflicting feelings toward you, this would be NPC Toward Player Relationship Deepening, which is described in Chapter 2.12.)

And, because we'll use some Player Toward NPC Chemistry Techniques (see Chapter 2.11), we'll arrange it so that you also come to like her. For example, after you are victorious in a battle in which your fighting was spectacular, and during which you saved some innocents, Death makes you aware of her admiration for you—despite the fact that, by saving so many people, you've robbed her of some of her prey.

Though you might, on some level, like her, you also fear her and loath her. After all, she didn't just admire you; she also eagerly whisked away the souls of your friends who fell in battle.

The result would be that you'd have several different feelings toward her—and thus it would be a classic case of Player Toward NPC Relationship Deepening (see Chapter 2.13).





At some point in the game, you will die—but instead of taking you to the next realm (in a cinematic), she revives you.

God gave Death her role in the universe, and he doesn't like her disobeying him by reviving men who are dead. After all, the world's balance is delicate, and those who are supposed to die all play a role in the grandiose plan.

And so God has imprisoned her and is torturing her. He would have killed her, but as Death, she can't die.

At this point in the game, your feelings toward her would be ambivalent. You'd like her—she saved your life—but she's also taken the lives of some of those closest to you.

Yet you're compelled to free her because of what she did for you. Risking your life for someone for whom you feel both love and hate is a very emotionally complex situation.

### **Another Way You Could Employ This Technique**

You could have a boss whom you encounter several times during your missions. Each time you set out to fight, you learn aspects that not only “fill in” his Character Diamond (making him more dimensional), but you see qualities in him that gradually begin to give him Rooting Interest (see Chapter 2.10). Then, during the final encounter, he could approach you for help, creating an emotionally complex situation.

The question would then be, who would the player fight in the final battle? Perhaps the boss you thought was the big enemy—the one who asks for your help—was really doing the bidding of an even worse boss who now you'll meet.

You could make the situation even more complex if, in the fight with this new boss, the boss who has changed sides sacrifices himself to save you. So the character you've spent so much of the game hating now gains instant Rooting Interest by sacrificing himself for you.





## Ambivalence Toward a Situation

Consider a different hypothetical game case study.

You're training to be the pilot of a space fighter. After the game's training level, you take a test—and pass, but don't score quite high enough to make the grade. So as the game begins (the first level after the training level), you're stuck at the helm of a cargo ship.

At this point, your character—and probably you, the player—aren't too happy—especially when you learn your first job is to ferry two children to a distant planet. You wanted to command a space fighter but now you're just a babysitter!

Very soon into the journey, when you look over your shoulder, you spot the children levitating objects! These kids have a secret power that makes them targets for every nasty human and creature in the universe—including the one who's currently breaking into your ship from another dimension.

You want action? You've got it, for in about two seconds you and that creature will be in a heated battle over those kids.

The scene is emotionally complex, because the job you thought was awful is beginning to look a lot more intriguing.

Later in the game, simply as a Role Induction Technique (a technique that makes you more willing to adopt your role, described in Chapter 2.19), we'll throw in a plot twist. That twist is that you'll learn that you were picked for this assignment not because you failed your test, but because of your outstanding abilities and potential. You weren't told at the time because everything about these two children is classified and revealed only on a need-to-know basis. So it turns out that being picked for this “baby-sitting” mission was really a very high honor.

### note

This is actually harder to pull off than it might first seem. The player will suspect that this job isn't awful, anticipating that although he's merely ferrying kids, this will soon turn into some kind of adventure. To make the emotional experience work, it might be worth taking a risk and really have the player perform some drudgery. It would only need to go on for a few minutes, in order to build up some frustration in the player. (Testing the game would reveal the right duration of this drudgery.)

## You Discover You've Been Tricked

One of the first jobs I ever had was working in a phone bank, raising money for a very worthwhile charity. It wasn't the world's greatest job, but I didn't have a lot of job skills. The money was okay, and I took pride in doing a job that had tangible benefits to people in dire need.

One day, however, I skipped the morning injection of caffeine, slowed down, and did some serious math. I realized that only 5% of the money being raised in this office was actually going toward the charity. A very large percent went to the guys who ran the phone bank.

It was a very weird feeling to realize my good intentions had been preyed upon and used. I quit that day.

What if the situation was even more emotionally complex? In *The Road Warrior*, "Mad" Max Rockatansky (Mel Gibson) is "played," or used, by a peaceful group surrounded by enemies in a post-apocalyptic world.

I won't reprise the entire plot here, but suffice to say that, as a skilled driver, he ends up at the helm of a tanker truck filled with water, vital for the peaceful group's survival. Enemies continuously besiege the truck.

As Max later learns, he was just a decoy; he was really driving a truck filled with sand. He was duped, set up to draw off the enemy, while the tribe made their secretive escape with the real water.

Unlike my experience with the phone bank, the group that misled Max were good guys, and misleading him was, perhaps, the "right" thing to do. He realizes all this in the end—but he has still been used. He has been used by good people for a good cause. This is a very complex moment.

If you were playing the role of Max in a game, and this happened to you, you'd feel a complex range of feelings.

Here's a similar complex moment from another Top Cow comic, Michael Turner's *Fathom*.

Aspen is a woman who has seemingly magical abilities and strange links to the sea. Her own nature and history are a mystery to her.

In this illustration, Killian, whom she thought was a friend but who is actually evil, has manipulated her into using her powers. Not realizing the magnitude of the force she wields, she accidentally kills a man and is consumed with regret.



What if this scenario was transposed into the world of games? In fact, it has been. In the game *Thief II*, you play Garrett and run a number of missions for Victoria before you realize she's evil.

What if we made the situation even more emotionally complex? Let's say you were playing the role of Fathom, and you were tricked by someone like Killian into killing a man, just because Killian didn't like him.

Of course you'd be angry at Killian, and angry at yourself for being fooled.

But what if you then learn that the man you killed was evil and had slaughtered many helpless people? So you'd been used—tricked—into killing someone who was even more evil.

*That* would be a truly emotionally complex moment.

### **Further Thoughts**

In most games, you expect to kill bad guys. So, if someone *tricks* you into killing the bad guys—imagine the shock of the player. It would be an emotionally complex moment.

Of course, you could be tricked not just into doing the right thing (like Max in *The Road Warrior*), but tricked instead into doing the wrong thing.

Or the trickery could be woven right into the gameplay itself. For example, the beginning of the game finds you carrying out a hazardous mission with great fighting and action involved (and you feel quite cocky about your abilities and power). Your motive is that a group of people in grave danger had begged and pleaded with you to carry out your mission in order to save them.

The game is designed so that the more you use a skill, the faster and more effective you become at it, thus encouraging you to specialize in certain modes of combat.



Then later in the game, you realize that there is more to the game than just shooting. For instance, there is hacking, stealing, sneaking, and using disguises. The people who asked you to carry out this mission are actually more powerful than you, and they tricked you into building up the “wrong” skills (skills that they can defend themselves against), so that later you’ll pose no threat to them when they initiate their nefarious plan.

So you’ve been tricked not just into doing the wrong thing, but even into building up the wrong abilities. The people who tricked you are evidently quite clever.

In short, you’ll realize that a lot of your first assumptions were wrong—not just about these people, but about the game itself. It would truly be an emotionally complex situation.

To now stop this group, you need other skills such as stealth, disguises, and so on. However, you’ve built up your shooting skills (such as accuracy), but you’ve done nothing to increase your stealth capabilities.

And then I’d consider adding even another layer of emotional complexity. Perhaps, after you’ve become certain that those who tricked you are evil, I’d put in a twist and you’d then learn they’re actually good. They only tricked you because they felt they had no choice. Someone like you (someone of your order or guild, or someone wearing a uniform like yours, etc.) did great harm to them just a few days ago. So they had a legitimate reason to fear you and trick you.

This example starts pointing the way as to how Emotioneering techniques, when combined, can be used to create games that begin to have the same emotional richness we expect from some films and television shows.





## Helpless to Aid Someone You Love

The hypothetical game depicted on the left is set in ancient days. You play the warrior. Your true love has been captured—by aliens! She's a thousand miles away—you don't know where—but you can see her image in the magical waters. And you're unable to help her, at least for now. To be able to see someone you care about who's in grave danger, but not be able to help, is emotionally complex.

Consider a related example, illustrated on the following two pages.

This is an emotionally complex scene because the trees watch on, unable to help the forest nymphs, whom they love.

But another technique is used here that also makes the moment emotionally complex:

## What's Good and What's Evil Is Not Black and White

The beast used to live here first, long before the nymphs moved in. They invaded his land, and ate the same food he depends on. (They were forced out of their own lands by the encroachment of humans.) By diminishing his food supply, the nymphs had endangered the beast's survival, although unintentionally. Thus, who is good here and who is evil is a bit muddled.





## Other Techniques at Work in This Scenario (An Example of Technique Stacking)

Beside the two Emotionally Complex Moment Techniques noted previously in this scenario, there are added Emotioneering techniques at work as well:

- ♦ **The nymph in the cage is distraught because of what happened to her friend.** Her pain makes us identify with her; it creates NPC Rooting Interest (see Chapter 2.10).
- ♦ **She's also in grave danger herself.** This creates further NPC Rooting Interest.
- ♦ **It's because of these and other Rooting Interest techniques that you care about the nymphs.** Taking responsibility for them also makes you care more about the *world* of the game. Thus, it's a World Induction Technique (see Chapter 2.18).
- ♦ **Taking responsibility for others in a game, just as in real life, gives us depth.** Thus it's also is a First-Person Deepening Technique (see Chapter 2.21).

## Forced to Violate Your Own Integrity

In the hypothetical game illustrated on pages 196–197, you play Brianna. You and your brother were fighters together on this distant world.

But the enemy built a war machine—this mechanical centaur—and it just killed your brother. You, the player, really liked him, because of NPC Rooting Interest Techniques (see Chapter 2.10) and Player Toward NPC Chemistry Techniques (see Chapter 2.11).

But now he's dead. And the enemy is almost here, about to swarm in overwhelming numbers.

You escape the only way possible—by riding on the very creature who killed your brother. It's emotionally complex because, given your choice, you would have rather destroyed the thing. But now you have to use your brother's killer to escape. On some level, it's a violation of integrity.



## Creating Emotionally Complex Moments and Situations Through Incongruence<sup>1</sup>

When incongruence occurs, the way our minds or spirits function is to try and assemble the pieces into a story or a mood in which the disparate elements make sense. Incongruence snaps us out of a lulled state of complacency.

There are many forms of incongruence, and many uses of it. I want to talk about one form of visual incongruence, which can help create a rich world. (Other uses of incongruence will be discussed in Chapter 2.18 (“World Induction Techniques”), Chapter 5.2 (“Techniques for Creating Fun”), and Chapter 5.3 (“Gatherings”).

Sights, sounds, language, and just about any other media can also be incongruent. When the incongruent items themselves have a richness or emotional resonance to them, the incongruence can help create a rich world.<sup>2</sup>

**Example 1:** In a game, your Guide, who has been leading you, takes you out of the dark forest and to the edge of a huge meadow, surrounded by towering peaks. You’re caught up on their beauty. He looks at you and says:

**“This is where the our great leader, Kalnar, was slain. Thousands died. It’s where our slavery began.”**

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1. I define *incongruence* as putting things together that normally you wouldn’t think of as belonging together.

2. This discussion leads to the question: “What constitutes an emotionally resonant image?” Well, it’s safe to say that images of profoundly happy or sad or momentous events are emotionally resonant to many cultures—images such as those of birth, marriage, death, war, or physical triumph. (Case in point: the Olympics.) So are images of the elements or aspects of nature, such as mountains or forests.

But many other images that are emotionally resonant are culturally relative. For instance, an angel might be emotionally resonant in Christian Western cultures, but not necessarily to the Eskimos. An eagle’s feather might be emotionally resonant to the Sioux Indians, but not necessarily to Russians.





His sad words are incongruent with the scenic meadow. The emotional resonance in the image and in the words mean that, when combined, their incongruence create an emotional depth and complexity to the moment.

**Example 2:** In a game set in the American Revolution, the Americans have taken a pounding. Many lay dying in the mud. Your captain is injured and can barely drag himself along the ground.

Suddenly, a runner enters the scene and whispers something to him. He cracks a small smile, and says in a loud, hoarse whisper, “We’ve won.”

Here we see a reverse of the incongruence with the meadow. In this situation, the battlefield is a place of ruination and very emotionally resonant. But his words are happy. The incongruence creates a moment of emotional depth and complexity.

## Final Thoughts

Creating Emotionally Complex Moments and Situations is one of the best ways to mirror the complexity of life itself.

If you want to open the door to emotionally engaging games, this is a great place to start.