Rollin Poe evaluates the

Transition into Transistor

THE SCOPE

AFFECTIVE EVALUATION OF A VIDEO GAME OPENING

The first impression of a video game can make or break the experience. With more games than ever vying for our attention, if players are left cold and confused then it is all too easy for them to move on to a new game.

Transistor is Supergiant Games's second release and was met with rightful acclaim. The complex narrative, innovative gameplay systems, and artistic stylings, however, can make it difficult for new players. I undertook an affective evaluation of the first 20-30 minutes of Transistor to understand high and low points, and provide possible design solutions.

Time: June, 2020
Status: Complete

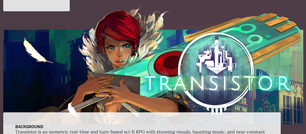
A COUPLE

KEY ASPECTS

- **Affective evaluation** of an award winning video game
- **Transcribing and coding** participant comments from **think aloud and cued debrief recall** techniques
- Produce achievable **design solutions backed by data**

SETTING

THE STAGE



BACKGROUND

Transistor is an isometric real-time and turn-based sci-fi RPG with stunning visuals, haunting music, and near constant narration. Starting in medias res you as a player are left to piece together the story and systems of the world. The opaque narrative and complex combat system has the potential to draw some players in and leave others out in the cold.

To better understand these high and low points, I undertook an affective evaluation of the opening scenes of Transistor. Through carefully examining what worked and what did not, I could then proceed to make usability suggestions to smooth out the pain points and better serve the goal of player retention and engagement.

LEVEL 1

METHODS

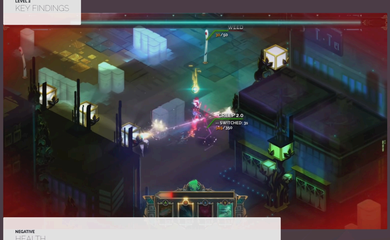
Comment	Affect (Valence/Displacement, Excitedness, Ease, Pressure/Restraint)	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Well, I mean by now you've mastered the art of dodging for different blues so that's not surprising.	Surprise		1	
Usually just a frequent occurrence, like the kind of stress that's fun.	Surprise		1	
I didn't really know what to expect. Its the fact that I'm a fan of the first game, so I kind of just think of Bit as his person but the fact that expect like a third person kind of throw me off at first	Surprise	1		
I didn't expect to see the abilities at the bottom were either like	Confusion		1	
I didn't realize there, they started that I had to hit, like, I'm like trying to sort of club in front of the attacks	Confusion	1		
I didn't know how to the attacks were either	Confusion		1	
I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do with this	Confusion		1	
something I could attract people with because I'm first instance of it being and was just to take down the enemy	Confusion		1	
Yeah, I know of the way I thought I was going to	Surprise	1		
Cool you like the ability to attack? Well, yeah. Like I'm all I do is just run around with (pep)	Enjoyment	1		
That was pretty quickly what I settled into	Competence	1		
I mean, it's from way kind of like, just sort of fitting	Confusion		1	
So I think training it is my head like a nice and DND numbers, I mean, I'm like, very, like I'm into I had to have to plan out each of my turns.	Jocular/Connection/Ind	1		
environments are really like stylized. And they kind of feel like they wanted them a cartoon.	Enjoyment	1		
something confusing me about this encounter	Confusion		1	
[illegible]	Feeling of Gilbert Penn / Anti-Imperial			
[illegible]	Understanding	1		
[illegible]	Feeling like, myself / Anti-Imperial			

METHODOLOGY

- **Gameplay:** Participants with no prior experience played the opening 20-30 minutes of Transistor, commenting on their experiences as they saw fit.
- **IMI Questionnaire:** After the play session, an IMI questionnaire was given which would later be used to assess feelings of competence, enjoyment, and control among others
- **Cued Debrief Recall:** Soon after playing, myself and the participant watched back the gameplay session. During this time participants were asked to enumerate on their affective experiences. Follow-up questions and/or prompting was done as needed.
- **Affective Coding:** Transcripts from the cued debrief recall and gameplay session were generated and coded for affect (Enjoyment, confusion, frustration, etc.) and valence (positive, negative, neutral). These codings were later verified with an inter-rater reliability score.

LEVEL 2

KEY FINDINGS



NEGATIVE

HEALTH

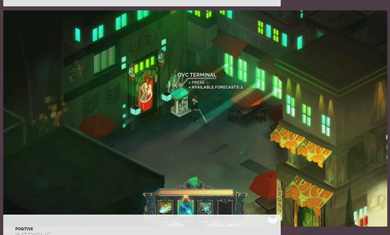
Two of the three participants expressed confusion over the health system in game. This confusion largely stemmed from not knowing what their player character's health was. One participant in particular never realized where the in game UI displayed health until watching back their play session, going so far as to say:

"IF I DIE, I DIE"

NEGATIVE

CONTROL

It is completely normal for new players to need to come to grips with the controls of a new game, especially one with such an innovative combat system. However, all users felt some frustration over their control. For example, one participant did not realize they could undo planned actions, believing they were locked into a sequence. Another did not realize they could aim their shot manually, instead of relying on imprecise character positioning. Interestingly, both of these mechanics are taught **yet players did not learn from the current tutorial system.**



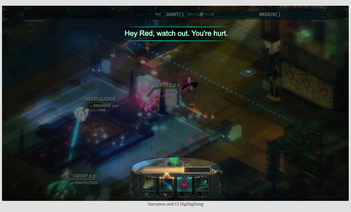
POSITIVE

AESTHETIQUE

All players commented very positively on the art direction of the game. Early sections of world building such as voting on weather via in game terminals or viewing in game posters generated questions about the narrative that they were eager to find answers to. One participant explained, **"those little mottifs... are what really got me hooked on the plot."**

POSSIBLE

DESIGN SUGGESTIONS



Narration and UI Highlighting

HEY RED,

WATCH OUT. YOU'RE HURT

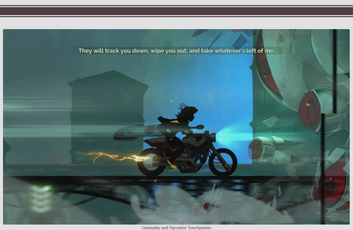
For a game that has an omnipresent narrator, one who reacts to the player's actions, it would be trivial to include an additional line of dialogue calling the player's attention to their health bar when they took damage. This should also be paired with a visual highlighting of the UI element to increase the likelihood the player will take notice of their health.

Clear Opportunities to Practice Core Mechanics

CREATE OPPROTUNITIES TO

ENGAGE WITH THE MECHANICS

None of the three participants used the manual aim feature despite two making mention that they were struggling with lining up their shots. Two of the three only found the rewind function by stumbling upon it. As with the health example above, part of this comes down to Transistor failing to be clear in its messaging about how and when to use its mechanics. Setting up a situation where it is clearly advantageous to aim and use a long range attack, then making explicit mention of how to do so would alleviate player frustration.



Gameplay and Narrative Touchpoints

CONTINUE TO ALLOW FOR

MULTIPLE ACCESS POINTS

Transistor does a good job at creating many hooks to pull the player into the game world. Each player will find the portions that they most connect with, be that the striking visuals, intriguing glances into a bigger world, story traces from the narrator, the deep and complex combat system, or any number of other touch points. Having a wealth of options for players to engage with helps ensure a that a wider audience will find something to connect with, ultimately meaning a larger number of satisfied players who will see the game to completion.

WHAT IS

THE MAIN TAKEAWAY

By undertaking an affective evaluation, I was better able to understand the **emotional high points and usability low points**. From that, appropriate design suggestions can be made. Transistor is rightfully regarded as a masterclass in artistic design an innovative gameplay. But with those bold strides forward, Supergiant Games must be smart to ensure that their players need to be able to understand the core mechanics and vital information. **Mystery and intrigue are laudable goals, but not at the expense of player comprehension.** If players are lost during the introductory sections because they cannot pull the required information from the UI, then mystery will forever be unsolved. In the end, **form should follow function**, especially in a medium as interactive as video games. With a few minor additions to improve communication, many areas of player frustration can be avoided.