

Customizable Crying and Connection: Personalization and its Effect on Player Emotion and Empathy

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Abstract

Player choice in visual media is often attributed to video games, and narrative designers work with other game developers to implement tools that allow players to make choices and feel involved. Prior research focuses on games that include emotional themes and character customization, which are seen as effective ways to create empathy between player and protagonist. However, most research compares different games with various levels of customization and opens the door to several confounding variables. I address this gap by exploring how character customization and narrative context influence player emotion, character connection, morality, and engagement in a single game. This study involved participants playing a custom-built interactive fiction game demo (*MOSAIC*). Overall, players' attitudes toward the demo were consistent across all three experimental groups and control group, though character connection was higher in groups where participants were given additional story information and/or opportunities to customize the protagonist. This is a valuable step towards understanding video games and player emotion, especially considering gaming's global presence and constant expansion.

Objectives

- Identify whether customization and narrative pretext affect participants' self-reported emotional state and create a heightened emotional experience.
- Create a playable demo for participants with a variety of customization options.
- Create a survey that is easy to navigate with clear expectations for the participant.

Methods

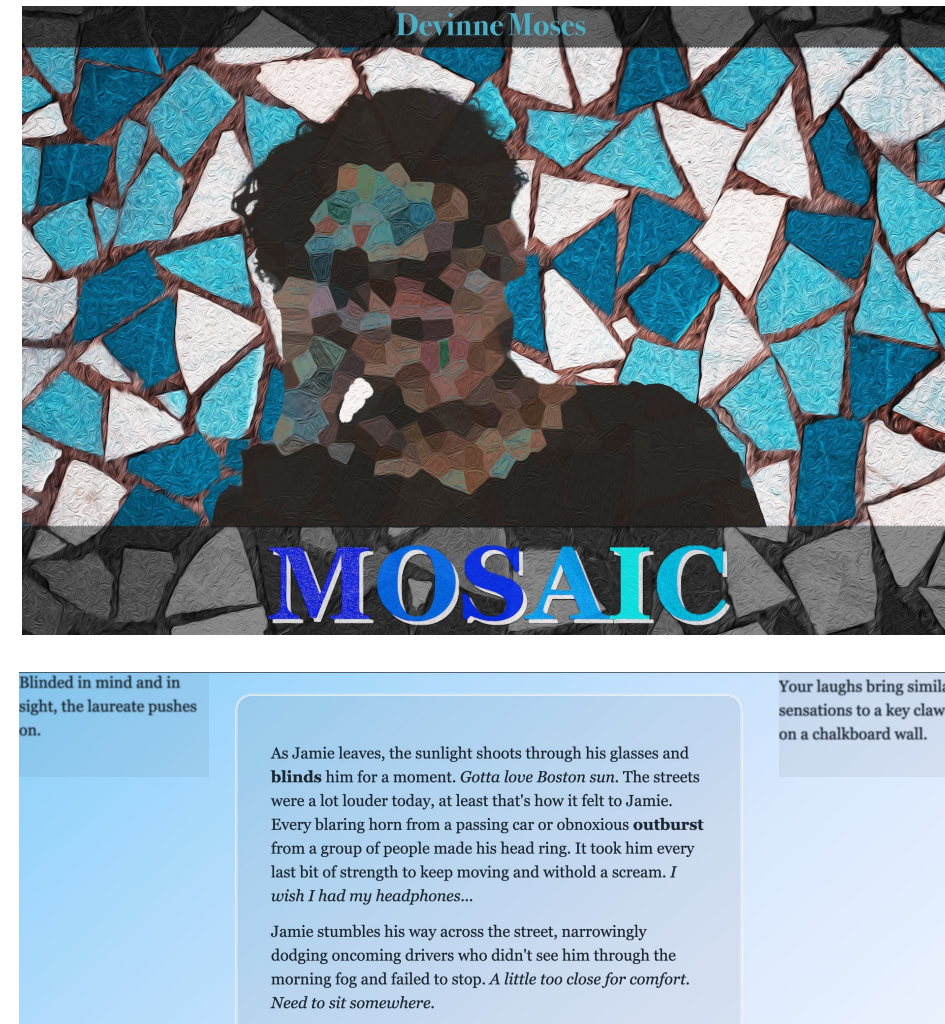
Participants were given an 8–10-minute survey that consisted of an emotion + intensity table with 10 discrete emotions for participants to choose from, 5 character connection questions, 3 participant engagement questions, and 3 morality questions. Four different versions of the study were created, so that each survey group represented different combinations of the independent variables. The control group had no pretext before reading the short scene, so they were not given any context pertaining to the story and the character's current situations. The control group also didn't have any personalization options, so they were not given the opportunity to pick an outfit for their character or a certain type of music (which would be represented in the story). One survey group had only pretext, another survey group had only personalization options, and the last survey group had both the pretext and personalization options. All groups received and answered the same questions after reading the short scene.

At the beginning of the survey, participants were asked to give informed consent and confirm that they were above the age of 18. Participants agreed and then were randomly assigned to one of the four possible survey variations per the independent variables. The dependent variables were participant's emotions and emotional intensity and character connection, where emotional intensity is scored from -10 to 10 (to account for negative and positive emotions) and character connection is scored from 1-5. Our exploratory variables included morality and engagement with the story, which are also scored from 1-5.

Upon completing the survey, participants read a debrief of the study design and purpose, including an explanation of the short scene outcome and how their choices did not have an effect. At the end of the debrief, participants were provided with my contact information should they have further questions, and participants had the option to provide their email if they were interested in receiving a \$5 Amazon gift-card.

Project: MOSAIC

MOSAIC is an interactive novel game in the Worldview Maturation genre that involves selecting from various text-based choices to influence the character relationships and overall story. The game tells the story of Jamie, a struggling poet in modern-day Fenway-Kenmore, Boston, the home of some of the greatest poetic geniuses of all time. Playing as Jamie, the player makes a series of choices that involve him taking his prescribed medication, engaging with his partner Mehri, and meeting new people that look to aid him on his journey of growth. While Jamie is a fully constructed character, a lot of his personality depends on the player's decisions. There are minimal visual and audio representations for Jamie, which allows players to shape the character through their in-game choices and potentially project themselves into or role-play as Jamie. For this experiment, participants read a 3-minute scene, and personalization groups were allowed to choose clothing options and music preferences that appeared later in the demo. Every dialogue choice the player made would lead to a different dialogue response, so players would get immediate feedback based on their choices. However, every choice made still resulted in the same ending for the demo scene, which was unknown to the players. This combination allows players to feel in control of developing Jamie's personality and decision-making without greatly altering the fundamental narrative plot. All participants were given the option of different pronouns that Jamie would identify with (she/her, he/him, they/them), which was implemented to establish a baseline connection between the player and Jamie.

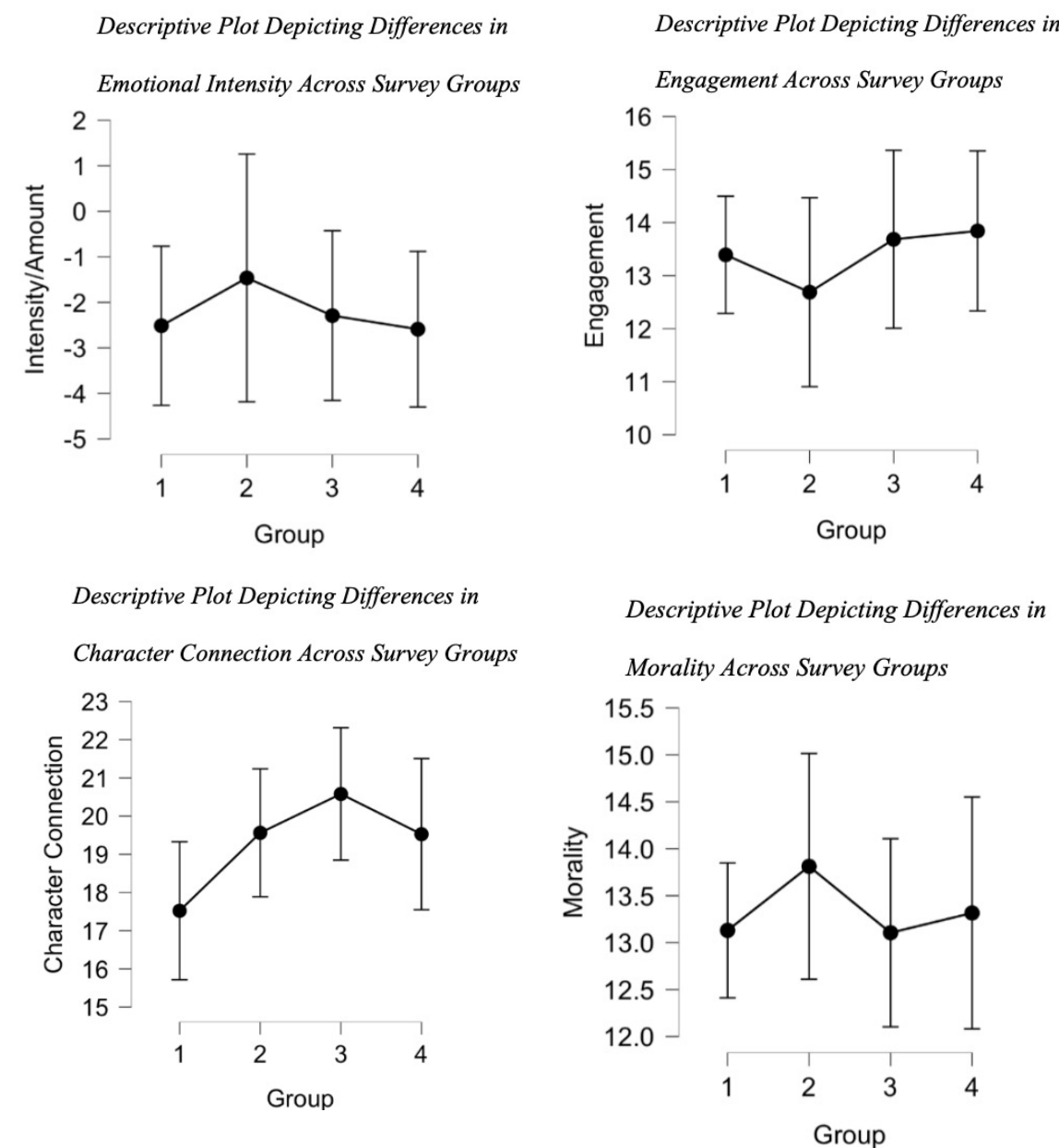
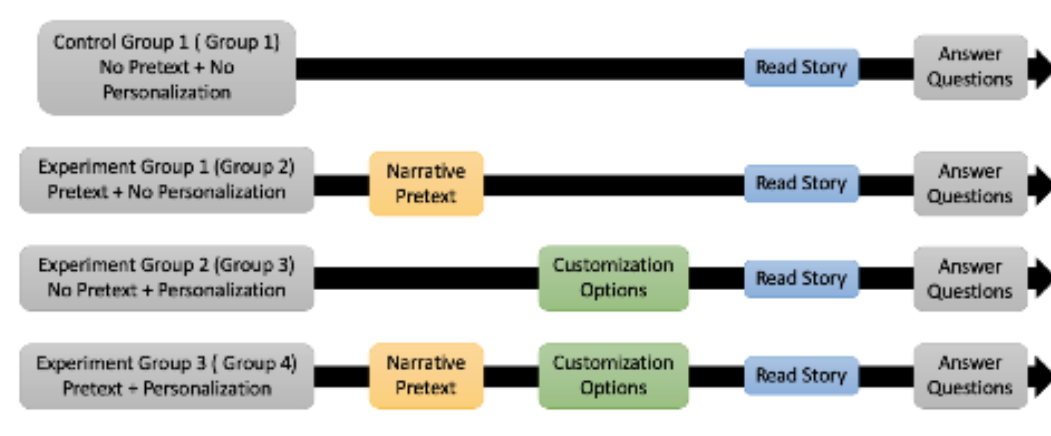


Results

The first hypothesis was for the pretext + personalization group (group 4) to report the most negative emotions at the highest intensity and the most character connection compared to the control and other experimental groups. My second hypothesis was for the pretext + no personalization group (group 2) to report more negative emotions at a higher intensity and higher character connection than the no pretext + personalization group. My third hypothesis was for all experimental groups (groups 2, 3, and 4) to have more negative emotions, emotional intensity, and higher character connection compared to the control group.

For my exploratory hypotheses, I expected the pretext + personalization group (group 4) to also be the most morally conflicting and engaging, the pretext + no personalization group (group 2) to be more morally conflicting and engaging than the no pretext + personalization group (group 3), and the no pretext + no personalization group (group 1) to be the least morally conflicting and engaging.

To test these hypotheses, I ran a MANOVA to see how the three experimental groups compared to the control group. Data was collected through a scoring system in Qualtrics that recorded each participant score for emotional intensity, character connection, morality, and engagement. The MANOVA test of differences among the four groups was not significant, Pillai's trace = 0.17, $F(3,70) = 0.27$, $p = 0.848$, $n2 = .01$; character connection, $F(3,73) = 2.40$, $p = 0.075$, $n2 = .09$; morality, $F(3, 73) = 0.41$, $p = 0.748$, $n2 = .02$; and engagement, $F(3,73) = 0.46$, $p = 0.712$, $n2 = .02$, were not significant. Participants' responses were not significantly influenced by personalization or pretext when compared to the control group that received neither.



Discussion

Overall, this study found that, contrary to previous research, pretext and personalization options did not have as much of an influence on emotion and character connection as hypothesized. Pretext and personalization also did not have a large influence on the other exploratory variables like morality and engagement as hypothesized.

There was a nonsignificant effect of survey group on emotional intensity. This result may be indicative of the difficulties involved with playing an interactive fiction demo and survey. Participants may have found it difficult to emotionally engage with the demo if they have not experienced a web-based interactive text before.

There was also a nonsignificant effect of survey group on character connection. The character connection results were interesting because it suggests that participants felt more connected to the protagonist when they were given the option to customize Jamie's appearance and music taste as well as learn more about Jamie's situation. A larger sample might have statistically supported this observation and resulted in a significant effect.

There was a nonsignificant effect of survey group for both exploratory variables (morality and engagement). For morality, this might be the result because the items implemented weren't morally conflicting enough like other video games, such as *Papers Please* (3909 LLC, 2013), which at one point has the player decide whether characters can enter a country and reunite with family despite faulty papers. Previous research has already concluded that moral challenges in video games can make players regretful or make them always make a good decision (Consalvo et al., 2019). As for engagement, there are a myriad of factors that help video games engage their player base that were not included in the demo, such as visual art or audio. Previous research already concludes that these conventions, among others, enhance player engagement (Chew & Mitchell, 2020).

Conclusion

Although this study did not result in anything substantial in terms of emotion, character connection, and personalization, it did take important steps toward understanding the impact of player preferences and personalization in a particular kind of game. Interactive fiction is rarely discussed in modern popular culture, though it is a unique combination of literature and video games that has found a strong, persevering community on various sites. The video game industry saw tremendous growth in 2020 despite the COVID-19 pandemic, and it looks to continue growing in the next several years with several big companies like Amazon, Google, and Netflix competing to break into the market dominated for years by Microsoft, Sony, and Nintendo.

Understanding how video games impact players, especially on an emotional level, may advance the industry and help it branch into new markets or those occupied by modern-day film, television, and literature. This global market will have the opportunity to share relatable and impactful stories that would not only garner critical and commercial acclaim, but also teach people different perspectives and experiences for a broader, more culturally-conscious worldview.

Works Cited

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