

How Interactive Choice Design Influences Player Emotion and Decision Behavior in Narrative-Driven Games

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Abstract. With the increasing application of interactive systems in narrative-driven games, players have gradually become participants who make decisions actively rather than passive recipients of stories. Different patterns of players' choices can have a significant impact on their emotions and decisions. Through a review of recent research and a comparative case study of the Final Fantasy series and Detroit: Become Human, this paper explores implicit and explicit consequence systems. The research shows that consequence visibility, moral framing and perceived responsibility all affect emotional intensity and decision-making pressure differently. An explicit system can produce anxiety immediately, but the implicit system forms an unbroken process of emotional associations. In short, interactive choice systems can affect the generation of narratives as well as players' feelings and thoughts.

Keywords: Game interaction, Choice mechanics, Emotional investment, Moral choice, Narrative games.

1 Introduction

Role-playing and narrative-driven video games have been changing over time in terms of their interaction design. Most new titles have abandoned the traditional linear narrative structure in favour of allowing players to contribute to the story development by providing choices with different consequences. Through gameplay decisions players may affect the direction of the story, what happens to characters and how the story is interpreted. The design transforms the mode of narrative participation from passive to active in terms of the gaming experience. As the choice-based system in games has gained more acceptance from players, researchers have paid more attention to its influence on player emotion and decision-making behaviour. In terms of research, interactive selection systems are also linked to the design of narrative structures, and can influence players' feelings of emotion, morality and sense of duty; by understanding how choice mechanisms affect player psychology, one can explore Interactive narrative experience more organisedly and systematically. The main focus of this article is the interactive selection

system in narrative-based games; at the same time, it will also explore the influence of various types of choice models on emotions and decision-making behaviour. The discussion covers the visibility of consequences, moral frame-of-reference, and attachment to characters, as well as their implementation in different works of art. This paper consists of a literature review and a case study. Based on the research results from domestic and foreign scholars in recent years, taking the representative works of this genre as examples — Final Fantasy series and Detroit: Become Human — this paper will examine them in detail. In order to choose the system design plan that best meets requirements in a specific game; describe its influence on playing experience of users. In this study, it is hoped that some general patterns of the mechanism connecting interactive choice design, emotion and decision behaviour will be identified; at the same time, information about how various interaction modes trigger emotions at different levels and generate sense of decision-making will also be obtained; at the same time, theoretical insights to improve the experience of interactive narrative games can be gained.

2 Literature review

Role-playing games and narrative-driven games have been gradually changing from a linear story-telling pattern to a more interactive model emphasising player choice. In such games, these people are no longer passive participants in the story. Rather, based on their own choices, they actively determine the course of events in the story. Decisions made by players usually cause the branch plots to change direction. Sometimes, you need to do some side tasks to get what you want; sometimes, these optional ways will also affect the final outcome.

Branching dialogue, moral choices, and consequence-based systems have now become a design element of this genre of games. Famous examples are the Final Fantasy series and other games, like Detroit: Become Human, where the player choices obviously result in various story directions and endings. Earlier research reveals the fact that interactive choice systems are not just the ones that alter story structure but also influence the feelings and thoughts of players when playing. As players learn that their choices will actually cause actual consequences, they become more tense and take longer to think before making a decision. In addition, they may also be more prone to feeling emotions of hesitation and guilt. According to Wright and Denisova, most players would define the moral decisions made in the games as challenging but inevitable [1]. The implication is that the choice systems themselves can determine the emotional experience, not just act as the mechanisms to advance the story.

Based on the study of game design from an emotional perspective, it can be seen that many developers intentionally reserve some room for players' interpretations. An interactive system allows players to express their own feelings when they interpret the results of the story; it is not confined to a single emotion. Different players will have different interpretations of the same story event. Therefore, the interaction design of narrative games is not just about organising the structure of the story. It cannot be denied that this will cause some negativity in the players' emotions and attitude.

3 Case analysis

Final Fantasy is an excellent example of a role-playing game based on narrative that utilises several choices to influence the player's experience. There is no title in the series that uses entirely branching endings, but many titles contain important decisions, optional stories and side quests. These factors can have some impact on players' perception of character relationships and their emotional connection to the plot. Also used to alter one's own interpretation of the final result of the story. At this time, if there is little difference in the main plots across various scenarios, players' choices will still affect their feelings about these different plots.

In many of the Final Fantasy games, the choices presented to the player and the side quests have been known to change the emotional connection that players feel towards the characters and events. The player can select which storylines to focus on more, which optional tasks to complete, and in which direction the story will develop. These usually give the audience a stronger sense of affinity towards the character and increase their feelings. Based on interactive narrative immersion research, it can be found that people's emotional responses will become stronger and more personalised after they identify with the character or story [2].

Other related research suggests that different narrative structures may produce varying degrees of immersion and emotional impact. Research on digital narratives and puzzle games indicates that there will be various impacts of adopting other ways to tell stories or modify plots on players' mood changes; therefore, it is necessary to establish effective regulatory mechanisms for this field [3]. The same situation also exists in other types of RPGs based on Final Fantasy; even though there are some optional branches, it does not change the conclusion; however, it changes the feeling during the journey. Emotional influence does not depend on the traditional form of branch paths. It is found that camera framing, character movement and scene display are also parts of emotional storytelling even if the main plot structure varies [4]. This also explains why there can be a limited number of branches in the game, but still evoke a strong emotion.

In *Detroit: Become Human* there is a perfect instance of how an explicit branching system can be directly associated with player choices and emotional and moral pressure. In contrast to other RPGs where consequences are partially unknown or presented much later, in this game the outcome of decisions is demonstrated in an extremely visible manner. Players often encounter limited times to choose and moral dilemmas and must often make a decision fast between two options that both have either a risk or a negative consequence. Such a structure leads to the immediate emotional tension of the choice itself. Players can sometimes choose options that are not entirely consistent with their original intentions due to the intense time pressure. The reason why many major game decisions are associated with life-and-death choices or moral accountability is that players often feel a sense of hesitation and internal struggle. Arrambide et al. found that players often apply their real-life moral standards when making decisions within the game [5]. They also refuse the choices that they believe are morally wrong, even if those choices do not result in the safe outcome of the fictional scenario. It shows that the interactive choice system can prompt real moral judgment and emotional resistance rather than only strategic reason. The other related study also indicated that such moral choice systems in games can affect the development of empathy and attitude towards decision-making beyond the actual gameplay situation [6].

Other studies on moral decision-making in games demonstrate that as players perceive their own responsibility in the outcomes of their decisions, the emotional load is heightened. It has been reported by Wright and Denisova that the players often characterize these events as stressful but meaningful [1]. It means that emotional discomfort does not lead to disengagement. On most occasions, it only intensifies the feeling of participation of a player.

A critical aspect of the design of *Detroit: Become Human* is visualization of consequences. Following important decisions the game presents a branching flowchart of other options. It gives players a sense of what they have not selected. Consequently, most of the players replay the chapters to experience varied outcomes. Research in the area of emotionally focused game design indicates that visible consequence systems promote reflective decision-making and post-decision evaluation [7].

When comparing the *Final Fantasy* style RPG systems to the explicit branching design in *Detroit: Become Human*, one key design distinction comes into view. In some games, the consequences are presented in a more indirect or partially concealed fashion, wherein the emotional effect is slowly developed as a result of character interactions and the unfolding of the storyline. Others employ extremely obvious consequence structures, in which emotional stress is focused on particular points of choice. The two ways may lead to intense emotions but in different ways. The systems that have less visible outcomes are more likely to promote long-term emotional attachment whereas explicit branching systems commonly generate immediate decision pressure [8]. This discrepancy also affects the behaviors of the players. Visible systems of choices are more prone to promote replay and path comparisons, whereas less visible systems are more prone to foster deeper immersion into one playthrough.

4 Discussion

Based on the comparison of these cases, it can be seen that the interactive choice system has an impact on the player's emotional response, sense of responsibility and decision-making pressure in three related aspects. The combined effect of all these mechanisms can also be used to explain why narrative-based game choices tend to be perceived as meaningful choices rather than purely procedural actions. These systems of choices, which include emotional responses to links between players' actions and expected observations or situations. Emotions will increase after the player feels some characters' lives or stories may be caused by their actions. As shown in some research findings, even if one is aware that a choice will bring about certain outcomes, they still experience emotional arousal; moreover, these results may be present whether or not the consequences are known [1]. Emotional participation refers not only to the desired outcomes but also people's foreboding sense of possible results before that.

Perceived responsibility is also closely related to emotion. If the failure results from their own mistakes or misjudgment, most people will feel guilty, sad or regretful as a result. Research on the transfer of behaviours suggests that this sense of responsibility is likely to continue even after playing the game and influence subsequent reflection [9]. Therefore, choice systems are not only story-telling tools but also instruments for simulating responsibility.

The decision pressure also alters the way players think and decide. Time constraints, visible consequences indicators, and moral framing all add to the cognitive load at decision making

points. When under greater pressure, players will be more inclined to use their personal values and intuition to make decisions as opposed to strictly strategic calculations [5]. It explains why emotional choices are frequently associated with time-consuming decision-making and better memory.

Emotional tension is frequently experienced by players when games offer explicit hints that the choices they make will be important prior to the final outcome being revealed [7]. In this situation, players visualize probable results and suppose how each of them can impact on the characters or the development of the story. Emotional tension occurs due to the very process of anticipation, as players act upon the supposed consequences even in the absence of an outcome. In actual fact, many of the choices are made once a player has already undergone a number of emotional and cognitive responses internally. The manner in which it is presented will determine the processing of emotions by players. If a game gives warnings or contextual hints that a choice will have an impact, players tend to slow down and analyze their options more carefully. There is a reflective pause that tends to increase emotional involvement and attention when the choice is made personally and voluntarily. Therefore, if the outcome is ambiguous, players may act more quickly due to a lack of emotion; only after knowing the result will they experience corresponding emotions. That is to say, the generation of an emotional response is closely linked to the communication of consequences, rather than simply the severity; The presence of emotional intensity tends to increase when a choice is framed as moral rather than practical or efficiency-related. The players stop thinking in terms of advantage and begins to think in terms of right and wrong. Thus, the way of thinking changes, and decisions will be derived from value judgment instead of strategic consideration. In these situations, although the optimal gameplay results are obtained, due to the conflict between this choice and the moral norms that the player should follow in real life, it may not be considered an ideal solution. Moral framing also has more sustained after-effects. Players are more likely to replay the decision in their minds after making it and wonder if they have made the right choice at that time.

Reinforcement through the pattern of character attachment. If a player forms an emotional attachment to a character, any morally framed decision involving that character will carry more emotional weight and psychological pressure. In one and the same choice, it may appear unimportant in a neutral environment; however, if it involves one of your favourite characters, it will be extremely stressful. It shows that emotional effects are not only related to the selection structure but also to the design of the consequences, moral framing and character recognition. Other studies on games also explore how interaction in narrative design and player perspective structures can be used to promote empathy intentionally [10].

There is another problem with the design of interactive selection systems that individual differences need to be taken into account. Players may have different emotions and decision-making behaviour in the face of the same choice situation. These differences are all closely linked to personal values, life experiences, play styles, and the characters that individuals are fond of.

According to the research, most players will incorporate their moral standards in real life into their decision-making process when playing the game [5]. However, the magnitude of this transfer varies from person to person. Some players treat the game as a virtual world and can distinguish it from reality in terms of value. Some individuals have an emotional resonance with the in-game character, and this alignment is in line with their own beliefs. Due to the differences

in moral values, individuals experiencing distinct moral conflicts may experience varying levels of psychological stress.

The way in which characters are attached and recognised will affect the induction of emotions. If the player has a strong sense of identity with a specific character, and there are choices in the game that harm or raise moral questions about this character, it is likely to cause them more emotional distress. It has been determined that character recognition is directly related to feelings and whether one hesitates to make a decision [2]. Those who have a low identification are prone to be swayed by the strategies, while those who have a high identification tend to protect or act on emotion. The level of experience changes the pattern of decisions. Experienced players can generally tell whether there is a branching structure, and options are often used for system exploration. Newer players tend to think that each choice represents a different and significant moral behaviour. This difference in distinction affects the replay behavior and how seriously players take the consequences.

There are several designs for the pattern; Some of them have a visual or noneffectual phenomenon, and others clearly show these phenomena; At different times, various levels of emotions and decision-making pressures affect people. There are also individual differences in people's reactions to the same choice situation.

These mechanisms help in understanding game design and research on player experiences. Not only as a means of branch narratives, but also as an entity that defines how players feel, perceive and behave. Taking into account the close relationship between the visibility of consequences, moral framing and the attachment to characters in future design of interactive narratives, it is expected that the generated decision experiences will seem to have more meaning and emotional investment.

5 Conclusion

Through the analysis of relevant academic literature at home and abroad in recent five years and the study of the cases of the Final Fantasy series and Detroit: Become Human, this paper explores how the interactive choice structures in narrative-based games influence players' emotional perception and decision-making. The results indicate that choice systems are not only used as the guides to plot branches. They can also be useful in influencing players emotions, situational assessment, and decision making processes during gameplay. The presentation of the various models of choices reveals that the style in which the consequences are presented alters the temporal and intensity of emotional reactions. Clear-cut and direct presentations of consequences make the process of making decisions trigger immediate pressure, which frequently results in tension, hesitation, and internal struggle. With the absence of visible consequences and their gradual presentation, emotional involvement tends to take place more over time due to story development and character interactions. Players are more prone to reflect on their decisions after they are presented as moral dilemmas and linked to character results or player accountability. The same pattern is regularly observed in previous researches as well as in the cases described in the present paper. It matters also who plays. The values of the person, the attachment to a character and the experience in gameplay will determine what meanings are given to the choices and what actions are taken. The same scenario of decision-making can cause radically varying emotions and approaches to the situation based on the individual player.

This implies that the interactive choice system effects are not predetermined, but arise in the context of the system design and player attributes.

In practice, it is limiting to consider choice systems merely as branching instruments. When actively in use, they are more like frameworks for organising emotions and thoughts. In terms of interactive narrative design, the balance between consequence visibility, moral framing and character attachment is probably better achieved to improve the quality of the overall experience rather than simply increasing the number of branches. In future research, more detailed emotional changes and decision pressure in Interactive systems may be extended through additional quantification or empirical analysis.

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