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How This War of Mine Creates Empathy for Virtual Characters

By Cole Pergerson

Is it possible to empathize with virtual characters? Are game characters just a means for game and story progress or can we develop a strong emotional connection with them? In this research essay, I analysis *This War of Mine*, a game about surviving a worn torn city where food is limited, and the player must make difficult moral decisions survive. The player controls a small group of characters who all need to be feed, get enough sleep, may need medical care, and other human needs. To look how *This War of Mine* creates empathy for the virtual characters, I will analysis how humanized characters and difficult dilemmas encourage empathy.

Introduction

This War of Mine (TWO M) is about the survival of group of characters in a besieged city. The developers, when describing this game, made it clear that you are not going to be able shoot your way to victory like most war themed games. This game focuses on the often-forgotten parts of war, the civilians caught in the destruction. The game gives the player a group of people who are hiding in a war-torn house with limited resources. The player uses a mouse to select characters, set their destinations, and perform actions such as eat food or craft items. Each character has a hunger, health, energy, and emotional state, as well as backstory and daily reflection of game events. The levels are cross sectionals of buildings and outside environments. The game is split into two different modes: daytime and nighttime. During the day, the characters are in a safe zone and the player can direct the characters to craft items, sleep, eat, and other upkeep tasks. Nighttime is when the player can send someone outside to scavenge materials, parts, food, or other valuable items.

Before analyzing the specific ways *TWO M* creates empathy for virtual characters, there needs to be an understanding of what empathy is. There many thoughts for what empathy is, but the most prominent is cognitive, affective, and multidimensional empathy.¹ Affective empathy refers to the ability understand the emotions of someone, such as the feeling of being happy or angry.² Cognitive empathy is about being able understand the mental state of another.³ It is taking the perspective of someone else through imagination. Lastly, multidimensional empathy includes both cognitive and affective empathy.⁴ *TWO M* enables players to feel both cognitive and affective empathy so this essay will focus on multidimensional empathy. With that definition of empathy, what design elements in *This War of Mine*

¹ Huang, Wen-Hao David, and Sharon Y. Tettegah. "Cognitive Load and Empathy in Serious Games: A Conceptual Framework." Chapter. *Gamification for Human Factors Integration: Social, Education, and Psychological Issues*. (IGI Global, 2014), 137-146. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-4666-5071-8.ch002>.

² Huang, David, and Tettegah, "Cognitive Load and Empathy in Serious Games," 137-146

³ Huang, David, and Tettegah, "Cognitive Load and Empathy in Serious Games," 137-146

⁴ Huang, David, and Tettegah, "Cognitive Load and Empathy in Serious Games," 137-146

create empathy for virtual characters? There are two ways that will be discussed in this paper: humanizing characters and difficult dilemmas.

Humanizing Virtual Characters

While the developers wanted to create realistic situation that civilians faced in war, their focus was humanizing the experience of war.⁵ This design decision was reflected in the mechanics of the game and encouraged the player empathize with virtual characters. The ability for the player to identify and understand virtual characters has been linked to great empathy.⁶ This essay will cover four ways that the characters are humanized. The first way a character is humanized is through their ability to talk. Characters will talk through text bubbles that appear above their heads to convey how they are feeling or what they want. They are the most talkative when they need something such as food or cigarettes.

In addition to talking, the characters have daily reflections and bios that humanize them. These daily reflections are usually a sentence long and represent the main thought of a character for one day. Like the text bubbles, these reflections can reveal to the player what a character desire, such as need cigarettes or food. The writing tends to be more powerful than the shortened text for the text bubbles, and as a result, stands out more. These reflections also will reveal how they feel about other NPCs and characters. They may respond with sympathy for other NPCs or react to the death of a character. Along side with the reflections, bios tell the player the character's story. One of the first things that a player can do at the start of a game is to read the bios of the characters. This shows that they are not just controllable pieces but ordinary people who are stuck in a war-torn city.

Another way the virtual characters are humanized is through fuzzy states. States, which are hunger, energy, health, and emotion, not only tell what a character needs, they frame the characters as people because they represent human needs. To reinforce this, the states do not give any percentages and instead represent degrees. For instance, hunger is categorized as hungry, very hungry, and starving. There are also sub states, such as "still hungry," which signal that the player has eaten, but the state has not changed. Using numbers or percentages would take away the human element of the characters. These fuzzy states let the player use their own experience of being hungry and imagine how a character is feeling.

Lastly, characters are humanized through their autonomy. There are times when a character will show autonomy by ignoring player input. During a playthrough, Bruno, one of my characters, was depressed after days of being hungry and other subtle factors. He had been depressed for a couple days, and after the death of another character, he broke down. After returning from a scavenger hunt, he walked into the house, but I was no longer able to control him. He sat on ground and put his hand on face, saying that there was no hope for us left. I had options to send another character to feed and talk to Bruno, which I did. Afterwards, he would frequently stop performing tasks for short moments and question the purpose of what he was doing. This combined with angry gestures and talking about his

⁵ Smale, Stephanie de, Martijn J. L. Kors, and Alyea M. Sandovar. "The Case of This War of Mine: A Production Studies Perspective on Moral Game Design." *Games and Culture* 14, no. 4 (June 1, 2019): 387–409. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412017725996>.

⁶ Bachen, Christine M., Pedro Hernández-Ramos, Chad Raphael, and Amanda Waldron. "How Do Presence, Flow, and Character Identification Affect Players' Empathy and Interest in Learning from a Serious Computer Game?" *Computers in Human Behavior* 64 (November 1, 2016): 77–87. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.06.043>.

feelings of hopelessness convey that Bruno was giving up living day to day with little food and little chance for survival. The fact that there moments in the game where the characters, that the player has full control of, can act own their own reinforces the human framing of these characters.

Difficult dilemmas

Difficult dilemmas force the player to make morally ambiguous decisions and, through reflection, empathize with the characters involved. The player usually is not empathizing during the main gameplay, but instead after a conflict is over. It is during the calmness when the player will reflect on their actions and empathize with the characters.⁷ To show the player the harsh conditions of civilians during wars, the developers of *TwoM* intentionally designed dilemmas to be morally ambiguous so that there is never a good choice to make.⁸ Since much of the tense arises for a lack of resources, a common dilemma is whether to steal from others. In one play through, I went to an abandoned villa to search for food and other supplies. When I got there, I heard two other people talking and realized that they were living here. In that moment, I had to decide whether to steal from them or walk away and find another place to scavenge. Because I was desperate for food and short on time, I choose to sneak around their place and steal from them. By interacting with these dilemmas, myself and others empathize with circumstances of the virtual characters.⁹

Conclusion

Both humanizing characters and difficult dilemmas were used to encourage the player to empathize with the virtual characters in *This War of Mine*. While only two ways were covered, these are not meant to be the only methods in game design, therefore, more games need to be analyzed to find more design patterns that encourage empathy for virtual characters. Furthermore, depending on the game, these methods may not translate well, which provides more reason to continue researching empathy in games. In addition to more design methods, further research needs to be done to determine if empathy in TWoM will affect empathy for civilians in real life situations and the effects of that.

⁷ Smethurst, Toby, and Stef Craps. "Playing with Trauma: Interreactivity, Empathy, and Complicity in The Walking Dead Video Game." *Games and Culture* 10, no. 3 (May 1, 2015): 269–90. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412014559306>.

⁸ Smale, Stephanie de, Kors, and Sandovar. "The Case of This War of Mine," 387–409.

⁹ Darvasi, Paul. "Peace, Conflict, and Empathy: Leveraging Violent Games for Global Good." In *Compassion and Empathy in Educational Contexts*, edited by Georgina Barton and Susanne Garvis, 143–64. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-18925-9_8.

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