VÄNTA, ÄR JAG HAN NU?
Identifikation och val i spel med fler än en protagonist.

WAIT, I’M HIM NOW?
Identification and choice in games with more than one protagonist.

Bachelor Degree Project in Media Arts, Aesthetics and Narration

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Abstract

This study examines correlations between player choice and identification in a multiple protagonist video game, seeking to determine whether a player’s identification with one or more player characters affects the way they make choices while playing. It discusses various definitions and types of identification as well as ways to create a successful narrative with multiple protagonists. The artefact created for the study is a text-based game with a branching narrative, where the player is required to make choices for three different characters, and a qualitative research method based on interviews with a small group of participants. The results show that players seek to identify with the player character even when there are more than one, and often use this as a basis for the choices they make, either by imagining themselves in the situation of the main character or by imagining that they are the main character. They do not usually base their choices while playing as a character on their identification or lack thereof with another, and regardless of how they made choices, most players made more or less the same ones. However, it did show that lack of identification made making choices more difficult for that character, which lessened their enjoyment of that storyline.

Keywords: video games, narrative, multiple protagonists, player choice, identification
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1 Introduction

This study merges two points of interest related to gaming and narrative. First, it has been noted by many that one of the biggest differences between narrative video games and other story-driven media - such as literature, drama and film - is the player’s ability to identify with the protagonist (Christy & Fox 2016, Klimmt, Hefner & Vorderer 2009). The protagonist, by being the character one controls, becomes in a video game an extension of the player. In a game with graphical representation of the character, when the player decides that the character will move in a certain direction, the character (usually) does. Instead of mostly observing the protagonist, the player controls them, and may even feel as though they are the protagonist.

Second, something that is instead less common in video games than in traditional media, is the multiple protagonist narrative. These are narratives which tell not only one story about one character, but many stories about many characters. In the case of games, they have more than one player character. Solstice (2016), Dreamfall (2017), and Telltale’s Game of Thrones (2014) are examples of story-driven games which include multiple playable characters, but compared to games with only one protagonist, they are far fewer. Compared to identification, there are few to no studies on multiple protagonist narratives in games.

The aim of this study is to analyze a game with multiple protagonists in relation to player identification with these characters. The study seeks to answer if the use of more than one player character with which players may try to identify how they navigate a branching narrative. For this purpose, an artefact was created using Twine (2009) which combined the branching narrative with that of a multiple protagonist narrative in a short, text-based game. Participants in the study were interviewed about their experiences, especially in relation to characters and choice, in a qualitative interview after playing the artefact.
2 Background

In a video game, the player controls the protagonists’ actions. They may be able to customize their name, appearance, background and personality; sometimes they can affect their storyline, even the ending of the game. This enables identification far beyond what is possible in traditional media (Christy & Fox 2016). But what exactly is identification? Christy and Fox defines it as “the degree to which individuals like a character, perceive characters as being similar to themselves, or empathize with a character” (Christy & Fox 2016 p. 283). By that definition almost any character which a player is attached to is included, regardless of why the player likes them. The first part of the background will look at some different definitions of identification and compare some of their aspects to find a definition that fits the scope of the study.

The second part of the background will examine the narrative structures of plots with multiple protagonists. The sources used for this are written on other media than video games, mainly film. This is due to the lack of academic studies written on the use of multiple protagonists in games, which in turn may be due to the prevalence of single-protagonist plots in games. However, even in film this kind of narrative has only recently caught the attention of academic study, although it has existed for a very long time (Oria Gomez 2010). This part of the background will define some different types of narratives with multiple protagonists to find what is typical and what is important for such narratives to work on film, knowledge that can then be applied to a video game.

2.1 Identification

2.1.1 Definitions of identification

Identification has been discussed and defined in various ways in relation to literature, TV and film, in which the audience is continually placed in the role of an observer, disengaged from the character or characters with whom they may identify (Klimmt, Hefner & Vorderer 2009). In such cases, identification may take the form of imagining oneself in the position of a character, empathizing with them by drawing from one’s own experiences, or imagining oneself to be beside the character or characters; standing in the same room and seeing the events unfold close, but not as, the character. However, Klimmt, Hefner and Vorderer argue that with video games these definitions are not sufficient. In video games, the player may create and customize their character to a greater or lesser degree, and affect the game’s storyline by making choices as the player character, sometimes resulting in a branching narrative that may have drastically different endings. Even in games a linear story and pre-determined character, players by virtue of being players - not readers, watchers or listeners - have a large degree of control over the character. They do not merely control a character in the sense that they “tell them” where to go and when to jump - they perform the physical actions that cause the character to walk and jump themselves (i.e. by pressing a button or moving a control stick); thereby they become the character (Klimmt, Hefner & Vorderer 2009).

Identification in video games can be defined as an experience of merging of the player with their player character. It leads to a temporary change of players’ self-perception, from their perception of themselves to their perception of the character they’re identifying with (Klimmt, Hefner & Vorderer 2009). Klimmt, Hefner and Vorderer do not argue that in order to identify
with a character, the user has to feel as though they are themselves similar to that character; rather they (temporarily) adopt traits which they perceive the character as having. If the character is perceived as strong and capable, a user who may not normally feel strong and capable themselves may, when identifying with the character, feel as though they are (Klimmt, Hefner & Vorderer 2009).

This definition is used by Van Looy et al. although they argue that similarity between the player and the player character may play a significant role in identification (Van Looy, Courtois, De Vocht & De Marez 2012). According to Van Looy et al., similarity can be a vital component of identification. Research show that people expect more rewarding interactions with similar individuals, and even that they are more likely to adopt traits and characteristics from them. This is also true for fictional characters. Players often feel closer to characters if they recognize themselves both in their physical appearance, and in their beliefs, personalities, experiences and behaviors. Perceived similarity is thus an important factor in identification, even if it also results in the player taking on certain characteristics that they do not have from the character they perceive as otherwise similar to themselves.

2.1.2 Types of identification

It is also important to note that dissimilarity can also be desired and a reason for identification with a character. In particular, one study found this to be the case with players with a high body mass index, who often preferred playing a character closer to what they perceived as an ideal body shape than one with a body shape similar to their own (Van Looy et al. 2012). This is, instead, a form of wishful identification, where a player identifies with a character because they possess traits or qualities which the player does not have but wishes to have. The character may be perceived as similar to the player in some areas - as we saw above, that kind of similarity encouraged the player to adopt traits which they did not have. Yet as with Klimmt, Hefner and Vorderer, this does not have to be the case: the important factor is the dissimilarity, the flaw or lack which the player “fixes” through identification with the player character. A player who does not see themselves as strong may identify with a strong character specifically because they want to be strong. Playing as the character temporarily makes the player feel as though they themselves are strong, a feeling which may persist for some time after they stop playing (Van Looy et al. 2012). Since identification with a game character leads to a temporary change of players’ self-perception, from their perception of themselves to their perception of the character they’re identifying with, players may temporarily forget their own troubles, shame or guilt which the character does not share (Klimmt, Hefner & Vorderer 2009).

2.1.3 Degrees of identification

Players, while playing, have a tendency to think of the player-character as themselves in a sense, leading to such sentences as: I must jump across this lava pit to reach that treasure chest, although, naturally, the player is sitting comfortably in their couch, with neither lava nor treasure nearby (Klimmt, Hefner & Vorderer 2009). Clearly, this is not the player momentarily believing they are standing in front of a lava pit. But they perceive themselves as being the player character, who is currently doing just that. They are stepping into the character’s shoes, experiencing the thrill of the lava pit jump.

However, it is debatable if the player is truly seeing the situation from that perspective, or if they are merely engaged in the game as a game: wanting to successfully make a difficult move to feel the triumph of an accomplishment, wanting the treasure in the chest to complete an
objective in the game, or wanting to beat a previous high score. Objectives and high scores are typically implemented for the player, not for the player character; they are not a part of roleplaying or the game world. In the player characters point of view they would be of little to no importance, and if the jump is dangerous and reaching the treasure chest optional, it might simply be too risky to consider. If the player identified with the player character at this point and at every level, perhaps they should feel apprehensive instead of thrilled, especially after dying a couple of times.

Identification with a player character is temporary and shifts continually throughout a gaming session (Klimmt, Hefner & Vorderer 2009). At times, a player may identify deeply with the player character, only to "die" - which in many games truly is depicted as death of the character - rendering the object of identification unavailable. While waiting for the last save point to load, the player then returns to their own self-perception, their real-world self. At other times, this un-identification is voluntary, perhaps even conscious. Studies on the game Grand Theft Auto, which has the player perform some morally ambiguous or outright wrong actions, show that many players attempt to distance themselves from the player character while performing those actions. For instance, they may focus on their own gameplay rather than the in-game consequences of their actions. This shows that players may identify with a character only to a certain point: they may not voluntarily identify with traits that they find undesirable, just as they may disengage from distressing situations.

2.1.4 Roleplaying

Klimmt, Hefner and Vorderer's definition of identification shares similarities with the concept of roleplaying, another important aspect of the player-player character relationship in video games. As with identification, roleplaying does not have a single definition and can be understood in multiple ways. Some definitions of roleplay focuses on the act of imagining oneself as someone or something else, or imagining oneself as oneself in a situation different from one's own current situation. However, others focus on the aspect of social cues and expectations as formative for the roleplaying experience: a person who roleplays takes up a role and, thus, a series of behaviors expected of someone in that role, while subsequently avoiding behaviors not expected by the same role. For instance, a child roleplaying as a teacher acts as they believe or know a teacher is supposed to act, and actively suppresses actions they perceive as more typical of a child (Klimmt, Hefner & Vorderer 2009).

According to Klimmt, Hefner and Vorderer, video game identification can be linked to both these definitions of roleplay. The player adopts a role, but the role may be more or less free; many games offer plenty of freedom in the ways that the role should be fulfilled, allowing the player to set their own boundaries or not set any at all. At the same time, acting outside the role may cause the player to get stuck or receive no response from the game, at which point it quickly becomes boring. Thus, it is in the players own interests to fulfill the role to some degree (Klimmt, Hefner & Vorderer 2009).

These findings are supported by the study The Mimesis Effect (Domínguez, Cardona-Rivera, Vance & Roberts 2016) aimed to find out how players fulfill their narrative role by their choices in a video game. A narrative role is a fictional set of narrative functions, such as behaviors, goals, motivations and actions performable by and attachable to, an entity. For example, the narrative roles examined by Domínguez et al. are those of the mage, the rogue and the fighter common among character classes in fantasy tabletop roleplaying games (Domínguez et al. 2016). These roles can be attached to a variety of character types, from player characters to antagonists to minor and support character. They are defined by the skills and traits they have
and do not have and their approach to problem-solving: the fighter relies on their expertise in armed combat, they are strong, do not use magic and are not stealthy. Mages avoid physical combat and favors spells; they use magic but are not strong or stealthy. Rogues try to strike their enemies from behind and avoid being seen; they are not strong and do not have magic, but they are stealthy. When presented with situations where they could approach a problem in ways typical of all three roles, a majority of the participants chose the approach that corresponded with their role. Those had that been given or chosen a role followed it even more closely than those that had not been given an explicit role at the beginning of the game; however, even the ones that had no role tended to adopt one and stick to it throughout (Domínguez, I. X. et al. 2016).

This kind of roleplay is more closely related to the aforementioned child roleplaying as a teacher, in that the players picked choices associated with their narrative role. The study does not ask the participants why they chose the options that they did; whether it had anything to do with which approach the players thought preferable, which would have pointed towards identification with the player character.

2.2 Narrative

2.2.1 Overview of multiple protagonist narratives

Ensemble films, multi-protagonist films, network plots, mosaic films, or simply alternative plots, are all names for films which have one thing in common: they do not follow the common narrative structure of a single protagonist in a linear plot (Aronson 2010, Oria Gomez 2010, Ramirez Berg, Thompson and Bordwell, 2003). Ensemble films, Aronson writes, are films which consist of several stories that occur simultaneously and chronologically, typically with a large cast, and often without a traditional main plot (Aronson 2010). The multiple storylines are often of equal importance and do not occur in flashbacks. An ensemble film may have time jumps, but multiple story lines must occur at the same time. The network plot of Thompson and Bordwell is not as narrowly defined and doesn’t necessarily differentiate between plots happening in flashbacks and plots happening at the same time. The important aspect of the plot is that it shows characters whose lives intercept, cross or affect each other in some way (Thompson and Bordwell, 2003).

2.2.2 Types of multiple protagonist narratives

Aronsson writes about three kinds of ensemble films. The multiple protagonist film is about a group of people who together experience an adventure, or are brought together for a single plot (Aronson 2010). Though not all of the characters in this group have to be of equal importance to the story, at least some of them do. The story is not about an individual within the group, but the group as a whole. Otherwise, the plot is simply a single-protagonist plot with a large supporting cast (Aronson 2010). The “adventure” of the film can be literal or figurative depending on the demands of the plot. It can be a journey or quest the group undertakes together, but the group may also come together for a show, a wedding, class, as family, or as neighbors (Aronson 2010). The group’s views and their responses to the plot are the focus of the narrative.

This type of narrative work well on film, but as the structure of it makes it important that the protagonists are together for most of the time, it may be less successful as a video game. The protagonists need to interact with each other as a group. In a video game, this creates a problem: as the player controls the protagonists they must now either control several
characters at once, or switch between characters and consequently losing control of the ones not currently controlled.

However, an ensemble film doesn’t have to have the protagonists be seen at the same time. The **double journey** is rather similar to a multiple protagonist film, but features only two central characters, who are journeying (literally or metaphorically) either towards, from, or parallel with each other (Aronson 2010). Their storylines should be connected and may mirror each other, but the characters may be apart for much of the time (Aronson 2010). The **tandem narrative** has several storylines connected by a theme, but not with the protagonists interacting (Aronson 2010). The storylines should take place at the same time and in the same geographical area (which can mean the same school, city or even continent) and like with the double journey, their storylines should be connected - in this case by their shared theme - but the characters are not required to meet.

The tandem narrative is the type of narrative that will be used in this study. However, the term **multiple protagonist narrative** will continue be used, due to the frequent mention of **multiple protagonists**.

### 2.2.3 Creating a multiple protagonist narrative

One of the challenges in writing ensemble films is making the mental transition from writing a regular, single-protagonist narrative to a different one (Aronson 2010). Writing a multiple protagonist narrative is neither about forcing the narrative into a traditional structure it does not fit, nor about disregarding traditional structures altogether. Importantly, these narratives follow the typical three-act structure that is common in today’s films (Aronson 2010). Like any film using this structure, they have a strong opening that catches the audience’s attention, a suspenseful middle with rising tension, and finally a climax that ends with closure for the characters and audience. Using multiple plotlines and protagonists, this is accomplished in the way the stories intertwine and the way the narrative jumps between them.

Another important part of the multiple protagonist narratives is the connection between the stories. Each story should have a reason to be told; there should also be a reason they are told together. Their messages need to be clear, as do the connections between them and the theme (Aronson 2010). To achieve this, a multiple protagonist narrative may have an overarching story connecting the individual stories together. This overarching story, or “macro”, works similarly to the main plot of single-protagonist narratives. It is often arranged as a three-part structure with a beginning, a climax and an end, both for the macro and for each storyline within it (Aronson 2010).

Not all narratives with multiple protagonists have a macro plot, and some manages to successfully tie storylines together without one. Theme and morals can also be used to connect the various storylines so that they make sense to the audience in the way they unfold (Aronson 2010). But one should take care that every storyline is good both in relation to the others, and on its own. If not, the storylines may feel like mere variations of a theme with no individual values (Aronson 2010).

### 2.2.4 Interactive narratives

As has been discussed, interaction is a requirement for players to experience the kind of identification that is unique to video games. Interactivity – the possibility for the player to manipulate the narrative, and even the requirement that they do so for the narrative to continue – is a defining aspect of games, and what sets them apart from traditional media (Aarseth, 1997). Thus it is not enough to look at how to create a multiple protagonist narrative.
It is also vital to adapt this narrative to a video game, as an interactive story where the player has a sense of control and agency.

In a story-driven game, especially a game that is presented entirely through text, to create a narrative in which the player has agency is especially tricky. Most players do not mind giving up some freedom or interactivity to experience a good narrative, but they need to feel that their actions are what drives the story and game (Heussner, Finley, Brandes Hepler & Lemay, 2015). The type of narrative most often used in story-driven games are branching narratives. In a branching narrative, the player makes choices which affect individual sections of plot and gameplay, such as letting them choose between paths to a similar goal, or choose between sides in a conflict. The story then diverges depending on the choice the player made. In some branching narratives, the different paths come back together at certain points, ensuring that the story stays on course and that some scenes, dialogues and plot points can be reused for all story paths to limit the amount of work the writer has to put in (Heussner et al. 2015).

The player can also be given an illusion of agency by giving them choices that will not affect the overall plot, but which will be reflected by the narrative in smaller ways. For example, Bateman (2007) suggests a scenario in which is playing a third-person mystery game. While investigating an apartment, the player turns on faucets in the bathroom and flushes the toilet only to test how much of the game environment is interactive. Nothing in the game tells the player to do this. But later on, the player will hear NPCs complain about the water pressure in the house, and recognize this as a consequence of their actions earlier. None of this affects the overall plot, but the player is given an illusion of agency and their investment in the story increases (Bateman, 2007).
3 Problem

The background looked at definitions from the writings of Christy and Fox, Van Looy et al. and Klimmt, Hefner and Vorderer and saw that they vary in both how broad they are and whether they focus on similarities or dissimilarities between the player and player character. While Christy and Fox’s definition includes players who perceive themselves as similar to a character, empathize a character or even simply like a character, Van Looy et al. and Klimmt, Hefner and Vorderer rather defines it as the player temporarily shifting some of their personality to match that of the player character. Similarity can be a vital part of it, but sometimes a dissimilarity is preferred, as when players take on traits they wish they had rather than traits they do have. For this study, a mix of Van Looy et al.’s and Klimmt, Hefner and Vorderer’s definitions will be used: identification will be defined as when a player feels as though they are feeling and thinking like the player character, regardless if this is because of a temporary shift, or because they perceive their thoughts and feelings to always be similar.

A player identifying strongly with a certain character may act, feel and choose differently while playing than they a player with greater emotional distance to the character (Klimmt, Hefner & Vorderer 2009). Thus, it is interesting to consider what affect the use of a multiple protagonist plot has on a video game. Will players identify more strongly with one of the characters they play as? Does the degree to which they identify with a character affect their interest in that character’s storyline compared to the others? With characters they identify less with, do they play through their storyline faster or with less thoughtfulness, and do they make decisions differently? With the rise of alternative plot formations in film, it is not unlikely that a similar trend may occur in video game narratives, making it a relevant subject.

Narrowing this down, the question this study aims to answer is:

In a narrative game with multiple protagonists and storylines, how does the player’s level of identification with a character affect the choices they make as they play the game?

3.1 Method

For this study, a game with multiple protagonists and a branching narrative dictated by player choice was created. Participants in the study played the game, which took around 30 minutes, and were then interviewed about their experiences.

3.1.1 Artefact

The artefact was developed using Twine (2009) and has no graphic elements besides text. The key gameplay mechanic is the choices presented to the player, which affect the narrative in two ways: directly in that the choices lead to different paths in the text, which later converge, and indirectly in that the choices affect variables, which affect later events or choices. It has three protagonists, and the choices made within the storyline of one character have effects on those of other characters.

The narrative follows the structure for the tandem narrative introduced in the background. The story is split into short sections of roughly the same length, with each section is told from the perspective of one of the protagonists, giving each protagonist around the same amount of space in the narrative. All of the protagonists are in close proximity to each other but have individual storylines, although they intercept each other at key plot points. Additionally, the story has a macro plot that ties the storylines and protagonists together. The artefact does not
contain a conclusive story as the goal is not the resolution of the plotlines, but giving the players enough time to get introduced to the characters.

3.1.2 Study
As the question the study aims to answer is concerned with the participants’ individual thought processes and emotions, a qualitative study with personal interviews of the participants was deemed to be necessary (Østbye, Knapskog, Helland & Larsen 2008). The players were given short instructions on how to play the game, as many were inexperienced with the format of a twine game, and then to take a screenshot or photo of the last page, which showed a summary of the choices they had made during the game.

The interviews were semi-structured with pre-written questions and themes, but participants were encouraged to speak freely and some follow-up questions were improvised (Østbye et al. 2008). This allowed for more in depth discussions about interesting aspects of the players’ experience, and they were given room to talk about what they perceived as most important or what stood out to them during the playing sessions. Notes were taken during the interviews, and some were recorded with the participants’ permissions.

The goal for the study was to find at least ten participants, but due to the artefact being re-worked following the pilot study, only seven participated in the final study. However, due to the qualitative nature of the interviews, the small number was made up for by the extensive material gathered from each participant and the more detailed answers than would have been possible with a larger group of participants, as that would have required shorter interviews.

3.1.3 Ethical aspects
All players participated in the study voluntarily, and were informed beforehand that they could quit at any time as well as request to have the results from their participation removed from the study for as long as it had not received a passing grade. Those who were recorded were asked beforehand and informed that the recordings would be stored as safely as possible and deleted after the study had received a passing grade.

3.1.4 Analysis
Qualitative studies provide difficulties in analyzing and organizing the gathered data, as it is complex and often not as easily converted to measurable facts as the data a quantitative study might give (Østbye et al. 2008). The data must be analyzed in relation to the problem - in this case, the focus will be on the identification of the participants with the player characters. It must be systematically gathered, as through interviews and observations, and its relevance must be evaluated (Østbye et al. 2008).
4 Implementation

The game created for this study was called The Ascended Kingdom and featured a fantasy themed story set in the fictional land called The Seven Isles. It featured the opening scenes of a longer story which functioned as an introduction to the world and, most importantly, the main characters which the participants played as. The main characters were Cassian, a male guard, Gwyneira, a foreigner about to marry the country’s king, and Felix, an orphan and the assistant to the castle’s physician. The characters were never given a specified age, but were intended to be around their early twenties, the same age as most of the participants of the study, although this was not done deliberately.

The artefact was made as a joint project between the author of this study and another student at the University of Skövde, Amanda Thim. As will be discussed in more detail below, the prototype went through two major iterations. In the first iteration, the plotting and structuring of the story was done together by the creators of the artefact, and save for some smaller changes it remained largely the same throughout the iterations. Thim then wrote the parts of the artefact narrated from the perspective of Gwyneira and Cassian, and the author of this study wrote the parts narrated by Felix and a fourth character, Orinthia, who was removed from the second iteration. The second iteration was done exclusively for this study by the author. It uses much of the text written by Thim either as it were, or in altered form, but the story was restructured and shortened. Thus, it should be assumed that the basis of the plots and characters were made jointly by the author of this study and Thim, and that the parts of the prototype focusing on Gwyneira and Cassian were either fully or partly written by her.

4.1 Narrative

According to Christy and Fox, much of the research surrounding players' identification with player characters has focused on “formal” features such as the ability to customize and control the player characters - something which do increase identification with a character (Christy & Fox 2016). Less focus has been paid to the narrative aspects of gaming, but one study proved this to also be of importance. With that in mind, a narrative game might be more likely to cause identification in the player. This is highly relevant for this study, as creating an artefact that allowed the customization of a graphically represented character would have required much more time, resources and programming knowledge than was available, and the game has instead been made entirely text-based, with no graphic elements and little coding. Though it should be remembered that Christy and Fox's definition of identification with a player character is wider than the definition used in this study, and their findings may not all be applicable here.

While creating an engaging narrative is important, it was assumed it would be more rewarding to create characters which the players got to know at depth than a full story with a satisfying end. Thus, it was decided that the game would feature the first part of a longer story. This would allow more in-depth descriptions of the characters and story world, as there was less of a rush to get a story going. However, a rough storyline of the full game was planned out to make structuring the beginning chapters easier. The major conflicts of the full story may only be introduced in the game, but they create suspense and a sense of a forward motion.
4.2 Worldbuilding

Fantasy is a common genre in role-playing games, seen in classic table-top rpgs such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, as well as the popular series *Elder Scrolls, Dragon Age, The Witcher, Fable* and *World of Warcraft*. As we have seen, this can be a part of wishful identification and escapism, and thus positive in creating identification. However, it also requires some world building to create the setting.

The setting defines the world that the game takes place in (Bateman, 2007). This includes not only locations but character races, languages, laws of physics (both real and fictional, such as magic) technology and geography. Games set in the real world still requires world building, but it is even more important in worlds unfamiliar to the player. These need more specific explanations for the player to feel comfortable in. Two approaches to worldbuilding for video games are the micro and macro perspectives (Heussner et al., 2015). The macro perspective (not to be confused with the macro plot mentioned elsewhere in this study) is a top-down approach starting with general concepts and ideas of the world as a whole, such as the sizes and locations of various cities, or even the creation of the world. The micro perspective begins at a smaller scale, with a single location or an event such as a coronation or election, and expand from there (Heussner et al., 2015). For this story, a smaller approach seemed appropriate as the game would be limited to a single location, the palace. The Seven Isles were first sketched out, adding customs, historical events and other cultural aspects as needed, and the neighboring kingdom of Glannoweth was somewhat more loosely defined.

4.2.1 Macro plot

Following Aronson’s guidelines for tandem narratives the game has a macro plot or overarching story which concerns all of the four characters, as well as individual storylines that are tied to the macro plot (Aronson, 2010).

In the macro plot, the small kingdom of Seven Isles is about to enter an alliance with the much larger neighboring kingdom Glannoweth. Having been at war for a long time ever since the Seven Isles broke away from Glannoweth following a rebellion, the alliance is to ensure a lasting peace but isn’t welcomed by many people. Especially among the inhabitants of the Seven Isles, many suspect it’s really a cover for Glannoweth to invade. To seal the alliance a Glannish noblewoman will marry the king of the Seven Isles, thus becoming its queen. Like the alliance, this marriage is seen by many of the Isles’ inhabitants as suspicious and unwelcome, and their displeasure is evident at the arrival of the noblewoman.

At the start of the game, the noblewoman, Gwyneira, is travelling towards the royal castle on one of the Isles on board of a flying ship. Escorting her is the Griffin Guard, riding on flying griffins, of which Cassian is a part. The narrative alternates between his and Gwyneira’s perspectives as they approach the castle. When they reach the castle, Felix is in the crowd watching their arrival. He and Gwyneira becomes witnesses to a Glannish nobleman, Lord Eurig, striking his servant as punishment for a minor offense. Felix tries to stop the nobleman, who then becomes angry with him. The game ends with Cassian bringing the injured servant to the clinic, where Felix tends to him, while Gwyneira finally meets the king.

4.2.2 Characters and individual storylines

When creating character it is important that they stand out not only in comparison to the protagonists of other games, but also to other protagonists in the same game, if there are
several, or in the game franchise (Bateman, 2007). Therefore the characters were created to be distinctly different from each other, and to all have their own goals and motivations, as well as different positions in life. Bearing in mind that both similarity to a character and desire to be more like them can be important factors in identification, they all have common, relatable characteristics as well as more unusual ones, with the latter often blending in with the fantasy theme. They have both good and bad qualities, with the player sometimes being able to choose which way to lean.

One way to create characters that stand out from each other is to give them different approaches to solving problems (Bateman, 2007). As mentioned in chapter 2, three common and differentiated approaches were studied in *The Mimesis Effect* (Domínguez et al. 2016): the fighter, rogue and mage. The fighter is active, strong and straightforward and uses their physical prowess to solve problems. The mage is not only magical, but also intelligent, thoughtful and learned, and prefers to use their knowledge and willpower. The rogue is stealthy and acrobatic. These roles were used for three of the protagonists of *The Ascended Kingdom*. A fourth role was also created: the healer, who uses compassion, skill with people, and knowledge of healing to solve problems. The first iteration of the artefact had four protagonists, as will be discussed further below. The protagonist which was eventually removed had the role of the rogue.

The roles of the protagonists affect not only their skills and ways to solve problems, but also their narrative roles. Cassian, the guard, is a fighter. While he never fights in the game, it is natural for him to be physically active; he is also straightforward and restless. Gwyneira, while she has no magic powers, prefers to avoid conflict altogether by using her intelligence and knowledge of the world – knowledge which she has been able to acquire due to her privileged upbringing giving her access to higher education. She is perceptive, anticipating problems before they arrive so as to be more prepared. Felix is quite literally a healer, being a physician’s assistant, a fact which defines his life in the castle and his storyline.

With these roles in mind, the characters were given personality traits, goals and motivations. Cassian is idealistic, a little naive, but well-meaning, and takes his duties as a guard seriously. As a member of the Griffin Guard he flies on the titular animal as a part of his job. He is new to the guard and eager to show his capabilities, but also has a streak of mischief, shown in how he uses humor when speaking to his superior captain Nerva. Though he’s aware of the political situation surrounding the arranged marriage, he is mostly excited about escorting Gwyneira and lord Eurig as it is an important mission.

Gwyneira is dutiful, more introverted, wants to make her family proud by fulfilling her part of the alliance. She struggles with social anxiety and fear of the future as the queen of the Seven Isles, and grows increasingly fearful as the story progresses. With only lord Eurig to accompany her, she is isolated and lacks allies. But she shows both intelligence in how she deals with the events of the game and, somewhat depending on the player’s choices, inner strength.

Felix is the assistant to the palace’s physician. He’s caring and compassionate, but opposed to alliance with Glannoweth and angry about the marriage, showing that his caring nature doesn’t mean he’s soft or naïve. Felix is introduced working alone in the clinic, before he leaves to watch Gwyneira’s arrival. When he sees lord Eurig abusing his servant, he intervenes without thinking, and the player can decide whether to insist on helping Alun or backing off when confronted by lord Eurig.
Other characters mentioned by the participants in this study are Lord Eurig, captain Nerva and the servant. Lord Eurig was written as the antagonist, and while he is reasonably nice to Gwyneira and to Cassian when Gwyneira is nearby, he is arrogant, prejudiced and cruel to people below his station, including Cassian if they have a conversation when Gwyneira is not around. Captain Nerva is Cassian’s superior. She is firm but not without a heart, and he looks up to her. The servant, Alun, is more important in his role as a victim of lord Eurig’s cruelty, but also provides some insight into the politics of Glannoweth.

4.3 Artefact

4.3.1 Iterations

The first version of the artefact included two “chapters” of the story and four protagonists. The prototype had a focus on building plot and on introduced the characters slowly. The choices the player was presented with often affected the current character’s storyline, but not as often that of other characters. Furthermore, there were few choices that explicitly referred to other characters or where it was obvious they would affect another character. The pilot study showed that the test players were able to relate to the characters, but did not provide much information about how identification affected their choices. Thus, the artefact was reworked. As the artefact had been much longer than intended, it was shortened down to only contain the events of the first chapter, and the character Orinthia was omitted as there would not have been much room to include her and thus not to relate to her. The narrative structure was also changed so that the perspective switched between the protagonists more often, which made it possible for the player’s choice as one character to have a notable effect on another character soon after it was made, rather than much later.

A more structured approach was also made to the choices themselves. All choices leave the player with either two or three options. Many dialogue choices contain one diplomatic or neutral option, one option to be humoristic or sarcastic, and one option that is more blunt and to the point, sometimes even rude. A player can choose to stick to one set of options throughout, one set of options for each character, or a mix depending on situation or whims. The options give different results - sometimes a sarcastic option will give a negative result, and sometimes it will cause other characters to laugh. Other choices present the player with either an action or inaction. The player may choose for Cassian to show off his skills on his griffin, or simply let it be. Gwyneira may stay inside the ship she’s on, or follow lord Eurig onto the deck.

At the end of the game, the player is presented with three choices in which one character was asked to judge another. While playing as Gwyneira the player has to decide whether Felix should be punished for intervening between lord Eurig and his servant or not. At this point in the story, there is no reason for Gwyneira to know that Felix is a good person who most likely does not deserve to be punished. Lord Eurig, an important ally to her despite his disagreeable personality, argues for her to punish him. Later, Cassian is told by Alun, the servant, that Gwyneira is most likely going to be a bad queen for the Seven Isles, as she is from Glannoweth, and the player must either agree with him or agree. Alun also tells Felix that Cassian seems like a good person, and again the player can agree or disagree with him.

Finally, to further encourage the player to quickly become acquainted to the main characters, their introduction was prefaced by a short passage of text which immediately put the player in their shoes and explained the character’s current goal. Similar passages also appeared every time the narrative switched perspective to make it clear to the player when this happened.
4.3.2 Gameplay

The artefact is structured as passages of text, and the player progresses through the story via the links through which they influence the playable character’s actions. They are given various options to react to what they hear and see, ask questions, express their opinions and solve problems. Choices between links leading to different passages create multiple paths. Though these paths always converge after a single passage, variables are used to keep track of which options the player has picked in all previous choices, allowing them to affect the story any time. Most passages are between one and three paragraphs long. Some, instead of ending with a choice of multiple links, only presents the player with a ’next’ link. This keeps the passages shorter, dividing text between multiple passages when there are longer breaks between choices. When the perspective changes to a different character, it begins with a passage stating which character is now the player character and what they are currently doing, as a quick introduction to the present scene. There are between one and two choices for each character before the perspective changes, and four or five choices for each character in total.
5 Evaluation

5.1 The study

As mentioned previously, due to the time taken to improve the artefact, there was less time than desired for the following study. Seven people participated in the final study. The only requirements for participating were that the test players should be comfortable with reading in English and with fictional literature (in the form of books, games or other media) preferably but not necessarily fantasy; this was to ensure that the medium itself would not interfere with their engagement with the story. Though this was not a requirement, most participants played other games often, and many of them had played similar games to the artefact such as text-based games or visual novels at least a few times before. The gender of the players was not taken into consideration when they were selected for the study, but ended up being as equal as possible, with four female and three male participants.

5.1.1 The characters

The first question aimed to find out which of the player characters (Cassian, Gwyneira and Felix) the players preferred, why they preferred that character, and how, if at all, it affected their gaming experience – either when playing as that character, or when playing as the others. The second question was a reversal of the first, asking which character the player liked the least. The questions yielded the following results:

Gwyneira was the most universally liked character; four participants had her as their favorite player character. Their reasons varied. Two participants found her story to be fascinating and thus more interesting; one of them said that “Gwyneira had the most interesting story, the one you wanted to read the most of”, and the other that it was “fascinating, even if it’s not relatable”, because there was more at stake for her. Said player also felt drawn towards Gwyneira because she was the only female player character and she was often more drawn to characters of her own gender. No other participant noted this as a reason for which character they liked best, and on the whole that does not seem to have affected results much. Of those who liked Gwyneira best, two were male and two female; of those who preferred Cassian, one was male and one female, and the one who preferred Felix was female.

The other two participants who had Gwyneira as their favorite instead focused on her relatability. One said that the choices they made for her felt like choices they might make in real life. Another compared her situation to living abroad:

“...She’s very plain in a way. She’s this a bit typical fantasy main character, a normal person who in some way ends up in a strange situation, but I can feel sometimes when I’ve been to places in Tokyo, ’this is a cool place, but I’m just a normal person.’”

The two participants who liked Cassian best also picked up on him being a “typical main character”. One said that he, being a guard or soldier in a more active role, resembled the main characters in the kind of books, games and films he usually enjoyed the most. The other participant picked up on Cassian’s personality, saying they felt he was “a chill dude” and “the main character who will get together with the queen [Gwyneira]”.

The final participant had Felix as their favorite if they had to pick one, but there was no strong bias; the participant didn't feel as though they got a clear picture of Felix, but liked that “he helped people”.

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Three of the participants did not have a least favorite character, while those who did all liked Felix the least. He was perceived as sympathetic by most, but harder to describe. His situation was less interesting, he was more difficult to relate to, or the players didn’t get a grip on the character. Only one person answered that they actively disliked him. They were not interested in his storyline, found him annoying, and didn’t like the play as him at all. The other participants all said that they liked Felix but found him the least engaging if they had to choose, and that they did not mind playing as him, though some experienced a little more difficulty because they did not know what choices to make due to not relating as much to the character.

5.1.2 Engagement
The third and fourth questions regarded player engagement with the story and how they felt while playing it. The purpose of these questions were to see when the participants felt the most immersed in the game – for example if they felt stronger engagement when they were playing as a certain character, and if switching between characters caused them to lose engagement. Put together with the previous questions, this might show if players felt more immersed when playing as their favorite character, or if there were other factors playing in.

Though most people didn’t feel any strong emotions while playing beyond enjoyment of or interest in the story, two of the players felt anger when lord Eurig struck the servant; one said they felt angrier than any of the player characters in the scene. Another player said the following about a choice in which they, as Cassian, could choose to give their griffin free rein to fly in the air:

“I thought I would like to but I didn’t really dare to because I was afraid of the Lord Ambassador. So I felt a bit afraid that they’d do something if I did something wrong.”

All players were drawn into the story, becoming engaged with the game and the characters. They mentioned specific moments when they felt this even more strongly: when Cassian talked to captain Nerva, because they became interested in their relationship, when they were able to fly freely with Cassian, and when Gwyneira met the king and the assembly, a moment the player felt that had been built up from the beginning to something momentous. Two felt that the engagement grew as the story went on, but not in any specific moment. One had hoped “something would happen” when they were flying as Cassian, wanting something exciting like a sudden attack or a battle to occur. Switching between characters caused some players to feel withdrawn from the narrative the first time it happened, but all but one felt that it improved as the game went on and they became used to it. Some noted that putting the breaks in natural places helped with the switch.

5.1.3 Choices
The fifth question concerned the final choice in Gwyneira’s storyline, where she was asked to decide if Felix should be punished or not. The participants were asked to describe their thought process when presented with this choice and how they made their decision; if it was based on their feelings for Felix, on what they felt would be the wisest choice, the choice most in character for Gwyneira, or something else. They were also asked if they believed they would have made a different decision had they not played as Felix. If this would be the case, it would indicate players are influenced by the storylines of characters they are not currently playing as when making decisions that might concern them, using information from those storylines or being affected by feelings for those characters which do not reflect the current player character's feelings.
This was the only choice in which all participants picked the same option, as no one had Felix punished. A majority of the players considered the consequences, that it would seemingly be bad for Gwyneira if she punished Felix, and all mentioned her kindness, saying that it seemed fitting for her personality to pardon him. One said: “I thought she seemed to be a slightly softer person, that she didn’t want someone punished.” Two of the players thought they might have chosen differently if they hadn’t played as Felix previously, but weren’t certain. Three thought they would not but still did take into consideration that they knew Felix and didn’t want him to be punished.

The next question asked the participants to describe how they made their choices in general. This would indicate if they took a different approach to the more obviously crucial decision regarding Felix, or if their approach to that choice was the same as other choices, or if there were other instances in which their decisions were made in unusual ways compared to most of their test session.

Three of the players did primarily what they thought the characters would have done, two what they themselves would have done, and two a mix of both. One player noted that the characters’ personalities depended partly on the choices that was made by the player, and that he “built the characters as I would have done or thought they should have done.” One other player also made choices depending on the story or characters they wanted to create rather than on what was definitely there.

5.2 Analysis

Interactive stories end up somewhere between games and traditional media. Aarseth (1997) argues that the interactive narratives of video games, which he calls cybertext, is more than text, and that the theories and concepts that is usually applied to traditional media cannot be applied to cybertext. But when looking at the answers from the participants in the study, some of what they say can still be traced back to such concepts. In the first chapter, identification in relation to traditional media was brought up. It was found that it may take the form of imagining oneself in the position of a character, empathizing with them by drawing from one’s own experiences, or imagining oneself to be beside the character or characters (Klimmt, Hefner & Vorderer 2009).

This was one of the ways in which the test players related to the player characters. Most, but not all, of the participants showed an inclination to put themselves into the minds of the characters they played as. More often they did so with the character or characters they felt similar to. Four of the participants people liked Gwyneira best, two Cassian, and one had no preference, but was slightly more drawn to Felix. The reasons players preferred Gwyneira varied greatly however. One player drew from their experiences abroad to empathize with Gwyneira, and most players made some of their decisions based on what they thought they would have done in the same situation. To some, she was relatable, but to others it was her situation that was the most interesting and fascinating. That there was much at stake around her was also mentioned as a positive factor, as was the fact that she, being a foreigner in the Seven Isles as opposed to Cassian and Felix, saw her surroundings as a newcomer, which was what the player also felt like.

The fact that they liked Gwyneira best did not translate to all players into feeling more strongly for her, or experiencing her emotions more vividly. Most people who felt that their feelings at times mirrored those of the character they played as felt this with Cassian, or with both Cassian and Gwyneira, even if she was their favorite.
This is not the merging of minds which Klimmt, Hefner & Vorderer defined as identification in video games, where the player perceive that they are the character (Klimmt, Hefner & Vorderer, 2009). However, it does correspond with what Van Looy et al. writes about similarity identification: players feel closer to characters if they recognize themselves in their beliefs, personalities, experiences and behaviors (Van Looy et al. 2012). From the way the participants talked about choices, it is clear that they expected them to have consequences, even if they were never explicitly told so. Moreover, even though when speaking of their engagement with the characters and narrative they seemed to empathize with them more than they identified with them, there are instances where the latter seems to be more true. One participant said, about how it felt playing as Felix, the character he thought it was the most difficult to relate to:

“It felt different because it didn’t feel as though it were me in the same way.”

From this, it can be concluded that the participant felt as though Cassian and Gwyneira were him to some extent - in other words, he identified with them.

When players did not identify with a character, it was sometimes because it was more difficult to relate or understand their motives, and sometimes because they were less interesting, or a mix of both. Felix, the character least preferred by the participants, was found to be harder to relate to. The players said that they didn’t know his motivations, that he felt less relevant or involved in the story, and that his situation or person was less interesting. He was not seen as unlikeable except by one participant, rather he was sympathetic but boring. People also felt somewhat less strongly for Felix. As mentioned some felt emotions that mirrored Cassian’s or Gwyneira’s emotions, but none did so for Felix; one participant mentioned they felt strongly for him, but not as him. Felix was also never mentioned as a character where the player felt more engaged in the story, as Gwyneira and especially Cassian did. Three of the participants felt that switching player character to Felix, either the first time he was introduced or every time, was more abrupt or game-breaking than switching between Cassian and Gwyneira. This can be compared to only two participants who only felt that the first change of perspective was confusing.

The participants were either less interested in Felix's story altogether, or it was because he was geographically and thematically in another place than the others. In the latter case, it helped when he moved to where the action took place, as when he left the clinic to watch Gwyneira arrive, thus coming closer to the rest of the story. However, those who were neutral or somewhat positive to Felix didn’t feel as though they played through his storyline differently than the other characters which they may have liked more. One player felt that it was harder to make decisions for Felix due to them not being able to relate and thus not knowing what to do; another simply was not interested in Felix and didn’t want to play as him at all. For others, making choices as Felix was little different than making choices for Cassian and Gwyneira.

When it comes to the choices made specifically to try to assess if identification affected player choice and how, results vary. When playing as Felix in the last section of the game, the players had to choose between agreeing and disagreeing with a positive assessment of Cassian. Five of the participants agreed, including all who picked Cassian as their favorite character. Five of the participants agreed, including all who picked Cassian as their favorite character. Furthermore, all those who felt the most for Cassian (as answered in the fourth question) also agreed with the positive judgment. The two who did not either related more to Gwyneira or no one in particular. Those who picked the disagreed option also said that they tried to act the way the characters would have acted, whereas the other five either did what they themselves would have done, a mix of both, or they picked options depending on the outcome they wanted.
This might indicate that their opinion of Cassian informed their judgement in this question, despite Felix not having access to the same information they had. Even when players try to roleplay, their own biases may not be completely ignored.

These results are somewhat different from the choice in which Cassian was asked to judge whether Gwyneira would be a good or a bad queen. Here only four of the players agreed. Of those who agreed with this negative assessment, two had Gwyneira as their favorite character, which is the same number as those who disagreed. Out of those who agreed, three stated that they tried to pick the options they thought the character they were currently playing would have picked, and one that they did what they themselves would have done. Of the ones who disagreed, it was a mix, or they made decisions according to the outcome they wanted. It is worth noting that most players felt more secure in their understanding of Cassian than they did of Felix, and that some noted this made it more difficult to make choices from his perspective. Thus it is possible that players, knowingly or not, resorted to their own judgement of Cassian rather than of Felix', whereas they could more easily assess what Cassian might think of Gwyneira.

In *Cybertext*, Aarspeth (1997) writes that reading a cybertext not only requires the reader (or player) to interpret it, as they would a traditional text, but also to take control of the text. When trying to know a cybertext the player must make an effort. If they succeed the result is intimacy with the text. While he speaks of text in a broader sense than character, still it is interesting to note that in the case of Felix, players tried and failed to know him, and their failure did result in a lack of intimacy - of understanding and relating to the character. The lack of intimacy, in turn, meant that it was more difficult to make choices the way they wanted, by trying to think as the character, and thus, their narrative control was somewhat lessened. One might also add that Felix was created as a different role than the rogue, fighter and mage which *The Mimesis Effect* found the most common in fantasy games, while Cassian and Gwyneira were based on the fighter and mage (Domínguez et al. 2016). It is not within the scope of this study to delve into the use of narrative roles, and it is not large enough to draw any conclusions, but perhaps this is one reason why Felix was less understood by the players - and maybe even why the one participant who preferred him to the others, even though she also found it hard to relate to him, was the participant with the least gaming experience.

On a final interesting point, though most participants role-played by either imagining themselves in the player character's situation, or thinking as the player character, one of the participants strongly leaned towards a different playstyle. This participant, who was the one with the most experience of similar text-based branching games, saw Cassian as the main character of the game, hoped he and Gwyneira would become a couple, and planned their choices according to these assumptions and desires. When playing as Gwyneira they could chose to stay inside the cabin of the ship or walk outside the where they knew Cassian were, and chose for her to walk outside. When Cassian talked to her and lord Eurig, the participant choose for him to make a joke in the hopes that it would be positive for his and Gwyneira’s relationship. They also wanted Gwyneira to be a good character, which was a factor in their decision to pardon Felix.

The participant also assigned roles to the characters that were neither explicitly told nor implied, casting Cassian as the sole main character of the game and Gwyneira as his love interest. Perhaps this is one reason they felt that Felix was abundant or not involved in the story, as by the time they got to his introduction, they had already assigned these roles to the other two characters and set up expectations for the game. This participant was also the only one to see the Glannish as the “good guys” and the Seven Isles as the antagonists in the game.
They saw lord Eurig as a good person up until he struck the servant, which in turn made them feel more betrayed than most of the other participants for whom it was no surprise to see lord Eurig behave in a cruel way. This player was the only one who consistently picked their options with a desired outcome in mind, trying to guess ahead and predict the outcome of their choices to create the story they wanted.

5.3 Conclusions

The study showed that most players did identify with the protagonists, although not equally as much with all of them. Identification was either based on similarity with the character (players related to them and understood their situations) or thinking as the character (trying to guess what their feelings and motivations were and acting on them) and sometimes a mix of both. Identification was the basis of how most of the players made their decisions, but rarely the only way. Sometimes, they picked and option that they thought would make a good story, or simply because it seemed fun, thinking as a player and somewhat regarding what their character wanted. The opposite also happened, where they did not pick options that seemed interesting out of fear that it would have negative consequences, such as not letting Cassian fly freely on his griffin.

Having multiple protagonists was no hindrance for identification, although again, identification did not happen equally between characters. Players were more likely to identify with one or two characters, though at this point it’s not possible to know whether that depends on the third character being written in a way that made him less relatable overall, or if this would be the case even with three or more equally relatable characters. The character which players found the hardest to identify with was seen as less involved in the main storyline, as having less clear motivations and emotions, and as being less interesting. The lack of both relatability and understanding made making decisions more difficult for this character than most; although it should be noted there was no more variation in which options were most common. Switching between characters caused some players to feel withdrawn from the narrative the first time it happened, but all but one felt that it improved as the game went on and they became used to it. Some noted that putting the breaks in natural places helped with the switch. Furthermore, placing the characters close by in relation to each other, and letting their storylines converge, was positive for engagement.

It was also important the all storylines feel equally important. One player noted that, in comparison to Gwyneira’s and Cassian’s situations, Felix being an orphan but having a rather privileged position made him seem "whiny", as though his problems were not as severe and thus they were less engaging. While Gwyneira’s struggles are of a "larger than life" kind, being about arranged marriages to a king of a foreign country, something few if any players will be familiar with, it seems to have struck a chord more than Felix, who’s life situation is more down to earth and common, did.

What affected the choices players made in the game was less their identification with the characters, but rather their willingness to roleplay versus to act as they would have done. They were not explicitly told to make their decisions based on one or the other factor, resulting in a mixed result, although most roleplayed as their characters - putting themselves in their character’s shoes and trying to gauge what they would have done, a form of identification. However, though the reasoning behind their choices was different, there was no clear correlation between which choices they picked and which method they used to pick them. Players who identified with Gwyneira were not more likely to defend her when playing as Felix,
and most players did not think not playing as Felix would have affected their choice not to punish him. Overall, players used information they received from playing as one character, such as information about their disposition, sparingly when playing as another character, although it did happen, regardless of whether they identified with them or not.

The question this study sought to answer was how the player’s level of identification with a character affects the choices they make while playing a branching story-driven game with multiple protagonists. There is evidence pointing towards the players not consciously letting their identification with a different character than the one they’re playing affect the choices they make, although it may happen unconsciously, due to their biases affecting their judgement. Regardless if the players made decisions based on what they would have done or what they thought the character would have done, they preferred to roleplay as though they did not have outside information, such as that acquired outside the particular storyline. Thus identification affected their choices little if at all.

What it did affect was their ability to make choices. Being unable to identify with a character due to not understanding them made it more difficult to make choices while playing as that character, especially for the players who wanted to know what that character would have chosen. In turn, for some this had a negative effect on their enjoyment of Felix’s storyline. This might be connected to the yearning for narrative control in a cybertext (Aarspeth, 1997), as when players were less sure what choice fit the story or character the most, they felt that they had less control in taking the story where they wanted it to go. Not understanding the character means being unable to identify with them, and both lead to it becoming more difficult to make choices for them.
6 Concluding remarks

6.1 Summary

This study sought to find out if a player’s identification with the character they played as affected the way they made choices in a branching game with multiple protagonists. The purpose was to see what problems arose that were specific to games with multiple protagonists and how they could be avoided to successfully create such a narrative. The study hopes that bringing attention to this kind of narratives in games may make developers more interested in creating them, as they are rare among video games.

The study was made on an artefact created in Twine, a text-based fantasy game with three protagonists and a branching narrative. It was tested on a small group of seven participants who were then asked about their experience as players, especially in regards to how they identified with the main characters, if at all, and how they made decisions in the game.

The study showed that players were able to identify with more than one protagonist even as the perspective changed between them, as long as the character were equally as interesting. They identified with these characters without being explicitly told to, albeit in different ways, and were overall positive to the multiple protagonist narrative. The study was not large nor precise enough to conclude if players choose different options based on if they identified with a character. However, it is possible to conclude that players are able to identify with several characters in a game, and that this affects the way they make choices, although it may not affect what kind of choices they will make.

6.2 Discussion

This study touched upon many points of interest regarding identification, multiple narrative and choice. It showed that players were highly willing to roleplay without being explicitly told to do so, and that they did so with multiple characters, switching between them without losing immersion in the story. At least some of them identified with more than one character. There was variety in how players made choices, but some consistency in the choices that they made. This may be a result of how the artefact was written, with some choices unintentionally seeming more desirable than others.

Most players made their decisions based on either what they thought the characters would have done or what they themselves would have done, and in both cases, picking the desirable option would generally be expected as unless the player character had a vastly different motive or perspective than the player, their choice is likely to be the same. Even so, it is also possible that the perspective, experiences and knowledge of the players affected their choices even when they imagined being the character. Some players made choices based on what they thought would make a good story, and one player did so consistently throughout their play through. This is especially interesting as it shows almost the opposite of what the other players did, and both the instances where their choices were similar to other players’ and where they were different provide insight into the mechanisms behind those choices, although the results are not significantly different enough to draw conclusions from.

The question posed in this study was a complex one, drawing from many different areas of narrative and gaming. This limits the conclusions that can be drawn from its results, as there was not time in the final interviews for all of these areas to be addressed in as much depth as they could have been. While the choice for Gwyneira to punish or pardon Felix was interesting,
a further analysis could have been made by asking the participants specifically about other choices as well (instead of about their choices in general) but this would have created significantly longer interviews. Furthermore, because of the extensive changes between the first and second iteration, and the fact that the second iteration could not be fully tested before the final tests had to be made, the questions used had also not been tested. The lack of time significantly affected the quality of the study as a whole, especially combined with the complexity of the question.

However, the study has still successfully brought up interesting aspects of all areas which it touched upon. Instead of an in-depth analysis, the results of this study cover a broad spectrum and show areas that would benefit from further study. The new question it has given rise to point towards the subject being well worth further study.

The study of how players identify with multiple protagonists and what kind of choices they make is not only interesting because it might help developers looking to creating such games. As the study shows, it is possible to identify with and roleplay as more than one character in a single game, even when those characters are in some form of opposition to each other. While none of the characters in The Ascended Kingdom are in open conflict, they have different values and morals, and Gwyneira is from an 'enemy nation' which both Felix and Cassian reflect upon. None of the players seemed to have a problem with seeing these different perspectives. Perhaps multiple protagonist narratives could be used as a tool to explore the different sides of a conflict, showing that there isn’t always a side that is right and one that is wrong. One the other hand, it could also be used to trick players into sympathizing with “evil” characters to the point where morally bad actions are justified or forgiven.

6.3 Future work

The artefact created for this study was useful, although it could be tweaked to give players reasons to pick other choices than the ones most did, to bring Felix closer to the narrative and clarify his character, and perhaps to create choices with more narrative weight, which the player needs to think about. Using it, a larger study group and a more extensive, detailed set of questions, more data could be gathered and used to analyze the questions which the current study has given rise to. The study shows that multiple narrative games are well worth investigating further; they are compelling, enjoyable, and not as difficult for players to interact with as one might expect. Using a branching narrative where multiple characters interact with each other is certainly not fruitless.

Questions a larger study could seek to answer are what makes a certain character in a multiple narrative game less easy to identify with than another, if and how the narrative role has anything to do with identification, and further analysis on how identification affects choice. In this study, the results were inconclusive - some players make choices by identifying with a character, others don’t, but the choices in this particular game are not necessarily different. Perhaps, if the players were asked to identify with a character with vastly different goals and motives than themselves, this would have been different. But as we have also seen, being able to relate to a character has an effect on identification as well, and players may thus find it difficult to identify with such characters.
7 References


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