Media enjoyment as a function of control over characters ☆

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the enjoyment of interactive media, especially interactive narratives, can be explained via perceptions of control. Specifically, control over a character's choices, lead to higher perceptions of control which increased user enjoyment. Three different experiments using varying narratives, grammatical perspectives and story outcomes support these arguments consistently. This series of studies demonstrates that perceptions of control over media characters facilitate positive attitudes toward media content, corroborating and expanding upon earlier entertainment research. This research demonstrates a low-tech application of content-based user control in new media environments.

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1. Introduction

In 2013, a two-person video game developer, Simogo, surprised the video game industry with the release of *Device 6*, an interactive narrative that entwined game play and literature [1]. This sort of game, that was "a single user experience where explicit interaction was formed around narrative" in "an adaptive interactive narrative experience," has received a degree of attention lately, and more games in this vein, like *Façade* and *Madame Bovary*, have been developed in recent years [2]. In *Device 6*, the player wakes up on a mysterious island. Reading through text, the player must figure out how to escape. *Device 6* received universally positive reviews and was even nominated for the illustrious game of the year award by a variety of game organizations (see [3–5]). This is a noteworthy feat. Typically, games considered for the game of the year award are developed by large studios with hundreds of employees and vast budgets. Critics noted that *Device 6* was able to compete with larger studios because of the way the story was married with player control [6], resulting in a piece of beautiful and brilliant interactive fiction [7] which thus offered insight into the main character [8,6].

The success of *Device 6* and other similar games is compelling given the growing popularity of online media storytelling and the corresponding increase in scholarly thought regarding the effects of interactive content (e.g. [9–12]).[1] Simultaneously, it is compelling that a game such as *Device 6* can compete with games that boast more advanced technology.

Interactive storytelling is a term used to describe entertainment media that offers "unique entertainment experiences to users by enabling them to actively engage in a meaningful storyline, to shape it according to individual decisions and preferences" [14]. Based on this definition and its emphasis on user control, the current study argues that agency, in the form of perceived control over a character's choices, can explain the increased enjoyment elicited by interactive content. Agency has been defined as an individual's ability to control outcomes or the act of exerting power [15]. In agreement with research on interactivity, researchers have noted that controlling outcomes can improve attitudes toward content [11,16,17]. Within interactive narratives like *Device 6*, *Façade* and *Madame Bovary*, exerting power can be understood as control over a character such that users control the character's choices and actions in the story. In turn, we suggest that character control in an interactive narrative will increase enjoyment of the content. Specifically, in line with the current research on interactivity, customization, and video game enjoyment, we believe that agency will impact enjoyment of content by strengthening a user's connection with the main character (e.g., [18–20]).

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[1] Interactive content meaning users have the ability to select, modify, or control content [13].

The current study explores the interplay between two characteristics critical to media enjoyment – technology design (for example, whether a game allows a user to control a character's decisions or not) and the user's relationship with the character [21] using a text-based game. As such, the current study examines how user control of a character's decisions might factor into enjoyment in ways that existing theory does not predict. By isolating the act of controlling a character's choices from other interactive or narrative elements, we can expressly examine how this type of control explains overall enjoyment of entertainment media.

In this study, we argue that user control over character choices affects enjoyment by first strengthening the connection felt with the narrative's main character. We test this argument with stories that end well or poorly for the character, with stories whose main characters are similar to or divergent from the user (e.g., age, occupation), and with narratives that vary on grammatical perspective (first-person, second-person, or third-person). Our ultimate goal with this research is to demonstrate a low-tech application of content-based user control in new media environments to enhance audience enjoyment and engagement.

1.1. The entertainment experience as media enjoyment

The study of media entertainment has a rich tradition. Media enjoyment has been the subject of much research because of its impact on audience members' attitudes and behaviors [21] as well as its commercial applications. Consider mood management theory [22], which focuses on audience enjoyment of content, and uses and gratifications [23] in which audience enjoyment is often either included as part of an entertainment construct or as an important construct in its own right [24]. Meanwhile, disposition theory argues that media enjoyment is closely tied to character enjoyment: audiences like content that shows the "good guy" rewarded with a positive outcome and villains punished with a negative outcome [25]. Entertainment theory has also been expanded to explain the appeal of sad or tragic content like *Titanic* and *Schindler's List* [26–28]. People tend to enjoy sad films when they are people who are more empathetic and feminine [26]. In that vein, it has been suggested that people *appreciate* media content to the extent that it elicits feelings of awe and inspiration [27]. Indeed, entertainment media can gratify those looking for pleasurable entertainment experiences as well as meaningful entertainment experiences [28]. More recent research on meaningful experiences in video games showed that *hedonic* video game play was determined by aspects related to game play and *meaningful* video game play was determined by aspects related to character and story [29]. Similarly, the nature of the control which a player felt over his or her avatar led to more hedonic and meaningful experiences with the games [30].

Recently, a more complex model explaining media entertainment has emerged that puts enjoyment of content at its center. According to Vorderer et al. [22], enjoyment is the heart of entertainment; enjoyment is the key experience of exposure to an entertainment product [31,32]. In construction of this model, Vorderer et al. [22] provide a synthesis of existing media enjoyment research, identifying antecedents and outcomes of enjoyment (e.g. [33–35]). For example, in order to enjoy entertainment media, one must suspend his or her disbelief rather than question the plausibility, consistency, or realism of the characters, actions, and storyline (e.g., [36]). Enjoyment is also enhanced to the extent that people care about the characters in the narrative [18,19]. Especially for interactive content, media enjoyment can increase due to a sense of control over aspects of the content, including character appearance, character actions, appearance of the narrative environment, and so on (e.g., [37–42]). This final notion related to control is also seen in the research on customization, in which the act of individualizing content or products begets positive attitudes toward the content, as well as toward the act itself (e.g., [43,44]).

Ultimately, Vorderer et al. [22] suggest that media enjoyment is an interplay between various user prerequisites (suspension of disbelief, empathy, parasocial interaction, presence, interest), media prerequisites (technology, design, aesthetics, content), and user motives for consumption (escapism, mood management, achievement, competition). These predict enjoyment, which can be manifested as positive affective and cognitive responses to the content. As noted by Vorderer et al. [22], the model requires testing to advance understanding of media entertainment.

Even more recent theoretical advancements shed light on the current investigation. Specifically, recent empirical research by Tamborini and colleagues explores enjoyment of video games through Self Determination Theory. The degree to which video games satisfy user needs as defined by SDT (autonomy, competence, and relatedness), the more enjoyable playing that game will be [45,46]. Indeed, the more a video game promotes feelings of arousal and affect, the more hedonic the media enjoyment will be; the more a video game promotes competence and autonomy, the more nonhedonic media enjoyment will be [47]. Tamborini and colleagues predicted that noninteractive media (in other words, viewing media but not having control over it) would be less likely to satisfy autonomy and competence needs and would therefore be less enjoyable. Using a flight simulator video game, participants allowed a larger degree of control were expected to garner more hedonic needs satisfaction from the game, but higher levels of control actually increased the importance of *nonhedonic* needs satisfaction. In other words, control did not function as expected in this study. Couple this information with evidence that media audiences might disengage from characters who suffer negative consequences, for example favored sports teams who suffer an embarrassing loss [48]. This evidence suggests that, if effects of agency over character choices exist, these effects on enjoyment might be more prominent when characters experience positive outcomes, rather than negative outcomes.

The current study helps to clarify the function of control in a game when the game emphasizes narrative, as opposed to a game like the flight simulator used by Tamborini and colleagues in the context of interactive narratives. Vorderer and Roth [49] asked "how do we entertain ourselves with literary texts?" Traditionally, literature has not been viewed as "entertaining," but advancements such as the Tamborini studies detailed above may allow for researchers to understand how literature entertains [49]. The flight simulator did not have a strong narrative (flying a plane), but we posit that by reducing game elements and increasing narrative elements, we can find a connection between how video games entertain and literature entertains. Further, providing control did not act as expected in the Tamborini studies in that it improved *nonhedonic* needs satisfaction. Consequently, we believe that when a video game player has control it does two things: (1) It increases perceptions of control and thereby increases autonomy, and (2) It creates a bond with the character being controlled and should therefore increase relatedness.

1.2. The mediating role of character attachment

As entertainment theory indicates that closer relationships with media characters result in more enjoyment of content [18], new media studies indicate that user control over characters helps the user connect with, if not "become," the character [45,40,47]. To date, empirical tests show that people tend to adopt the attitudes and behaviors of characters with which they feel close relationships, or in the case of video game studies, characters the users control [50–52]. These observations corroborate general findings that attitudes toward a given task are improved when a person is