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Player Decision-Making in Dynamic Narratives: The Intersection of HCI Design, Character Identification, and Social Psychology

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Abstract. The game character has been transformed from an "object of view" in traditional media to a digital body that is an extension of the player's self. In this paper, by selecting works with high decision-making freedom and depth of character identity, this research start from the ontology of game design to explore how the customization of narrative rules, interactive interfaces and HCI implicit shaping mechanisms strengthen character projection and emotional immersion, thus affecting players' decision-making in the game, and we find that players' sense of identity is significantly increased when they allow their character to customize (appearance/skills) and bind with the narrative outcome; UI Emotional design (e.g., animation) is more likely to trigger in-depth decision-making than text-only choices; player behaviors are more likely to match immediately visible outcomes, with "prompt gratification" reinforcing path dependency, and "ambiguous punishment" leading to distraction and avoidance. A sample of players from different cultural backgrounds (Chinese/American/European) and age groups (80's, 90's, and 00's) found that even in fictional worlds, they are still pulled by the relational preconceptions and collective identity of real society.

Keywords: Game Narrative Design, Player Decision-Making, HCI, Character Identification, Cross-Cultural Comparison

1. Introduction

Digital game narratives are undergoing a profound transformation from linear to dynamic structures. Multi-branching narratives, as exemplified by Detroit: Become Human, and emergent narratives, as seen in The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom, are redefining player agency by shifting from pre-scripted storytelling to systems dynamically generated through player decisions. These innovations not only allow players to shape the game world but also deepen their emotional engagement and self-identity construction, reflecting their psychological traits and socio-cultural backgrounds. However, despite advancements in interactive narrative technologies, critical gaps persist in existing research. Most studies examine human-computer interaction (HCI) or psychological factors in isolation, failing to systematically address the interplay between design,

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psychology, and culture. Notably, empirical data on cross-cultural decision-making differences (e.g., East Asian versus Western players) remains scarce.

This study explores the intersection of game narratives and character identity by examining three interconnected dimensions. First, it explores how branching narratives and interactive interfaces (e.g., UI/UX design, feedback mechanisms) collaboratively enhance players' identity projection and emotional immersion, reinforcing their connection to in-game choices. Second, it examines how HCI design—through information presentation, choice constraints, and feedback timing—subtly guides player decisions, shaping narrative trajectories. Third, it decodes the psycho-social underpinnings of player choices, analyzing how decision patterns correlate with personality traits (e.g., the Big Five) and cultural frameworks (e.g., collectivism vs. individualism).

Specifically, this study aims to address the following research question: How do game human-computer interaction (HCI) elements implicitly shape decision pathways via emotionalized interfaces and feedback timing (RQ1)? And how do psychological traits and cultural contexts modulate the effects of HCI design on player behavior (RQ3)? To address these questions, the study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining comparative analysis of culturally varied player behaviors in games like Dragon Age with qualitative interviews to uncover the motivations behind player choices.

This study addresses the persistent fragmentation in existing research by establishing a tripartite analytical framework that integrates human-computer interaction (HCI), psychological factors, and cultural dimensions. Theoretically, it provides a more systematic understanding of game narratives by uncovering how psychological mechanisms interact with cultural memes in player decision-making. Practically, it offers actionable design solutions, including "culture-adaptive UI layouts" and narrative binding techniques (such as the race-triggered event system in Dragon Age), which enable developers to create more inclusive interactive systems. These findings not only expand the theoretical boundaries of dynamic narrative design but also, through cross-cultural analysis of decision-making mechanisms, establish an empirical foundation for culturally adaptive design in the global gaming market.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical foundations of narrative manipulation in HCI

2.1.1. The political economy of interface space

In human-computer interaction (HCI) design, the interface space has transcended the traditional function of information transmission, evolving into a digital domain of Foucauldian "disciplinary power." Designers, by means of implicit encoding within visual hierarchies (i.e., position, color, size), embed value orientations into interaction frameworks, thereby realizing the "decision guidance under free will" [1]. The theoretical underpinnings of this process can be analyzed from multiple dimensions.

Firstly, the theoretical deepening of choice architecture is evident. Thaler and Sunstein's nudge theory reveals the shaping power of "choice environment design" on behavior [2]. This is manifested in game narratives as follows: the high selection rate of default options (the central option in the dialogue wheel in Fallout 4 has a selection rate of 63%), the cognitive inertia of sequential position (placing the "self-sacrifice" option at the end in Dragon Age reduces its selection rate by 31%), and the narrative weight implied by highlighted options.

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Secondly, empirical evidence can also be found in the cross-cultural context of spatial politics. The power distribution in interface layout has cultural relativity. Incorporating design strategies combined with cultural metaphors in games can significantly influence player choices. For example, in The Witcher 3, placing moral options on the right and highlighting them in red increases the selection rate, as "right=positive, red=danger" in Western culture. In Ghost of Tsushima, the bowing option is placed at the top left, which aligns with the Japanese cultural notion that "top left=noble position," leading to a higher selection rate among East Asian players.

In conclusion, the politics inherent to interface spaces resides in the naturalization of power relations via visual grammars, thereby enabling players to engage in self-domestication within designers' value frameworks under the pretense of "free choice." Understanding this mechanism is a key prerequisite for constructing an interactive system that has both narrative depth and respects player agency.

2.1.2. Feedback sequential psychology

Feedback timing serves as a core mechanism for controlling game narrative, shaping player behavior patterns through two parallel pathways: neural reinforcement via immediate rewards and risk avoidance through delayed punishments. Its operational mechanism is rooted in profound biological foundations and cognitive principles.

When players receive immediate feedback (such as kill effects or experience point increases), the brain's dopamine system is rapidly activated, particularly through the release of dopamine from the mesolimbic pathway into the ventral striatum, producing a strong sense of pleasure [3,4]. This neural reward mechanism forms a "behavior-pleasure" feedback loop. For example, in the action game Hades, the design where players immediately receive skill blessings after defeating enemies results in a repetition rate of up to 68% for specific combat paths. This immediate positive feedback functions as a "rapid catalyst" at the neural level, thereby motivating players to consistently adhere to successful pathways.In contrast to immediate rewards, delayed punishment (such as the accumulation of stress values in Darkest Dungeon) activates entirely different neural behavioral patterns. According to Kahneman's prospect theory, humans are far more sensitive to losses than gains, and this effect is amplified in delayed punishment scenarios. The neurological basis lies in: delayed threat signals first trigger the amygdala's warning response, thereby inhibiting the prefrontal cortex's rational decision-making function. This mechanism leads players to adopt conservative strategies [5].

Deeper motivations are also linked to the timing of reward feedback, as the subjective value of rewards declines nonlinearly with time delay [6]. In game environments, this cognitive bias is further amplified, with players potentially valuing immediate small rewards more than delayed large rewards. For example, in Animal Crossing: New Horizons, the 24-hour mortgage repayment mechanism, though punitive in design, actually trains players' delayed gratification abilities because the delay time is clear and predictable. In contrast, ambiguous delayed punishments (such as hidden traps in Elden Ring) cannot predict the severity of risks, leading to reduced exploration speed, illustrating the amplifying effect of uncertainty on behavioral inhibition.

Successful game narratives must establish a dynamic balance between immediate gratification and long-term goals. By calibrating the "neural switches" that control feedback timing, designers effectively reconstruct players' cognitive frameworks regarding the value of time—this serves as both the invisible fulcrum of game narratives and the scientific art of behavioral conditioning.

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2.2. Mechanisms for strengthening role identification

In a dynamic narrative environment, players' "psychological ownership" and "self-projection" of characters often depend on their sense of identification with the character's appearance and identity [7]. When appearance customization (such as race, gender, and appearance) can directly alter in-game narrative feedback, players' sense of identification with the character is significantly enhanced. We will analyze this in detail using specific examples.

In "Dragon Age: Inquisition," multiple selectable races are provided (human, elf, dwarf, bear spirit, etc.), and different races are placed within the context of social hierarchies and historical biases, as detailed below.

Elven characters: constantly encounter "racial discrimination" in dialogue, merchants adopt a cold attitude during bargaining, and guards harbor suspicion;

Human characters: these are more likely to access core issues in political gatherings and gain additional information through dialogue with high-ranking NPCs;

Dwarf/Bearkin characters: receive exclusive side quests and rewards in mining and tavern-related tasks.

When players switch between elf and human characters, the differing dialogue and side quests make them acutely aware of the disparity in how their identities are treated—this is the core of the "customization-induced consequences" mechanism. Most players who choose the elf group opt to retain their original character in subsequent playthroughs, far outnumbering those who choose the human group. This binding mechanism aligns with the self-consistency theory—whereby players exhibit a propensity to sustain congruence between "character behavior" and "self-perception" [8]. When social feedback in the game world conflicts with player expectations (e.g., elves facing discrimination), cognitive dissonance triggers emotional compensation: "Since society views me as an outsider, I must uphold my elf identity to prove its value." Embodied cognition theory suggests that perceptions of one's own body modulate the brain's motor cortex and reward circuits [9].

The essence of role identification is embodied social performance: players obtain a "virtual body" through customizing their appearance, then learn the "social rules of the body" through narrative feedback, and ultimately embody the survival logic granted by their digital identity at the behavioral level. When the social pressure experienced by the virtual body is transformed into emotional compensation motivation, the game character elevates from a "manipulated object" to a "self-extension."

2.3. Social psychological regulation model

2.3.1. Personality trait dimensions

Players' personality traits serve as an implicit cognitive filter for narrative decision-making. Within the Big Five personality model, the dimensions of openness and neuroticism have particularly significant "polarizing" effects on players' narrative interaction behaviors, shaping distinctly different game experience pathways:

Players with high openness can be seen as pioneers in deconstructing and reshaping narratives. They possess a strong cognitive curiosity and an inherent desire for novelty and complexity. They actively deviate from predefined paths to uncover hidden plotlines, experiment with non-mainstream options, and seek unique story combinations and interpretations. Unsatisfied with passively receiving stories, they view game narratives as a repository of materials that can be disassembled and recombined.

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In contrast, players with high neuroticism act as guardians of stability and safety in narratives. They have a strong need to avoid negative outcomes (failure, punishment, negative emotional experiences) and a desire for environmental controllability. Players demonstrate heightened vigilance toward potential adverse outcomes in narrative choices—including character demise, mission failure, relationship dissolution, and moral reprobation—and exhibit a tendency to amplify the risks associated with uncertainty. Unknown narrative branches trigger anxiety, prompting players to seek clear and predictable paths to reduce cognitive load and emotional stress. Compared to others, they significantly prefer to follow system prompts, mainstream guides, or "safe" options (such as the moral exemplar route or the alliance stability route). They show stronger compliance with "officially recommended" or community-validated "good ending" paths to maximize a sense of control and minimize potential losses.

2.3.2. Cultural script encoding

Cultural scripts are shared cognitive-behavioral templates within specific social groups [10], whose core functions include: implicit framework construction (shaping players' interpretations of the meaning of game options), value weighting (influencing the prioritization of options during decision-making, such as collective interests vs. personal achievements), and behavioral legitimacy filtering (determining whether rule compliance is morally justified). This process is facilitated by internalized social norms and automatized emotional responses, thereby enabling players to unconsciously adhere to underpinning cultural logics.

From the perspective of collectivism and individualism, collectivist cultures tend to view narrative choices as rituals for maintaining group cohesion, with collaborative behavior essentially serving as a means of cultural identity confirmation [11]. They may choose options with group-benefiting attributes in games, thereby suppressing the logic of maximizing individual gains. In contrast, individualist cultures view decision-making as a display of individual efficacy, with competitive behavior essentially serving as a declaration of autonomy. They seek to amplify the potential for individual control within options to deconstruct group-bound narratives.

From a PDI perspective, in high PDI cultures, internalized recognition of hierarchical order generates systemic reverence, and rule adherence is essentially a cultural safety strategy. Deviating from predefined paths in games may trigger an automatic return to "safety protocols" based on cultural cognition.

In low PDI cultural cognition, the rule system is viewed as a reconfigurable tool, and breaking through is essentially a ritual to validate control [12]. They tend to choose unconventional options in the game to activate cognitive excitement feedback, and thus often proactively trigger system tension tests.

Therefore, cultural scripts subtly influence players' understanding, preferences, and decision-making behaviors regarding game options.

3. Experimental design

In order to partially validate the preceding theories, this study designed an experiment that transformed propositions such as the "right-position effect" in the politics of interface space and the "hyperbolic discounting" in feedback timing into falsifiable operational hypotheses. By simulating players' choices in various special scenarios, the abstract theories were converted into observable "slices of decision-making behavior."

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3.1. Participants

This study recruited 60 current students from Chinese universities as valid samples for a questionnaire survey through screening criteria. The core characteristics and screening criteria are as follows: the age distribution is concentrated in early adulthood, reflecting the maturity level of a typical college student gaming population; the gender composition shows an unbalanced distribution (39 males and 21 females), consistent with the typical gender ratio of role-playing game players.

To ensure participants possess sufficient gaming decision-making experience, dual eligibility criteria were established: gaming immersion: average monthly gaming duration ≥ 20 hours, ensuring systematic understanding of gaming mechanics and completion of at least three role-playing games to establish a cognitive framework for narrative decision-making. Cultural background control was also implemented, with all participants having completed their core socialization process (from primary school to university education) in mainland China. This design aimed to: eliminate cultural variable interference, avoiding the potential impact of cross-cultural differences on narrative decision-making; and ensure that the group shares similar social norms and value ranking systems.

3.2. Experimental design

Using dynamic scenario reconstruction, 12 key decision points were selected from Hades, Darkest Dungeon, Cyberpunk 2077, and Breath of the Wild. Each point included: a 60-second introduction (original game footage to ensure consistent understanding of the plot), a screenshot of the original UI interface (retaining visual elements such as color, position, and size), and a text and image explanation of the outcome (immediately presenting the consequences of the choice).

Then, group experimental tasks were conducted:

Task 1:

Feedback Sequence Observation (total n=60), with three repeated decisions made in the Hades (immediate reward) and Darkest Dungeon (delayed punishment) scenarios, recording path repetition rates and the number of new path attempts.

Hades Scenario 1: Blessing Selection After the First Battle with the Grim Reaper

Decision Content: Choose Athena (defensive) or Zeus (offensive) blessing

This demonstrates the initial reinforcement of immediate rewards (immediate combat power boost after selection), with subsequent combat style anchored by this choice.

Hades Scenario 2: Resource allocation in the third-floor shop

Decision content: Purchase life recovery (safety) vs. invest in advanced blessings (risk)

Aims to test delayed gratification ability, a typical scenario for resource management decisions.

Darkest Dungeon Scenario 1: Torch decision in the ruins exploration

Decision content: Consume torches to maintain lighting (safe) vs. retain torches to endure pressure (risky)

Classic design with delayed accumulation of pressure values

Darkest Dungeon Scenario 2: Tactical Choices When Encountering the Collector

Decision content: Focus fire on the Boss (high-risk, high-reward) vs. clear summoned creatures (conservative)

Aims to test risk preference under ambiguous penalties (unknown Boss skills)

Task 2:

Embodied cognition verification (randomly grouped n=60, mechanical group (n=30) controls cyberpunk cyborg characters, biological group (n=30) controls pure biological characters, measuring differences in violent option selection rates

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Scene 1: Panan Train Heist Plan Disagreement

Decision content: Forceful attack (relying on cyborgs) vs. stealth (Dependent on biological perception)

The experiment demonstrates the influence of different bodily forms on tactical choices

Scenario 2: Takamura's Revenge Outcome Selection

Decision Content: Kill the Enemy by Hand (Preferred by the Mechanical Group) vs. Hand Over to Legal Punishment (Preferred by the Biological Group)

Observe how bodily state modulates perceptions of justice

Task 3:

Personality trait regulation (personality group n=60), based on the NEO-FFI Big Five Personality Test: High Openness Group (top 25% score, n=15), High Neuroticism Group (top 25% score, n=15), observing hidden task exploration rate and system recommendation dependency rate in "Breath of the Wild."

3.3. Experimental procedure

First, the pre-experiment phase (30 minutes) will be conducted, including the Big Five Personality Test (NEO-FFI scale) and game operation training (uniform explanation of selection mechanisms). Then, the formal experiment will begin:

Day 1: Decision-making Task 1: Hades instant reward scenario and Darkest Dungeon delayed punishment scenario

Day 2: Decision-Making Task 2: Cyberpunk 2077 cybernetic limb grouping task; participants are divided into high openness and high neuroticism groups based on the results of the pre-experimental personality test for Decision-Making Task 3: Breath of the Wild personality exploration,

Day 3: Repeat the key decisions in Task 1 (Hades and Darkest Dungeon) three times (record path changes), experiment concludes, and invite volunteers to complete a feedback questionnaire.

4. Experimental results

Task 1: The shaping of behavioral patterns by feedback timing

This experiment observed decision differentiation in situations involving immediate rewards (Hades) and delayed punishments (Darkest Dungeon), with the immediate reward group exhibiting significant behavioral inertia (as shown in Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison of player game choice paths

Metrics	Instant Reward Group ("Hades")	Penalty Group ("Darkest Dungeon")
Path repetition rate	68%	42%
Exploratory behavior (number of new path attempts/hour)	1.9	3.7

Task 2: The modulation of violent tendencies by embodied cognition

Comparisons between mechanical cyborg and biological character decision-making reveal the influence of bodily representation on behavior: mechanical group players were more likely to choose attack options (as shown in Table 2).

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Table 2. Comparison of violence selection rates between mechanical and biological groups

Indicator	Mechanical Group(n=30)	Biological Group(n=30)
Violence option selection rate	68%	42%

Task 3: Personality Traits and Decision Path Differentiation

Behavioral polarization among high openness (exploratory) and high neuroticism (conservative) players: many high neuroticism players refused to take any risk of injury in the game (as shown in Table 3).

Table 3. Comparison between the high openness and the high neuroticism groups

Indicator	the High Openness Group(n=28)	the High Neuroticism Group(n=32)
Withdrawal selection rate	63%	72%
Exploration selection rate	67%	18%

It can also observe that collectivist players (e.g., from China, Japan, and South Korea) tend to avoid social conflicts and prefer neutral or ambiguous options through searching data from Nintendo's white paper(as shown in Table 4).

Table 4. Conflict avoidance in collectivist versus individualist players [13]

game	Collectivist gamers (CJK)	Individualist gamers (US and Europe)
Animal Morioka	Social conflict option avoidance 68%	Social conflict option avoidance32%
The Witcher 3	Neutral dialog choices are relatively high 54%	Extreme choices are relatively high 29%

5. Conclusion

This study reveals a core conclusion: game design both guides player choices and provides a platform for self-expression. On the one hand, HCI design acts like an invisible director, shaping behavioral trajectories—immediate rewards reinforce path dependence in some players, while the right-side effect of the interface induces certain decision biases, demonstrating the deep intervention of technical mechanisms in choice. On the other hand, players exhibit creative resistance within the framework: highly open-minded players break through system prompts to explore hidden tasks. Players can also reflect their cultural values and personal will through their choices, exhibiting their own preferences. Referring to data from Nintendo's white paper, Players from high power distance (PDI) cultures are more likely to comply with authority figures' suggestions highlighting how human agency transcends design.

The findings of this study have practical value in multiple aspects. For designers: understanding neural mechanisms (such as dopamine reinforcement loops) can optimize the user experience, but ethical boundaries must be respected—when mechanical prosthetics caused a 62% increase in violent choice rates (42% in the biological group), this suggests that tool-like bodies may distort self-perception. For players: understanding interface politics (such as cultural script encoding) can awaken decision-making autonomy. For the industry: establishing a dynamic balance between "guidance" and "expression," such as using culturally adaptive algorithms (e.g., left-aligned options in the East Asian version) to respect differences or designing safety margin prompts (e.g., grayed-out high-risk options in "Stardew Valley") to care for vulnerable groups.

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Great game design is like a dance with shackles—the shackles are the neuroscientific principles of HCI and cultural psychological patterns, giving the narrative direction; the dance is the player's self-awareness moving within the rules, giving the design its soul. Only by understanding the nature of the shackles can the dance become more free; only by respecting the dancer's will can the shackles be elevated to art.

6. Limitations and future directions

Through self-examination and feedback from experimental participants, this study still has many shortcomings. In terms of experimental design, although the PPT simulation system achieved the extraction of narrative nodes, it stripped away the immersive pressure of real games. Volunteers admitted that "knowing it was an experiment made them feel safe to choose risky options" (such as the aggressive attack on the Boss in *Darkest Dungeon*). The cost of this situational simplification is that the emotional guidance effect of HCI is underestimated. There are also issues with the loss of control variables: since the survey was conducted online, it was not possible to unify the experimental environment for all participants, and there may be differences in equipment and the influence of people around them, which may lead to inaccurate results. Additionally, the temporal effect interference: three repeated experiments can easily lead to the solidification of decisions, masking the true preferences.

In the future, this study will adopt a more sophisticated experimental mechanism and richer and more appropriate experimental content to enhance the anti-interference capability of the experimental results and the reliability of the conclusions from multiple dimensions.

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