Analysis & Exploration of Emotional Attachment in Video Game Character Design: A Case Study of Life is Strange

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Abstract— Character design in video games plays a crucial role in shaping players' emotional engagement and long-term attachment to the characters they control and interact with. Narrative-driven games, in particular, rely heavily on visual aesthetics, personality construction, and moral agency to create emotionally resonant experiences. Life is Strange is selected as a case study due to its strong emphasis on character-centered storytelling, where the main character is developed through complex personal traits, emotional vulnerability, and narrative events that evolve according to players' moral choices. These elements allow players to experience fluctuating emotional states throughout the gameplay. This study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine how visual character design and narrative structures contribute to the formation of emotional attachment, focusing specifically on teenage players in Indonesia. Data were collected through visual content analysis of the game's character design and in-depth interviews with players to explore their emotional responses and interpretative experiences. The findings indicate that effective character design not only enhances emotional immersion but also enables players to recognize, express, and reflect upon their own emotions by relating in-game decisions to real-life experiences. Moral decision-making mechanics further strengthen this connection by positioning players as active participants in the character's emotional journey. The conclusions of this study provide valuable insights for game developers and character designers, particularly in understanding how visual storytelling and narrative coherence can be strategically employed to foster emotional resonance and meaningful player–character relationships in narrative-driven video games.

Keywords— Character design, emotional attachment, visual storytelling, narrative design, Life is Strange, character aesthetics, emotional resonance, game art design.

I. INTRODUCTION

The popularity of video games among teenagers in Indonesia has increased with the advancement of technology and due to the accessibility of digital media. These games are entertaining and also provide a medium for the users to build social and emotional skills in an indirect way. This trend has seen an uplift in first-person, narrative-driven games that aim at building relationships with players through deep storylines and relatable characters. Life is Strange is an exemplary game in how to appropriately establish emotional connections with the audience.

Despite this, studies investigating the influence of character design in video games on emotions and attachment, especially among Indonesian adolescents, are very limited.

This research aims to explore how character design in Life is Strange might help Indonesian teenagers deal with emotional challenges, facilitate their identity formation, and express emotions in healthier ways. By analyzing character design elements that are accentuated on emotional engagement, this study will seek to improve existing understanding of the impact interactive media has on adolescent mental health in Indonesia. As well as providing recommendations for local game developers in constructing characters that are emotionally relevant.

The evolution of character design in video games has become one of the most crucial aspects that creates an emotional connection between the player and the storyline within the game. Lankoski Explains that designing characters with a solid background story behind them will give players more emotional connections with the game. Detailed backstories allow players to empathize with the pains and motivations [1].

The article "Character Design for 'Heart at War'" by Amalia et al. is an example of the application of the Research and Development methodology in creating aesthetically pleasing character designs filled with emotional and narrative meaning. The research advances the idea that immersive character design based on ethical dilemmas and emotional storylines could offer a much more compelling and engaging narrative-driven experience for players [2].

Within the context of Life is Strange, aspects like moral choices and interpersonal relationships between characters serve to nurture emotional attachment for players. This study tries to analyze the influence of characters like Max and Chloe on the emotional self-reflection of players, specifically adolescents in Indonesia, actively developing their sense of self.

II. METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive analysis method to analyze secondary data. Data was collected by conducting a literature review of various sources, including scholarly journals, books, articles, and digital material relevant to character design and emotional engagement in video games, specifically the game Life is Strange. The research begins by compiling information from literature that discusses theories on character design, visual aesthetics, and interactive narratives. More specifically, visual

material such as concept art, screenshots, and in-game depictions of character designs were analyzed to determine what significance they hold in evoking emotions in players. The research used qualitative content analysis methods, which made it possible to identify certain patterns and themes within the collected visual and narrative data [3].

The theoretical framework used in the current research is the one conceived by Bowen, which places great emphasis on document analysis in qualitative research [4]. Under this framework, the investigation delves into character design from a visual perspective, including considerations of the use of color, signs and symbols, facial expressions as well as narrative features. This methodological approach becomes especially suitable for examining the visual media as the center of the research, thus the researcher does not have any direct interaction with the subject of the research.

Those results are also compared and related to already published literature, in an effort to bring out any patterns, connections, or consequences that character design might bear on the emotional experience of players. Such a methodological framework attempts to help elaborate new viewpoints concerning the function of character design as one approach to forging emotional relationships between players and game characters [5] [12, 13].

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A. Character as a Medium of Emotional Attachment

First, it needs to be noted that an emotional connection between game players and game characters is rather significantly influenced by the character's design and a proper narrative that unfolds as one plays the game. Thus, the design of a character in a video game is of great importance if a strong emotional relationship with the player is desired for the character [14, 15]. This phenomenon is deeply embodied by Chloe Price through her character design in Life is Strange obviously a clear representative of the defiant disposition she displays as a teenager looking to figure out who or what to be.

The design of the character Chloe Price combines visual elements that are characteristic of the Rebel style, including a grunge fashion with a leather jacket, a grunge- themed t-shirt, distressed jeans, and boots. One especially noticeable feature that immediately draws the viewer's attention is her short, bright blue hair, which adds up to a unique impression and emphasizes her boldness in expressing herself. The tattoos that adorn her arms are very detailed in design, with each one representing ornate details that express her difficult and rebellious life experiences. The emotional bonds that players form with the characters in a video game are greatly influenced by the design of the characters and the narrative that unfolds during the gameplay. For instance, character design in video games is essential in developing an emotional bond between the player and the character. The character Chloe Price from the game Life is Strange is a perfect example of this, as her design defines her personality that of a rebel, an attitude characteristic of most teenagers trying to find their place in the world.

Fig. 1. Concept art Chloe Price

This visual design is indicative of Chloe's personality, which has been described as bold, independent, and not afraid to break the mold. It also speaks to her very complicated emotional dynamics. In fact, her style in clothes and body tattoos gives insight into her troubled past and very intricate relationships with people around her. Her bright blue hair serves to symbolize her yearning to stand out in society, while her facial expressions, often full of emotions like anger, anxiety, or sadness, further solidify the connection that the player has to her emotional experiences. The deliberate design of these elements aims to establish Chloe as a character with which players, particularly adolescents, can easily identify, thereby serving as a representation of the self-identity struggles frequently encountered during adolescence. Chloe's distinctive design, characterized by her unique appearance and emotive range, serves to enhance the player's engagement.

According to research outlined by R Malik et al. strong character design with a focus on visual and narrative aspects can strengthen players' emotional attachment Chloe's unique and characterful design is not only aesthetically appealing but also gives players the opportunity to understand and connect with her emotions and struggles, enriching the gaming experience [2].

TABLE I. ANALYSIS VISUAL DESIGN CHARACTER CHLOE PRICE

Component Visual & Design Chloe	Concept Art Chloe Price	
	Visual Description	*Emotional*
Hairstyles	Short blue hair	Symbolizes a unique and deviant nature
Tattoos	Tattoo pattern on the arm	Reflects rebellion, life experience, and self-expression
Clothing Choice	Leather jacket and jeans	courageous personality, Rebel & and independent

Facial Expression	Expressions often show anger or anxiety	Reinforces emotional traits that players can easily relate to

Unlike Chloe, whose visual identity is more rebellious and expressive, Max Caulfield's character design reflects a grounded and introspective personality. Her brown hair and modest attire give her a relatable, every-girl appeal, helping players project their own emotions onto her. The Polaroid camera becomes a core symbol for reflection and memory, enhancing the emotional journey. Her facial expressions, often subtle yet sincere, further amplify the player's empathy toward her inner struggles.

Fig. 2. Concept art Max Claufield

TABLE II. ANALYSIS VISUAL DESIGN CHARACTER MAX CLAUFIELD

Component Visual & Design Chloe	Concept Art Max Claufield	
	Visual Description	*Emotional*
Hairstyles	Brown shoulder-length hair with simple natural style	Reflects modesty, introversion, and down-to-earth personality
Accessory	Polaroid camera often carried or worn	Symbolizes nostalgia, memory, and emotional reflection
Clothing Choice	Casual layered outfit: hoodie, jeans, simple shirt	Indicates a relatable, approachable teenager; not attention-seeking
Facial Expression	Often looks thoughtful, worried, or empathetic	Shows sensitivity, inner conflict, and emotional awareness

In the video game Life is Strange, the interrelationship between the player and the protagonist, Max, highly depends on the player's ethical decisions. This is what justifies giving some control over the direction that the story will take because of the player; thereby, an even stronger connection is felt toward the character. The results are consistent with those reported in the journal article titled "Player-Character Relationship and Game Satisfaction in Narrative Games" (Frontiers in Psychology, 2021), which posits that "The relationship between the player and the character is a crucial factor that affects emotional satisfaction in narrative-driven games, as players' attachment to the characters influences their overall gaming experience"[6].

Fig 3. Scene Max and Chloe during the decissoon chooise Emotional Max (user) towards Chloe.

This is depicted in the scene when Max and Chloe are standing by a lighthouse as the sun sets, with the beach and a golden orange sky in the background. The looks on their faces show a reflective and touching moment, therefore emphasizing the strong friendship between the characters as well as the moral issues they are going through. This particular scene very much conveys the very strong connection emotionally between them the performers and the protagonists this underlining its thematic value.

TABLE III. ANALYSIS EMOTIONAL INTERACTION CHARACTER IN NARRATIVE

Character	Emotional Interaction in Narrative		
	Main Scene	*Triggered Emotions*	*Player Moral Decision*
Max	Max and Chloe at the lighthouse at sunset.	Reflection on feeling connected	Players choose to support or criticize Chloe in difficult emotional situations
Chloe	Chloe dealing with family conflict Anger, sadness, frustration	Anger, sadness, & frustration	Players help Chloe or let her face the problem alone

The journal emphasizes that the emotional attachment built through the relationship between player and character greatly influences satisfaction in narrative-based games. Players feel more engaged and emotionally connected to characters when they are given control over decisions that affect character and story development. In the context of Life is Strange, this is reflected in the dynamics of the moral decisions Max has to make, which affect not only the course of the story but also the player's emotional connection with Chloe and other characters [16, 17].

This attachment also leads to deep feelings of empathy for the characters. As the player makes increasingly difficult decisions, they feel the emotional impact of those choices, which creates a stronger connection between the player and the characters. This supports the journal's argument that well-designed characters, which have a clear background and purpose, are able to significantly influence the player's emotions, providing a more immersive and satisfying experience in the game"[7].

B. Attachment Creation Process with Game Characters

The narration, moral choices, and interactions with other characters greatly influence the process of creating attachments between the player and the game characters. Life is Strange provides players with choices that will change the story's path and draws the player into deeper emotional connections with characters like Max and Chloe. This is in accordance with the theory expressed by Lewis et al. in the article "'They may be pixels, but they're MY pixels:' Developing a metric of character attachment in role-playing video games", which states that "Attachment to a game character develops as players interact with and influence the character's journey and decisions."[8]
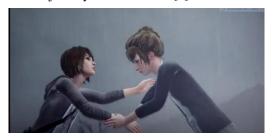

Fig. 4. Max's choice to save Kate or let her kill herself.

TABLE IV. ATTACHMENT CREATION THROUGH

MORAL DECISIONS IN LIFE IS STRANGE

Attachment Creation through Moral Decisions in Life is Strange					
Character	**Main Scene**	**Player Moral Dilemma**	**Player Decision**	**Influence on Attachment**	**Story Consequence**
Max	Max tries to save Kate Marsh who tried to commit suicide	Is it helping depressed Kate or letting her jump?	Players choose to save Kate or let her fall.	The decision to save Kate creates an emotional closeness between Max and Kate, deepening the players' attachment.	If Kate is saved, she becomes emotionally supportive of Max and appears in later episodes. If she dies, Max experiences deep guilt, and the story tone becomes darker and more emotionally intense
Kate	Kate looks depressed and is on the edge of the roof of the school building	Kate felt no one cared and wanted to end her life	If Max shows support, Kate is saved, conversely, if Max fails, Kate could fall.	Success in saving Kate builds the player's emotional connection with the character, as the player feels responsible for her fate.	*Saving Kate leads to her continued presence in the story and impacts Max's confidence. Failing to save her causes grief, changes character interactions, and affects Max's emotional state*

These outcomes highlight how moral decisions in Life is Strange are not merely mechanical gameplay elements but crucial emotional and narrative triggers. The branching consequences based on Max's actions deepen the immersion and encourage players to reflect on the emotional weight of their choices. This mechanism fosters a stronger sense of empathy and emotional engagement with the characters.

The theory proposed by Lewis et al. [8] describes that attachment to a character is formed by the interactions the player goes through with the character. As players make choices that have consequences on the character and the story, they start to feel more invested in the character, much like the scene of Max making a crucial choice in Figure 3. saving Kate From Suicide From the school building. This choice is where the emergence of emotional engagement comes in, where players feel more attached to the character based on the influence they have over the character's fate in the game.

This suggests that attachment to game characters is developed by narrative elements that facilitate an immersive emotional journey. In Life is Strange, for example, the player faces complex moral dilemmas and has control over the choices of Max. This intense emotional investment arises from the players' active contribution to the development of the story and the fate of the character. This already more personalized feeling of connectedness evokes empathy and a sense of belonging, which heightens the emotional engagement of the player in the story.

C. Character as a Reflection of Player Emotions

Characters in video games are often designed to be a reflection of the player's emotions, allowing them to identify, reflect, and express their feelings through in game interactions. In Life is Strange, Max and Chloe are two characters that represent internal and external conflicts commonly experienced by players, especially teenagers.

Fig. 5. Visual design Chloe Price & Max Claufield

As seen from Figure 5, Max holding the camera with a reflective gaze acts symbolically for her being introverted and reflective in her nature, while the appearance of Chloe in bright blue hair and stern eyes acts symbolic of her being rebellious and breaking free from conventional societal shackles.

TABLE V. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF VISUAL DESIGNS

Comparative Analysis of Visual Designs: Max Caulfield and Chloe Price		
Composition	*Max Caulfield*	*Chloe Price*
Focal Point	Simple and symmetrical	Asymmetrical, full of personal details
Hierarchy	Brown hair and camera	Bright blue hair, arm tattoos
Symbol	Polaroid camera	Butterfly-shaped tattoo
Photo/Illustration	Conservative, neutral tones	Rebellious, vibrant colors
Colors	Pale blue, gray (calming)	Bright blue, black (contrasting, expressive)

Based on the theoretical framework suggested by Plass et al., the inclusion of colors and accessories has shown to play a very significant role in the character's perception and emotional arousal. In designing Max and Chloe, the use of cameras and tattoos as accessories has shown not just their personalities but also signaled the emotions of the player while in the game [9].

In a thesis presented by Bopp, it is suggested that the character designs can influence the players' emotions if those are connected to their own experiences. In Life is Strange, Max and Chloe are two characters designed to raise emotions related to the player. Max, with her ambivalent emotions and

will to help others, often finds herself being a mirror for players who experience similar situations. On the other hand, Chloe is a rebellious character who personifies the feelings of frustration and loss among adolescents [10].

All interactions with these characters allow a player to understand their emotional state and give space to one's reflection and emotional development. This strengthens the argument: immersive character design can actually be a medium whereby players explore and process their emotive experience. By offering characters with problems and emotions similar to real-life teenagers, the game provides an opportunity for deep emotional involvement and becomes a medium of reflection through which players can work out and understand their emotions [18]. Contribution of Character Design to Emotional Motivation: Character design is not only for aesthetics but can also be a tool to emotionally motivate players. Life is Strange shows how important character design can be to deliver such emotional experiences that have an effect on players, particularly teenagers. By presenting relatable characters and complex emotional dilemmas, the game invites players to explore their emotions and find more constructive ways to express themselves.

D. Emotional Design for Digital Games and Game Character Dimensions

Considering the creation of character designs aimed at engaging a player emotionally, a number of other issues deserve consideration. According to "Emotional Design for Digital Games for Learning", it is stated that in character designing, there exist specific elements, such as visual expression-color, shape, and dimension-that are influential on players' emotions: "warm colors and rounded shapes create positive associations with warmth and safety, whereas dark colors or sharp shapes will produce tension or unease. These elements, according to the authors, not only affect emotional attachment but also enhance the learning experience by more in-depth interaction with the game content [9].

Fig. 6. Concept Art For Emotions Design

TABLE VI. ANALYSIS EMOTIONAL DESIGN

Emotional Design Elements in Life is Strange		
Design Element	*Description*	*Emotional Effect*
Colors	Cool tones for calm scenes, warm tones for conflict	Influences players' mood

Environment	Chloe's room filled with personal items (posters, music, decor)	Provides story context and supports empathy
Moral Choices	Players must choose to save or leave another character	Creates emotional dilemmas
Facial Expressions	Max's reactions when worried or happy	Implicitly mirrors players' emotions
Soundtrack	Melancholic background music, such as "Max & Chloe By Jonathan Morali"	Enhances emotional connection to the story

The interaction between Max and Chloe in Chloe's room, with a background full of warm colors that reflect nostalgia and emotional closeness. Objects around them, such as posters and personal belongings, give an insight into Chloe's personality and deepen the player's connection with the in-game world.

Moreover, the article by C. Thomas, titled "Writing for Emotional Impact in Film and Video Games," highlights the importance of genuine character development in eliciting emotional responses. He adds, "Dialog choices and interactive narratives allow players to emotionally connect with characters by influencing their fates, creating a shared sense of agency and impact." In Life is Strange, the moral decisions the game places upon players can be seen as strengthening this emotional connection between the player and characters like Max and Chloe, where every decision made has very real in-game repercussions [11].

These two sources used provide very important insights into the way that thoughtful character design, both visual and narrative, can create a much deeper connection between the player and the character. In your research, these findings could be used to back up the claim of how a similar approach is applied in Life is Strange. The depiction of characters like Max and Chloe is meant to reflect their complex emotional conditions, while the story that branches out based on player decisions adds a layer of control over the narrative, so players feel more emotionally invested in the game.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

This study illustrates that character design within video games, as exemplified by Life is Strange, is crucial in cultivating an emotional connection between the player and the character. Characters possessing rich backstories, complex personalities, and aesthetically pleasing designs can enhance emotional involvement, allowing players to resonate with the emotional experiences of the characters depicted in the game. This emotional attachment can be especially influential for adolescents, since it may provide a way of

more positive identification, expression, and regulation of emotions. These findings carry implications beyond game design, enabling game designers to create characters that are not only aesthetically pleasing but also supportive in terms of emotional development among Indonesian adolescents.

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