

06/2011

## Interactivity and identification in fictional products



The affective relationships people establish with characters in fiction influence their attitudes, thoughts and values. UAB researchers have examined whether interactive use of fictional products influences emotional relationships, particularly self-identification, and have found that interactivity has cognitive and emotional consequences: the projection of the self invites and encourages self-awareness, and this role of the user closes the link with the message and its components.

It has been said that people establish affective relationships with fiction characters. These relationships are powerful since they are able to change people's attitudes, beliefs and values. One of the most important types of relationship with characters is what has been called identification. The concept of identification is understood as the affinity that the audience has towards media characters, which allow them to experience the emotions of these characters and understand their actions. Audiences compare their thoughts and goals and evaluate their achievements with those of the characters they feel identified. Identification is an important area of study in Media Studies since it increases the influence that characters have on people and it is a crucial aspect in Media Enjoyment theory.

On the other hand, interactive fictions, audiovisual series that allow users to take decisions related to the plot, are also of great importance in current research in the Media field. It is thought that the transition from a passive to an active audience could have emotional, cognitive and behavioral consequences over audiences and so it is an important aspect that needs to be analyzed since we have entered the age of interactive media.

*Impact of interactivity on identification with characters in fiction*, as its name indicates, centers its attention on the impact that interactivity has on identification with characters. It looks into whether interacting and deciding the plot has any effect on users' identification.

In our study, we created different versions of the German film *Lola Reent* (1998, directed by Tom Tykwer), from a version of this film dubbed to Spanish. For the purposes of the experiment we created an interactive and a non interactive version of the movie and tested them in two experimental conditions. 310 University students voluntarily took part in the study. During the process, volunteers individually watched one of the versions (interactive or non interactive) of the film in a PC screen. In the interactive version they had to take several decisions with regard to the plot and deciding what had to happen to characters. In the non interactive, they saw the same film but in a linear way. These subjects didn't have to take decisions about what happened to characters. Afterwards, all completed a post-test questionnaire. We used EDI scale by Igartua & Páez in 1998 to test identification and empathy with characters.

The study found that there are differences in the identification produced by interactivity. The possibility of deciding the plot, and determining the circumstances that characters live, affect identification with characters. The study confirms that interactivity – the imaginative process by which audiences assume the character's perspectives, goals and identity- becomes more intense and superior than in conventional audiovisual reception. Interactivity also affects the two dimensions of identification detected by this study: it produces a bigger cognitive-emotional empathy of the audiences with characters and a superior feeling of becoming like them.

These results add themselves to those of preliminary works that, in trying to explain the effects of interactivity, find that it impacts content processing by audiences. Our results specially agree to the studies that assure that, at least during consumption, interactivity has emotional and cognitive consequences. Because of that, it is recommended to consider that interactivity consumption of audiovisual contents could have a superior impact on attitude, values and beliefs change than conventional consumption. Also, that it could increase the intensity of the effects that other forms of relation of audience with characters (not only identification).

These results confirm that interactivity redefine the relationship's modes of audiences with media messages. In this sense, they complement data provided by Soto about gratification in the interaction with fictions. They, in fact, suggest that the interactivity invites to the projection of the ego and produces self awareness in interaction with fictions. The principal role that user's assume in fiction's creation stretches the link between them and the message or its components.

**Maria Teresa Soto-Sanfiel**

[mariateresa.soto@uab.es](mailto:mariateresa.soto@uab.es)

## References

"Impacto de la interactividad en la identificación con los personajes". Soto-Sanfiel, M.T., Aymerich-Franch, L., Ribes, X. (2010). *Psicothema*, 22 (4), pp. 822-827

[View low-bandwidth version](#)