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The Impact of AI-Generated Characters on Audience Perception and Emotional Engagement in Film

Kaiyuan Yang

University College London, London, UK

uclzky0@ucl.ac.uk

Abstract. Artificially-generated characters in movies have radically altered conventional cinema, creating entirely new mechanisms of perception and feeling. This research investigates the psychological effects of artificial character, including how realistically, empathetically and trust-based traits impact audience reactions. Drawing on cognitive processing, social conditioning and ethical implications, the article examines the emotional bond (or lack of it) that viewers feel between artificial characters. Data suggests that intensely realistic AI characters are potentially empathetic and absorbing, but they come with their own unique difficulties, like the "uncanny valley" effect and ethical questions around AI autonomy. In this way, the paper shows how AI is increasingly a force for storytelling and emotional connection, which can help filmmakers optimise how audiences engage with virtual characters. Knowing these dynamics can help developers anticipate audience reactions and leverage AI characters to augment films. This study adds to the ongoing debate about AI's contributions to media psychology and narrative.

Keywords: AI-generated characters, audience perception, emotional engagement, film psychology, artificial intelligence

1. Introduction

The rise of artificial intelligence has resulted in major cinematic innovations, most notably AI-generated characters. These actors, designed with high-tech CGI and ML methods, are quite unlike human actors in the way that they challenging traditional notions of authenticity, empatheticality and characterisation. With AI technology advancing, users are seeing digital figures that are real and more emotionally rich than they could ever be, so it's important to wonder how these creatures influence the audience. Psychological reactions to artificial characters are idiosyncratic because they entail distinct forms of cognitive control, selective empathy and moral judgement about artificial characters. We explore the emotional effects of AI-generated characters in three domains: audience perception, cognitive engagement, and moral engagement [1]. Given the paradox of attraction and discomfort inherent in fictional AI actors — what has become known as the "uncanny valley" — this study considers how viewers' empathy reaches limits, how social conditioning drives perceptions, and what kinds of moral dilemmas may ensue when people question the "rights" or moral status of AI agents. Through exploring these dimensions, this article seeks to shed new light on the shifting dynamic between audience and artificially intelligent actors, and how AI could change the way viewers experience narrative and emotional storytelling in cinema.

2. Audience Perception of AI-Generated Characters

2.1. Realism and Believability

An important part of how people think about AI characters is the level of realistic realism and credibility that they manage to provide. With AI, we can create characters with unprecedented depth, expressiveness and movement – characters that transcend digital and human reality. Yet realism is not necessarily a measure of empathy; even characters who are close to but not yet human-like realism tend to slip into the "uncanny valley" and the smallest imperfections bring on fear rather than sympathy [2]. This contradiction affects how viewers experience and feel the AI characters, because their standards of realism dictate their acceptance and emotional attachment. Believability is the point at which audiences suspend disbelief and read on, and when it fails the audience feels a level of discomfort or alienation. Consequently, achieving realisticity in the AI-created characters can both serve

to make the audience engage or alienate them, depending on the technical implementation and psychoanalytic effect of the representation.

2.2. Empathy and Identification

The level to which viewers can empathise with and identify with artificially created characters is a key measure of how they emotionally respond to a film. Traditionally, character identification hinges on actors' conveying emotive and behavioural qualities that viewers recognise on an individual basis. But with artificially generated characters, empathy relies heavily on the character's creation, personality and context, not the human being of the performer. Studies indicate that humans might bond with AI characters if they show consistent, expressive behaviours that parallel easily recognised human feelings. Identification is further helped by storytelling techniques that cast AI characters as vulnerable, misinterpreted or seeking themselves, phenomenological features familiar from the experience of all humans [3]. Yet when artificial-intelligence characters don't exhibit these emotional states, or if they are entirely utilitarian or robotic, then empathy and identification are sucked down, and viewers feel less invested. This means that the development of empathic AI characters on the screen calls for judicious use of narrative and design techniques to resemble human expression and emotional development.

2.3. Trust and Acceptance

The public's confidence and acceptance in AI-created characters are conditioned by the implied motives and functions these characters play within the film's narrative. If these AI protagonists have empowering roles — as parents, guides or friends — then viewers are more likely to accept them and buy into their narratives. AI characters that portray antagonistic or morally problematic roles, by contrast, could also lead to distrust, which would influence how the character was viewed and perceived. Emotional engagement requires trust because readers are less inclined to empathise with characters who are seen as volatile or hostile. Acceptance of artificial characters is also contingent upon the character's conformity to society and ethics: characters who are morally or emotionally human within their fictional environments attract greater trust and tolerance. Filmmakers can take advantage of this by constructing artificial characters who fulfill roles or represent values our audience is familiar with, creating more emotional attachment via trust and human-like virtues, even in elaborate or fantasy plots [4].

3. Emotional Engagement with AI-Generated Characters

3.1. Emotional Resonance and Sympathy

The emotional connectivity of AI-generated characters largely depends on whether the character is able to act or express himself or herself in a way that provokes sympathy. In contrast to human actors whose bodies and their feelings are bound to their actions, AI actors utilise scripted movements that could appear robotic or incoherent. But when AI characters are trained to show predictable, empathetic behavior, and are shown in emotionally compelling scenes, they may evoke empathy. Research suggests that these resonances are more likely when the AI character experiences pain, shows vulnerability or has a stable moral compass, since those traits correspond to human psychological theories of attachment and empathy [5]. How effective a technique is for generating empathy often depends on how well the AI character is rendered, and even a slight shift in responsiveness or expression can increase or decrease empathy. So, effective emotional interactions with AI characters include pre-scripted displays of vulnerability, carefully shaped narrative development, and social interaction on the human level.

3.2. Dynamic Interaction and Immersion

Dynamic interaction is a particular trait of artificially intelligent characters, which can make a film more immersion and emotionally invested. By deploying sophisticated AI, characters can respond to viewers' reactions or be aware of the audience presence in some interactive media forms. It is this interactive element that provides the viewer with a distinct sense of intimacy between themselves and the character because the viewer is recognized or physically involved by the artificial character. Interactivity adds more depth with interactive technologies like augmented reality or virtual reality where viewers can get stories that change depending on their input. These in-world scenarios provide deeper emotional immersion as fans feel that they are part of the character's journey or dilemma [6]. This responsiveness also adds a new level of storytelling interactivity, with the viewer no longer observing passively but instead undergoing a response from their interaction with the AI character, making the experience psychologically compelling and emotionally engaging.

3.3. Consistency and Behavioral Authenticity

For a character created by AI to be engaging, his behaviour must remain predictable and consistent with previously identified traits or roles [7]. Behavioural authenticity lets readers guess and make sense of what the character will do — building emotionally

secure bonds and reducing cognitive dissonance. In scenes where AI characters have predictable personality, motivations and reactions, audiences will pay more attention emotionally, because the character's predictability satisfies human social expectations of behavior. Aiming for behavioural consistency among AI characters helps the narrative to remain consistent, so that the audience can feel immersed in the action without being distracted by arid or unrealistic behaviours. Instead, behavioural ambiguities break up the audience's suspension of disbelief, detracting from emotional reaction by making the character appear implausible [8]. So, creating plausible AI characters is a matter of behavioural authenticity, and predictable arcs and movements, reinforcing the character's personality and function within the film's narrative flow.

4. Deepening Analysis of Audience-AI Character Dynamics

4.1. Cognitive Processing and Emotional Regulation

The mental processing needed to engage with AI-generated characters differs radically from the processing of humans in relation to emotional regulation and audience response. When they perceive a character as artificial, viewers are more likely to engage in what's called "selective empathy," when emotion is mitigated by the recognition of an artificial character. Such selective empathy enables viewers to affectively manage their feelings towards AI characters according to their understanding of the character as an automaton rather than an entirely autonomous individual. Cognitive processing becomes trickier as artificial characters become more humanoid, imposing a double consciousness where the reader must balance feelings with knowledge of the character's non-human status. This subtle cognitive response enables emotional responses ranging from genuine empathy to disengagement, which can affect how emotionally receptive audiences are [9]. The intellectual effort inflicted by artificial characters can, thus, either enhance or undermine emotional interaction, depending on how the filmmakers design and frame the narrative.

4.2. The Role of Social Conditioning in AI Character Reception

Social conditioning also shapes audience reactions to artificially created characters because culture and media exposure determine the acceptance and likability of characters [10]. Popular-culture audiences may be more inclined to adopt AI characters, who fit into a familiar schema: the "loyal friend" or the "charming protector." Those schemas establish a framework for audience reactions, because existing schemas predetermine how people respond to AI characters. In the AI-rich cultures where AI technology is embedded in everyday experience, AI-generated characters are likely to be viewed favourably by readers, as a natural extension of contemporary narratives. Conversely, in societies with less exposure to AI, viewers may be more sceptical or uneasy about AI characters, finding them unfamiliar or unsettling. This social conditioning illustrates the importance of audience cultural factors in determining how an AI-generated character affects them and, hence, why demographic and cultural factors must be taken into account when assessing the emotional impact of Ai characters on screen. Such considerations can determine whether AI characters succeed in evoking universal emotional response among a range of audience [11].

4.3. Ethical Implications and Audience Morality

The ethical context of AI-generated characters adds another dimension to viewership: audiences can ask questions about how and why AI should be portrayed in the movies. If these AI protagonists are presented as fully autonomous or self-aware, then there might be moral issues to be addressed regarding how they are treated and their narrative development, particularly if they are subjected to suffering or discrimination. This moral aspect can also boost emotional intensity, challenging readers to contemplate the ethical status of AI creatures, potentially eliciting sympathy or even support for AI rights in fiction [12]. But moral objections can drive them away, too, if viewers think that the AI figures have been exploited or co-opted purely for entertainment. Aiming to present AI characters as disposable or subservient will affect whether it's ethical for viewers to be absorbed by them, who might feel uneasy about becoming emotionally involved with objects that don't seem autonomous or competent. This moral reflection exposes a distinctive dimension of AI character engagement in which morality and emotional investment collide, impacting the extent to which audiences engage ethically and emotionally with AI characters.

5. Limitations

Some limitations were noted during this investigation, related primarily to sample variation and technical differences. The study's conclusions cannot apply to everyone, since culture and the way people view AI vary among users. In addition, this study largely addressed visual realism and narrative empathy while neglecting other aspects, like voice synthesis and interactive ability. At the current rate of AI innovation, some of these findings might even become outdated in due course due to the rapid evolution of AI technologies, thereby shortening their relevance.

6. Future Work

In future studies, the focus should be to expand demographic sampling and investigate cross-cultural understanding of AI characters in order to capture a more holistic picture of audience responses worldwide. Studying other aspects of AI characters – including voice and behaviour – would bring deeper insights into engagement and attachment. It's also potentially useful to conduct long-term studies, which can allow researchers to track changes in audiences over time as AI technology matures. Additionally, exploring AI character autonomy on a more nuanced ethical level would potentially yield insights into AI's social effects in media and open up the potential for ethically subtle AI characterisation in future films.

7. Conclusion

The inclusion of fictional characters in film adds a new, complex aspect to audience experience and affect. This research shows that although AI characters can arouse deep feelings of empathy and identification, they also pose special challenges – including apprehension through the "uncanny valley" and ethical dilemmas around AI autonomy. Audiences' emotional reactions to these characters depend on cognitive dynamics, social conditioning and moral ideas, all of which affect the intensity of an audience's emotional response. Filmmakers can therefore potentially use artificial characters to cleverly augment or undermine conventional narrative experiences, harnessing psychological and cultural dynamics that enhance the viewer's experience. As the technology evolves, it will become imperative to learn how to negotiate the limits of AI character realism and moral depiction if the film industry wants to take advantage of AI's full potential. Such research fits into the ever-widening debate about AI's place in media: Ai-driven characters will remain a dominant element of storytelling, affective resonance and the experience of watching a movie.

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