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Chimeria:Grayscale: An Interactive Narrative for Provoking Critical Reflection on Gender Discrimination

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ABSTRACT

Roleplaying has a history of serving diverse aims, including art, entertainment, therapeutic purposes, and political action (Piper 1973; Gygax 1978; Boal 1993; Matthews *et al.* 2014). This paper presents an interactive narrative called *Grayscale* that uses roleplaying to provoke critical reflection through modeling workplace gender discrimination. *Grayscale's* interface resembles a stream-lined email system, constituting what Henry Jenkins has termed an “embedded narrative” since the narration is distributed across elements in the space (e.g. emails, notes, draft messages).

KEYWORDS

interactive narrative; reflection; roleplay; gender.

RESUMO

O jogo de papéis tem servido diversos objetivos, incluindo arte, entretenimento, fins terapêuticos e ação política (Piper 1973; Gygax 1978; Boal 1993; Matthews *et al.* 2014). Este artigo apresenta uma narrativa interativa chamada *Grayscale*, que usa o jogo de papéis para provocar a reflexão crítica através da modelagem da discriminação de gênero no local de trabalho. A interface do *Grayscale* assemelha-se a um sistema de e-mail simplificado, constituindo o que Henry Jenkins denominou de “narrativa embutida”, já que a narração é distribuída

entre os elementos no espaço (por exemplo, e-mails, notas, rascunhos de mensagens).

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

narrativa interativa; reflexão; jogo de papéis; gênero.

I. CHIMERIA

We have chosen to model gender discrimination through the *Chimeria* platform (Harrell 2017), a platform that supports simulation of social category membership in virtual identity systems through: (1) modeling the underlying structure of many social categorization phenomena with a computational engine and (2) enabling players to build their own creative applications about social categorization using the engine as a backbone. *Chimeria* simulates experiences based upon social group membership using a data-driven approach and may take multiple forms (e.g., a 2D visual novel style game (Harrell 2014), a fictitious chat narrative set in a social network (Harrell 2013), or a 3D virtual environment).

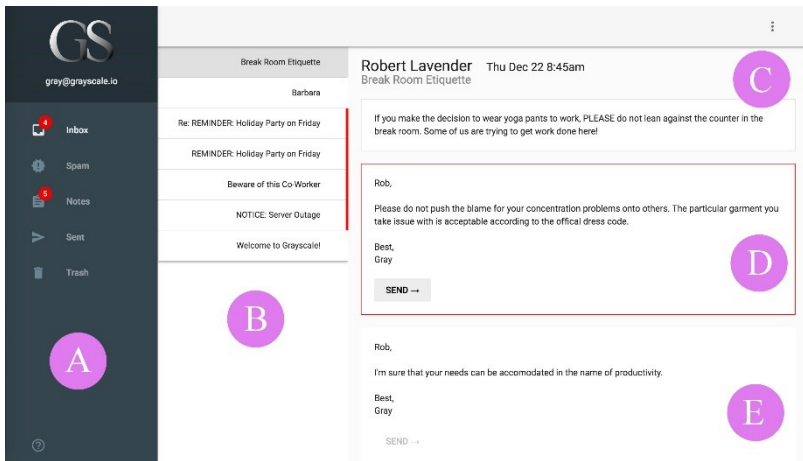


Figure 1. *Chimeria:Grayscale's* email interface. The labeled components are (A) the inbox pane, (B) inbox contents, (C) email contents, (D) response #1, and (E) response #2, respectively.

II. CHIMERIA: GRAYSCALE

In our narrative, players take on the role of a newly hired Human Resource Manager at an inhospitable corporation eponymously called *Grayscale*.¹ The player character is afforded some agency through the use of the company's email system (see Figure 1), including the ability to customize its interface. The narrative itself is presented as a sequence of emails, some of which the player can respond to.

The narrative's central theme is that of the struggles produced by mediated communication in the face of gendered workplace microaggressions (Basford 2013). The protagonist is melancholic, though the story uses humorous satire. The story also explores accompanying social categorizations including "activism"², conformity, feminism,³ and misogyny. As the player receives both banal and incendiary fictional emails, their character will occasionally be on the receiving end of a microaggression, or made to observe a microaggression experienced by a peer. When afforded the opportunity to respond, the player is able to simultaneously engage with the systematicity of disempowering gendered interactions while exploring their affective and material repercussions. The narrative is driven by other characters' reactions to the protagonist's responses. Consider the excerpt in Figure 2. Choosing the first option results in the protagonist's categorization shifting towards "activism" along a spectrum from "activism" to conformity. One character within the narrative becomes increasingly emboldened and empowered by observing such disruptions to the social order. Most characters, however, become increasingly hostile in response to threats to stability. Over the course of a single playthrough, players will experience several interactions like that of Figure 2, resulting in one of many narrative conclusions.

"If you make the decision to wear yoga pants to work, PLEASE do not lean against the counter in the break room. Some of us are trying to get work done here!"

In response, the player can choose 1 of 2 options:

(1) "Please do not push the blame for your concentration problems onto others. The particular garment you take issue with is acceptable according to the official dress code."

(2) "I'm sure that your needs can be accommodated in the name of productivity."

Figure 2. Excerpt from an email in the *Chimeria:Grayscale* narrative.

1 We also refer to the system as *Chimeria:Grayscale* when emphasizing the platform used to create it.

2 When we use the term "activism" in this paper, we are referring to one's willingness to upset the social order.

3 The category of "feminism" as implemented in *Grayscale* reflects a worldview of gender as performed and constructed (Butler 1990; Hooks 2014), but we recognize the diversity of (often contested) approaches to feminism.

III. CONCLUSION

We use *Chimeria:Grayscale* to demonstrate how the *Chimeria* engine can be leveraged to create compelling, socially nuanced roleplay experiences. *Chimeria*'s ability to model the specifics and dynamics of identity allow it to portray social interactions with increasing nuance. This stands in stark contrast to a large swath of games that do not highly value complex models of identity for non-player characters. We hope taking on roles within *Chimeria* will agitate players' critical awareness of the socially impactful themes raised by its narrative.

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