

More than a Martyr: Fostering Empathy Through Interactive Storytelling in the Matthew Shepard Case

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Statements and Declarations

Ethical Considerations: This study involved human participants. Ethical approval was not required because SCAD does not have an Ethics Committee or Institutional Review Board.

Consent to Participate: Informed consent to participate in this study was provided by the participants in writing in the screening process.

Consent for Publication: Not applicable

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Data Availability Statement: The interactive design, *Matthew: More than a Martyr* tested in this study, and the resulting, anonymized participant data can be accessed in a GitHub repository [here](#).

Author Biography

Thomas Walker is an MFA student in Interactive Design and Game Development at Savannah College of Art and Design. Walker completed his BS in Computer Science at Samford University in 2023, with a concentration in Game Design. His work focuses on interactive installations in galleries and museums, and serious games related to education, training, and raising awareness to social issues.

Abstract

This paper explores the use of empathy design to foster a nuanced understanding of the Matthew Shepard murder, which catalyzed significant hate crime legislation in the U.S. While the cultural narrative often simplifies Shepard's killing into a binary of victim and perpetrator, this research sought to encourage complexity in understanding the individuals involved with the case by utilizing theories of empathy and interactive systems. The study presented a web-based visual novel, *Matthew: More than a Martyr*, structured around testimonies from those involved in the case which prompted participants to make ethical decisions about the incident. Using a gamified empathy model that integrates cognitive and affective empathy, the experience engaged participants both emotionally and intellectually. Empathy shifts in participants were assessed through in-game choices and a survey evaluating their empathy for the perpetrators. Results indicated diversity in perspectives on the case, with measurements of intellectual and affective empathy observed across participants.

Keywords

Matthew Shepard, empathy design, interactive storytelling, serious games, visual novels

Introduction

The 1998 murder of Matthew Shepard stands as a pivotal moment in American history, deeply influencing both cultural attitudes and legal frameworks surrounding hate crimes. Shepard, a young gay man attending the University of Wyoming, was brutally beaten and left for dead by two men in what many initially believed to be a clear-cut hate crime. His death became a powerful symbol for the fight against violence targeting the LGBTQ+ community, ultimately leading to the creation of the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act

in 2009 (U.S. Congress). This law expanded federal hate crime legislation to include offenses motivated by a victim's sexual orientation, gender identity, or disability, connecting Shepard's name to social justice reforms and the pursuit of equality. However, the cultural significance of the Matthew Shepard case often comes at the cost of nuance. The broader narrative portrays Shepard solely as a martyr for the LGBTQ+ community, but in doing so, overlooks valuable insights into the personal and societal contexts of those involved in the crime, including the killers. Over time, discussions of the case have leaned toward simplification, framing it as a binary of good and evil - victim and perpetrators. In reality, understanding the killers' motives—potentially ranging from hate, drugs, economic hardship, or gender-based power dynamics—demands a more nuanced interpretation that engages the full spectrum of human experience and empathy.

Research Opportunity

The goal of this research was to use empathy design principles to foster more meaningful engagement with the complex narratives surrounding Matthew Shepard's death. By utilizing the theory of empathy design as espoused in "Designing Gamified Interactive Systems for Empathy Development" (2021), this research project consisted of the designing and testing of an interactive, visual-novel style game experience – *Matthew: More than a Martyr*. In this serious game, participants were tasked with reviewing real-life testimony and evidence surrounding Matthew Shepard's murder. At the conclusion of the experience, they assigned motivations to the killers from a set of possible options, inciting an ethical dilemma. The primary aim was to increase participants' empathy not just for Shepard, but also for the individuals involved in his death—understanding the conditions that may have contributed to their actions.

Literature Review

Perspectives on the Matthew Shepard Case

The Matthew Shepard case has been widely explored in various forms of media and literature, each offering a unique lens through which to understand the events and their aftermath. One of the most prominent and artistic responses to the tragedy is *The Laramie Project*, a play (2000) and later a film (2002) that presented a series of interviews from the people of Laramie, Wyoming, the town where Shepard was murdered (Kaufman & Tectonic Theater Project). Through its verbatim theatre style, *The Laramie Project* captured the community's raw and mixed reactions and offered a variety of viewpoints. However, it also promoted the framing of Shepard as a martyr and his killers as irredeemable villains, reinforcing the dominant narrative rather than challenging it.

In contrast, JoAnn Wypijewski's article "A Boy's Life: For Matthew Shepard's Killers, What Does It Take to Pass as a Man?" offered a much more complex view of the events. Published in Harper's Magazine in 1999, Wypijewski's piece delved into the psychological profiles of Shepard's killers, Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson, and argued that their actions were not solely driven by homophobia but were shaped by economic desperation, drug addiction, and deeply ingrained notions of toxic masculinity prevalent in Laramie. This perspective directly informed the empathy design framework used in this project, as it prompted participants to question the conventional understanding of "villainy" in the narratives around the case.

Adding further complexity to the narrative was Stephen Jimenez's book, *The Book of Matt* (2013), which provided a controversial investigative account of Shepard's life and murder. Jimenez challenged the widely accepted notion that Shepard's murder was purely a hate crime,

suggesting instead that it was influenced by the methamphetamine drug trade and that Shepard and one of his killers may have known each other previously. While Jimenez's claims have been met with skepticism and criticism, his work demonstrated that Shepard's case is more complex than it was initially portrayed. These varying interpretations of Shepard's life and death provided the framework for a deeper exploration of the story in this project's visual novel by encouraging participants to consider multiple motives for the crime as was addressed in these various media.

Approaches to Empathy Design in Interactive or Gamified Systems

Empathy in interactive systems is fostered not only through narrative depth but also through the design of mechanics that guide players to feel and think in new ways. The 2019 SCAD thesis, *Procedural Empathy: How Simulations Shape Heart & Mind*, emphasizes how the structure and rules of a game can evoke empathy by requiring players to experience the consequences of their choices within a system. Procedural empathy emerges when players build emotional connections through the game mechanics rather than relying solely on storytelling. By embedding processes that simulate real-life dilemmas, players are encouraged to understand perspectives and emotions they may not have encountered before. This concept shaped the design of *Matthew: More than a Martyr*, which uses an interactive system to involve participants in testimonies and motive assignments, simulating the complex task of moral judgment.

In *Predictive Power of Game Experience on Empathy with People Living with HIV/AIDS* (2022), Xiaoxiao Zhang explores how serious games can increase empathy for marginalized groups by allowing players to engage with the challenges of people living with HIV/AIDS. Zhang's study found that interactive experiences can impact empathy by engaging players in decision-making processes that confront stigmas, health challenges, and social barriers. This approach allows players to confront biases and ethical dilemmas within the game framework,

promoting empathy for those facing systemic discrimination or health struggles. This research is paralleled in this project, where participants face morally challenging decisions related to motives and sentencing that prompted a nuanced empathy for all parties involved.

The paper *Are Newsgames Better Journalism?: Empathy, Information and Representation in Games on Refugees and Migrants* (2018) by Plewe and Fürsich demonstrates how interactive journalism can use games to create empathy by immersing players in the lives of migrants and refugees. By placing players in decision-driven scenarios that mirror real-world hardships, newsgames aim to foster a deeper understanding of social and political contexts affecting migrants beyond reading news. This form of empathy design aligns with *More than a Martyr* by engaging participants in choices that reflect the social and personal complexities of the Matthew Shepard case. Both approaches rely on participatory mechanics that encourage reflection, empathy, and an understanding of media-driven, multifaceted issues.

Together, these frameworks—drawing from procedural empathy, Zhang’s study on HIV/AIDS empathy, and Plewe and Fürsich’s work on newsgames—highlight how empathy in interactive systems can be cultivated not just through storytelling but through game mechanics that embed empathetic engagement within the structure itself. For this study, these models informed the design, where interactions allow participants to review testimonies, assign motives, and confront moral judgments, thus engaging cognitive and affective empathy directly within the system.

Serious Games and Visual Novels for Social Awareness/Empathy

There are several notable examples of serious games and visual novels that tackle themes of social justice, empathy, or controversial events, each of which informed the project’s design. One such example is the highly debated *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* (2005), a game that

explored the motives and psychological state of the perpetrators of the Columbine High School shooting. The game forced participants to confront the horrific violence of the event from the challenging perspective of the shooters themselves. While criticized for its insensitivity, the game also raised discussions on how serious games can be used to provoke thought about real-world issues. This blend of shock and empathy design influenced the approach to *More than a Martyr*, as it also invoked empathy regarding a real-life, violent event. Instead of being placed in the point of view of the assailants, the participants took on the role of a judge interceding on the case, which I chose due to the criticism *Super Columbine* received for potentially stoking reverence for the shooters with its point of view.

Her Story (2015), another relevant interactive experience, was a narrative-based game where players pieced together the story of a murder through fragmented video interviews. The game's non-linear structure encouraged players to engage in detective work, piecing together a complex narrative that defied easy categorization. *Her Story* showed how interactive systems can evoke empathy and curiosity by leaving room for interpretation and self-directed exploration, like in *More than a Martyr*, where participants reviewed testimonies at their own pace and decided motives in the Shepard case.

Lastly, *Papers, Please* (2013), is an example of a game that elicits empathy by having players make difficult moral decisions within a legal system, constantly weighing personal ethics against state-imposed rules. By placing players in morally ambiguous situations, *Papers, Please* demonstrated how game mechanics can challenge players to empathize with individuals in complex bureaucratic systems, a design strategy that my project utilized as participants engaged with the ethical dilemmas surrounding Matthew Shepard's death through a simulated legal ruling. These examples highlight how serious games and visual novels use interactive mechanics

to foster empathy and provoke thought on social issues. Together, they informed this project's approach to creating an empathetic experience around the Matthew Shepard case.

Methodology

Design Artifact

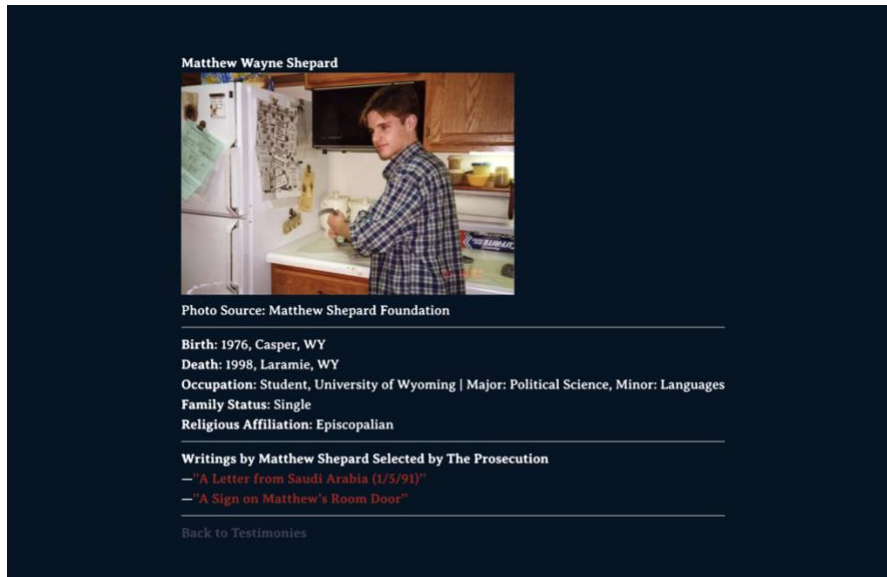


Figure 1. The webpage for Matthew Shepard, where the user can read documents written by Shepard.

The design artifact for this study was an interactive installation presented in a visual novel style. This format combined visual and narrative elements, immersing participants in an investigative role that revolved around reviewing case files and testimonies. The visuals and text content aimed to engage participants through sequential testimonies, reminiscent of the format used in *The Laramie Project*. The design asked participants to evaluate the motives of Matthew Shepard's killers based on available information and ultimately to assign motives and punishments. This ethical dilemma served as the core interaction, offering multiple interpretations of the event and challenging participants to think beyond the dominant narratives around the case.

Empathy Model

The empathy model guiding the design of this artifact draws from “Designing Gamified Interactive Systems for Empathy Development” (2021), which combined two pre-existing models of empathy into one comprehensive framework. The model integrated cognitive empathy—the ability to intellectually understand another’s emotional experience—and affective empathy—the emotional resonance with another’s experience. This model was chosen because it is tailored to gamified, interactive systems, providing an ideal foundation for a system that aims to evoke emotional and intellectual engagement. In this case, I incorporated it by first offering varying perspectives to participants, then allowing them to build their own conceptions, and finally to act on their view by making a decision with an in-game impact.

Participant Experience

Participants tested *More Than a Martyr* remotely by visiting a URL on their personal laptop or desktop device. When they opened the webpage, they were introduced to the fictional premise of the game – playing the role of a legal consultant assigned to revisit the case in light of pertinent evidence that has come forward following the trials of the assailants. They were then given the freedom to review testimonies from various people involved in the case, such as family members, community members, and the perpetrators. This approach allowed participants to engage with the content at their own pace, reviewing testimonies in any order they prefer. The core task for participants was to determine the motivations behind the actions of Matthew Shepard’s killers, choosing between different explanations (e.g., hate crime, drug-related) to reach a decision at the end of the experience.



Figure 2. Participant testing the game

Validation Approach

To validate the effectiveness of the design artifact in promoting empathy, I used both quantitative and qualitative methods. I quantitatively analyzed the degree of diversity in participants' end-game decisions — a wider range of decisions suggest that the installation successfully encourages participants to consider multiple perspectives rather than adhering to a singular narrative, while similar results suggest that it was not.

The image shows a screenshot of a Google Form with a light purple background. It contains four questions, each with a dropdown menu. The first question is "Which option did you select as the primary motive of Aaron James McKinney? *". Its dropdown menu is open, showing options: "Choose", "Hate Crime", "Robbery", "Substance Abuse", and "Personal Grievance". The second question is "Which option did you select as the appropriate sentence for Aaron James *". Its dropdown menu is closed and shows "Choose". The third question is "Which option did you select as the primary motive of Russel Henderson? *". Its dropdown menu is closed and shows "Choose". The fourth question is "Which option did you select as the appropriate sentence for Russel Henderson? *". Its dropdown menu is closed and shows "Choose".

Figure 3. Questions from the Google Form filled out by participants recording their in-game decisions

I also surveyed the participants' degree of empathy after the experience, determining whether the test led to a noticeable change in their empathetic engagement with those involved in the tragedy. I designed the questions based on a methodology from a research project that similarly assessed empathy development for a serious game (Zhang, 2022). This mixed-methods approach ensured that the study captured both the intellectual shifts in participants' reasoning and the emotional impact of the experience.

Results and Discussion

Screening

There were 9 participants who tested *More than a Martyr*. First, they underwent a screening process in which they filled out a form assessing their degree of familiarity with the Matthew Shepard murder from three options – 'not familiar', 'somewhat familiar', and 'very familiar'. 5 of the participants reported they were 'not familiar' with the case, while 4 said they

were ‘somewhat familiar’ with it. The form also required that the testers acknowledge they are testing:

a serious game that will allow [you] to learn about the murder of Matthew Shepard, which was a culturally significant murder in 1998 in Laramie, Wyoming. The experience will be a webpage you will visit remotely on your own computer and it will take about 15-20 minutes to complete. Please know that the experience involves reading details about the case which addresses hate crimes, substance abuse, and violence, which some may find disturbing.

The purpose of the agreement was to provide introductory information about the test, and to inform the participants about the potentially triggering nature of the in-game content.

Results

Participants were presented with four options for the killers’ motivations—*Hate Crime*, *Robbery*, *Substance Abuse*, and *Personal Grievance*. Responses were varied, with about half selecting *Robbery* as the primary motive for both criminals, and two participants identifying the crime as a *Hate Crime* for at least one of the assailants.

Which option did you select as the primary motive of Aaron James McKinney?

9 responses

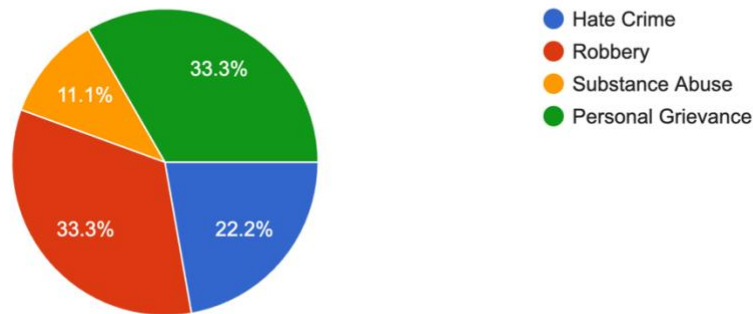


Figure 4. Selected motives for Aaron James McKinney

Which option did you select as the primary motive of Russel Henderson?

9 responses

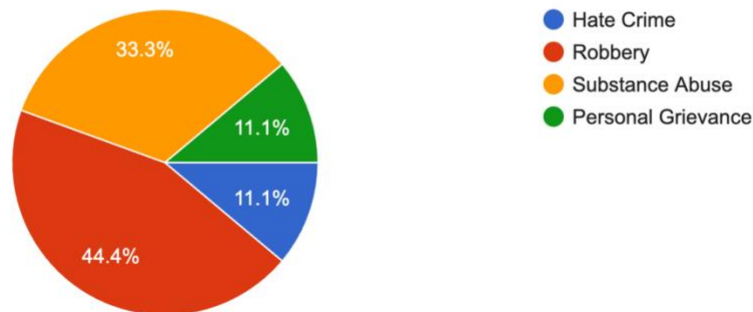


Figure 5. Selected motives for Russel Henderson

Regarding sentencing opinions, participants chose among *Life Imprisonment without Parole*, *Life Imprisonment with Parole*, *Death Penalty*, *Reduced Sentence (25-40 years)*, and *Rehabilitation Sentence (15-20 years)*. There was a strong consensus favoring *Life Imprisonment without Parole* for Aaron McKinney, with only two participants dissenting. For Russell

Henderson, participants mostly agreed on *Life Imprisonment* as well but were divided over whether parole should be an option.

Which option did you select as the appropriate sentence for Aaron James McKinney?

9 responses

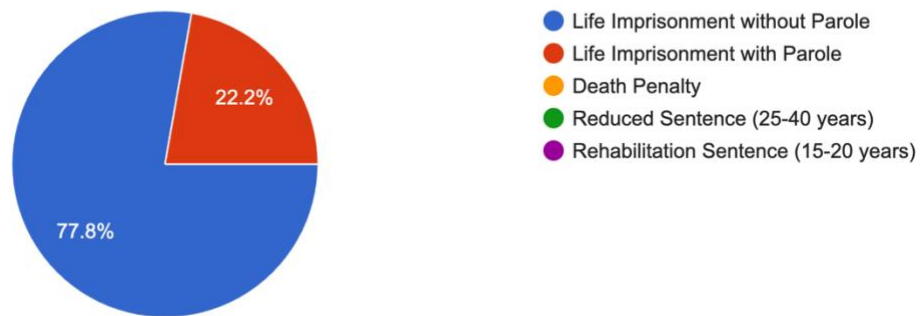


Figure 6. Selected sentencings for Aaron James McKinney

Which option did you select as the appropriate sentence for Russel Henderson?

9 responses

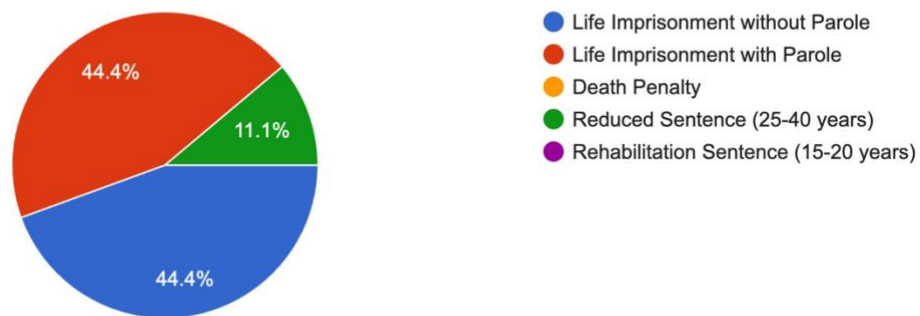


Figure 7. Selected sentencings for Russel Henderson

To assess cognitive empathy, participants indicated their perceived understanding of the killers' perspectives while interacting with *More than a Martyr*. Approximately half agreed that they could understand the killers' thoughts to some degree, while the others disagreed or

remained neutral. Affective empathy was assessed by asking participants to choose adjectives that described their emotional responses to the killers. All participants reported feeling *Sad* or *Concerned*, with one expressing an unempathetic reaction of *Repulsed* and one noting a neutral feeling of *Confused*.

Rate how closely you agree with this statement: When interacting with Matthew, I could understand the killers' thoughts.

9 responses

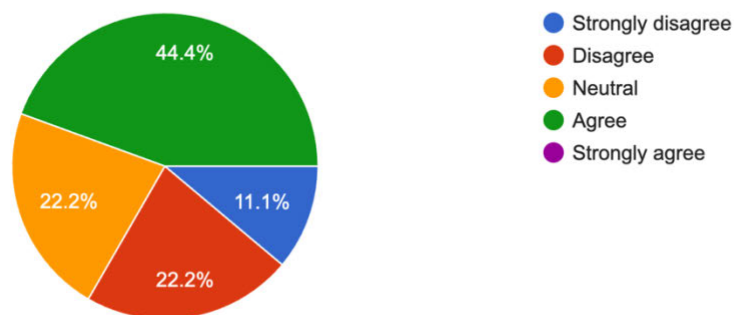


Figure 8. Degree of intellectual empathy experienced by participants

Select which of the following adjectives, if any, reflect your feelings towards the killers while you were interacting with Matthew.

8 responses

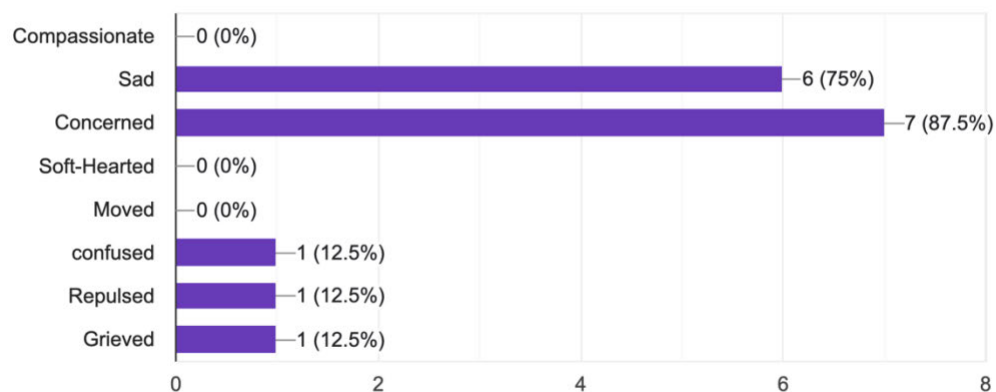


Figure 9. Participants' experience of affective empathy

Discussion

The diversity of responses from testers regarding the motivations and sentencings generally suggests that the serious game was moderately successful at allowing them to consider multiple ways of understanding the killers and the incident. Notably, only two participants chose “Hate Crime” as the primary motivation for either killer, implying that the media’s portrayal of the murder as a straightforward case of anti-gay violence may not fully capture the complexity of the situation when examined critically.

Additionally, the survey responses indicate that *More than a Martyr* successfully elicited both intellectual and emotional empathy. Only three participants reported being unable to understand the killers’ thoughts, suggesting that most users were able to intellectually grasp the killers’ perspectives to some extent. Furthermore, many participants reported feeling “Sad,” “Concerned,” or “Grieved” (affective empathy) when engaging with the killers’ viewpoints, even if they also experienced discomfort or confusion. This combination of empathy and moral conflict suggests that while participants could understand certain aspects of the killers’ motives, they maintained a critical stance that allowed for reflection without necessarily condoning the actions.

Limitations

While the users’ responses do suggest the test was effective at fostering empathy, the experiment consisted of only 8 participants. Of these testers, most were not familiar with the case, and none reported being ‘Very Familiar’ with the case, which likely shaped their interaction as they had little to no preconceptions about the murder. The serious game was also tested remotely by the participants - while they were instructed to complete testing in a distraction-free environment, it is possible that their testing environment impacted their

engagement. Lastly, the collected data was self-reported, meaning that the users may have felt pressured to select the answers they perceived as socially acceptable, rather than the most accurate to their experience.

Conclusion

The findings of this research suggest that empathy-driven interactive design may effectively encourage more nuanced engagement with complex historical narratives like the Matthew Shepard case, if further testing is conducted. By challenging participants to consider alternative motives involved in Shepard's death, *Matthew: More than a Martyr* succeeded in eliciting both cognitive and affective empathy among its users, as demonstrated by the diversity of selected motives and sentencing options. Most participants felt sadness and concern for those involved, reflecting a degree of emotional empathy, while the varied responses in motivations indicate intellectual empathy, where users were able to critically evaluate the killers' actions without resorting to the simplistic “gay bashing” framing. This project also highlights the potential of serious games and visual novel formats as tools for exploring the moral complexities of real-world events. By incorporating elements of empathy design—such as narrative structure, multiple perspectives, and ethically challenging choices—*More than a Martyr* invited participants to move beyond passive observation and encouraged active engagement with the material.

Despite the promising results, this study is limited by its small sample size, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Future research could feature a larger participant pool, including those with more diversity in familiarity with the case, to assess how pre-existing knowledge impacts empathetic engagement. Additionally, a controlled testing environment would reduce potential impacts from external factors.

In summary, this research illustrates the potential of empathy-driven interactive design to foster complex, critical engagement with challenging topics like the Matthew Shepard case. By creating opportunities for participants to reflect on and question simplified narratives, interactive experiences can contribute to a more empathetic and nuanced understanding of historical events, enhancing social awareness and broadening perspectives on issues of justice, empathy, and human complexity.

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