

Leaving Home: Using Interactive Fiction to Explore Student Attitudes towards Immigration

Introduction

Anti-immigrant sentiment, especially towards racialized international students, has been on the rise in Canada.ⁱ While anti-immigration rhetorics are not new,ⁱⁱ their growing prevalence has affected social perceptions of immigrants and policies targeted at reducing the influx of international students. My research project aims to offer an interactive, educational experience which can help users understand the challenges related to immigration and xenophobia. Interactive fiction (IF) is a virtual form of choose-your-own-adventure stories, where the reader/user has to make choices that determine the storyline. For this project, I created an IF story to test the utility of IF for expanding university students' understanding of the varied aspects of international students' lives in Canada.

Methods

The IF story for this project, titled *Leaving Home*, was created using Twine, an open-source software used to write interactive stories and video games. Participants in this study were recruited using snowball sampling from the large population of students currently registered at Carleton University. The participants were originally meant to be divided in two groups with an equal number of participants: Group A – International Students, and Group B: Domestic Students. The participants were asked to play the IF story on their personal devices at least two times and up to three times. They were then asked to complete the post-gameplay questionnaire after each playthrough of the story.

Results

A total number of 11 participants were successfully recruited for the study. 10 of these participants completed their tasks for the study. Only 2 of the participants were international students, which is why the total number of participants were ultimately not divided into groups A and B.

The participants identified the following as “social, political and/or economic issues that international students in Canada face” – high tuition fees and cost of living, social isolation, xenophobia, racism, discrimination, language barriers, lack of employment opportunities, homesickness, and fear of deportation. 2/10 participants felt that the immigration of international students to Canada adversely affected them and their community. When playing the IF story, participants felt more connected to the main character in the story when they made decisions in the story that they personally would have made in similar real-life situations. 3/10 participants said that the game altered their views on international student immigration. The other 7 participants said that they already held favourable views towards international students in Canada. 8/10 participants said they would recommend the IF story to others to enhance their understanding of international student life in Canada. The other questions in the survey were focused on the story and the participant choices, the data from which will be used to improve *Leaving Home*.

Implications and Future Directions for the Study

This project demonstrates the power of creative visualization and digital storytelling for individuals with different lived experiences to promote empathy, counter harmful rhetorics, and to experience the act of reclaiming one’s narrative. The IF story can also be used as a pedagogical tool in classrooms for different disciplines. It can also serve as a prototype for IF stories on other EDI related topics.

ⁱ Hatton, C. (2025, January 8). Canada's immigration debate soured and helped seal Trudeau's fate. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c8rjzr7vexmo>

Neuman, K. (2024, October 17). Canadian public opinion about immigration and refugees—Fall 2024. Environics Institute. <https://www.environicsinstitute.org/projects/project-details/canadian-public-opinion-about-immigration-and-refugees---fall-2024>

ⁱⁱ *History | Canadian Council for Refugees*. (n.d.). Retrieved March 12, 2025, from <https://ccrweb.ca/en/issues/history>;

Pottie-Sherman, Y., & Rima, W. (2012). Anti-immigrant sentiment in Canada. In M. Vereza (Ed.), *Anti-Immigrant Sentiments, Actions, and Policies: The North American Region and the European Union* (pp. 275–289). Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México : Centro de Investigaciones sobre América del Norte. https://ru.micisan.unam.mx/bitstream/handle/123456789/21408/L0089_0275.pdf?sequence=1