The Art of Death: Comparing Emotional Responses when Viewing Death and Dying Related Video Art

Abby Blenk, Shelby Ryan, Faith Fleming, Peter Helm, Katina Bitsicas

Introduction

Death is often a source of anxiety and pain. Despite this, processing death is necessary to adequately cope with its inevitability. Art is a powerful method of nonverbal communication and can help work through emotional barriers to prepare people for conversation. Our intention is to determine effective ways of using art to prepare people for conversations about death.

Previous research by the ASH Art of Death Digital Storytelling Research Team indicates that viewing metaphorical footage of death as a process softens death anxiety by evoking positive responses in participants. Despite these positive responses, participants indicated that the footage was both comfortable to view and caused them to think about death and mortality. This year's ASH Art of Death Digital Storytelling Research Team expands on these results by measuring changes in response when metaphorical footage is present. We believe that presenting the footage alongside a clinical depiction of death will make participants more comfortable with discussing death than seeing only a clinical depiction.

The culmination of our study is *Points of View,* a two-stage video art experience of death as a physiological and emotional process. Stage one consists of an animation depicting the scientific process of death as a self-contained piece, while the second stage combines this animation with a video background reflecting emotional responses to death. The footage was chosen as a simplified expression of the stages of grief, with this expectation that this would be a culturally and religiously neutral association with death and dying.
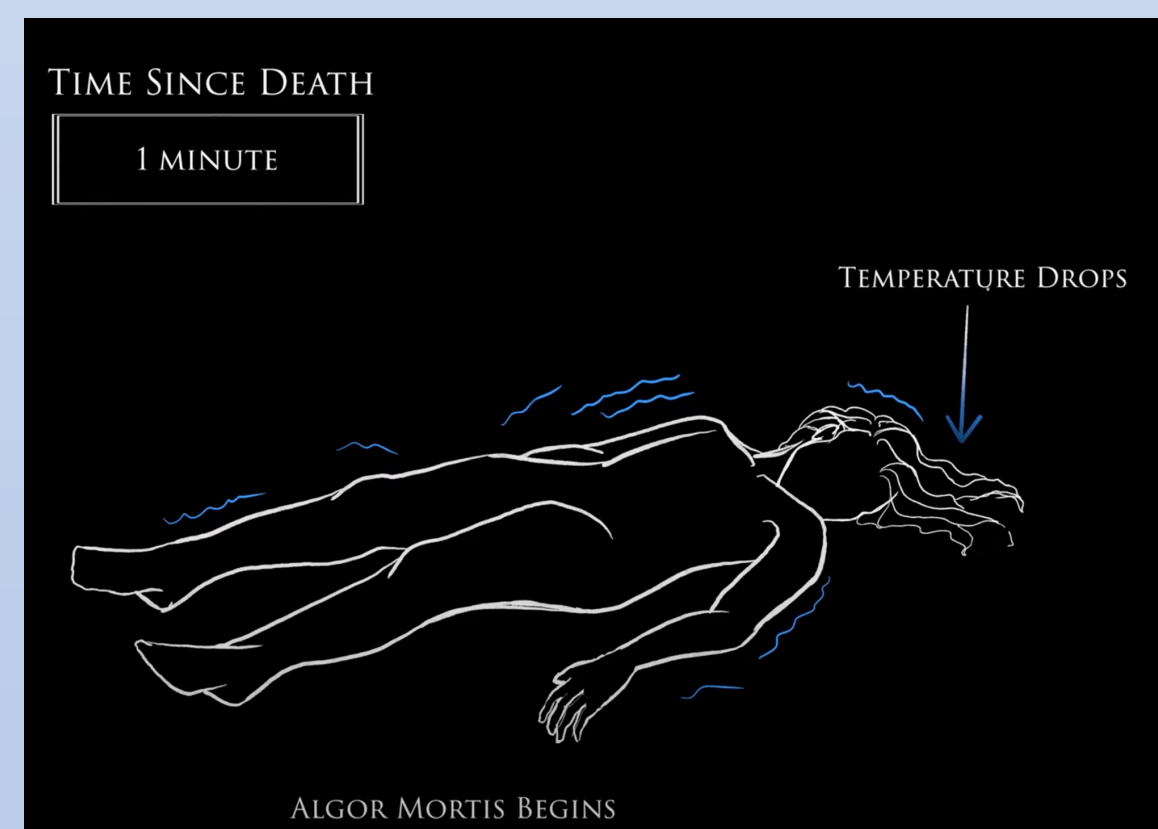

Methodology

The team determined the project's imagery could combine live-action and animation to evoke specific feelings associated with death and dying when confronted with abstract and more scientific imagery. To do so, the team began by storyboarding the combined live-action and animated processes. The team then began filming the live-action aspects of the project. After the live-action portion was done, key frames were drawn out in Adobe Photoshop to represent the different stages of death. Using the digital art software Procreate, in-between animations of the process of decay were added to the key frames. After this, the animation and live-action portions were combined in Adobe Premiere Pro.
The live-action portions abstractly represented emotional responses to death, while the animated portion represented the clinical perspective by displaying different stages of the post-death physiological process. In order to gauge the different responses to abstract and concrete images of death, we created two separate videos. Video 1 only contained animations depicting the physical process of death while video 2 combined animated and abstract live-action aspects to elicit different emotional responses to the process of death.

Research collection occurred via mTurk, an online survey conductor. Participants first viewed the animation-only video and responded to a series of questions. Subsequently, participants viewed the combined artwork and responded to the same set of questions. After viewing both videos, participants were surveyed on which elements (if any) of the piece evoked a selection of emotional and thought responses. In the study conducted, there were two different types of questions. For the first, respondents were asked to rate on a scale of 1-5 (1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree) whether they agreed with the statement provided or not. For the second set, participants were asked about a specific emotion and which element of the video they thought evoked that emotion. In this portion, the choices were as follows: animated element only, video element only, both video and animated, or not applicable. These questions allowed us to determine what emotions each participant linked certain aspects of *Points of View* to.

Results

- Surveys were filled out by the participants (N=193). The survey demographic leaned largely towards Christians (59.6%) and white (73.1%), with a rather even balance of males (42.5%) and females (57.0%) and a small number of non-binary participants (0.01%). Participants were primarily between 35-44 years old.

- There was no significant difference in response for viewers saying the animated body was comfortable to view after watching the first and second video.

- Participants responded that they reflect on what happens to them spiritually when they die more after watching the second video (video background and animation) than they did after watching the first (animation only).

- Participants responded that they feel more prepared to discuss death after watching the first video (animation only) and less after watching the second video (video background and animation).
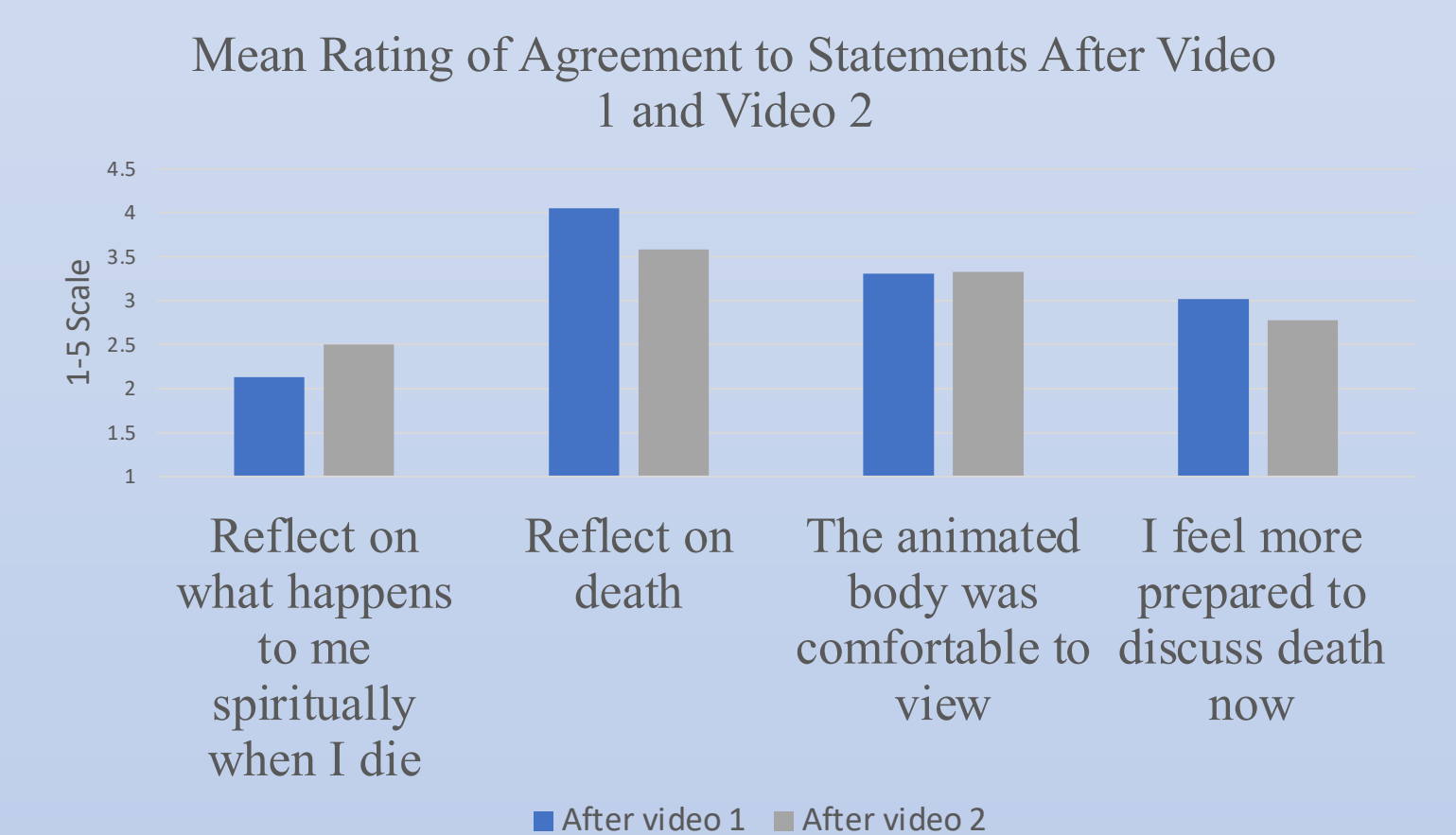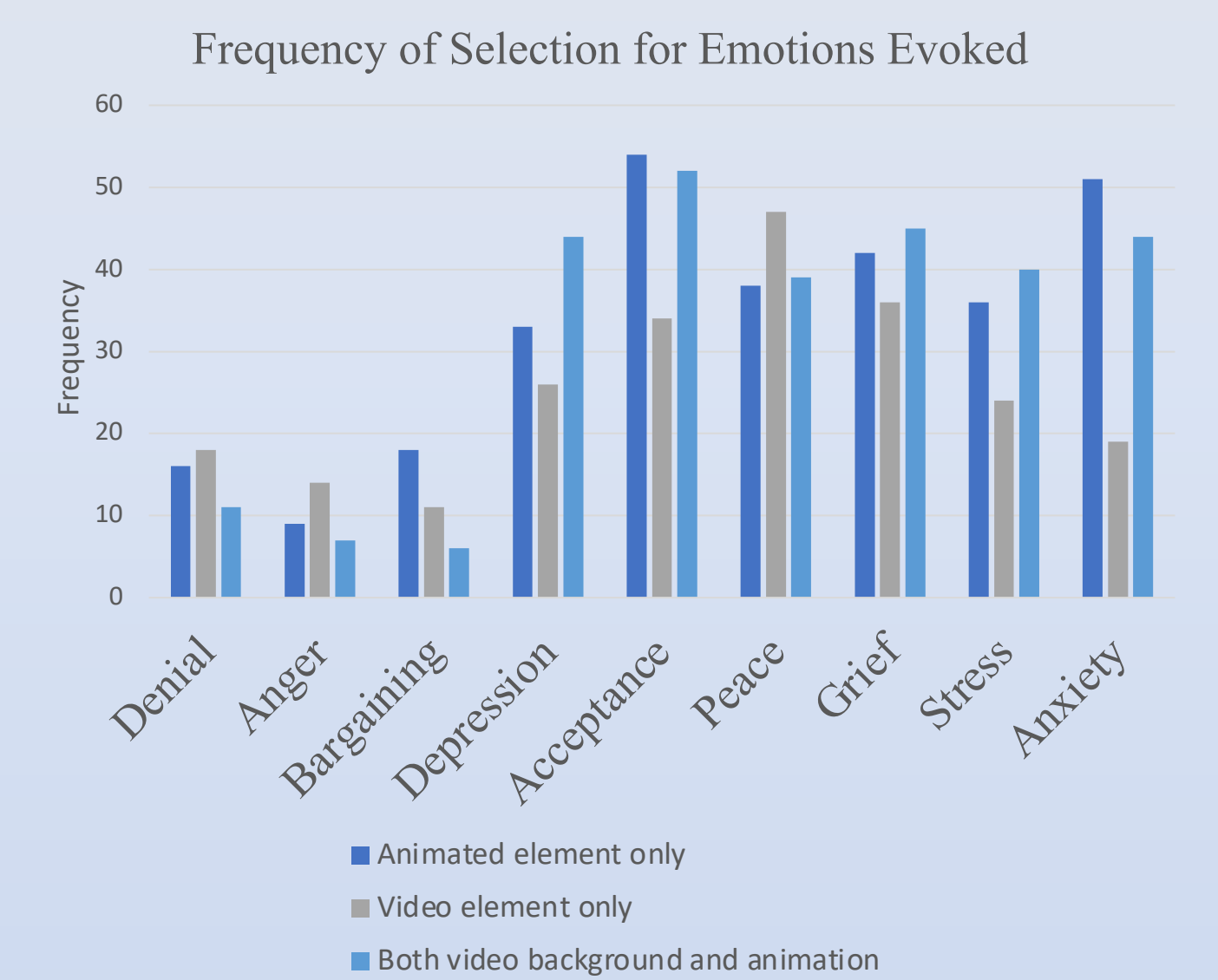
Conclusion + Future Study

The goal of this study continued the ideas of last year's study examining video art and its ability to create a sense of comfortability around discussing death. The project's focus was to see how comfortable a clinical animated depiction of death would cause participants to feel, and if the incorporation of metaphorical live-action video would increase comfort with death and death-related emotions. The study revealed that people feel more prepared to discuss death after watching video 1 (physiological animation only) than they did after video 2 (video background and animation), indicating that a focus on factual process provides a more directed line of thought. However, the general level of comfort that participants felt did not change with the addition of live-action footage in video 2. The study also found that people reflected on death more after video 1 but reflected on their own spirituality more after video 2.

These findings could be further examined in a future study to determine if metaphorical imagery is associated with spirituality more than with clinical depictions of death. Another possibility for future study is a comparison of the connotation of metaphorical footage before adding it to the animation. Footage used in this study differed from what the ASH Art of Death Digital Storytelling Pod used last year and changes in association with footage may have led to different responses.

Acknowledgements