

WIP: Characterizing the Impact of Perfectionism on MS GDD Students

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Abstract—This work-in-progress research-to-practice paper examines the impact of perfectionism and burnout among Master’s Game Design and Development (GDD) students. Utilizing the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS), the study identifies perfectionist tendencies and correlates them with students’ definitions of success, experiences with burnout, and strategies for coping with these challenges. Results from this pilot study reveal significant levels of perfectionism, particularly in areas such as concern over mistakes and high personal standards, which correlate with frequent burnout experiences. Thematic analysis of open-ended responses highlights both adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies, offering insights into potential curriculum interventions aimed at improving student well-being. These findings provide a foundation for future research and the development of educational structures that better support students in managing perfectionism and mitigating its adverse effects. **Keywords**— Perfectionism, Self-Growth, Video Game Development, Graduate Students

I. INTRODUCTION

At the Master’s level in Game Design and Development (GDD) education, a multifaceted challenge persists: students, despite their proficiency, grapple with the detrimental effects of perfectionism, leading to burnout and hindering their academic performance and personal well-being. Prior research has shed light on the prevalence of perfectionism and its adverse impact on mental health and academic achievement [1]-[4]. However, a comprehensive understanding of the nuanced struggles of MS GDD students concerning perfectionism and burnout, their definitions of success, and the coping strategies employed to combat perfectionism remains limited.

By focusing on the specific struggles of MS GDD students concerning perfectionism and burnout, this study situates itself within the context of well-being in higher education. This context is essential, considering the pressure and demands inherent to the competitive world of game design and development, where “perfect” doesn’t exist, and the ability to pivot and take critique is critical.

By aligning academic objectives with students’ definitions of success, the MS GDD program can enhance engagement and motivation, fostering a healthier learning experience. Moreover, gaining insights into the strategies already employed by students to combat perfectionism offers context-specific interventions that could be disseminated within the program and adapted to the program design, contributing to the broader sense of student well-being and mental health.

This work builds upon existing knowledge and its significance lies in its potential application and adaptation to the unique challenges MS GDD students face. Conducting a focused, context-specific investigation also provides a foundation for future studies and interventions, emphasizing the importance of addressing this multifaceted issue within the specific context of GDD education.

A. Signs of Perfectionism

Perfectionism is the tendency to hold and pursue exceedingly high standards; however, there are several different multidimensional models and measures of perfectionism. Two models have been widely accepted: the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS) and the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS) [5-6] (Table 1). While these scales have nine differing subscales, factor analysis resulted in a two-factor solution: one reflecting maladaptive perfectionism and the second reflecting adaptive perfectionism [8]. The FMPS model has been leveraged to identify perfectionism in college students and gifted students [1], [9]-[11].

Lee and Anderman note that adaptive perfectionists are closely associated with feelings of positive affect, while maladaptive perfectionists are closely associated with negative affect. The maladaptive perfectionist groups reported higher levels of cynicism and exhaustion, showing that perfectionism that invokes evaluative concerns may be more draining for students. Furthermore, maladaptive perfectionism encapsulates a self-evaluative process that overgeneralizes negative feelings of failure and shame. Both groups exhibit signs of exhaustion and burnout, although maladaptive perfectionists do so at a higher level. Adaptive perfectionists still experience more negative affect than non-perfectionists, implying that adaptive perfectionism is the least harmful subtype of perfectionism but still more detrimental to being a non-perfectionist [11].

TABLE I. MPS VS. FMPS DIMENSIONS

| Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale [6] | Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale [7] |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Self-oriented- Other-oriented- Socially prescribed | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Concern over mistakes and doubts about actions- Expressive concern with parents’ expectations and evaluation- Excessively high personal standards- Concern with precision, order, and organization |

B. Mindsets and Perfectionism

Past work has shown that maladaptive perfectionists have a negative relation to intelligence growth mindsets, while there was a positive relation to person-fixed mindsets [12]. Other studies show that maladaptive perfectionism was associated with lower growth mindset ratings and higher perceived stress, while adaptive perfectionism is related to higher growth mindset ratings and is not significantly associated with perceived stress; it was further inferred that growth mindset acted as a mediation effect in adaptive perfectionists [3]. Perfectionists who adopt a growth mindset are also better able to handle and learn from failure, mediating their psychological distress [2].

Growth mindsets are more oriented toward learning than achieving a fixed goal, while fixed mindsets are solely focused on achieving that goal. Applying mindfulness techniques has been found to help foster a growth mindset [13]. In a study addressing perfectionism in gifted adolescents with an affective curriculum, the lessons incorporated several elements of mindfulness, including introducing the concepts of nonviolent communication, positive self-talk, relaxation techniques, and self-affirmation to help them develop realistic goals. The findings from the study stated that students with moderate to high levels of maladaptive perfectionism reported lower levels of concern over mistakes, doubts about actions, and personal standard scores following the intervention [9].

II. METHODOLOGY

This research polled first-year MS GDD students utilizing an online questionnaire; 30 students were invited to participate, the entire 2023-24 first-year MS cohort. Participants were recruited online via email using the Qualtrics email service feature, which provided information about the study and requested their collaboration in filling out the questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of general demographic questions, the FMPS self-report instrument [14], and open-ended questions, as shown in Table 2 to determine students' definition of success (Q7-9), their relationships with perfectionism & burnout (Q10a-b, Q11), and the strategies they employ to mitigate the impacts of perfectionism and burnout (Q10c, Q12).

Following the questionnaire's administration, data were analyzed using the FMPS scaling system in tandem with thematic bottom-up coding of open responses to identify themes and compare student strategies with their level of perceived perfectionism and high standards [14].

The thematic coding process followed a bottom-up approach [15, pp. 152-154]. Open responses were read and analyzed as a single set unrelated to the specific question or participant. Codes were then identified clause by clause based on themes relevant to the study, intentionally being generous in judging what was important. Each code was given a short description as they accumulated. Following the initial review of the responses and creating the initial code book, codes were sifted through and winnowed, combining similar codes and trimming codes that might not be as relevant to the study; the remaining codes were given more in-depth descriptions to help identify where they may be applied in the responses. Lastly, responses were reviewed again, applying the codes to each notable clause; some clauses upheld multiple codes, and some responses had numerous instances of a code.

TABLE II. OPEN RESPONSE QUESTIONS

| | |
|------|--|
| Q7 | How do you define success in your life? (This question is intentionally open to see personal responses; it's up to you how you define success) |
| Q8 | How do you handle setbacks or failures on your path to success? Imagine a time you had a setback or failure. What did it look like, and what did you do? Describe the situation and how you reacted. (Think about a typical example, not an extreme) |
| Q9 | How would you describe the standards or expectations that you set for yourself? |
| Q10a | How often do you feel you experience burnout? |
| Q10b | How would you describe your experiences with burnout? |
| Q10c | What have you done to prevent burnout? |
| Q11 | How do you typically react when you don't meet your standards or expectations? (Consider your own biological, psychological, & social responses to setbacks/failure) |
| Q12 | Think of times you tried to prevent your negative reactions to failure/setbacks. Which of these strategies seemed to work well, and which didn't? |

Codes were tracked for each person's responses and then combined to calculate the total number of instances the theme occurred in the study as a whole, for each individual, and for each question. Since this is a pilot study, we determined that the bottom-up thematic analysis would be used to work toward creating codes for future studies, identify emerging patterns, and discuss these patterns and problems in the broader problem space. As such, we determined that interrater reliability would be of limited effectiveness in showing a strong reviewer correlation due to the limited data. However, the data in this pilot study can provide direction for future inquiries at a more extensive scope, where inter-rater correlation will be necessary for limiting individual rater bias.

III. RESULTS

Six students participated in the study. Five completed the entire questionnaire, while one only completed the FMPS portion. The average age & median of the participants was 23, with four males, one female, and one non-binary participant reporting. Five participants were Caucasian, and one was Asian. Three participants were in the accelerated BS/MS program, and the other three were strictly MS students.

While all six participants completed the FMPS portion of the questionnaire, only five completed the entire questionnaire; as such, the data from the one participant who did not complete the open responses is not included in the culminating review. Table 3 shows the raw scores and percentiles accrued for each dimension from the participants' FMPS results [14]. All participants showed the presence of perfectionism, being at least 30.9 percentile above the average [14]. Two participants showcased clinically significant levels of perfectionism, being above the 90th percentile. While it is a small sample, it does align with findings from earlier studies that examine the prevalence of perfectionism in college students [4].

TABLE III. FMPS PERCENTILE SCORES

P1-5 = Subjects, CM = Concern over Mistakes & Doubts about Actions, PE = Parental Expectations and Criticism, PS = Personal Standards, ORG = Organization, Total P = Total Perfectionism.

| | CM | PE | PS | ORG | Total |
|-----|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| AVG | 85.64% | 63.94% | 79.76% | 62% | 88.02% |
| P1 | 60.30% | 68.80% | 99.30% | 97% | 86.60% |
| P2 | 93.90% | 15.30% | 96.90% | 34.60% | 82.40% |
| P3 | 92.50% | 73.10% | 26.80% | 58.80% | 80.90% |
| P4 | 92.50% | 89.40% | 76.20% | 50.70% | 94.20% |
| P5 | 89% | 73.10% | 99.60% | 66.60% | 96% |

The most prevalent dimension of perfectionism using Stober's dimensions was Concern Over Mistakes & Doubts About Actions at 85.64%, followed by Personal Standards at 79.76%, leaving Parental Expectations & Criticisms as the lowest dimension included in the calculation of perfectionism at 63.94% [7]. The prevalence of these dimensions likely reflects the personal drive associated with graduate students. Students are more likely to attend graduate school of their own volition [16], which may be reflected in the relatively higher percentile in Personal Standards, leading to further Concern Over Mistakes & Doubts About Actions.

Due to the limited sample size, open response coding was not tied to individual survey questions, research questions, or dimensions of perfectionism. The full set of 79 codes identified are presented in Table 4, organized by the frequency at which they appeared.

1) High-Frequency Themes: Three of the six high-frequency themes are tied to students' focuses: work (career), college, and interests. Interests overlap mildly with some of the career aspirations, but not always. It is likely that the context of this study strongly influenced the discussion of career and college since it was delivered in a collegiate. One theme, efforts, focuses on how much effort they put into something, usually related to one of the other three aforementioned themes. Another

theme, happiness, determined whether they focused on happiness or enjoyment; this was usually set as an overall goal or something they strove to achieve. The prevalence of goal-oriented themes reflected that sentiment and the presence of fixed mindsets [17].

2) Frequent Themes: These themes generally reflect the more nuanced discussion of the participants' characterization of their views of their general concerns and what impacts their standards, successes, and strategies concerning setbacks and burnout. The frequency of these themes denotes commonly shared characteristics that could signify themes worth considering moving forward.

3) Low-Frequency Themes: These themes reflect more individual approaches and outlooks on their relationships with perfectionism. As such, these themes have lower validity in the scope of this study that may be validated through larger sample sizes or remain as low-occurrence statistics.

4) Infrequent Themes: These codes only appeared once through thematic analysis; however, they may still be worth exploring in future studies with larger sample sizes. They are highly individualistic and may not be meaningful; however, some themes in that set may be more prevalent in larger studies, such as Acceptance of perfectionistic tendencies, Depression, Extrinsic Motivation, Concern for the future, Therapy, Concern about personal worth, and Personal flaws, to name a few that stand out the most. Previous research has shown ties between perfectionism and many of these themes [1]-[4], so the infrequency of these themes within this study is likely due to the limited sample size.

IV. LIMITATIONS & RISKS

The key factor affecting the findings is the study's sample size. Since we only had five full responses, a response rate of roughly 17%, the frequency of the themes may not accurately reflect the significance or frequency of a larger sample size. As such, this study's resulting list of themes represents themes that may be worth exploring in future studies with larger sample

TABLE IV. OPEN RESPONSE THEMES

| High Frequency (10+ instances) | Frequent (5-9 instances) | Low Frequency (2-4 instances) | | Infrequent (Single instances) |
|---|--|--|--|---|
| College Efforts Goal-oriented Happiness Interests Work | Applying Breaks Comparison to others Competency Concern about external perception Concerns about meeting own standards Doubts Necessity of failures Positive Reframing Reflection Shame Short response Solution-driven Standards Time Waste | Accomplishments Agency Anger Anxiety Apologetic Assumptions about priorities Atypical Competition Concern about others Consciousness Contributions Corrections Emotional exhaustion Entertainment Frequent burnout Game Industry Ignore Incomplete thoughts Infrequent burnout Intrinsic Motivation | Lack of motivation Learning Meditation Money Negative self-talk Perceived failures Physical responses Process-oriented Proudness Reason Resistance Sacrifice Self-blame Stops doing things Stress Success in school Supportive environments Team-focus Trauma Withdrawing | Acceptance Brain fog Concern about personal worth Concern for the future Depression Energy Extrinsic Motivation Forgiving others Lack of specificity Obsessive personality Overwhelming Pacing Personal flaws Relative goals Secondary Option Shared priorities Therapy |

sizes to see their frequency and significance but may not reflect definitively related themes. The presence of perfectionism may also be less prevalent in a larger participant sample. Since the study found that all participants were well above the average percentiles for total perfectionism, it is also difficult to conclude which themes may be related to perfectionism and which may be shared between non-perfectionists and perfectionists.

While all participants exhibited perfectionistic tendencies, this may have also affected their responses to the questions as they tried to appear “perfect” in their responses based on their assumptions about what the “right” answer might be [9]. Additionally, since the lead researcher for this study was also a graduate teaching assistant, the students had the researcher provide formative and summative feedback in classes throughout the year, which may have implicitly affected the participants’ desire to appear “perfect.”

The survey context may have also significantly impacted their responses; since it was delivered in an academic context geared toward GDD, it likely affected how students thought about perfectionism and how they defined success, potentially increasing the frequency of the themes of college and work. Question 12’s phrasing may have also impacted how the participants responded, as many exhibited signs of defensiveness regarding “negative reactions” rather than providing more in-depth responses about specific strategies.

Limitations affecting the data include that we did not consider incomplete surveys and that thematic frequency refers to any time that theme comes up, so one person in this smaller sample size could have severe implications for classifying the frequency of that theme; if a theme came up more than once for an individual among their open responses, it was counted each time in this study, so the frequencies may not be representative of the whole.

While themes were identified, there may be more representative themes of the subject matter or the responses that could be better tied to the research questions. This process was the first time the lead researcher performed a bottom-up thematic analysis, which may affect how well the codes were defined and collapsed while identifying themes. The codes were also not formulated by multiple coders or applied to the responses to determine interrater reliability, a recommended practice while performing thematic analysis [18, p. 82], [19, pp. 275-283]. Between performing background research on thematic analysis and receiving guidance from two research advisors with experience with thematic analysis, the process was not wholly foreign or fruitless; however, extra guidance from advisors with a psychology background may have helped provide more pointed themes.

V. FUTURE WORK

A. Supporting & Increasing the Depth of Findings

One of the first steps following this study would be replicating the research with a more significant sample size to validate the prevalence of perfectionism and themes [18, p. 70]. Replicating and improving the reliability of these findings, or being unable to replicate these findings, have significant implications for future curriculum development to address the problems associated with perfectionism. In addition, with a

larger sample size, greater depth is possible by comparing the thematic results to specific survey questions, research questions, and each student’s prevalence of different dimensions in the FMPS. By breaking down which dimensions are associated with which themes of student relationships with perfectionism, we can explore personalized approaches to students with higher perfectionism scores in specific dimensions.

Future work should also explore why students choose to pursue the MS GDD degree. Previous studies found that students are more likely to attend graduate school of their own volition [16]. Still, it may be worth supporting these findings in the context of GDD by seeing the relationships with different dimensions of perfectionism, especially Parental Expectations & Criticisms.

While this research was completed strictly on first-year MS GDD students, comparing the results with those of other majors with more subjectively measured characteristics, such as MFA students, might be worthwhile. However, it would also be valuable to examine the shared characteristics with those of students in more objectively measured majors to determine whether subjectivity or objectivity affects how students perceive their relationship perfectionism.

B. Mitigating Perfectionism

Following the exploration and expansion of the knowledge base on the impacts of perfectionism, the next steps would be to investigate and implement methodologies that support students in mitigating the adverse effects of perfectionism.

One strategy describes using affective curriculums that utilize Sumner’s Enrichment Areas of Research, Creativity, and Higher-level thinking (SEARCH) to teach middle school students utilizing self-assessment of their perfectionism, positive self-talk, self-affirmation techniques, and self-growth and mindfulness qualities [9]. While this study focused on middle school students, incorporating some of the elements could be beneficial at the graduate level, especially for those with unhealthy relationships with perfectionism. Further research is necessary to support students by addressing adjacent areas in stress management, non-threatening grading procedures, supportive classroom environments, and encouraging risk-taking that can influence perfectionism and coping positively [9].

Rice & Dellwo suggest in their study that adaptive qualities should be considered in therapeutic interventions for perfectionism [10]. Solidifying those adaptive qualities might enable design for implementation in various curriculum pedagogical approaches. Another study by Neumeister suggests that the awareness of the factors contributing to perfectionism can guide educators in creating environments with realistic expectations, unconditional support, encouragement, and challenge; it also states that individuals may benefit from these environments that help them develop healthy standards for achievement [20].

C. Encouraging a Growth Mindset

Fixed mindsets are closely related to perfectionistic tendencies [12], which suggests a need to help students adapt to growth mindsets through meaningful changes to the pedagogy. This is especially relevant for our students since effective game

design and development requires the ability to rapidly iterate and take feedback while recognizing that a game will need to reach a definition of success that is not “perfect,” otherwise it will never be done. One approach to consider is cognitive-affective mediators. While Rice et al.’s work did not support complete mediation, it drew associations between perfectionism and adjustment, and cognitive-affective self-regulation and adjustment show that self-regulation adjustment has advantages for adaptive perfectionism [21].

Future work should also investigate the use of the Responsive Classroom method to encourage growth mindsets, which focuses on a student-centered, social, and emotional learning approach to teaching and discipline [22]. While there are associations between Responsive Classrooms and growth mindsets, current literature has limited research on its effectiveness on the level of perfectionism.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

In sum, this study confirmed the presence of perfectionism in our MS GDD program and identified the most prevalent FMPS dimension as Concern Over Mistakes & Doubts About Actions. Some common themes were also tied to the students’ relationships with perfectionism and burnout; however, the smaller sample size impacts the validity of the results as frequencies may have significant variance in a larger sample, and more direct thematic ties to each research question may provide more context. The more frequent themes reflected characteristics of fixed mindsets, which were supported by previous studies that support fixed mindsets as an element of perfectionism.

Per Schruder et al., no proven methods effectively intervene with perfectionistic students with long-term benefits. Some methods appear to function in the short term with clinical evidence, but educators must carefully consider whether or not they should intervene [23]. Not all forms of perfectionism, such as adaptive perfectionism, may be detrimental to a student. Schruder et al. suggest that deciding whether perfectionistic tendencies benefit or limit their students may be a decision only the student can make [23].

It may not be worth making considerable changes to a curriculum to mitigate perfectionism, but investigating the effects of subtle changes to areas in stress management, non-threatening grading procedures, and supportive classroom environments might provide enough cushion to aid students who need it.

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