

# Homunculus Love: Playing with People's Monsters

## Narrative Game Competition Abstract

<http://inshortfilms.com/DIGM/HomunculusLove/index.html>

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### ABSTRACT

Homunculus Love is an experimental, dark humor dating simulator app. This game was created as a critique of, and to poke fun at, the modern phenomena of online dating. We wanted to present players with simulated conversation and allow them to interact with a computer AI in the hopes of “getting a date.” In lieu of people we used “Homunculus” creatures as a representation of abstract emotions and/or preconceived views, both that the player might have of other people, and that we as a society have when interfacing with someone virtually (not seeing someone face to face).

### KEYWORDS

Experimental game, Narrative, Homunculus, Simulator, Dark humor, Relationships, Dating, Virtual Relationships

## 1 INTRODUCTION

This vertical slice shows a lot of the pieces of a full dating game. From the dynamic text, to the mood system we built, there are a lot of pieces created for a final game. In a full game we would have multiple conversations be open at the same time, allowing the user to navigate back and forth from one to another at their leisure. This would also allow the user to navigate at their own pace, reading and discovering all the text written by the characters in the profiles. Multiple conversations would also allow us to have multiple characters that had more distinct personalities. In the vertical slice we wanted to have one character that you conversed with for a long time, however with many characters we can allow for some conversations to be very short, brief, and provide more unique experiences for the user. An example of this might be someone who messages you, and then when you respond, they never message back. Those small experiences can be built in a larger scale game and don't help show off the vertical slice we wanted to demonstrate.

As you talk to the various homunculus you would collect more and more stats based off of each conversation. This could be used to help us dictate a final, very impactful conversation that would be chosen to teach the player something about themselves. For example if the player was selfish through many of the conversations, we could use that data to pull up a conversation(s) that would directly challenge someone who is

selfish. This would hopefully lead to a better understanding of oneself and how the player interacts with users online.



## 2 GAME OVERVIEW

### 2.1 Set Up

You weren't sure what precisely you wanted; love, friendship, or simply a way to stave off boredom. You downloaded a dating and chat app and quickly started talking to the first creature who messaged you.

### 2.2 Mechanics

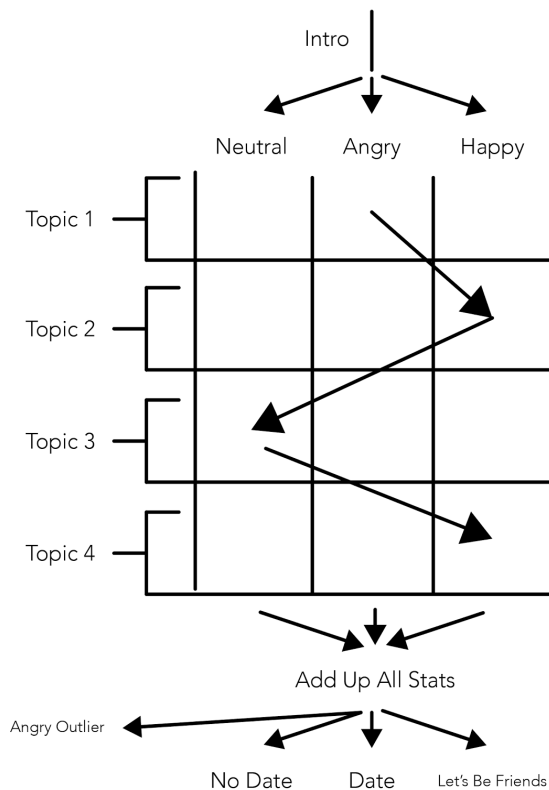
The Homunculus Dating App simulates conversation between the player and the homunculus. The player is able to create their own profile, including gender, desired gender, name, and profile picture. The player is then prompted to “speak” with the homunculus which will ask them question and answer theirs. The player is able to choose between 3-4 options of dialogue. Each option augments the players' stats while also dictating what the homunculus talks about and their reaction to you.

The player is able to gauge the homunculus' reaction based both on the tone in their messages as well as the changing profile picture on the homunculus' page. They only change their picture once certain stat thresholds are reached. The player is able to reach three separate endings by gaining specific stats while also moving through the conversation.

Depending on how the Player set up their original profile and answers the first few questions, the Homunculus will start off in different states. The player is able to have a conversation on 9 different topics. The tone and reaction of the Homunculus is dependent on which state it is in. Instead of shooting for one specific ending, the player is encouraged to replay the game to see the various conversational paths and reactions/images of the Homunculus.

### 2.3 Homunculus States

As a user plays the game the homunculus they are talking to will react based off the below states. When each topic is over the homunculus's mood will switch to another state, creating for a more dynamic, mood-based feedback system. This is key to having their reactions feel more expressive based off of the user's input. Along with the different text for each emotion for every topic, the picture and text of the profile picture changes for every step. This was intended to show the user the feelings of the computer character, acting as a metaphor for our lack of visual expression in online communication.



**Figure 1: Mood System Example for play through**

**2.3.1 Neutral (Default).** When the Homunculus is neutral, they neither like nor dislike the player. The conversations had while in neutral are predictable. If the player reaches the end in Neutral, the Homunculus will ask to only be friends and refuse to date them.

**2.3.2 Angry.** While in this state, the Homunculus tends to be respond aggressively or bitterly. If the Homunculus ends the game while Angry, they'll direct their anger at the player. They'll refuse to date them and be upset that they had spoken to the player at all.

2.3.3 *Happy*. While in this state, the Homunculus will respond cheerfully to the player. If the game ends with the Homunculus in the happy state, they will be willing to try to go on a date with the player.

**2.3.4 Angry.** When upset, the Homunculus may ask the player for advice or comfort. They will express sadness and frustration at their situation. Ending the game with the Homunculus in the upset state will not result in a date. The Homunculus may be willing to be friends but will desire to move on from the conversation.

## 2.4 Player Stats

The player has several stats that increment or decrement depending on their dialogue choices. The stats are as follows:

Stat	Max	“Best” Range
Empathy	10	3 to 6
Selfish	12	< 5
Thoughtless	15	6 to 8
Jokester	14	> 4
Daring	5	> 4
Truthful	15	> 7

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## 2.4 Player Controls

Mouse and Keyboard.

### 3 DESIRED PLAYER EXPERIENCE

The goal is to have the player enjoy talking to the Homunculus and want to see the different reactions they give. The purpose of

the Homunculus being used rather than a human is to both act as a vague Rorschach test for the player and to allow more projection and whimsy into the game. The Homunculus is meant to be an abstract way of personifying people's emotions. What may look Monstrous at first is actually just someone being seen through one person's biased view.

## 4 GAME AESTHETICS

The game is designed to mimic a Mac web browser and a sleek chatting app. The player is able to click between the chat window, their profile, and the Homunculus' profile. Small loading times while the Homunculus is typing were added to help with the immersion.

## 5 DESCRIPTION OF CHARACTERS

The Homunculi will change depending on the gender the player is searching for. In the current vertical slice there exists two main Homunculi.

### 5.1 In-Game Homunculi

**5.1.1 Nimbus.** Nimbus is the male gendered Homunculi. He appears a blue humanoid with no head except for a cloud that experiences changes in weather with his emotions.



**Figure 2: Happy Version of Nimbus**

**5.1.2 Iris.** Iris is the female gendered Homunculi. She appears as a blue humanoid covered in many eyes. She has no other facial features and emotes entirely with her many eyes.



**Figure 3: Sad version of Iris**

### 5.2 Planned Homunculi

Homunculi not added in the vertical slice thus far but planned in concept stages.

**5.2.1 Snailard.** A male gendered Homunculi. Appears as a large snail with a mass of hands protruding out of the shell.

**5.2.2 Organa.** Female gendered Homunculi. Appears as a female humanoid with her internal organs, notably her heart, on the exterior.

## 6 PLAYTESTING

As early as possible we wanted to get play testers to try out the game and give feedback. We knew that the faster we could get general feedback of the game the better we would be able to understand how users interacted with the game, and more importantly, what they felt was weird or lacking.

In the process, we were able to get Iris' conversation up and running within a few weeks of committing to our idea. Once we had a build ready we tested the game with as many people as we possibly could. To do so we created a web build of the game where anyone with a computer could play. To collect feedback,

we made a survey in Qualtrics with both scaled metrics and open ended feedback. We were also able to gain feedback from our classmates which helped us ask specific questions we could not have on a survey. Questions thought of in the moment while the user was playing the game.

## 6.1 Playtesting Round One Results

After our first build we had a lot of feedback given to us about all aspects of the game. There were three things in particular that people mentioned on a consistent basis however.

*6.1.1 Less Specific Choices* – When we originally wrote our dialogue and the various choices to it we had a lot of specific answers. On a consistent basis it was brought to our attention that the user wanted to respond differently than the answers provided. A good example of this was the AI asked the user what their favorite Harrison Ford movie was. We gave the answers, Blade Runner, The Last Crusade, and The Witness. Many users immediately asked why Star Wars wasn't a choice where even one refused to answer the question all together. This was also a problem in many of the emotional responses. We needed to retool our answers so that a user felt they could respond with an answer they felt comfortable with.

*6.1.2 More and Better Page Interaction* – The second critique was focused on the interaction in the “fake” browser window. Many people wanted to explore the various elements on every page, wanting to do things such as click on pictures to expand them, minimize windows to see more content, and quicken the time the AI responded. Initially we only had minimal interaction, but due to the demand we decided it would be a good idea to overhaul the browser window and make it more interactive. Things we added were expanding the profile picture to see all the details. Being able to add a caption to your profile pic, and choosing a profile picture. With every detail we added, the experience felt that much more intimate.

*6.1.3 Less Abstract Pictures for Homunculus'* – Initially, as a user went through the conversation with the Homunculus the image completely changed to a different creature. This abstract change felt jarring to everyone who played, all of whom asked if they were now talking to someone else. Since this was a big idea of the game originally, we felt it hard to cut as we wanted to keep the abstract nature of the game, having the creature completely change as the conversation progressed. But since no one was able to grasp the conceptual nature of the creature changing we decided to keep one creature throughout the whole conversation and then change their mood as you progressed through the conversation. This allowed a much better flow for the user and less confusion when the image changed.

## 6.2 Playtesting Round Two Results

We spent a lot of time fixing our next build to incorporate all of the requested features. In doing so we were able to create a much more polished game. Once our second build was done we asked even more people to play it. When we did we found that many people wanted one specific thing; more people to talk with.

Now that the framework was done we went forward and created more people to talk to. We decided that the flow of the game would work better if you had one long conversation and two other shorter ones that were written to be exaggerated in terms of trying to display stereotypes of online personalities and create conflict.

This final push really changed the gameplay, causing users to switch back and forth between each of the conversations, reading about the AI in their profiles, and picking more natural choices since they weren't able to obsess over one person at a time. This last piece was really where the game came together, creating an experience rather than just a chat.

## 7 FURTHER IMPROVEMENTS

In this vertical slice, we wanted to improve upon a few minor aspects to help better the experience. A large part of this is simply adding more Homunculi and conversational topics to the game.

### 7.1 Add Additional Dialogue

We wanted to add additional dialogue to help flesh out the character even further. In this vein, we wanted to modify the profile text of the Homunculus dynamically so that changed along with their mood. Currently the profile picture and text change based on mood and where you are in the conversation, however we wanted to apply this to the profile text too. We thought that might sell our idea even better.

### 7.2 Provide More Intuitive Feedback

Currently the bar graphs work to display how the player went through the conversation, however more can be done to relay how the user did in the experience as per the games judgement. We found that in the various playtesting we did that we were able to give the user a good idea of how they did, but the scores felt abstract and not concrete.

### 7.3 Add more Homunculus Images

With the time constraint we were only able to get two sets of images done for the characters and one set for the player. If we had more time we would loved to have included more pictures in order to help give a more dynamic experience. As is each homunculus has four different mood pictures. If more time allotted we wanted to add pictures that were more focused on each part of the conversation.

#### **7.4 Allow Homunculus to react more to Player Input**

We would like to allow the Homunculus to comment/react to the player's profile more so than it does. This includes the Homunculus reacting to the profile picture changes the player makes, as well their bio. This goes hand in hand with giving the player more control over their own profile.

#### **7.5 Refining the Mood System**

At times, as both a quirk of writing and the way it's programmed, the Homunculus can seem to react very strangely to certain choices by the player. With more time we wanted to elaborate on our mood system to included not just happy, sad, and angry. We wanted to display a wider range of emotions such as anxious, shy, enraged, etc. This we believe would make the mood system a more dynamic, more responsive system in the long run.