

AN ANALYSIS OF THE PLAYER AVATAR PROTAGONIST IN VIDEO GAME
NARRATIVES



MURAT DOĞA TURGAY

YEDITEPE UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
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MURAT DOĞA TURGAY

SUPERVISOR

ASSIST. PROF. MERVE ÇARKUŞLU

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PLAGIARISM

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Date: 20.01.2023

Name/Surname: Murat Doğa TURGAY

ABSTRACT

Video games depict various fantastic scenarios that players engage in. Fantasy has been a point of interest for humans for much of recorded history and fantasy fulfilment is an important appeal for people to play video games. The experience of such a fantasy can significantly enhance the player's experience in games. Players experience fantasy in games through its elements: Culmination of gameplay, narrative story and the design of protagonist character(s) are how this fantasy is relayed to the player. The design of these three parts is significant in shaping the player's fantasy and overall experience with the game's narrative story. There are several different methods through which these parts may be designed, but contradictions in design of core game elements can negatively affect the experience of the story, therefore hindering the player's ability to immerse themselves in the game's fantasy. In this thesis, the contents of various games including their design of the protagonist and narration of story are analysed. Gamers are surveyed via the internet in order to discover how different designs affect the players' role-playing experience. The objective of this thesis is to provide a guideline for creating an optimal fantasy experience in video game.

Keywords: Character design; narrative storytelling; player agency; protagonists; video game design

ÖZET

Video oyunları, oyuncuların ilgisini çeken farklı fantastik senaryoları gösterir. Fantezi, bilinen tarihin çoğu boyunca insanlar için bir ilgi noktası olmuştur ve bu fantezileri gerçekleştirmek, insanların video oyun oynamasının önemli nedenlerinden biridir. Bir fantezi deneyimi, oyun deneyimini önemli ölçüde genişletebilir. Oyuncular, bir oyunun fantezisini oyunun elemanları üzerinden deneyimler. Oyunun oynanışı, hikaye anlatısı ve ana karakterin tasarımının birleşimi üzerinden bu fantezi oyuncuya iletilir. Bu üç elemanın tasarımı, oyuncunun fantezi ve hikâye ile tüm deneyimlerini yapılandırmakta önemlidir. Bu elemanlar pek çok farklı metotlar ile tasarlanabilir, fakat öz oyun parçalarının çelişkili biçimde tasarlanması hikâyenin deneyimlenmesini negatif etkileyebilir, bu nedenle de oyuncunun kendini hikâyeye dahil hissetme kabiliyetini engelleyebilir. Bu tezde, ana karakter ve hikâye yazımı dahil olmak üzere farklı oyunların içerikleri analiz edilmiştir. Farklı tasarımların oyuncuların rol yapma deneyimini nasıl etkilediğini keşfetmek için oyunculara anket yapılmıştır. Bu tezin amacı, video oyunlarında ideal fantezi deneyimini sunmak için bir yönerge sağlamaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Video oyun tasarımı, karakter tasarımı, ana karakter, hikâye anlatımı

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Plagiarism

Abstract

Özet

Table of Contents

1. INTRODUCTION

2. THE PROTAGONIST IN VIDEO GAMES

2.1. Introduction to Video Games

2.1.1. Definition of a Game

2.1.2. Reasons People Play Games

2.1.2.1. Emotional Investment

2.1.2.2. Interactivity

2.1.3. Core elements of a game

2.1.3.1. Rules

2.1.3.2. Goal

2.1.3.3. Conflict

2.1.3.4. Outcome

2.1.4. Video Games

2.1.4.1. Games versus Video Games

2.1.4.1.1. Visuals and Sound

2.1.4.1.2. Gameplay

2.1.4.1.3. Story and world

2.1.4.2. The appeal of video games

2.1.4.3. Brief history of video games

2.1.4.4. Genres of video games

2.1.4.4.1. Adventure

2.1.4.4.2. Role-playing game

2.1.4.4.3. Japanese role-playing game

2.1.4.4.4. Shooter

2.1.4.4.5. Action

2.1.4.4.6. Strategy

2.1.4.4.7. Sports

2.1.4.4.8. Puzzle & arcade

2.1.4.5. Video game industry in the modern day

2.2. Characters in Video Games

2.2.1. Definition of a Character

2.2.2. Character Building

2.2.2.1. Goals

2.2.2.1.1. Motivation

2.2.2.2. Weaknesses

2.2.2.3. Empathy

2.2.2.4. Stereotypes

2.2.3. Character Roles in Stories

2.2.3.1. Protagonists

2.2.3.2. Antagonists

2.2.3.3. Supporting characters

2.2.3.4. Background characters

2.2.3.5. Other characters / Mascots

2.2.4. Characters in a Narrative Story

2.2.4.1. Storytelling

2.2.4.1.1. Linear and non-linear stories

2.2.4.2. Conflict

2.2.4.3. Development

2.2.4.4. Resolution

2.2.5. Characters in Gameplay

2.2.5.1. Implementation of characters into gameplay

2.2.5.2. Characterization building through gameplay

2.2.5.3. Interacting with characters

2.2.5.4. Immersion

2.2.5.4.1. Suspension of disbelief

2.2.5.5. Playable characters (PC)

2.2.5.6. Non-playable characters (NPC)

2.2.5.7. Character roles in genres

2.3. The Protagonist in a Video Game Context

2.3.1. The protagonist

2.3.1.1.	Protagonist as a character
2.3.1.2.	Protagonist as a player avatar
2.3.1.2.1.	Silent protagonists
2.3.2.	Role-Playing
2.3.2.1.	Role-play oriented gameplay design
2.3.2.2.	Player agency
2.3.2.2.1.	Control of Goals
2.3.3.	Game Analysis
2.3.3.1.	The Last of Us
2.3.3.2.	The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt
2.3.3.3.	Genshin Impact
2.3.3.4.	The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
2.3.3.5.	Guild Wars 2
2.3.3.6.	Minecraft
3.	RESEARCH
3.1.	Aim of the Research
3.2.	Methodologies of the Research
3.3.	Scope and Limitations of the Research
3.4.	Importance of the Research
4.	ANALYSIS OF THE FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
5.	CONCLUSION
	REFERENCES
	APPENDIX

1. INTRODUCTION

Video games are a unique form of media that are able to tell a story or provide a digital environment to players, reinforced with appealing visuals and sounds. It is evident that fantasy has always been a point of interest for humans, whether one looks at old Greek myths about various Gods or the many different forms of art throughout history, such as artwork, books or poems. People simply enjoy thinking about the supernatural and video games allow them to experience all sorts of fantasies due to their interactive nature. Games make these fantasies believable enough to immerse players in these fantasy worlds. But aside from simply providing a fantasy for the player, video games can also tell a captivating story, getting players attached to the fictional characters, the world and the locations within the story. A digital town in a game may come to feel homely or nostalgic, even if it is, in actuality, fictional and does not exist. Video games very much excel at getting people to treat their fiction like reality, making them an excellent form of “fantasy fulfilment”. A movie can only be watched: A game demands more attention from the player as they are the one that will be playing it and are an active participant in the game.

But within modern video games, the aspect of fantasy fulfilment can conflict with the narrative that is usually present in games. One common method of providing this fantasy fulfilment is “role-playing”. Originating from board games where players imagine their own story, progressing it with twists and turns for as long as they like. Video games aim to mimic this by attempting to place the player in the position of the protagonist. This is usually emphasized by allowing the player to create their own character, or the game referring to the protagonist as “You”, for example, a piece of story text stating “You went to drink water”, rather than stating “The protagonist goes to drink water”. However, issues arise when the game’s attempt to make the player into the protagonist starts to conflict with the story the game wishes to tell. If the game expects players to act as if they are the protagonists, they must have some control over the protagonist, such as customizing their appearance, choosing their skillset or determining how the protagonist acts within the story. These features are somewhat common in video games: Many games offer players different methods of customization, with which the player can express themselves. However, there are a notable number of games that fail to do this.

Such games usually provide players with a protagonist whom they can't customize, whose skills are largely set-in stone and the story simply strings the player along its narrative rather than letting them actually make any meaningful decisions. Despite this lack of control, games still try to force the player into the protagonist role by featuring a "silent protagonist", not allowing the protagonist to vocally speak or show a significant amount of personality, with the expectation of the player pretending to be the protagonist. However, as mentioned above, the player still has no true control over such a protagonist: The protagonist still acts as required by the narrative and the player has no real control over this protagonist, despite the game expecting the player to insert themselves into the protagonist role. This results in the protagonists of such games being stuck in a state between trying to be both an avatar for the player and also their own character as required by the narrative.

This type of design is highly contradictory, expecting the player to place themselves in the story while providing them with no means of actually expressing themselves. At the same time, it also hinders the protagonist's position in the story by reducing them to a largely passive actor due to their inability to speak or express significant emotion. Regardless of this, this type of design is still all too common in video games, despite the seeming conflict in these design principles.

The subject of this thesis primarily concerns analysing this conflict and the potential issues that arise in a video game as a result of it. It hypothesizes that there is no purpose to featuring a player avatar or silent protagonist in a game if this design choice is not supported by providing the player with sufficient agency and control in order to express themselves through the protagonist. This only hinders the protagonist as a character within the game's story, while failing to provide the player with a sufficient and satisfying ability to role-play. The goal is to prove that this contradictory design of the protagonist does not contribute positively to the video game experience or the game's narrative story and that it should not be used if it is not reinforced with sufficient customization and control, in order for the player to truly express themselves through the protagonist.

For this, literature research was performed on terms relevant to this context. Descriptive content analysis was performed on selected video games in order to give real-life examples of different methods of designing the protagonist(s) in a game's

narrative and how it can relate to the player's ability to role-play or experience the game's story. Finally, surveys were conducted through the internet to obtain quantitative data on player opinions and preferences regarding this topic.

2.THE PROTAGONIST IN VIDEO GAMES

2.1. Introduction to Video Games

The first step to understanding the primary topic of this thesis is to understand video games. Throughout history, games have existed and continue to exist today in many different forms. Whether it be various forms of sports, motor racing, children playing hide and seek or video games that came as a result of improving technology in the modern day, all originate from the basic concept of a "game".

2.1.1. Definition of a game.

Crawford states that "Games are a fundamental part of human existence". He argues that games have made their way into human language, with phrases such as "playing games" when being indecisive, "playing along" with something we don't like and such. (C. Crawford, 1997, p. 8, 9). Games are also commonly tied with the term "play". In essence, playing is a natural desire. It is born out of a variety of different reasons such as learning or simply enjoying oneself. Games are an extension of the desire to play.

At their core, games are a set of rules that create a functional system. Within these rules, the player pursues a certain goal. In a game of chess for example, players move each piece based on the game's set of rules. This forms a "closed formal system that subjectively represents a subset of reality" (C. Crawford, 1997, p.9). That is, games portray a subset of reality (As they cannot present all of reality) that is self-sufficient on its own with no reliance on outside information. They have a set of explicit rules and parts that interact with each other that form this system.

These rules give context and meaning to each possible action in a game. This is also what separates games from playing. Playing is a free, loosely defined activity, whereas games are defined by their rules (J. Juul, 2005, p.38). Games must also have a "conflict", such as a problem to solve or an opponent to beat, in addition to an outcome: Winning, losing, attaining a high score or a fast completion time (J. P. Wolf, 2008, p.3).

2.1.2 Reasons people play games.

There are many reasons people play games. Each given person may choose to play a certain game for a wide variety of different reasons. It is not possible to pinpoint a specific or absolute reason as to why games are played as a whole. Every individual may have their own reason(s) for playing a given game. Juul states that “The idea of what makes a game enjoyable may change over time and things that were once considered dull obstacles to the player's enjoyment can be foregrounded and become the central focus of a new game.” (J. Juul, 2005, p.40). For this reason, it is not possible to speak of a “perfect” game that is appealing to all possible players: Not only does it depend on the individual, but preferences may also change over time.

A game that is considered enjoyable in the past may not be considered as such in the future. Despite this, there are still numerous consistent points that can be given as a reason for playing games.

Crawford points out the following as some of the factors that drive people to play games: Emotional satisfaction, fantasy fulfilment, learning, exercise, proving oneself or socialization. (C. Crawford, 1997, p16-19). To elaborate on each of these:

Emotional satisfaction is a notable common reason for playing games. Due to the interactive nature of games, people place greater emotional investment into them, which also returns greater emotional satisfaction compared to other, more passive forms of media (C. Crawford, 197, p.3). In addition, the above stated reasons for playing games also tie into a form of emotional satisfaction. While this still cannot be given as the absolute reason for playing games, it is undeniable that the emotional impact of games is one of the main reasons for attracting people and keeping them playing.

The idea of fantasy fulfilment is a natural result of games portraying a subset of reality. Games depict situations that may not be possible in reality and place the players in these situations. This is most notable among “role-playing” games, a genre which that places emphasis on the players making up fictional characters and pretending to go on a journey in a fantasy world. The board game *Dungeons & Dragons* originally put focus on this aspect of games, which later continued on into video games. However, other board games such as *Monopoly* also have such aspects. The players playing this game for example pretend to be rich and buy up properties they normally would have

no chance of purchasing. Living out such unlikely, impossible or otherwise dangerous scenarios portrayed by games makes up the idea of fantasy fulfilment.

Games for educational purposes is a commonly researched topic in the modern day. Games create a safe environment where people can play out impossible or normally dangerous events without the risk of harm. Each game will present players with a certain challenge, which the player must overcome. This makes games a healthy environment for learning. Juul states “Playing a game is an activity of improving skills in order to overcome these challenges, and playing a game is therefore fundamentally a learning experience.” (J. Juul, 2005, p.18).

Rouse states:

“Games can entertain players over time, differently each time they play, while engaging their minds in an entirely different way than a book, movie, or other form of art. In somewhat the same way someone might fiddle with a Rubik’s Cube or a steel “remove the ring” puzzle, games force players to think actively, to try out different solutions to problems, to understand a given game mechanism.” (R. Rouse, 2001, p.2).

Exercise is, in a way, an extension of learning. This can both be physical or cognitive exercise. Athletic games help train the body, while games that require strategy or thinking can be mentally stimulating. Video games should also be noted in this regard. Action-heavy games can encourage quick thinking, reaction times and hand-eye coordination which can also prove as a form of cognitive exercise.

These two above points combine into a greater desire to prove oneself. As a player learns the game and improves their skills, it can become a desire to further improve their skills to the maximum they can achieve, pushing themselves either physically or cognitively. The player may feel a sense of satisfaction from their own progress or defeat equally skilled opponents to prove their own skill and talent. Board games such as chess have historically had competitions and tournaments between such players. Video games in the modern day may also provide various options to play against other players. Over-coming skilled opponents to prove one’s own skill superior can result in great emotional satisfaction. However, the shame of loss may also prove a deterrent to some people. In this regard, this point also ties into socialization.

Many games also require interaction with at least one other person. Aside from video games which are often played against a computer, games will be played with or against

other human players. This inevitably results in some form of socialization with these other players and can sometimes be the driving factor for playing a game in the first place. A given player may not enjoy a certain game much, but the idea of playing the game with or against their other people can make it more appealing and entice them to play.

It should also be noted that, on contrary to this, games can also provide an antisocial experience. Video games specifically excel at this, by allowing players to play with or against the computer rather than other players. “The computer game “fakes” the interesting part of human interaction without all of the potential annoyances. In this way, people are able to turn to computer games for a dynamic and interactive yet antisocial experience.” (R. Rouse, 2001, p.5).

However, above all this, a core reason for playing games, especially video games, is simply entertainment. People have a need for entertainment (Brock & Livingston, 2004) and modern media largely fulfils this need by providing an enjoyable pastime.

2.1.2.1. Emotional investment.

The prior discussed reasons for playing games all result in some manner of an emotional reaction from the player. In its most simple form, this takes the shape of winning a game causing happiness. Losing may cause sadness or frustration instead. This simple duology can be applied to the reasons for playing games. Winning can be equated to learning, improving, progressing a story or proving superiority over another player. Losing can be seen as a failure to learn, lack of improvement, being unable to progress a game or feeling shame due to losing against another player. Losing is not a desired outcome, which makes the reward of victory even greater.

These emotional responses are amplified by the interactive nature of games. Players will frequently interact with both the game and other players, resulting in a consistent emotional exchange. In addition, victory or loss depends on the players' abilities, which can result in an increased desire to win and greater satisfaction from doing so. Players may feel an increased sense of success after suffering repeated losses. As a result, the emotional responses from games tend to be more dynamic compared to other media.

2.1.2.2. *Interactivity.*

Interactivity is a core aspect of every game. The player is always interacting with something or someone, whether it is another person, a computer-controlled character or a whole fictional world. Crawford describes the importance of interaction as follows:

“Interaction is important for several reasons. First, it injects a social or interpersonal element into the event. It transforms the challenge of the game from a technical one to an interpersonal one. Solving a cube puzzle is a strictly technical operation; playing chess is an interpersonal operation. In the former, one plays against the logic of the situation; in the latter, one uses the logic of the situation to play against the opponent” (C. Crawford, 1997, p.10)

This gives games an extra layer of depth that would not be present in simple puzzles or other such activities. The frequent interaction with an opponent or a fictional world (In the case of games like *D&D* or video games) creates a dynamic environment in which players can take different actions, make decisions and view the differing results, whereas a puzzle would always have the same result: The player either solves the puzzle or they do not. Once the trick behind the puzzle is discovered, it can no longer provide a challenge: It is static. The dynamic interactions in games create many different situations that can require the player to take different actions in order to succeed, allowing games to remain an enjoyable experience for a longer time, until the player has experienced every outcome possible. This allows players to attempt many different actions and create different strategies to tackle the challenges of the game. When playing against a human opponent, it is possible for an almost endless number of scenarios to occur as each player takes different actions to gain the advantage. Players are allowed to express themselves and their personalities through these actions, which can make games a more social experience as the players learn about each other through their interactions in the game.

Aside from simply interacting with a fictional world, games can be highly stimulating through various means. A research using video games as a subject for therapy suggests features of video games such as challenges and interactivity contributes to larger motivation and mental stimulation (S. Smys, 2019). A fast-paced action combat game would demand strong hand-eye coordination from the player. Many combat-heavy games require the player to have awareness of their surroundings, their opponents and the actions of their opponents. A player may listen to audio or visual cues to react to

certain actions, which tests their reaction times and ability to correctly recognize these cues. When playing against a human opponent, a strategic component comes in as the player aims to understand the opponent's playstyle and counter them effectively. Such gameplay requires sub-conscious quick thinking and decision-making, as well as a level of interaction between both players.

Other games may prioritize long-term planning or management of resources instead of quick action. Players may act slowly and think deeply into their actions to ensure they are making the best choices. These factors can make games mentally stimulating, allowing them to pose a better distraction from everyday worries.

2.1.3. Core elements of a game.

Games are created from a system of parts that work together. The most basic pieces are a set of rules that dictate what the players may or may not do, a goal for the player(s) to pursue, a conflict that acts as an obstacle and provides a challenge during the pursuit of this goal and an outcome that determines success or failure.

2.1.3.1. Rules.

Every game must first establish a set of self-sufficient rules to cover the various possibilities within the game. Crawford explains that a game's rules must "...cover all contingencies encountered in the game.". He states the rules shouldn't cause any unforeseen or unexplained situations, which cause a dispute over the rules or force the players to create their own rules to amend the situation (C. Crawford, 1997, p.8). These rules dictate how the game will be played. For example, there are many athletic games that involve the usage of a ball. However, these games are set apart by their rules. In soccer, players may only kick the ball. In basketball, players throw the ball. In tennis, players hit the ball with a racket. While sharing the usage of a ball, the rules cause various changes between the games, including the number of players, the size of the ball and the tools the players are allowed to use. Overall, rules effectively define what a game is.

Each game has a different set of rules causes them to provide different challenges to the player and therefore, different experiences. A goal is provided which must be reached within the limitations imposed by the rules. The rules limiting the players' possible actions or imposing certain penalties for breaking them create this challenge.

Without the rules, players would simply take the easiest path to the goal, eliminating any challenge from the game. With no challenge, players will not be pushed to learn or improve. The lack of clear rules can also cause disputes among players, creating an overall negative experience.

Rules are also necessary to add a sense of meaning to the possible actions in a game. Juul states “...games provide context for actions: moving an avatar is much more meaningful in a game environment than in an empty space; throwing a ball has more interesting implications on the playing field than off the playing field” (J. Juul, 2005, p.38). Continuing on from the prior example of ball games, simply throwing or kicking a ball around would indeed be an aimless task. The rules of the various ball games provide meaning for each action. Should a person decide to play alone, they are likely to impose some sort of rules on themselves to create a type of challenge and make the action more interesting. Even a child, idly playing with a ball, may subconsciously make up a certain challenge, such as trying to throw the ball as high up or far away as possible.

Finally, although rules must be created to avoid confusion or unaddressed scenarios, they are not absolute.

“Game rules can be interpreted and reinterpreted toward preferred meanings and purposes, selectively invoked or ignored, challenged or defended, changed or enforced to suit the collective goals of different groups of players. In short, players can take the same game and collectively make of it strikingly different experiences” (L. Hughes, 1999, p.94).

This is especially common among board games, where players can add certain rules or modify existing rules in order to make the game more enjoyable or remove certain frustrating aspects. Ultimately, the rules are upheld by the players and are therefore up to interpretation.

Video games are usually an exception to this, as the rules are enforced by the computer and not the players. However, most games offer some type of customization to the player such as selecting a difficulty level. In addition, some gaming communities in the modern day can also create unofficial modifications for video games, commonly called “mods” by gamers. These often involve changing various aspects of the game, such as visuals or rules. This is not too dissimilar to players modifying the rules of a board game to suit their tastes and make the game more enjoyable for themselves.

2.1.3.2. Goal.

A game must provide the player with a goal to pursue within the limitations imposed by the rules of the game. A game without a goal cannot be considered a game. Goals vary depending on the game. In a game of soccer, the goal is to hit the ball into the opponent's goalie. In a game of chess, the goal is to capture the opponent's king, causing a checkmate. In a game of cards, the goal can be to obtain the highest score possible or clear your hand before all other players.

Pursuing a goal can trigger certain emotional reactions from the player. They may feel happy when successfully approaching their goal, sad when failing to reach the goal or frustrated if the goal is too hard to reach. These emotions drive the players' decision-making as they aim to achieve the most advantageous outcome possible. (P. Lankoski, 2007, p.1-6). Completing a goal can result in a sense of satisfaction or progress in the game, therefore incentivizing players to successfully complete them.

2.1.3.3. Conflict.

C. Crawford states

"Conflict arises naturally from the interaction in a game. The player is actively pursuing some goal. Obstacles prevent him from easily achieving this goal." These obstacles in a game must be active, dynamic rather than static. "If the obstacles are passive or static, the challenge is a puzzle or athletic challenge. If they are active or dynamic, if they purposefully respond to the player, the challenge is a game." (C. Crawford, 1997, p.12-13)

An "active response" can be considered a set of opponents, either human or computer-controlled, that reacts to the players actions to prevent them from reaching the goal. Using chess as an example again, your opponent will react to your moves to prevent you from capturing their king, while attempting to capture yours, making this a dynamic conflict. A dynamic conflict will also change in every attempt and may cause different outcomes. Static obstacles will result in either success if the obstacles are successfully passed, or failure, if the player cannot pass the obstacles.

Conflict is also necessary for providing a type of challenge in the game. Overcoming the challenge can result in a sense of emotional satisfaction, therefore creating a sense of a reward for successfully reaching the goal and winning.

2.1.3.4. Outcome.

Finally, a game must provide the players with an outcome: Success or failure. The outcome will be connected to the goal. Depending on the game, this outcome can be determined by how close a player was to achieving the goal or which player obtained the highest score. In some games, failing to reach the goal can result in failure regardless of other conditions.

The outcome of a game must not have any significant real-life penalties. Losing against another player may cause emotions such as shame, anger or embarrassment. Winning can provide a sense of satisfaction. Video games generally allow the player to keep retrying until they succeed, therefore only costing the player their time. In either case, the player is not under threat of any physical harm. However, the negative emotions upon losing may deter a player from playing a game against human opponents. This is not present in video games where you play against the computer, but repeated failure against computer-controlled opponents can still cause frustration and cause the player to stop playing.

2.1.4. Video games.

Video games are a fairly new addition to the long history of games. They first emerged in the mid-20th century and rapidly gained popularity along with the improvements in computer technologies. A “video game” isn’t necessarily the same term as a “computer game”. As the name implies, a video game requires the usage of video technology, therefore, visuals. A game without any visuals can be a computer game, but not a video game (J. P. Wolf, 2008, p.3). Aside from computers, “video game” in the current day is used as a general term to refer to games played on other platforms such as home consoles, arcades or phones, in addition to computers.

The addition of graphics and sound allowed computers to “communicate with the human, not just in the cold and distant language of digits, but in the emotionally immediate and compelling language of images and sounds.” (C. Crawford, 1997, p.3). While a game may depict a subset of reality, a large portion of this reality must be completed by the players’ imagination. A board game for example can only provide a limited number of visuals and no sounds. Video games can decorate the reality they depicted with animated graphics, sounds and music, therefore making for a more emotionally compelling experience. Instead of having to imagine the depicted world,

the player can see it, hear it and interact with it. With this development, video games became a form of media that could present visuals and sounds like a movie, while also providing the interactivity of a game, creating a unique form of media. This allowed the creation of completely new types of games that would previously be impossible due to the lack of technology.

“Video games are real in that they consist of real rules with which players actually interact, and in that winning or losing a game is a real event. However, when winning a game by slaying a dragon, the dragon is not a real dragon but a fictional one. To play a video game is therefore to interact with real rules while imagining a fictional world, and a video game is a set of rules as well as a fictional world.” (J. Juul, 2005, p.12).

In this regard, video games combine the real with the unreal. Players play a real game that depicts a fictional world and perform fictional acts. This makes video games exceptional at fulfilling these fantasies, allowing players to experience all sorts of impossible or unreal events.

Finally, video games can also be considered a form of “simulation” (G. Frasca, 2003). While many games in the current day usually follow linear and sometimes non-linear narrative stories, beyond the narrative, video games also serve to simulate the various scenarios, stories and hypotheticals they may depict.

2.1.4.1. Games versus video games.

Video games are created out of the same core parts of a game: Rules, a goal, a conflict or challenge while pursuing that goal and an outcome. These components are interwoven into various parts of the game, often revolving around the fiction the game wishes to tell. Video games are not impaired by limitations of reality; That is to say, a real game must be made within realistic capabilities. Athletic games for example must be made according to the laws of physics. A game cannot require a person to perform an action that the human body is simply incapable of performing. Video games however are played with a simple controlling mechanism, such as a keyboard, “controller” for home consoles or a touch screen for modern cell phones. This allows game designers to create these rules, goals and conflicts with greater freedom and intertwine them with the game’s fiction. The fiction can be used to explain the rules of the game (Why a certain action is or isn’t possible), provide the player with a goal or pose various

challenges to them. This creates the “gameplay” of the video game, which is the culmination of a video game’s rules, goals and challenges.

In addition to this, the fictional aspect of the game will introduce to the player an imaginary world, story and characters. Although some board games such as the earlier mentioned *D&D* attempt to achieve this same effect, video games can perform it to a much greater degree due to the additions of visuals and sounds.

2.1.4.1.1. Visuals and sound.

The largest difference between normal games and video games is the addition of the computer. As previously stated, this technology allows video games to be decorated with visual graphics and audio. A board game or a card game can provide simple visuals, mostly to ensure the game can be played correctly, such as each type of piece in chess looking distinct from other pieces to ensure the players know what each piece is. However, these games may not provide the same level of visual and audial fidelity that video games can provide. Video games can create a fictional scene and reinforce it with sounds and music, resulting in a much different experience to what other types of games would provide. Crawford says about graphics that “They support the fantasy of the game by providing sensory “proof” of the game’s reality...The things we see look so real that we believe the fantasy; we know (subjectively) that the fantasy is real.” (C. Crawford, 1997, p.20). Effectively, the graphics create a convincing depiction of a fantasy world. In addition, as video games can depict a massive variety of different worlds, each with their own quirks, this creates grounds for a variety of graphical styles between different games. One may look desaturated and gloomy; another game may be very colourful and lively. This may reinforce the emotions a game wishes to draw from the players, as well as make different fictional worlds visibly distinct from one another.

However, graphics alone do not make a game. A colourful world cannot make up for a poorly designed game or a badly written narrative. Graphics and audio reinforce what is already there and can make a good game experience even more memorable. In the modern day, quality graphics require increasingly expensive hardware and increase the cost of game development. The developers must ensure they do not focus excessively on creating high-fidelity graphics, causing the rest of the game to be lacking.

Figure 2.1

The “Ancient Forest” game map from Monster Hunter: World



Note: From video game “Monster Hunter: World”. Copyright 2018-2019 by Capcom

2.1.4.1.2. *Gameplay.*

“Gameplay” is a product of a video games rules, goals and challenges. The rules outline the actions the player and enemies can take and the effects of these actions. The goal influences the actions the player takes in order to accomplish that goal. The challenges similarly influence player actions to overcome them in the most effective way possible. All of this results in what is called gameplay: What action the player takes and when to take that action, in order to successfully achieve the goal. Gameplay is not specific to video games and the term can be applied to all games, however video games are capable of offering more complex and detailed gameplay to the player, due to their fictional nature and the presence of the computer to administer more complex rules.

Gameplay is the players’ primary method of interacting with the game. Interaction is achieved through performing available actions in the game and gameplay influences which actions the player takes. Rouse states:

“The gameplay is the component of computer games which is found in no other art form: interactivity. A game’s gameplay is the degree and nature of the interactivity that the game

includes, i.e., how the player is able to interact with the game-world and how that game-world reacts to the choices the player makes.” (R. Rouse, 2001, p.xviii).

In addition, it is also the part through which the player experiences the rest of a video games’ parts, such as the graphics, story, world and characters. For this reason, it is one of the most significant aspects of game design.

Earlier video games especially focused on gameplay, with other parts such as a narrative story being fairly basic, although still present. Over time, in-depth stories started to find a larger place within video games. Many games within the recent years contain “rich and emotional narrative worlds” (Bowman et al, 2016, p.87). The improvements in technology also allowed for the creation of much more impressive graphics and sounds. This resulted in these parts playing a more significant role in the games. Since the gameplay is how the player interacts with these other parts, it is important for the gameplay to be designed in a way to best present them.

To achieve this, the gameplay must have certain focus points that the designers wish for the player to experience. In many cases, certain actions, such as flying a plane, are deliberately simplified to avoid distracting the player with realistic details that would take away from the actual action the player wishes to perform. If a game wishes for the player to fight and slay hordes of enemies, the game will not go into details such as the proper techniques for wielding a weapon or explain how a sword can seemingly slash through multiple enemies. This ensures the player can focus on the objectives given by the game without being distracted by such details. However, some games also aim to provide a realistic experience where the player must keep track of such small details. In this instance, these details contribute to the focus point of the game (That is, providing a realistic experience of a certain action), rather than taking away from it.

2.1.4.1.3 Story and world.

One of the major appeals of video games is the idea of a “fantasy”. Video games take improbable ideas and scenarios and make them into their own reality. They are similar to other forms of fiction such as movies or books in this regard. However, video games allow the player to directly control and be a part of the events in these fictional worlds. Originally, an in-depth narrative wasn’t prioritized in earlier video games. Juul states:

“While narratology originated from Aristotle's Poetics and the study of storytelling media such as drama, novels, and films, the concept of narrative is today commonly used in a much

broader sense. We can speak of a narrative turn after which it has become common to see narrative as the primary way in which we make sense of and structure the world.” (J. Juul, 2005, p. 33).

Video games were a part of this and over time, a narrative story became common in many games. Some modern games even put more emphasis on the story over gameplay, such as the game “Heavy Rain” or the series “Life is Strange”.

Much like books or movies, video games can draw in a player to an intricately created world, ensuring the players interest in this world and its characters. Games can mix a sense of realism with fiction: In his book *More than a Game*, Atkins discusses how games make claims to “realism”, while in actuality, telling a fictional or hypothetical story (B. Atkins, 2003). Game stories can be based on real-world or historical events, with a claim to authenticity, yet tell stories vastly different from actual reality or history. The idea of realism can draw players in, but instead of simply copying reality, game stories can add various twists and depict fictional hypothetical scenarios.

Various studies suggest a link between game enjoyment and player’s attachment to the fictional characters and story of a game (Green, Brock & Kaufman, 2004, Raney, 2003, Bowman et al, 2016). In most video games, the story and “rules” of that fictional world can be used to support the core parts of the gameplay. The rules of the game can be explained through the story and each story will also provide goals for the player to follow. As the player pursues these various goals, the story will progress, introducing the game’s characters and building up the fictional setting in which it takes place. Through this, the player will come to know the world and its characters in a natural manner. Even in an action game where the focus would be on combat, the story is used in order to keep pushing the player forward. However, while the fictional aspect can be said to contribute to game enjoyment based on above mentioned studies, it is still possible for a player to find a game enjoyable for its gameplay alone.

Ultimately, whether the story or gameplay should be prioritized depends on the type of experience the game designer wishes to provide. While a story enhances the game experience, it only has a significant emotional impact on the player during their first playing of the game. After the player experiences the story, replaying the game may become less enjoyable as the player is now aware of the story’s twists and turns, therefore making it less impactful. Gameplay may remain enjoyable for longer and the

player may opt to challenge themselves with a higher difficulty setting or some other additional challenge the game may provide, keeping the game interesting. It is possible for a game to provide both a compelling story and enjoyable gameplay, with the story providing a strong initial experience and the gameplay keeping the game enjoyable even after the story has been completed. Additionally, some games may provide branching storylines that may require multiple playthroughs of the game to experience all facets of the story.

2.1.4.2. The appeal of video games.

Video games are one of the numerous forms of entertainment in the modern day. On the surface, they are a simple leisure to pass time with. However, there are a number of qualities that set them apart from other similar leisurely activities. As video games can depict all sorts of different scenarios and offer many different types of gameplay, they are very versatile and can appeal to a wide variety of groups. On a research in gamer mentality, Kallio, Mäyrä and Kaipainen split gamers into “fun gamers”, those who casually play for aspects such as story and immersion, as well as “committed gamers”, those who play more for gameplay aspects such as skill and speed (Kallio, Mäyrä & Kaipainen, 2011, p. 341). For such gamers, video games can offer either a relaxing pastime or provide engaging, in-depth gameplay that demands skill and focus. A busy person may wish to return home to a casual, relaxing game, whereas someone with more free time may opt to spend hours upon hours challenging themselves in a single game. Video games can fulfil all such desires, providing an enjoyable experience to many different people.

Fantasy fulfilment, mentioned in section 3.2., is one possible reason for people to play games and this aspect is further amplified within video games. Humans have always been drawn to various forms of fiction and imagination, with fiction taking on many different forms such as mythical stories, poems, books and artwork. People enjoy fantasizing about impossible or improbable situations, whether it be dragon slaying heroes or the various tragedies of Greek myths. However, such forms of fiction are all passive. It requires no participation from someone experiencing it. Crawford states that “Games are potentially superior to the traditional means of escape (movies, books, music) because they are participatory. Instead of merely watching a movie, reading a book, or listening to music, the player is actively involved in the game.” (C. Crawford,

1997, p.17). This active involvement creates a more engaging experience and can allow players to truly immerse themselves in the game's fantasy.

In addition, various forms of entertainment have attempted to take these types of fantasies into more “real” forms. Video games can arguably provide the most immersive experiences by reinforcing their interactive nature with life-like graphics, sounds and a well-written narrative. Instead of simply watching the hero save the world, a player can be the hero that saves the world. This creates a very potent form of fantasy fulfilment, bringing them as close to reality as possible. Allowing one to directly experience such fantasies is one of the biggest appealing points of video games and what truly sets them apart from other media forms.

2.1.4.3. Brief history of video games.

The roots of video games originated with the game *Spacewar!* by MIT in 1962. In 1971, this would be released with the name *Computer Space* by Atari, as the first “Arcade” video game. It would be followed by the release of the “Odyssey” home video game system (Referred to as “consoles” today) a year later in 1972. The popular arcade game PONG also released around this time.

This game would cause the Arcade industry to find massive success, with many games being released for the platform. Atari would also release alternate versions of PONG for other platforms, such as home consoles.

The home console industry suffered a crash in 1977. Atari also released its home console called “VCS” this year. The game “Space Invaders” was released a year later, becoming the most popular arcade game of the time.

The industry suffered another crash in 1982, lasting multiple years. Nintendo released the “Famicon” in Japan in 1984. A year later in 1985, Nintendo released a new version of the Famicon called the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) in America. The popularity of this console brought an end to the industry crash. “Super Mario Bros” was also released in 1985, starting the long legacy of Nintendo's globally well-known mascot, Mario. “The Legend of Zelda” series was also released a year later in 1986.

In 1989, Nintendo released their first handheld console, the “Game Boy”. SEGA also released their own home console called the “SEGA Genesis”. SEGA would go on to

release “Sonic the Hedgehog” in 1991, who would eventually become the company’s mascot.

“Wolfenstein 3D” was released by id Software in 1992, later followed by the game “Doom” in 1993. This game grew to enormous popularity and is known as the father of the “First Person Shooter” genre. The game also helped the popularity of personal computers as a gaming platform. In addition, Doom set the foundation for 3D video games. While the game didn’t actually have a 3D world, it specifically utilized its 2D graphics to create the illusion of a 3D world.

The Sony Playstation was released in Japan in 1994, marking the beginning of one of today’s most popular home consoles. The Playstation would be released in America a year later in 1995. SEGA released the Sega Saturn the same year. They would also release the Sega Dreamcast in 1999.

Sony released the Playstation 2 in 2000, which would later become the most selling home console of all time. Microsoft released their own home console of Xbox in 2001 and Nintendo released the Game Cube. SEGA pulled out of the home console industry, though they would still keep developing and publishing games. With these developments, Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo were established as the lead console developers.

The computer program “Steam” was released in 2003. This was launched as a service for computer gaming, allowing users to download games digitally through the internet without the requirement of a disc.

Sony would release the Playstation Portable (PSP) in Japan in 2004. Nintendo would release the Nintendo DS. Microsoft released the Xbox 360 a year later in 2005.

Followed by the Playstation 3 being released in 2006. With Nintendo moving to handheld consoles, Sony and Microsoft became the sole home console developers. This still remains the case today.

Video games had reached enormous global popularity by this point and established themselves as a part of global industry and society. With video games being firmly established, they would keep improving with the evolution of technology, ever increasing in graphical fidelity. However, this caused criticisms in modern day that some games focus too much on “graphics” and that other aspects of games gets

neglected in favour of making a game that looks pretty, but without much substance. The increase in graphics also demand more powerful hardware, therefore increasing the costs of developing games which can negatively impact the quality of the games being released.

In the early 2010s, a move from disc-based games to digital games would be made, as the 8th generation of consoles (Playstation 4 and Xbox One) would be able to download games directly from the internet, without requiring a disc.

Throughout the 2010s, “Virtual Reality” (VR) technologies started to gain popularity. While this technology was originally presented as far back as the 1990s, it would receive little interest during the 2000s. In the late 2010s, the technology was improved enough to be used in games, with a number of games being made specifically for VR. It is still a developing technology however, and hasn’t been widely used yet. As gaming has improved enormously in graphics and creating extremely detailed worlds, some speculate that VR will be the next step to look at for the future, as modern games get very close to photorealism, with people claiming there isn’t much room left to improve on.

2.1.4.4. Genres of video games.

People’s preferences in video games can greatly vary, which has resulted in the creation of a number of genres. Genres can be defined by certain recurring similarities between games. In a criticism of genre definitions, Apperley suggests that genres should be defined by “ergodic interactions” within the game, that is, the player’s actions to “traverse” the video game, rather than being defined similarly to Hollywood genres (T. H. Apperley, 2006). In a way, genres can be viewed similarly to stereotypes (See: Section 4.3.4), in that they help give players a quick understanding of whether they may be interested in a game or not. Some commonly found game genres in the current day would be the following:

2.1.4.4.1 Adventure.

This genre focuses on the idea of some type of journey or a grand adventure. This is a fairly loosely defined genre, as most games with a story can be considered a certain type of adventure. These games tend to focus on exploration and story. The player explores either an open world or a stage-based game world, meets various characters

and advances the story. These games can tell a linear story about a given protagonist character or add some possibility for role-playing by allowing the player to create their own character. Some games can also focus heavily on combat, progression, obtaining better equipment or learning new skills to become more powerful.

2.1.4.4.2. *Role-Playing Games (RPG).*

Role-playing games were inspired by table top board games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*. As indicated by the name, the standout feature of this genre is the ability to “role-play”. To better understand this genre, comparisons can be drawn with *D&D*. In the board game, the players each create their own, unique character, choosing their race, morality, abilities and profession.

The game is administered by a “game master” who guides the players throughout their journey, explaining the various circumstances they come across. The players make various decisions to overcome whatever they may come across as the game master reveals the story to the players over time. In essence, players role-play as the character they have created, pretending to be experiencing a fantasy story.

Role-playing games attempt to bring this experience to video games and enhance it with computer graphics and sound. The game’s rules and story are administered by the computer instead of a game master. Players are still allowed to create their own characters. In most RPGs, you are encouraged to choose your own path, act and face possible consequences for your actions. This is the primary focus of this genre.

It should be noted that role-playing aspects can even be put in games that are of completely different genres. Sports games for example allow the player to experience a “career” mode where they may take on the role of a team manager or an athlete and strive for success. This can be considered a type of role-playing.

2.1.4.4.3. *Japanese Role-Playing Games (JRPG).*

This genre originated from RPGs, though it eventually started being differentiated due to notable differences in game design from usual RPGs. This is primarily due to differences between Western RPGs and Japanese RPGs, which resulted in this genre being named as such.

The JRPG genre focuses less on customization and player choice, but on telling a linear story instead, with more focus on individual characters and character development. In this regard, these games are closer to Adventure games rather than role-playing games, though they may retain some role-playing elements.

This can result in some contradictory game design, however. Although JRPGs tend to lack many role-playing features such as customization or decision making, some games still treat the player character as if these features are present. In other words, the protagonist is treated as a custom character and a representation of the player, despite being designed as a standard protagonist. As a result, the protagonist can become too passive in the story due to the inability to make decisions and take actions on their own, while not allowing the player to role-play due to the lack of customization or decision making. This conflict will be analysed more in-depth later in this thesis.

2.1.4.4.4. Shooter.

As implied by the name, shooters involve shooting hordes of enemies with a weapon. This genre is considered to have been started by id Software's "Wolfenstein 3D" and "Doom" games. Due to the limitation of the player having to be wielding some sort of a gun, this genre will often place the player in similar scenarios, such as a warzone or a sci-fi environment. This genre's primary focus is gameplay, as games will always revolve around shooting an enemy. Progression will often be placed in the form of obtaining new weapons or upgrading them.

This genre lends itself well to a multiplayer "PvP" (Person versus person) environment. While shooter games will often feature single player modes, most of them will have some sort of a PvP mode. Some shooter games focus entirely on PvP instead, having no single player modes at all. Therefore, this genre's success can be considered more for its competitive PvP aspect, versus a single player experience. The long running series "Halo" and "Call of Duty" often featured both a single player story mode in addition to PvP aspects. "Doom (2016)" and the sequel "Doom: Eternal", instead focus on a single player experience. Other titles such as "Overwatch" or "Fortnite" focus entirely on PvP instead.

2.1.4.4.5. *Action.*

Action games generally refers to games that place emphasis on combat gameplay. These games will generally prioritize high quality combat, often involving melee weaponry or fantasy elements such as magic or monsters. Some action games can also focus on story as well. Story can be an important factor in pushing the player to keep progressing through the game. Action games often utilize more linear worlds or closed off arenas for the player to fight hordes of enemies in, rather than more open-ended game maps often found in RPGs.

Most notably, while RPGs will often feature some customization, such as creating your own character, Action games will largely forgo such options. Examples to this genre would be games such as the “Devil May Cry” series, “NieR” series or the “Dynasty Warriors” series.

There are RPG games with an emphasis on action called “Action RPGs”. These will generally combine elements of both genres, featuring plenty of action with the progression and customization elements of an RPG. “Monster Hunter” series is an example to an Action RPG game series.

2.1.4.4.6. *Strategy.*

A genre that focuses on managing a kingdom, military or other type of organization. This genre places less emphasis on real time action and more on “micro-management” aspects, such as building infrastructure for your kingdom, training troops, making deals with other kingdoms or creating better equipment. The genre will often utilize a top-down perspective of the game world, rather than the 1st or 3rd person view of a certain character, used in other games. Depending on the game, the player can compete against computer-controlled opponents or other players.

This genre aims to give the player the experience of a leader. Story elements can exist in strategy games, but the games will largely focus on the management elements without much interaction with characters. The appeal of this genre is growing your property, whether it be a kingdom or sci-fi base. Examples of this genre would be the “Civilization” series, “Starcraft” series or “XCom” series.

2.1.4.4.7. Sports.

Sports games are often based on real life sports such as football, basketball or various forms of racing. These games attempt to simulate these sports as realistically as possible. As a result, they focus almost entirely on gameplay and graphics in order to create the most authentic representation possible. These games will feature little to no story or focus on characters. Some sports games may have some forms of progression: A racing game for example can allow a player to customize and upgrade a car or unlock new, faster cars.

Sports games can also implement “management” aspects, such as creating your own football team, allowing players to experience the behind-the-scenes aspects of these sports that contribute to a team’s success. These games also indirectly act as advertising for these real-life sports. Sports games are often named directly after the sport or the organization and the year the game released in, such as “FIFA 2021” or “F1 2020”.

2.1.4.4.8. Puzzle & Arcade.

Simplistic games often made for mobile phones in the modern day. These are mostly casual games, designed to be played on a work break, at school or while commuting. Puzzle & Arcade games are versatile and differ greatly between each other. Their common point is that these games are easy to understand and utilize very simplistic gameplay, making them highly accessible to all people. Due to this and the high rate of phone ownership in developed countries, mobile games have become widespread and highly popular. However, the genre receives criticism and is looked down upon by the larger gaming community for excessively preying on people’s spending habits and filling games up with advertisements, which has become an increasingly common practice across the last decade. Examples to these genres would be games such as “Bubble Shooter”, “Candy Crush”, “Fruit Ninja” or “Subway Surfers”.

2.1.4.5. Video game industry in the modern day.

Video games have achieved global popularity and success after their rapid development and evolution since the 90s. The game industry has become a major player among the entertainment industries and the various applications of video games, such as for education or their impact on people’s mental health, are common topics of discussion and research.

According to the statistics provided by the Statista website, in 2022, mobile video games made an annual 103.5 billion U.S. dollars, followed by 53 billion from consoles and PC gaming ranking last. This revenue is the combination of hardware sales, actual game sales as well as additional in-game purchases (Clement, 2022).

Video games themselves are achieving incredible graphical fidelity, drawing close to photorealism. Quality games that reach mainstream popularity still come out each year. However, there is increasing disdain among gamers that the video game industry is becoming increasingly profit-driven, with developers being accused of releasing incomplete games, falsely advertising features that are not present or different at the release of the game, releasing a game with many software glitches or excessively pushing additional in-game purchases to make players spend more money than the games purchase price. The mobile game industry is especially notorious for using extremely predatory strategies and psychological manipulation to entice players into paying unusually high amounts of money.

While the success of video games has allowed for their global popularity, this also opened the industry up to a problem of excessive monetization. There is room for a strong criticism that numerous games no longer attempt to create an enticing or interesting world or provide exciting gameplay, but rather only attempt to manipulate the player into spending money. Some mobile games get criticized among gaming communities for being made as an excuse to show the player as many advertisements as possible or trying to lure them into purchasing in-game items with real money, rather than providing an entertaining video game experience.

2.2. Characters in Video Games

Characters are an important part of any fictional story. For games, characters serve as the connection between the player and the games world. A story is told through characters: Their actions, the problems they face and the way they react to the events around them will make up a games story and push the story forward. Concepts, ideals or the background of a fictional world can be given to a player through the characters. In regards to the impact of characters on the player experience, a study by Bowman et al use the term “game appreciation” to describe “...time spent relating with and thinking about in-game characters and the stories involving them.” (Bowman et al, 2016, p. 86). The more players can relate to and think about the characters within the game and their

stories, the more they appreciate the game in question. Therefore, both can be said to be important for creating a memorable experience. Additionally, enjoyment of media can sometimes be directly tied to characters. On media enjoyment, Raney states:

“A leading explanation of enjoyment focuses on the affective dispositions that viewers form toward the characters in those presentations; simply put, enjoyment of some types of entertainment is predicted by what happens with and to the characters that we like and/or dislike.” (A. A. Raney, 2003, p. 61).

Commenting on Raney’s work, Green, Brock & Kaufman suggest that an individual’s identification and empathy towards characters, as well as how they view the actions of the characters within the messages of a narrative are significant in conceptualizing the topic of enjoyment in media (Green, Brock, Kaufman, 2004, p. 311). Hence it can be stated that characters play a significant role in providing an enjoyable entertainment experience, including in video games.

What makes characters unique in games are the interactions with them. The player can directly assume control of a character and interact with other characters in a game. This gives the player a feeling of a more personal relation with these characters and is largely present in single-player oriented games, as other types of games usually have players interacting with human players, rather than fictional characters. Humans inherently have a need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and characters can somewhat fulfil this need by creating an illusion of social interactions. However, Baumeister & Leary outline “...a need for frequent, affectively pleasant interactions with a few other people, and, second, these interactions must take place in the context of a temporally stable and enduring framework of affective concern for each other’s welfare.” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p.497) to truly fulfil this need: Interactions with game characters are limited to each game, therefore they cannot truly fill this need. Despite this, it can still be given as a reason for people becoming attached to fictional characters nevertheless.

The increased interaction in games gives characters a certain level of sociality with the player. The computer-controlled characters can create an illusion of playing with or interacting with a human. In addition, the dynamic nature of games means that characters in games can have more facets than one in a movie or a book. The player may witness how the character reacts to different decisions from the player or different

outcomes in the story, giving them an additional layer of depth. As a result, a player may find themselves more attached to a game character, with whom they can interact with within the scope of the game, versus a static character from a movie, book or other media.

Characters can also serve a strong purpose outside of telling a story. A character can be effectively used as a marketing tool to sell a product or merchandise. People being able to recognize a character and associate them with a certain game or company can help spread positive word about this company and their products. Some companies will have characters dedicated to this purpose, called “mascots”. Characters such as Nintendo’s Mario or Pokémon’s Pikachu are examples to globally renowned mascots.

Before discussing the role of characters in games, the defining features of characters and their importance in storytelling will be explained in the following sections.

2.2.1. Definition of a character.

A character is a fictional person or creature that exists as part of a fictional story, literature or media. Rimmon-Kenan discusses characters in literature with the following:

“In the text characters are nodes in the verbal design; in the story they are — by definition - non (or pre-) verbal abstractions, constructs. Although these constructs are by no means human beings in the literal sense of the word, they are partly modelled on the reader's conception of people and in this they are person-like.” (S. Rimmon-Kenan, 1983, p.33)

This refers to characters specifically in textual literature. While characters in this context are, in a realistic sense, merely made up of words, they conceptually imitate an idea of a person. When reading a book, the reader is likely to create an image of a person in their mind, based on the characters in the book, rather than treating these characters as a mere bundle of words. Although this refers to human characters, the same can also be said of non-humans, such as an animal or even an entirely fictional entity like a dragon. In essence, while characters are unreal, they are based on certain concepts that make them more than only a bundle of text in the mind of a reader. This is reinforced even further in modern media due to the introduction of visuals and audio, which can give characters a visible, animated look and a voice. As a result, it becomes all too possible for a person to view these characters as “real”.

Characters are defined by a number of traits such as: Visuals, personality, abilities, goals, strengths and weaknesses. These aspects are necessary in order to allow a character to properly play their role in the story they are part of. This ensures that the character has certain aspects they can be recognized by, which is necessary for those that are intended to draw attention from players, such as protagonists or antagonists. This characterization is also necessary for characters to properly play their roles in a story: Aspects of a character, such as their goals, strengths and weaknesses can often be used as plot points to reinforce the story. Additionally, the character's visuals can also determine whether the viewer likes, dislikes, connects with or sympathizes with a character (B. Tillman, 2019, p.8). This is especially important for main characters like protagonists and antagonists to ensure they give the intended first impressions.

2.2.2. Character building.

Characters must be carefully written to fit their roles in a story and get the intended emotions and messages across to players. To this end, a character should be able to make an impression, positive or negative, on them. A tragic character suffering through terrible events should draw sympathy, causing players to wish for the character to pull through their troubles. A heinous villain should draw ire and cause players to support the protagonist against them. To this end, characters can be built in the story through 3 different methods: The character in question may describe themselves, their goals, motivations and such. Another character may describe this character's personality or abilities. Finally, the characters actions throughout the story may give an understanding as to their personality. (S. Rimmon-Kenan, 2002).

With this, the various aspects of a character will be put together throughout a story, with players learning more about the character from these differing sources. This forms the core of character building. The character itself will be created out of the following features:

2.2.2.1. Goals.

Goals are what a character striving for. Determination and pursuit of goals are a topic that is normally part of psychological research, however, basics of such research can still be used in character design to create characters with more believable goals. Goals may originate from needs, with a motivation to continue pursuing them. "Intrinsic motivation" for example suggests that "...organisms are intrinsically motivated by a

need to encounter stimulus events that are moderately discrepant from some internal standard; in other words, they seek stimulation that is moderately discrepant from their accustomed stimulation” (Deci & Ryan, 1980, p.40). Deci & Ryan elaborate that the pursuit of a goal depends on this internal standard, with something close to it being considered too easy, whereas something too far from it may be considered too difficult and therefore out of reach. (Deci & Ryan, 1980, p.41). Within further research, Deci & Ryan tie goals to the “Self-Determination Theory” (SDT), suggesting that a part of goal pursuit is related to satisfying innate psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In terms of fictional characters, Dennett explains these needs and the actions the characters take are key to better understanding the character. The character’s desires can explain their reasoning for the actions they take (D. Dennett, 1998).

In stories, the plot is usually progressed through the protagonist’s actions in pursuit of their goal. The goals the protagonist and other characters pursue in the story as well as the actions they take to reach it can help give us a deeper understanding of the character’s psychology. Understanding a character’s feelings helps empathize with them: See section 4.2.3 for more on empathy.

2.2.2.1.1. Motivation.

As briefly mentioned in the prior section, motivation is the psychological drive for a person to pursue their goals. In SDT, Deci & Ryan relate motivation to “needs”, explaining its importance with “...the needs that give goals their psychological potency and that influence which regulatory processes direct people’s goal pursuits.” (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 228). Effectively, fulfilling needs can act as a powerful motivation in the pursuit of goals. To give a basic example, humans work in order to earn money. Money is necessary in modern society to fulfil our basic needs, purchase luxuries or afford healthcare. Therefore, these basic needs motivate people to continue working. D. Bordwell explains this as “realistic motivation”: Actions and motivations that can be explained and make sense within the context of the character’s personality and situation (D. Bordwell, 1985, p.36).

Alongside goals, motivation make up the root of a character’s design. The same goal can be twisted into multiple forms through different motivations. Two heroes can be fighting villainy, but one is doing so to fulfil their idea of justice, while the other is motivated by the idea of achieving fame and power. This kind of difference results in

two very distinct characters, despite pursuing the same goal. Motivation can be used to entice the player into rooting for or against a character and give a deeper understanding into a character's mindset and personality. A character's motivations can also be directly linked to their background. Using a comparison between a rich and a poor character as an example, Lankoski, Heliö and Ekman state "...a character with poor parents is more likely to become a thief than a wealthy character; or at least the character will need different motivations or reasons to why he is currently a thief than a poor character would." (Lankoski, Heliö & Ekman, 2003, p.9). A poor character may become a thief with the goal of obtaining more money. A rich character would already have money, therefore requiring a different goal to explain their actions.

The lack of motivation or loss of it is a commonly used source of conflict for a character. A character may lose their motivation after failing to achieve a goal for an extended period or another reason, resulting in them feeling a lack of purpose as they no longer have the motivation to keep pursuing their goal. Attempting to find their motivation again or perhaps accepting their goal was out of reach to find another one is a problem that people can find relatable to real life experiences, therefore making it a compelling story point. For this reason, giving characters unachievable goals or misled motivations can allow for strong character development and create room for players to empathize with a character.

2.2.2.2. Weaknesses.

While it can be enticing to create a character who can handle any situation they come across, this limits the potential of the story and the character's development. Weaknesses allow for scenarios in which the character may find themselves struggling or needing help from others. This does not directly refer to "power". It is feasible to write a character who is extremely powerful and can win any fight, but has other problems they have to deal with instead. For example, an all-powerful, immortal character may struggle with the mental problems brought about by their immortality despite their power. The ability to achieve any goal they want without a challenge can result in a loss of motivation as they would no longer feel any satisfaction upon reaching these goals, hence creating a weakness for the character. These types of weaknesses allow for more varied plots around a character.

Weaknesses can be used to connect a character with other characters, building relationships between them and helping each other with their problems. A certain weakness can also make up the core of a character's story, such as a past traumatic event that haunts them. Or a loss of a person close to them. These problems can then be used as plot points to be resolved in their story and add depth to the character.

2.2.2.3. Empathy.

Empathy is an important social tool within human society, "...allowing the sharing of experiences, needs and goals across individuals." (Carr, Iacoboni, Dubeau, Mazziotta & Lenzi, 2003, p. 5497). Forming this link between the characters and players is important to get across the intended emotions and reactions. When players emphasize with a character's actions, goals and problems, they will become more engaged with this character. This ensures that they will have a lasting impression of the story and it can even draw extreme emotions from them, such as crying over the misfortune of a character.

Humans may also instinctively mirror the emotions shown by others around them, an example being the phenomenon known as "contagious laughing" (Laughing as a result of seeing others laughing). This applies to game characters as well. Character designers can use the expressions of the characters to set the tone of the game and the players mood: Featuring cheery and happy characters can be uplifting for the player. The protagonist's expressions can also be used to set their emotion, such as showing courage (K. Isbister, 2006). The opposite is also true, as games with serious themes will feature characters that show grim, gloomy, sad or angry expressions more frequently. A horror game may have the player character showing an expression of fear. This sets a tense tone in the game for the player. In this way, developers can use empathy to manipulate the player's mood and emotions throughout a game.

Players can also achieve a deeper understanding of a character's intentions through empathy. Using various experiments, V. Gallese notes that primates, including humans, can pick out a certain intent when observing the actions of other actors. (V. Gallese, 2001, p. 33-50). Similarly, when experiencing a fictional story, one is likely to instinctively observe the various actions and emotions of a character to try and figure out their intentions. Intentions are often tied to goals and emotions. An action's intent could be in pursuit of a certain goal, or a result of an emotion. Therefore, emphasizing

with a character's goals and emotions can then reveal their intentions, hence giving sense and purpose to their actions within the story.

2.2.3.4. Stereotypes.

A stereotype is a concept of a character that fits a certain, commonly used set of characteristics. A set combination of various qualities that are shared across different characters in many different forms of fiction create a stereotype. These stereotypical characters are often very similar due to sharing similar backgrounds, goals or motives. K. Isbister describes stereotypes as:

“...schemas or prototypes in your memory that associate a pattern of cues with a typical set of qualities in a person. These cues can include dress, build, posture, grooming, age, gender, race, style of speaking and moving, as well as the company in which a person is seen.” (K. Isbister, 2006, p.12)

There are many different common stereotypes in modern fiction, such as the righteous and just hero, the evil overlord villain, a cold rival who comes to befriend their opponent and so on.

Stereotypes can give players an immediate idea of a character's personality and set their expectations accordingly. It is important to be wary of stereotypes when writing a character. As time goes on, more and more characters and stories are included in the pool of modern media and fiction. This makes it increasingly difficult to create an entirely unique concept, as it is very likely for a given idea to have already been tackled by an existing story or character. Writers must instead take inspiration from previous works to build their characters and stories. However, characters that directly follow an existing stereotype will be very predictable. They must have unique quirks, features and twists to set themselves apart from similar stereotypes. Breaking a stereotype through these quirks or an unexpected twist can positively surprise the player and make them more engaged with a character.

2.2.3. Character roles in stories.

Characters in a piece of fiction all serve different purposes. Each character plays a different role in a given story and will be designed with varying qualities depending on that role. Characters have to be placed in the correct roles and designed accordingly in

order to successfully play that role and send their intended message and emotions to the players.

2.2.3.1. Protagonists.

Protagonists are the main character(s) of a story. These are the lead characters that act as the centrepieces of a story. The plot will largely revolve around the protagonists, showing their actions, reactions to the events happening around them and personal development as a result of any difficulties they may face. Therefore, these characters tend to have striking visuals that stand out from the other characters in the story or have other noteworthy qualities to set them apart, as they are the character(s) that the player will follow the most throughout the story. D. Bordwell explains the story is organized around the protagonist's pursuit of a goal and how their actions drive the plot onwards. The story quickly establishes the protagonist's motivations for pursuing this goal. It progresses as a back and forth between the protagonist and the antagonist: The latter repeatedly attempts to stop the former and the protagonist attempts to overcome the antagonist's ploys, in order to reach their goal (D. Bordwell, 1985). This usually forms the basis of a "Hollywood" style, protagonist-centric story.

Since the protagonist acts as the lens through which players experience a story and most of the events will be viewed through their perspective, it is important that they are sufficiently designed to make for a compelling and interesting character. Visually, protagonists will often be designed to appear attractive to the player. Humans instinctively build first impressions on other humans (or characters) based on looks. Therefore, players are more likely to view an attractive protagonist positively, such as finding them stronger or more skilled (K. Isbister, 2006). Protagonists also require an emotionally engaging goal, weakness and a conflict to resolve. Enduring hardships and developing as a person are commonly used scenarios for protagonists. These qualities are necessary to create compelling story and will also make the protagonist more relatable. A protagonist who is a "perfect" person can weaken the story as this character cannot go through struggles or hardships and develop as a result. They are already perfect and lack weaknesses or an internal conflict to resolve. Some defining features of such a protagonist is: Never losing a fight, never making mistakes or frequently being excused for their mistakes, being naturally good at any activity they attempt or constantly being praised by other characters within the story. Such a character will not

be relatable to most people and may have the opposite effect, frustrating players due to their inability to lose or have flaws.

While most protagonists are morally good characters, this is not at all a requirement for a protagonist. Protagonists can be depicted as having questionable morals, performing unethical actions or otherwise acting in bad faith. In a few instances, the protagonist can be villainous or outright evil. “The audience of a movie does not automatically assume that the protagonist does good, and neither does the player of a video game believe that the protagonist of the game does good.” (J. Juul, 2005, p.281). These kinds of flaws can make a protagonist a more in-depth character, or an outright heinous criminal, rather than only being righteous heroes who never do wrong.

In a video game, the player will spend most of their game time with the protagonist: They are most likely to leave a lasting impression on the player. The player will be performing the majority of the interactions in a game through the perspective of the protagonist character. For this reason, the design and characterization of the protagonist must be considered carefully. A poorly designed protagonist can directly result in a generally unremarkable story experience in a video game. It is also not uncommon for games to allow the player to create their own character, allowing players to design their own, ideal protagonist.

2.2.3.2. Antagonists.

An antagonist is the opposing force to the protagonist in a story. These characters act as the source of a problem for the protagonist to solve or repeatedly try to hamper the protagonist in their journey. An antagonist’s relation with the protagonist helps develop the story, provides contrasts to the protagonist’s point of view and may cause a set of events that result in the protagonist developing as a character. Therefore, antagonists can be as important as the protagonists in driving a story forward.

Similar to protagonists, antagonists can be simple villains who do evil for the sake of being evil, or more complex characters who oppose the protagonist for a variety of reasons such as conflicting ideals and morals, or form a rivalry between the antagonist and the protagonist. Sometimes, an antagonist will be designed to contrast the visuals and colours of the protagonist, signifying the conflict between their character. R. McKee compares the conflict between the protagonist and antagonist to a conflict of ideas, with one character representing an idea, and the other a counter-idea: As these

two ideas clash throughout the story, one of them ultimately succeeds, becoming the controlling idea of the story (R. McKee, 1997, p.128).

Antagonists can also be morally good characters, much like how a protagonist can be a villainous character: The term protagonist does not necessarily refer to a hero and antagonist does not refer to a villain. These roles can be switched around depending on the perspective of the character the story is being told from. If the story is told from the villain's perspective, then that villain is the protagonist of the story and the heroes trying to stop them are the antagonists.

An antagonist may make players question the protagonist's own actions and goals. Since a story will often be told from the protagonist's perspective, an antagonist can bring light to faults within the protagonist's thoughts and methods that may otherwise not be obvious to the player or the protagonist themselves. This conflict can result in important story development and get the players more engaged with these characters. For this reason, an antagonist with deep and detailed characterization is more likely to receive a positive reaction than one whose only purpose in the story is to be defeated by the protagonist.

2.2.3.3. *Supporting characters.*

Supporting characters make up the rest of a story's roster of characters, aside from the main protagonist(s) and antagonist(s). These characters generally will not be at the forefront of the story as much as the main characters, but can still have a consistent presence throughout the plot. They will also have their own personality, goals and background story that can either align with the protagonist or cause a conflict. They can help reveal certain aspects of the protagonist, cover up the protagonist's weaknesses or help the protagonist overcome their weaknesses. Much like the antagonists, they can also provide different perspectives to the protagonist's point of view. The goals and actions of the various supporting and side characters can also complicate the plot or add obstacles to the protagonist's journey (D. Bordwell, 1985, p.157), adding depth to the story.

Supporting characters can be given moments of importance in order to resolve their personal issues and develop them as characters. Although they may not be at the forefront of the story, these characters will still hold importance to make for a more

detailed story with a multitude of characters and plotlines, instead of only following the protagonist's journey.

Figure 2.2

Cover artwork of video game "Persona 5"



Note: The image features the protagonist character (front-center) with the game's main cast of supporting characters behind him. From "Persona 5", Copyright 2016 by SEGA

2.2.3.4. Background characters.

These are simple characters that inhabit the world the story takes place in. They won't hold much significance in the story and are mostly used to show a living world, outside of the events revolving around the main roster of characters. These characters are used to build the world the story takes place in, showing the lives of the ordinary people or how a set of ongoing plot events affect them. Since these are meant to resemble ordinary people or inhabitants of the story's world, they will have inconspicuous designs and look similar to one another.

The consequences of plot events on background characters can be used as a force to drive the protagonist forward or trigger certain emotional responses from the player.

Sometimes, the protagonist itself will cause grief for the background characters, making players question whether protagonist is in the right or wrong.

2.2.3.5. Other characters.

Characters aren't strictly restricted to a story. Various forms of media, such as advertisements or mobile video games, design characters for purposes outside of being used in a story, with their most common usage being marketing or advertising. Some companies also adopt a specific character as their "mascot", making this character the face of this company. These characters will have little in the way of characterization. They may have a simplistic personality, but their most important aspect is their visual design. Visuals can leave a lasting impression, so such mascot characters must have a memorable appearance that ensures a link between this character and the product or company they represent. It should also be noted that a character can both be a mascot, as well as an actual character within a story. Characters such as Mario or Sonic the Hedgehog serve as both mascots, as well as the protagonists of their respective game series.

Figure 2.3

Mascot of the "Pokémon" series, Pikachu



Note: From Pokémon (series). Copyright by Nintendo.

In some genres of games, most notably mobile games, puzzle games or strategy games, the characters may be used to make the game appear livelier. The character gives the player a face to look at and get familiar with, giving them a more personal investment in the game. These characters may not actually have any purpose within the

game, but simply exist as an animated decoration to appeal to the player and keep their interest by making the game appear livelier.

2.2.4. Characters in a narrative story.

Characters are an important component of a story. B. Tillman explains the importance of story in relation to character design as follows:

“Story is the second step to good character design. Even though it is the second thing mentioned, it is the most important. If you are willing to put in the time and effort to develop each character—their backstory and personality traits—before you start drawing, you will have a stronger and more well-rounded character design, which will in turn strengthen the aesthetic of your character in the future.” (B. Tillman, 2019, p. 5, 6)

As Tillman explains, a character’s story is especially important to their design. The character’s aesthetics should match their intended personality and position in the story in order to provide the intended impressions. This also includes other aspects of character design such as the character’s powers, goals and quirks. All of these should form a coherent, consistent character in order for the character to best play their role within the story.

Additionally, humans are social beings and tend to look for other people or creatures (such as animals) to connect to. As a result, they can also get connected to characters, despite their fictional nature. People tend to seek and project human-like characteristics onto other creatures, such as assuming a plant with its leaves drooping may be sad because it needs water. This may even be applied to inanimate objects (Lankoski et al., 2003). A person may feel an attachment to a simple object they have owned or used for a long time. For these reasons, characters play an important part in creating a memorable story.

2.2.4.1. Storytelling.

Stories are made up of a consecutive set of events. Rimmon-Kenan describes them as a “...fictional 'reality' in which the characters of the story are supposed to be living and in which its events are supposed to take place.” (S. Rimmon-Kenan, 1983, p.6). Once a character is designed, their characterization is established through the story. Without a story, a character can only be given a very basic and surface-level characterization. At the same time, a story requires something to revolve around,

whether it be a character or an object. While some abstract stories can be told through symbolisms and objects alone, the large majority of stories, modern and old, will contain some amount of characters. Therefore, storytelling and characterization tend to be involved together. Both of these aspects can be used to develop each other: The story is required to properly characterize a character, whereas this same characterization can also be used to progress and decorate the story. A poor story can hinder a well-designed character and poor characterization can hinder an otherwise well-written story.

As mentioned above, stories can take advantage of human tendencies to create appealing stories. Human-like qualities can be given to unlikely objects. A story can tell of a tree's life for example, showing it grow, blossom, wilting during a drought but healthy and lively after rain. Players can then come to feel a type of connection with this tree. Feeling sad as it wilts but happy after it blossoms up again. The player will start perceiving it as a type of character and even empathize with it. As a result, they will project their own emotions on the tree. This should be taken into consideration when writing a story to ensure the story can give the intended emotions and messages.

2.2.4.1.1. Linear and non-linear stories.

Most narrative stories follow a single, consecutive set of events. The stories found in most forms of media are a linear narrative: They follow a predetermined string of events. The story in a given book or a movie will always be the same every time a reader or viewer experiences it: It is predetermined and cannot change.

Since games are an interactive activity, unlike a book or a movie where the audience cannot participate in the story in any way, games may allow players to perform various interactions in the fictional reality of the story. This creates an opportunity for games to allow players to change the course of events in the game, thereby affecting the story and taking it in a different direction. This can allow games to feature non-linear narratives that react to player actions. However, due to the technical limitations of games, the game cannot provide the player an endless number of options. J. H. Murray explains the player's agency as the player responding to the "call" of the computer (J. H. Murray, 2016, p.124). The player simply watches along the narrative with no actions possible, then makes a given decision or takes a certain action when the game gives them the call to do so. Each choice may lead to a different string of events and move towards different conclusions to the story. This creates the basis of a non-linear story

that can change in reaction to player actions. Linear stories meanwhile are more comparable to a theatre play, where no matter what the audience (In this case, the player) does, the result and events of the play will always be the same.

Szilas identifies 3 types of non-linear interactivity: Branching, superposed interactivity and simulation (N. Szilas, 1999, p.150). Branching interactivity is the player making choices that directly alter the narrative: However, these are limited, as the author must carefully design each branching path (N. Szilas, 1999, p.150). Superposed interactivity is when the player is given an interactive scene (a fight or puzzle for example) within the linear narrative. Finally, a simulation consists of games such as SimCity or Minecraft: These games are highly interactive, but do not actually contain a narrative or story elements. Overall, non-linear narratives in video games are usually fairly limited: The game narrative cannot change dynamically, unlike what would be possible in a tabletop role-playing game where the human players can make up their own story as they play. Even should the game provide the player with some manner of decision making (Branching non-linearity), each option would still be pre-determined by the author, hence not providing a truly non-linear narrative.

2.2.4.2 Conflict.

Conflict is the primary force that ensures progression in a story. It is arguably an indispensable part of storytelling. Almost any story will have some sort of an obstacle to overcome. An opponent to defeat, a problem to solve. A character's chase of their own goal can also be considered a type of conflict. In more abstract stories, a conflict may be hidden within the actions of the characters, even if it is not immediately visible.

What makes conflict so essential is that it serves as the backbone of a story and can be the source of a character's development and lead to the resolution of their journey. McKee describes conflict with "...creates meaningful change in the life situation of a character that is expressed and experienced in terms of a value and achieved through conflict." (R. McKee, 1997, p.36). One or multiple conflicts will be built-up across the story, creating anticipation for a climax and resolution. Eventually, a character will directly confront the overarching conflicts of the story, making up the final climax and leading to the eventual resolution. There is generally one overarching major conflict in addition to more minor ones that are more quickly resolved. The pursuit of solving a

major conflict and the smaller ones along the way will help further characterize and develop characters.

2.2.4.3. *Development.*

Throughout a story, characters will experience a variety of different things. They will meet new people, have various interactions, achieve or fail their goals and wrestle with their own problems. Through these various events, a character can learn more about themselves, discover or overcome their weaknesses or find new motivations to keep pursuing their goals. These all make up a character's development. Development is an important factor of story writing: People are dynamic and can live, learn and change as a result of their experiences. Therefore, development is an expected part of a character in a piece of fiction, as they live out their lives and experience many things.

This can come as a natural result of a character's experiences in a story. Characters may gradually change throughout their journey, or have a sudden moment of epiphany after a climactic event that results in such change. It can also be a problem that is directly put on the forefront. The inability to develop and move on from past problems is a frequently tackled issue in many forms of media. In other instances, the conflict between the protagonist and antagonist can also depict the problem of wanting to develop and move forward, versus sticking to the past and being unable to develop as a person. Character development can be relayed through the character's actions, but also other means such as their dialogue or tone of voice (M. Nieminen, 2017, p.38): A notable shift in the way a character speaks or interacts with others can relay how they have changed over a story.

Development also applies not just to characters, but the setting of a world as well. The actions of the main characters can have positive or negative consequences. The world changing around the main plot depending on the unfolding events makes for a more dynamic story. These changes in the world and the characters will keep players more interested in the story and create anticipation as to how the events of the plot may unfold.

2.2.4.4. Resolution.

Every story must have a conclusion. The ending is an extremely important part of the story as it leaves its final message and impression. It is the culmination of everything that takes place in the story and the following results of the characters' actions. "The story ends with a decisive victory or defeat, a resolution of the problem and a clear achievement or nonachievement of the goals" (D. Bordwell, 1985, p.157). Have the characters succeeded in their pursuits, achieved their goals and carried on their lives to chase another goal? Or have they met a tragic end? It is important to give each story an appropriate resolution according to the prior themes and messages of the story to wrap it up in a satisfactory manner.

Since this will be one of the most impactful moments of the story, a sloppy or poorly written ending can have an extremely negative impact on the entire story. Even if the rest of the story is well-written and successful, a poor ending can ruin the player's opinion of the entire story and leave a lasting negative impression. While the resolution varies from story to story, a conclusive finale should wrap up any plot ends and avoid leaving unanswered questions. A story looking to create a sequel should conclude in a manner that will leave players wondering what will come next. Some endings leave their meaning up to interpretation, but they must give sufficient information for people to speculate on.

It is also important for follow-up stories to take the resolutions of prior events into consideration. A sequel that renders the resolution of the previous set of events may be negatively received as it reduces the effect and impact of the prior story in that fictional world. Creating an overly ambiguous ending to allow for a potential follow-up can also result in an unsatisfactory resolution, therefore drawing a negative response. Such sequels must also pay close attention to the development of any recurring characters. Players will expect the characters to act differently in accordance with the developments they had, but it is a common mistake for some stories to undo or ignore a character's development from prior events. This undermines the characters own past story as well as the sequel story.

2.2.5. Characters in gameplay.

Much like other forms of fiction, video games feature a wide variety of characters, following a similar design process, concepts and stereotypes. Video game characters

share numerous similarities to those used in 2D or 3D animations, as well as other forms of fiction. The primary difference in video game characters originate from the interactive nature of video games. Unlike other forms of fiction, the player can directly interact with the characters. This greatly affects how characters may be placed within the game and creates unique opportunities for characterization as the actions of the player can affect characters in different ways.

2.2.5.1 Implementation of characters into gameplay.

As stated in section 3.4.1.2., gameplay is the form through which the player interacts with the game and therefore, also how the player interacts with the characters. Although gameplay can function with mere shapes and objects, characters add a unique flair and layer to gameplay: Instead of merely clicking a button to open a shop, the player may instead talk to a shopkeeper character to buy or sell items. This shopkeeper may even have a hidden backstory that the player may discover, making this shopping feature more interesting. K. Isbister explains “Player-characters are at the heart of the interactive experience of gaming. They are the interface through which players experience both the physical and social landscape of the game world.” (K. Isbister, 2006, p.203).

Playable characters generally impact the gameplay with their abilities. Each character will have their own set of rules that function under the general ruleset of the game. While character A can perform actions 1, 2 and 3, character B may be able to perform actions 2, 4 and 5. As a result of this, different characters may have different strengths that can entice the player to change their strategy in order to make the most of these strengths. The actions a character can take or their style and approach to combat may also reflect aspects of their personality, talents and weaknesses. Decorating gameplay with a character’s unique quirks can make that character more enjoyable or memorable to play. In some instances, a rule of the game can entirely revolve around a certain ability or quirk the protagonist character may have. This helps building the character(s) through their gameplay features. This also applies for enemy characters. Each enemy character will pose a different challenge: Instead of playing to their own character’s strengths, players can strategize around the enemy character’s weaknesses. Additionally, the story may also provide the player with an additional reason to defeat these enemies, rather than simply pursuing the goal of victory. An evil boss may be

written as an evil, revolting individual that makes the player wish to defeat them and put them to justice, beyond simply wanting to win and progress the game. In this regard, the characterization of enemies may give players additional reasons to defeat them, on top of the simple goal of winning.

In this manner, characters add value to the goals, challenges and rules of the game. The rules are determined by the capabilities of the characters and the opponents. The goals are provided to the player by characters instead of a simple text on the screen. Enemy characters create various challenges, and so on. This way, the core parts that form the actual game are fitted into the story and explained to the player in an immersive manner through the characters.

The role and functions of characters differ between each game (Lankoski et al., 2003). In role-playing, adventure or otherwise story-focused games, characters are a part of the story and are expected to have some form of in-depth characterization. In a game that is focused more on action, such as a fighting game, characters will stand out through their combat abilities instead, as players choose which character they enjoy playing as the most. Each character will have some amount of characterization to give the player an idea of who the character is, but their gameplay abilities are what will be given the most attention. In smaller games such as puzzle games found on mobiles, characters are often used as graphic decorations, but don't serve a gameplay purpose or have much characterization.

2.2.5.2 Character building through gameplay.

Elaborating further from the prior section, gameplay can be used as an additional tool of characterization. A character's possible actions and skills can help relay their personality to the player. "When a person "plays" a player-character, she or he takes on the player-character's body in the game world and adapts his or her reactions to the affordances of the game world and to the capabilities of the player-character. "(K. Isbister, 2006, p.204). The player's possible actions will always be limited by the game's ruleset: However, these rules may be explained as part of a character's skills or personality. Alternatively, developers can also take control away from the player to establish important story moments. This includes content such as using cutscenes in which the player has no control, or certain pre-set events that play out as determined by the developers, where the player cannot change the outcome regardless of their actions.

Another common method is providing the player with dialogue options, but the options provided to the player may lead to the same predetermined results or not include an option that the player may wish to give (Lankoski et al., 2003). Developers can establish parts of a playable character's characterization through these methods.

Such methods are often used in linear stories where the result is predetermined and the players actions do not ultimately influence the direction of the story. In these games, the writers aim to tell their vision of the game's characters and story, without much, if any interference from the player. The player can be considered a spectator or witness to the story and does not actually have a part in it themselves, other than simply controlling the characters during the gameplay to progress the story.

As mentioned in section 4.4.1.1, some games take a more dynamic approach that attempts to involve the player within the story, providing them with decisions that can influence the events of the story or even the characterization of some characters, hence creating a non-linear story. In such games, the story can divert based on either player actions within the gameplay, or through multiple dialogue choices and decisions. The player may take a specific course of actions that unlock a hidden story path, or it can be something more obvious such as simply making the protagonist act like an evil person to achieve a bad ending. While games cannot provide an endless number of possibilities to the player, they can provide players with a feeling of control and agency by allowing them to somewhat steer the story.

Both of these methods can be created through the manipulation of goals. As previously established, goals are a core part of games. Modern video games tend to use goals as a part of the story, where the player must fulfil the goals provided by the story in order to progress. A linear story will simply provide the player with one goal. The player must reach this specific goal to progress the story, with other actions either resulting in failure or forcing the player to retry until they fulfil the goal. These given goals can provide subtle characterization to the characters, by way of depicting what the character wishes to do or is capable of doing in the current moment. The player has no option but to oblige to progress. In non-linear stories, goals can be manipulated, altered or sometimes even ignored by the player. The player may also be given multiple goals, with the objective of completing one of them. In this instance, the player may be able to progress the story in an unexpected manner by not pursuing the given goal or

unlock a different story branch by taking different actions. In this instance, the player themselves is able to exert influence over the characters and in a way, manipulate their characterization according to how they view the character themselves. By allowing players to pursue different goals, the game allows the players themselves to answer the question of “Who is this character?”.

Ultimately, neither system is superior to the other. Each type of story has its own strengths and weaknesses. A linear story is capable of more in-depth characterization as the developers do not have to worry about including player actions within the characterization and simply relay their vision of the story and characters to the player. A non-linear story can have multiple branching paths and grant the player a feeling of control over the story and characters. However, this can result in weaker or less in-depth characterization as the developers must leave multiple possibilities open for the player to take, instead of pushing them into a single specific scenario. In such non-linear narratives, the strength of the story tends to be the presence of multiple story paths and the ability of the player to manipulate events, granting an increased feeling of agency and immersion, whereas a linear story can be interpreted like an interactive movie.

2.2.5.3. Interacting with characters.

The most important factor in separating video game characters from other digital media is interactivity. While some forms of media such as visual novels feature limited interaction with characters, video games can allow for more dynamic interactions. Gameplay itself can also convey certain aspects of a character’s personality through their abilities and animations. In many story-driven games, there will be a notable focus on character interactions. Players will be able to talk with other characters or interact with them in various ways, hearing different dialogues or getting different reactions depending on the player’s actions. Through directly interacting with these characters, players may form an emotional bond with one or more characters that they emphasize with or find entertaining. As a result, they may change their actions depending on the character they are interacting with, such as being especially kind to a character they like and being rude to a character they dislike. This will also affect how the player reacts to events surrounding these characters. They may feel guilty if a dialogue choice they

make results in their favourite character being upset or sad, while feeling a sense of satisfaction when a character they dislike is hit by misfortune.

Ultimately, what the player is truly interacting with is the computer: All of the actions of the characters the player interacts with are determined and controlled by the computer or may be predetermined by the developers. However, characters act as a mask for the computer that give it a voice, a face, a personality and may even allow it to somewhat simulate social interactions in the otherwise asocial video games. They help build the illusion that the player is interacting with lively characters and not a lifeless, dull machine that is simply executing predetermined scripts and code.

2.2.5.4. Immersion.

Immersion is to create a consistent fictional world that the player can pretend is real. It is a powerful storytelling tool that allows players to get absorbed into the story being told to them. Using the book *Don Quixote* as an example, J. H Murray explains immersion as “creating a world more real than reality” (J.H. Murray, 2016, p.98). In this example, the character Don Quixote becomes so immersed in the fictional books he reads, that he comes to believe this fiction is real. Murray further explains the computer’s ability to take us to any place possible:

“A few clicks on the World Wide Web and we are instantly in one of the feudal fiefdoms of the “current Middle Ages” set up by the Society for Creative Anachronism or in the sick bay of the starship *Voyager* being examined by the cranky doctor. Unlike Don Quixote’s books, digital media takes us to a place where we can act out our fantasies.” (J.H.Murray, 2016, p.99).

A powerful sense of immersion can greatly enhance the players experience with a game’s story, increasing their emotional investment in the world and with its characters.

Maintaining a consistent sense of immersion throughout a video game is difficult, as numerous factors affect how immersive a game is. Brown and Cairns split immersion into three stages of: Engagement, engrossment and total immersion (Brown & Cairns, 2004). These stages can be briefly explained as follows: Basic engagement effectively originates from gameplay. The player must truly enjoy playing the game to get further engrossed in it, to then be totally immersed. Engrossment occurs when the player becomes emotionally invested in the game: This is achieved through factors such as visuals and plot. Finally, total immersion is achieved through the additions of

atmosphere and empathy. Once the player forms an attachment to the characters or the depicted world, they can get truly lost in the game, playing for hours on end with their attention solely on the game (Brown & Cairns, 2004, p. 1298-1299).

As part of a game's plot and atmosphere, every fictional story comes with its own set of rules. The writers somewhat explain how the supernatural in this fiction is possible and establish a sense of consistency to it. In a way, each fictional world must have its own "laws of physics" that allow that world to make sense within itself. The player can slowly gain an understanding of this world by putting together the rules presented to them. The player's sense of immersion can be further reinforced by disguising the various rules, goals and challenges of the game as a part of the story or explaining the game mechanics through the characters. This helps maintain the fictional world as a consistent reality that the player can believe in. However, immersion is fleeting and easily broken: An unexpected bug (Software glitch) for example can shatter the suspension of disbelief and break the player's immersion (R. Rouse, 2001, p.12), reminding them that they are playing a computer game.

Characters are also an important part of achieving an immersive experience. Each character will get an established personality and characterization throughout a story. In order to maintain an immersive experience, characters should act accordingly to their own established values and personalities. If a character acts out of line, there should be a convincing explanation as to what influenced this change in their actions. Characters taking actions that are inconsistent with their established personality with no explanation can be viewed as a tool to artificially progress the story or push it in a certain direction in an unnatural manner, therefore breaking the player's immersion. Characters who act and develop in a natural process will better allow the player to stay immersed in the game's world. The key is to continuously mimic a sense of reality as established by the game and characters that act in accordance with their beliefs and personalities is a part of this.

2.2.5.5.1. Suspension of Disbelief.

Fiction will often explain the supernatural through means that may seem illogical or even defy what we would consider normal according to reality. Looking at such explanations through the lens of reality may result in a fictional world that makes no sense. Suspension of disbelief is for the player to overlook certain things that may be

irrational in reality and accept the explanation given by the fictional world within the rules of that reality. Fictional stories contain all sorts of unbelievable situations, be it superheroes, enormous monsters or immensely exaggerated levels of power such as characters that are capable of destroying entire planets with minimal effort or breaking the fabric of reality itself. No matter how good the writing, some manner of pretending is necessary from the players to maintain a sense of immersion in such content.

Staying within the limits of the established rules of the fictional world is often sufficient to maintain the suspension of disbelief. The more the player understands how or why something is possible, the more likely they are to believe the fiction's explanations for it. However, writers must take care not to place themselves in a position where the story must frequently explain hows and whys to the player. The key is to write the events in a manner that the player can recognize how something is possible naturally through the rules established by the story. It is a common mistake for some stories to start bending their own rules or continually expanding them in order to explain how a new character in the story performs a given action that may not make sense with the established rules. Should this keep happening over and over again, the previously established rules start becoming blurred, convoluted and difficult to understand or get completely disregarded in some instances, which can start confusing the player. Eventually, the world risks losing its sense of consistency as the rules get frequently changed or altered, which in turn can break the players suspension of disbelief and immersion.

2.2.5.6. *Playable characters (PC).*

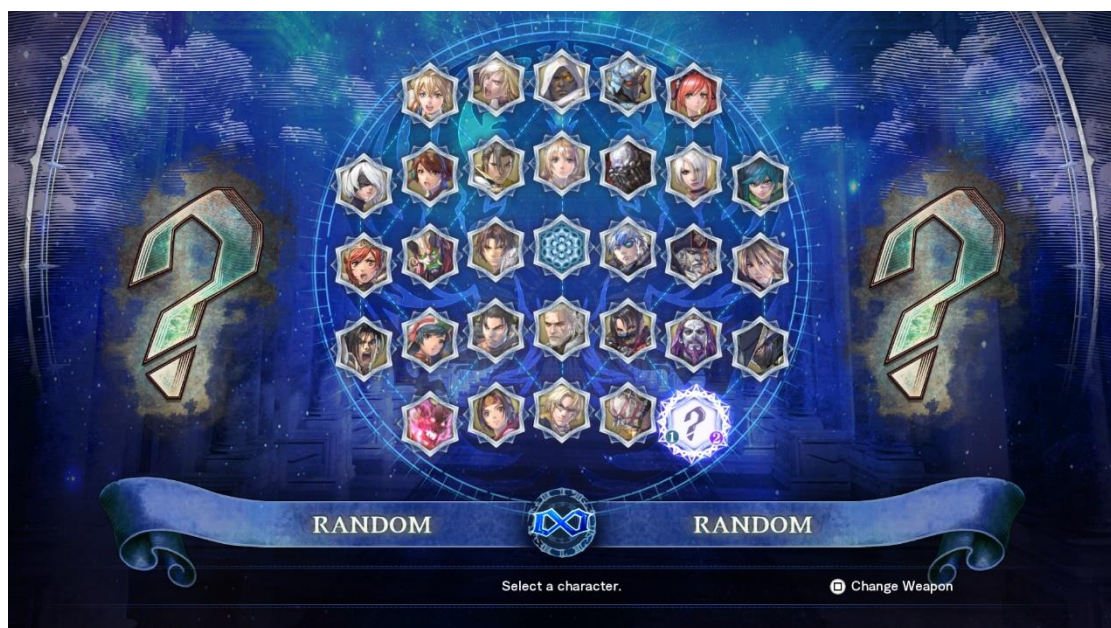
Playable characters are directly controlled by the player during gameplay. They have multiple purposes in a game: In story-focused games, the player experiences the events unfolding through the point of the view of the main playable character(s). Multiple playable characters can be used to show different perspectives of the same story. Some games will also use this in a way where the player first experiences one side of the story, then follow another character in the same story where various mysteries about the story are revealed through a new perspective. In action focused games, multiple characters will have different abilities and skills, giving the player many options to select from. Players can pick a character they particularly enjoy playing as, or strategically pick a character that is especially powerful for a specific scenario the

player wants to challenge. Such games may even allow the player to play as the antagonist(s) or otherwise evil characters as well. Playable characters will often be designed in a way to be appealing to players, even if they are not significant to the story. In games with many playable characters, characters should be different from each other visually and in terms of gameplay.

The number of playable characters in a game is dependent on the gameplay experience the developers wish to provide and does not depend on whether the game focuses on action or not: A game with a story focus can feature multiple playable characters whereas a game with action focus can feature a single playable character. Certain games provide the player with a single playable character that may be able to use multiple different sets of actions (Called “movesets” in gamer slang) and the player upgrades this character throughout the story. As stated above, some games have multiple playable characters provide different perspectives of the story. In other games, these additional playable characters may not have story significance but are provided for the player to have a variety of gameplay options through playing different characters, as to keep the gameplay fresh and enjoyable.

Figure 2.4

Playable Character Roster of Fighting Game “Soulcalibur VI”



Note: From “Soulcalibur VI”. Copyright 2018 by Bandai Namco

2.2.5.7. Non-playable characters (NPC).

“NPC” refers to any character in a game who is not controllable by the player. Any given character, such as an opponent, an antagonist or a supporting character can be an NPC. These characters serve an important role in populating the digital world of a video game and giving the player characters to interact with. Players can even like an NPC more than a playable character, if this NPC is designed in a way that appeals to that player. These characters may not be in the spotlight as much as playable characters, but can still serve an important role within the story or gameplay. They make up the characters the player can interact with, or the opponents that must be fought.

NPCs are also not irrelevant in gameplay despite not being directly controllable. Numerous games may allow allied NPCs to assist the player in gameplay through numerous ways, such as fighting enemies or supporting the player by recovering their health or increasing the player’s stats. Some NPCs may feature unique quirks and strengths that are not accessible to the player, which can set these characters apart from others or help add detail to their characterization. Additionally, providing the player with useful companions can help the player become more attached to these characters. Depending on the context of the game in question, this may also reinforce the player’s sense of immersion. For example, if the player character is part of a squad, group or army, the player will expect to have companions to assist them in combat. Such stories often have a problem of putting excessive emphasis on the player character which can make the allied characters appear weak, incompetent or simply useless. Therefore, showing to the player that these characters are capable of dealing with problems and assisting the player in gameplay can greatly reinforce the player’s immersion.

Figure 2.5*Generic non-playable characters in “Genshin Impact”*

Note: From “Genshin Impact”. Copyright 2020 by miHoYo

2.2.5.8 Character roles in genres.

Characters are used for different purposes in various genres of video games. The number of playable characters, their characterization and stories vary depending on the genre of the game and the primary audience the game is made for. Games that focus on story or roleplaying will have characters that are fitting to the game’s world. The goal of such games is to create an immersive world with compelling characters. RPGs primarily focus on this, creating a roster of main characters and giving each of them a considerable amount of characterization. These characters will generally have more in-depth personalities compared to those in less story focused genres.

Action or PvP oriented genres such as shooters may place less emphasis on characterization. Visually, character designs are still important, as playable characters must still appear interesting to the players. However, these types of games can often have a very large roster of playable characters. Therefore, each character may be given a simple and easy to understand personality, allowing players to quickly get familiar with each character. There may be a story to explain the on-going events of these games,

but it will not take priority over the combat gameplay. Visual designs and combat abilities become especially important in such games with a big roster of playable characters. These aspects are significant in separating characters from each other. This is also true for RPGs that contain many playable characters.

Some genres have characters that are only used for visuals or a sense of immersion. Strategy games with a focus on management may not have any noteworthy characters at all, only using background NPCs to show a populated world. The player may have assisting characters with unique visuals and some characterization, but these will generally have minimal focus. Characters in casual mobile games are also used in a similar manner, often being no more than visual decorations to make the game look more interesting.

2.3. The Protagonist in a Video Game Context

As it has been discussed so far, fictional stories and characters are highly appealing to people for a variety of reasons. As a result, while early video games focused heavily on gameplay alone, experiencing a story and interacting with fictional characters has become a significant reason for people to play video games. The protagonist character, being the lens through which the player experiences these interactions, is therefore also an important part of games. Although the protagonist isn't the only important part of telling a story, they are still very significant, especially in the context of a video game due to the fact that the player interacts with the game through this protagonist. For this reason, the overall design and characterization of the protagonist character(s) can have an impact on the player's general experience in a game. The protagonist can also be used to set the tone of a game: For example, in the earlier mentioned *Doom* (2016), the power and personality of the Doomslayer character creates an atmosphere that encourages the player to aggressively hunt down the enemy demons, rather than cowering from them. Whereas in a game from the horror genre, the protagonist is often made to be a weak, if not completely defenceless individual, hence creating a feeling of fear and anxiety in the player as they feel the defencelessness of the protagonist.

In this chapter, the usage of the protagonist in video games will be discussed more in depth, as well as how it may affect player experience. A number of games will be used as examples and their contents regarding the protagonist and story will be analysed.

2.3.1. The protagonist.

While the set of main characters in any fiction is important to the story, in the context of a video game, the protagonist acts as a filter through which the player experiences the rest of the game. In a large number of games, the player controls the protagonist character through most of the game's story. The protagonist's personality, emotions and feelings can help set the atmosphere and tone of the game as a whole, as previously discussed. The gameplay may also be designed around the protagonist's possible skills or quirks.

While these are qualities of a normal protagonist character, another common usage of the protagonist in games is allowing the player, to create their own protagonist instead. These two design directions can create considerably different scenarios in the game, as allowing the player to design their own protagonist requires numerous changes in not only gameplay, but the game's story. In practice, this can allow the player to better control their own game experience by shaping it to suit their own desires. Instead of following a predetermined story of a predetermined character, the player can, to the extent as allowed by the game, create their own story for their own character. As a result, the player can role-play in the game and write their own story, like they would in a Role-Playing board game such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, as mentioned in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

Identification with game protagonists is also relevant to the game experience. Hefner, Klimmt and Vorderer propose the following:

“... for the moment of media exposure, users adopt (parts of) the identity of the target character. They perceive or imagine themselves to actually be the media character and thus alter their self-concept ‘into the direction of’ the media character. Identification with a media character is thus construed as a temporary alteration of media users’ self-perception by inclusion of perceived properties of the target media character.” (Hefner, Klimmt & Vorderer, 2007, p.40)

In terms of video games, they suggest this identification occurs as a result of the interactive nature of games. As the player acts within the game world, the player directly controls the protagonist rather than watching the character perform actions on their own, which can cause players to identify with the protagonist as they keep playing the game. In a 2005 research, Hoffner and Buchanan use the term “wishful

identification” to refer to people trying to identify with characters they consider to be their “ideal self” (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). This can be examined as the basis of player avatar characters: Allowing players to create their ideal self in a fictional environment. Standard characters can still fulfil this role, however. Using Hoffner and Buchanan’s research as their basis, Hefner, Klimmt and Vorderer suggest that a person who wishes they were more courageous could identify with a brave hero such as James Bond (Hefner, Klimmt & Vorderer, p. 41). But at the same time, a player may not identify with a standard character protagonist that does not fit their image of their ideal-self. This identification can enhance the fantasy experience of a game, allowing players to pretend to be a kind of self they wish to be.

Additionally, the study by Bowman et al mentioned in section 4. finds that “game enjoyment” among gamers can be linked to “increased control over one’s in-game decisions and behaviours” and control over their “avatar”, or the protagonist (Bowman et al, 2016, p.86). Combining this study with the prior mentioned ones, it can be determined that creating or identifying with their ideal self in a video game and also having the agency within the game to act accordingly to this ideal-self result in a more enjoyable game experience among gamers. Now, these two design directions and their implications on the rest of the game will be discussed further.

2.3.1.1. The protagonist as a character.

Since the protagonist is one of the most important characters in a story, numerous games with a focus on story will feature a standard character as the protagonist. While this character is often controlled by the player during gameplay, they have their appearance, personality, goals, motivations, strengths and weaknesses will all be predetermined by the game developers, with the player having minimal to no control over these various traits. Although this lack of control over the protagonist may come at the expense of the player’s ability to role-play and express themselves in the game, it is not necessarily negative. With such a character, the developers may write the story around the predetermined protagonist without having to account for possible player actions. This can allow for more in-depth characterization and development for the protagonist character, while also creating a more consistent story.

Juul states “...players undoubtedly also want to be able to identify with the fictional protagonist and the goal of the game in the fictional world...” (J. Juul, 2005, p. 248).

Identifying with a standard character protagonist is naturally easier as this character will have their own goals and motivations that the player may empathise with. Customizable player characters on the other hand often do not speak and show minimal emotion. Their goals and motivations are usually left vague or left entirely to player interpretation. Tone of voice, expressions and emotions are important tools of communication: Without these, a character's role in the story can be greatly diminished as the player may see no emotions, goals or feelings from the protagonist to sympathize with. As a result, it can be easier for a player to identify with a standard character protagonist over a customizable one, even though customizable protagonists are usually supposed to represent the player.

On the other hand, Salen and Zimmerman argue that "A protagonist character is a persona through which a player exerts him or herself into an imaginary world; this relationship can be intense and emotionally "immersive."" (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p.563), but that the protagonist is still a tool, a puppet for the player to manipulate. This can be seen in some games which feature standard character protagonists while also granting the player some agency within the story. The player may be allowed to make choices in place of the protagonist, which may have different results and consequences. This can encourage players to put themselves in the shoes of the protagonist, which can also be considered a method of role-playing and allow the player to better sympathize and bond with the protagonist character. Certain video games such as the *Life is Strange* series or the game *Heavy Rain* focus significantly on this method of storytelling. Although such games aren't very common and could almost be considered to be interactive movies, these games focus very heavily on the player making decisions in place of the characters which can lead to significantly different outcomes within the story. Another example game is *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, an adventure game in which the player controls the "Witcher" Geralt. While the game's story is largely predetermined, the player can make numerous decisions within the story that affect how certain subplots are concluded, in addition to other decisions that determine the ending of the game, as well as slightly changing the kind of person the protagonist Geralt is.

In such games, the ability to role-play originates from the gameplay design of making decisions that influence characters and the story, rather than simply creating a customizable protagonist. Therefore, it is not impossible to provide an immersive role-playing experience while still having a fully designed protagonist character.

Alternatively, many games simply do not focus on role-playing at all, but rather telling the player a compelling, engaging story, in which case, a standard character protagonist should be used.

2.3.1.2. The protagonist as a player avatar.

A number of video games feature a protagonist who acts as a “player avatar”. Instead of standing as their own character, the protagonist will attempt to represent the player, acting as an avatar for the player in the game’s fictional world. This type of design is usually an attempt to allow the player to better express themselves in the game. C. Crawford writes:

“An excellent game allows the player to interact heavily with his opponent, to invest a great deal of his personality into the game. This requires that the game offer the player a large number of meaningful options, enough options that the player can express the nuances of his personality through the choices he makes.” (C. Crawford, 1997, p.55).

The player avatar attempts to achieve this by effectively making the player themselves the protagonist. Many games with such protagonists attempt to use this to create more direct interactions between the player and other characters, as these interactions will no longer be filtered through the protagonist’s personality. The player can feel that they are directly interacting with the world themselves, without interference from any personality a static protagonist would usually have.

R. Rouse states that the protagonist is a surrogate for the player and the player must like or identify with the protagonist in order to truly immerse themselves in the game. Using the character Mario as an example, he states that “...he (Mario) never really says much, and acts as something of a blank slate on which the player can impose his own personality.” (R. Rouse, 2001, p.13). Rouse argues that the character acting in a manner that the player would disapprove of without providing the player a choice can remind the player that they do not have control over the protagonist, hence breaking immersion. As the player should be able to view themselves as this character, these types of protagonists will often have little to no character building. The character’s goals, motivations, personality and other similar traits are all meant to be decided by the player. In numerous games with player avatar protagonists, the player may be allowed to create their own character, hence allowing them to create the perfect protagonist to represent them in the game. Some players opt to try and recreate themselves, others

design their own unique character instead. A male player may opt to play as a female and vice versa.

Creating your own character(s) is a somewhat popular feature in video games, with numerous different genres of games providing the player with such features. RPG series such as *The Elder Scrolls*, *Monster Hunter* or *Dark Souls* series, as well as many others allow the player to create their own characters. Almost every MMORPG (Massively Online Multiplayer RPG) also features character creation with a heavy emphasis on customization. Other genres such as First-Person Shooters may feature some amount of customization such as the *Call of Duty* or *Halo* series, while some Sports games allow players to create their own athlete to compete or even create their own team entirely. Ultimately, these all serve to help the player shape their game experience in the direction they wish. The player can role-play as characters in different roles in different games. The player may be a hero in a fantasy story, then a commander of a modern army or a driver for a sports racing team. Through player avatar characters, the player can place themselves in many different situations and live out fantasies or scenarios they otherwise never could.

Although these protagonists have a number of positives, they may also suffer from some considerable problems. As mentioned prior, these player avatar protagonists are often “blank” characters. This may be problematic within the story of the game, as it will have to account for a protagonist that essentially cannot have any goals, motivations, emotions or develop as a character. As a result, the story may have to be made very general and without a specific focus in order to accommodate this type of protagonist. For example, a large number of games use a simple stereotype where the protagonist is a chosen one or otherwise special and is destined to save the world, or is the only one who can fix a certain major problem. In the earlier mentioned Mario games for example, the goal of the games are usually no more complex than progressing through the levels to defeat the villain Bowser. In such games, the protagonist will often be directed to the problem by other characters while showing minimal to no personality themselves. While it cannot be said that these stories are inferior to ones with standard character protagonists, an argument can be made that it is much more difficult to create an engaging and interesting narrative story around such a blank protagonist. In some instances, the game may surround the player with a large cast of characters who drive the story forward, which may render the protagonist obsolete to some degree.

Ultimately, this results in numerous conflicts. The protagonist is usually supposed to be the character that is intended to drive the plot with their actions, but a player avatar tends to be directed by other characters instead. A blank slate protagonist is used to ensure the player can identify with the protagonist, yet a narrative story may prevent the player from making any meaningful decisions, removing control from them anyway and breaking immersion.

2.3.1.2.1. Silent protagonists.

Silent protagonists are a fairly common form of player avatar protagonists. As the name implies, these characters do not speak within the story, or in most cases, do not speak at all and only make a few simple sounds such as grunts during gameplay. This is done in line with player avatar protagonists being blank slate characters where the player is supposed to fill in this blank slate with their own imagination. By making this character speak, the game may imprint certain personality traits onto the protagonist, which can conflict with the player's impression of the character. Using a silent protagonist can avoid this problem. Since these characters do not speak, the player may instead be provided with textual dialogue options they can pick to interact with other characters. Some games only provide simple "Yes No" responses to the player, whereas numerous other games often provide more detailed dialogue choices. This allows a level of direct interaction between the player and other characters in the game.

However, this type of protagonist arguably has a number of potential problems. It has been mentioned in a prior section that providing a role-playing experience is difficult due to technical limitations and many games resort to providing an illusion of choice, rather than a truly dynamic game that can directly respond to player actions. This creates a scenario where the game must provide a story that can not only accommodate a blank protagonist with no voice, but also provide means of role-playing to the player in order to ensure the player can express themselves in the game through this protagonist. If the game fails to allow the player to role-play or otherwise express themselves through the protagonist, it can be argued that featuring a protagonist with no voice may not serve any purpose within the game.

Silent protagonists are also commonly found in the JRPG genre. Many of these games take a unique approach in creating a silent protagonist that is not a player avatar, but a fully designed character. The protagonists in such games often have somewhat in-

depth characterization, including a predetermined appearance that cannot be customized by the player, a given name, motivations, goals and a personality, none of which can be controlled by the player. However, within the story, despite having such characterization, the protagonist still does not speak, with the player instead picking dialogue choices. Although this genre is still called the “Japanese Role-Playing Game” genre, the games that are considered to be within this genre have evidently moved away from the idea of role-playing: Many games of the genre do not actually provide the player with any ability to make meaningful choices, change the course of the story or allow the player to express themselves through the protagonist. The player will often find that they are always pulled along in the direction as determined by the story rather than having any control at all. Instead, these games focus more heavily on characterization, interaction between characters and the main plot of the story. Therefore, a question can be raised as to the purpose of the usage of silent protagonists in these types of games. If the player cannot role-play and the game does not intend to focus on role-playing, then the silent protagonist arguably does not serve any purpose within the game. It can be further argued that removing the protagonist's voice only hurts the character's development and position in the story. A climactic moment for example may feel highly anticlimactic if the protagonist does not actually speak an important sentence, but the player simply clicks an unspoken text of dialogue instead. Ultimately, such a story may find that it is imposing upon itself the negatives of using a player avatar protagonist without utilizing its strengths, hence only hurting the position of the protagonist within the story.

2.3.2 Role-playing.

The concept of role-playing has been a point of interest in video games since their rise to fame. People are drawn to unreal magical worlds and adventures depicted in fiction. These works of fiction offer people an escape from the problems and stresses of real life, especially in the modern world. Video games stand-out in this regard due to providing not just visuals and sound, but also control to the player, making them especially stimulating, therefore creating a stronger distraction. Here, the concept of role-playing allows one to get completely immersed in a fictional world, providing a break from real-life worries. Role-playing can come in numerous forms and isn't exclusive to the RPG genre. While this genre naturally places a considerable amount of focus on it, other genres of games may also provide certain means of role-playing to

the player. Sports games for example often implement a “manager” or “career” mode, where the player can role-play as the manager of a professional team, or a successful athlete.

Role-playing is a difficult concept to execute in video games due to various limitations in game development. Technical limitations such as a game’s file size, in additions to required development time and game budget means that no video game can cover an endless number of possibilities. It is only possible to create a finite number of possibilities in games and most games with a focus on role-playing tend to create an illusion of choice (A feeling that the player has more control over the game than they actually do) rather than actually providing the player with a massive number of options. This is often sufficient to keep telling a story while still leaving room for the player to express themselves in the game. However, it should be noted that the player may become aware of the illusion of choice over repeated playthroughs of the game, as they may realize that different choices can result in similar outcomes. An argument can also be made on whether this is truly role-playing at all. Salen and Zimmerman argue that role-playing games (Referring to table top games rather than video games) usually have no clear endpoint and come with a sense of uncertainty (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). This is not the case in video games which both provide the player with clear goals and lose any sense of uncertainty upon repeated playthroughs. Even if the game attempts to provide the player with multiple choices, the player will know how the story will progress and conclude after experiencing it once or multiple times. Therefore, true role-playing in a narrative video game story may not be possible at all.

A genre of games worth mentioning regarding role-playing is “sandbox” games: These games leave the player free to act as they please in a world with minimal to no direction from the game itself, allowing the player to play and experiment with various actions. In this instance, the role-playing is left entirely to the player’s interpretation, as the game will have no story to tell at all. A popular example of such a game would be *Minecraft*. The game features a high amount of customization, allowing players to choose and modify their gameplay experience as they see fit. Although the game itself does not have a story, the players can create their own story through the game’s mechanics instead. While these games do allow an open-ended role-playing experience, it should be noted that the total lack of a story can be unsatisfactory to some players. If

the player does not wish to create their own goals but be directed by the game instead, then the player may find that they simply have no goal or purpose in such a game at all.

2.3.2.1 Role-play oriented gameplay design.

Ensuring a consistent sense of role-playing requires the game to be built in a way that allows it. Role-playing in games first originated from board games, in which the game is managed by a human who can dynamically react to the actions the players take and the decisions they make. This manager will generally plan out a story in their mind, but may change it dramatically in reaction to unexpected or unorthodox decisions from the players. In video games, as mentioned previously, technical limitations of game development make such freedom of choice for the players impossible. The computer, which manages the game, can only play out the scenarios provided to it by the developers and cannot create a completely new scenario in reaction to player actions.

Therefore, video games that wish to provide a role-playing experience must work around this limitation through various methods. Allowing customization of characters, such as customizing an existing character or creating entirely new characters through a character creation system, is a commonly used method that can allow a player to express themselves through the visuals of their character. Another approach is providing a different variety of playstyles, allowing players to find a style of play that best represents how they wish to play the game. In addition, although games cannot provide an infinite number of choices, some amount of choice and decision making is still important for a memorable role-playing experience. Games can mix an illusion of choice with decisions that have actual effects in the game to keep players engaged. Having numerous possible outcomes to the story, if possible, can also make repeated playthroughs of the game more engaging for the player, as they aim to achieve each possible ending. Only having a single outcome can break the illusion of choice and cause the player to feel their prior decisions have been pointless.

2.3.2.2 Player agency.

This term is used to describe the player's ability to control or exert influence within a game. It is "...the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (J. H. Murray, 2016, p.123). A study by Tamborini et al finds that players report increased enjoyment of a game when proving competence (Skill in the game) through their own autonomy, whereas enjoying the game less when

given less control. (Tamborini et al, 2010). Therefore, agency is a factor that should be considered to provide a more enjoyable gaming experience. As mentioned above, this can be provided to the player through means such as customization, providing different styles of play or allowing decision making in the story. The objective of this is to allow the player to express themselves in the game and allow them to interact with the game more directly.

A number of these features can be implemented in differing games. Some games may feature a limited amount of customization such as having a different selection of costumes for a given character (Called “skins” among gaming communities). While more in-depth customization is often found in RPG titles, some individual games of certain genres may also provide in-depth customization to the player. The Fighting game series *SoulCalibur* for example features an in-depth customization and character creation systems, allowing players to create their own fighters to play as, or heavily customize the appearance of existing characters. Although the game is not an RPG at all, the player can design their own characters to express themselves, granting a certain level of agency. Aside from such examples, most action-focused games, including different genres such as First-Person Shooters, Fighting games or Action Adventure games may also provide players with differing skillsets and playstyles. This can be achieved through featuring many playable characters with unique abilities, providing the player with different weapons that change how their character plays or allowing the player to specifically upgrade their character into different possible playstyles. This can allow players some level of creativity while approaching the gameplay, letting them come up with their own playstyle or strategies to tackle the challenges of the game. It should be noted however, that such aspects fall under “agency from gameplay”, that is, the player’s ability to “explore virtual environments, interact with characters and overcome challenges” (Thue, Bulitko, Spetch & Romanuik, 2010). In terms of agency within the narrative story, Thue et al. split it into “theoretical agency” and “perceived agency”, these being the player actually having control within the story and only a subjective sense of actually having control, respectively (Thue et al., 2010). Perceived agency may also be referred to as the “illusion of choice”. Returning to Murray’s description of agency, perceived agency may be broken should the player realize their decisions are meaningless and do not actually have any consequences, therefore taking the feeling of power away from the player and reducing the decision making in the

game to a pointless affair. Ensuring the player's actions have consequences is hence essential in achieving and maintaining theoretical agency.

Agency should be provided to the players within the limits of the experience the developers wish to deliver. A game looking to provide a specific experience can reduce the player's agency in order to enhance that type of experience. A game focused on stealth for example may restrict the player's options for combat to dissuade the player from engaging opponents head-on and encourage them to utilize the game's stealth mechanics instead. RPGs generally attempt not to restrict the player too much as to allow the player to role-play, but may still do so in some instances as required by the story or gameplay.

2.3.2.2.1. *Control of goals.*

As stated earlier, goals are one of the core components that make up a game. Narrative driven video games provide goals to the player as a means to progress through the game and the story. Most such games have numerous sub-goals that ultimately lead the players to the major, final goal that results in the completion of the story. In order to provide a feeling control, games may create different possible paths that lead to these goals. Each player approaches the game differently and the game allowing them freedom in how they solve each problem and reach the given goals can help reinforce a sense of control. Some games may even allow players to twist these goals, such as intentionally failing a goal resulting in a different outcome. Being able to influence goals or reach them in different manners can increase the emotional gratification from completing them and allow players to take different approaches upon replaying the game to see every possible outcome.

In the earlier mentioned "sandbox" type games, there are no goals at all. Instead, the player is intended to create goals for themselves through the various mechanics that may be available in the game. In the life simulation series, *The Sims* for example, there is no clear objective. Salen and Zimmerman state "A computer program like Sim City does not have explicit goals, and in that way is more like a toy than a game. However...players can turn it into a game by constructing their own goals." (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p.115). The player is free to build homes and create human characters called "Sims". They can then shape the lives of these Sims as they please. The player can choose to create a family or a lone Sim, make up a story for these

characters, choose their jobs, build their homes and so on. Some players of the game even focus heavily on simply building highly detailed homes instead. Overall, such games give no direction to the player: It is entirely up to the player to determine what their goals in the game are and how they wish to play it.

To summarize, role-playing and agency are important tools for creating a fictional space in which the player can interact and experiment with the world, story and features of a video game. However, these are not necessarily mandatory components, as focusing on such features heavily may also require the developers to compromise on storytelling and character building in order to ensure the player has control. Both styles of games have their own appeal to differing groups of players: Some enjoy the idea of freely experimenting in an open-ended video game, while others may prefer being told a linear story with memorable characters and climactic story moments. Any discussion on which is superior would be entirely subjective, as no single video game appeals to every possible type of player.

2.3.3. Game analysis.

With the various different usages and types of protagonists established, a number of games will be analysed regarding their approach to the protagonist in the story, the methods they use to drive their story onwards, how much room they allow for role-playing or if they even allow for it at all. These games all have different approaches to the story experience they provide, ranging from being akin to an interactive movie, to providing an entirely free experience with no story at all.

2.3.3.1. *The Last of Us*

The Last of Us is an action adventure game with some survival horror elements, released in 2013. The game is most notable for its story and characters, depicting the development of the two protagonists who are trying to survive in the aftermath of what is effectively a zombie apocalypse. The gameplay itself focuses more on stealth and resource management as well as basic puzzle and problem solving, with some amount of action combat as well. This game was chosen due to being similar to an interactive movie, with the player only taking control during gameplay sections whereas cutscenes make up most of the actual story.

This game features an entirely linear story with static characters. Within the story, there are no role-playing elements such as character customization or decision making: The player is placed in a third person perspective and witnesses the story the game has to tell with no interference or control provided to the player. The game is primarily witnessed from the perspective of the character Joel, with a few segments being seen through the character Ellie's perspective instead, including a large optional story that focuses on her background. This story focuses heavily on the relationship between Joel and Ellie and how it develops as they go through several hardships and try to survive in their apocalyptic world. Joel is originally seen to be a bitter man, having lost his biological daughter in beginning of the game, several years before the events of the story. The two characters are initially very cold and uncaring towards each other: Joel is tasked with taking care of Ellie and he treats this as no more than a task he has to complete. Ellie is consistently seen to be upset with his attitude, though occasionally tries to lighten the mood.

This story revolves heavily around the intricate relationship between these two characters. The development of the characters as they progress from their original cold attitude to a father-daughter like relationship is one of the key aspects of the story. The game focuses primarily on storytelling; therefore, no control is given to the player in how the story progresses. It can be argued that, in this instance, removing control from the player adds additional depth to the characters, as the player may feel that the events in the story are occurring due to the character's own actions, rather than being affected by the player: This is a notable strength of linear stories and characters. By removing control from the player, it is possible to create a feeling that the events in the story are happening due to the character's own choices and personalities, versus the player simply directing the course of events. Whereas if the player themselves was picking dialogue choices or influencing the character's actions, it is possible that the actions and dialogue of the character would lose some of their impact. Hence, the game's "interactive movie"-like format is arguably the better option for its storytelling, versus trying to provide role-playing elements to the player at the detriment of this storytelling.

2.3.3.2. *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt is a story-focused open-world RPG, released in late 2015. While *The Witcher* was originally a series of books written by Andrzej Sapkowski,

developer CD Projekt Red (CDPR) brought the series to video game format, spanning a trilogy of games. *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* was the third game in the series and was received very positively due to its story, detailed world and intricate characters, significantly boosting the popularity of the series. This game's story format creates a dynamic where the player is given choice and agency, despite featuring a standard character protagonist. As a result, the game was chosen for analysis.

The game places the player in the shoes of the "Witcher" Geralt, the recurring protagonist of the series. In this story, Geralt is tasked with finding the character Ciri and returning her to her emperor father. The game features a generally linear story: The player is allowed to make a number of decisions in Geralt's place that can affect the outcome of certain events throughout the story, with numerous choices also affecting the final ending, concerning the fate of the character Ciri. However, the overall structure of the story itself remains the same and most of the choices result in one of two possibilities. Additionally, the player can also slightly alter how Geralt conducts himself with other characters. The player may make Geralt appear more like a greedy mercenary who is only working for money, or someone with a kind heart behind a tough and cold exterior. It is even possible to influence Geralt's romantic life, which can determine who he spends the rest of his days with, after the conclusion of his story. In these ways, while the game does not have an entirely non-linear story, it still does allow the player to somewhat affect the events and determine some parts of who Geralt is, while keeping the core of the story and characters the same.

Although the decision making in the game is relatively simplistic, the story does somewhat encourage the player to put themselves in Geralt's shoes. The player forms their own opinion of who Geralt is throughout the story and can act accordingly to this view, or express their own thoughts to the extent as allowed by the game, which creates some ground for role-playing within the limits of Geralt's character. In this manner, role-playing can be performed by pretending to be an existing character in the story and acting within that character's perceived personality. This creates grounds for role-playing without falling into the issues that would be usually present with a player avatar or silent protagonist.

2.3.3.3. *Genshin Impact*

Genshin Impact is an open-world action RPG that released in late 2020 and rapidly rose to popularity, achieving immense global success in short time. The game utilizes a “live service” update format, with the developers releasing new updates for the game every 6 weeks. This game primarily focuses on exploration of its detailed open world, as well as story and combat. The game also has a large cast of playable characters, each with unique designs and personalities. Due to being a fairly recent title and containing a number of issues that are usually present with silent protagonists in various games of the JRPG genre, this game was considered a point of interest.

The game’s story focuses on the journey of the protagonist character, referred to as “Traveller”, who has lost their sibling and are aiming to find and reunite with them. The Traveller character is a silent protagonist and also intended to be a player avatar, as the game often refers to the Traveller as “you”, implying the player themselves. However, there are several flaws with this approach, as the game does not actually provide any means of role-playing to the player. At the start of the game, the player is allowed to pick one of the sibling characters, a boy or a girl, then give them a name. However, the Traveller character cannot be customized otherwise. Additionally, the Traveller is not a fully blank slate character unlike what would be expected of a player avatar protagonist. This character has certain bits of personality that are visible through dialogue choices and text, their own goal and a motivation for it. The game’s story, although incomplete, has been entirely linear, not allowing players to change the outcome of any events through choices or their own actions. The dialogue choices provided to the player do not affect the story or the outcome of events: The game sometimes does not even provide multiple options at all, forcing the player to click the single provided option.

Figure 2.6

An Example of a Fake Dialogue Choice in Genshin Impact



Note: The provided “choices” are actually one sentence split into two and presented as two separate options. Several instances of this occurs throughout the story. Screenshot from “Genshin Impact”, Copyright 2020 by miHoYo.

Another notable flaw is that unlike other games of the JRPG genre which usually employ a number of core cast characters that travel with the protagonist, the Traveller only has one companion in this game. While such characters would usually help make up for the protagonist’s inability to speak, the lack of such a core cast in this game results in the singular companion character frequently speaking in place of the Traveller. This further removes control from the player, as the companion character speaks in their place and usually directs the player towards the next goal.

As a result, it can be suggested that this protagonist is in fact designed not as a player avatar, but as a standard character instead. This creates a contradictory design where the game treats the protagonist as a player avatar and expects the player to view themselves as the protagonist, despite offering the player no customization or control over the protagonist or the story. The protagonist’s role in the story is arguably being compromised due to their inability to properly speak and interact with other characters, while also not providing the player with room for role-playing in the first place,

rendering the usage of a silent protagonist redundant. This also affects the companion character, who is forced to make up for the protagonist's inability to speak, hindering the character's own position in the story.

A further argument can be made that a plot such as witnessing this protagonist's journey to find their sibling requires the player to be emotionally attached to the protagonist in order to make this plot more compelling. However, this can be made significantly more difficult due to the protagonist being able to show only a very limited amount of emotion and personality. Overall, a criticism can be raised that the storytelling in the game and its approach to protagonist do not complement each other, hindering the protagonist's presence in the story while also providing minimal opportunity for role-playing.

2.3.3.4. *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, shortly referred to as *Skyrim* and fifth game in *The Elder Scrolls* series, is an open world RPG with a heavy focus on role-playing, released in late 2011. The game excels due to its somewhat sandbox style nature, allowing players to role-play as they see fit in the land of "Skyrim". This game was chosen due to its ability to provide a strong role-playing experience, despite not featuring a particularly large amount of choice or decision making in the story.

This game features a custom character protagonist, allowing the player to create their own character in the beginning of the game. The protagonist, titled "Dragonborn" in the game, is a silent character with no backstory, dialogue or any sort of character building, making them a complete player avatar. The game also features a skill tree system that is upgraded based on the player's actions: The more the player uses a given type of action, the more the skill related to it is improved. With this, the player can specialize their character either according to their gameplay preferences, or choose to focus on skills that fit their sense of role-playing. For example, the player can choose to specialize their character in magic, using spells frequently in combat. Or focus on melee combat, making their character into a durable brawler.

The game features a number of different storylines. Aside from the main plotline, the game contains a number of side plots, involving different factions within the game's world. There are also several, short side-quests that expand the lore of the world or provide the player with special equipment. However, despite the game being built for

role-playing, it generally follows a linear narrative, with few opportunities for decision making. While the player can make a few choices in some instances that may affect their own character or a specific NPC, the conclusion of each plotline is generally the same, regardless of player actions. Although this does not necessarily impede the player's ability to role-play, as the game never imposes any motivations on the player character: Instead, the player's imagination can fill in why their character is partaking in a particular storyline. It is also possible to simply not complete these storylines, as they are entirely optional. Despite the lack of decision making, this leaves sufficient room for the player to still role-play.

Finally, one unique aspect of this game is its heavy support for "mods": That is, fan made modifications of the game. Although not part of the base game, these modifications are supported by the developers, with official tools for players to create their own modifications. This has allowed the game to remain relevant for a significantly long time after its release, as players create their own content and modifications. These range from enhancing existing game content, to some fan projects adding entirely new, custom content to the game. As a result, a player can choose to utilize these "mods" in order to enhance or significantly modify their game experience in the direction they wish, which can greatly improve their role-playing experience.

2.3.3.5. *Guild Wars 2*

An MMORPG that was released in 2012, *Guild Wars 2* established itself as one of the top games in the declining MMORPG genre and remains an active title to this day, still receiving additional content. Due to its nature as an MMORPG, the game focuses primarily on gameplay content, but features a world with a highly in-depth lore, as well as several separated game maps that contain their own stories and lore about the world and various characters, as well as the various factions within the game. What makes this game a point of interest in the context of this thesis is that, throughout its long lifespan, the game has experimented with a number of approaches to the protagonist character. This makes it highly unique as a game that has gone through multiple approaches to the protagonist before settling on its current approach.

In its original release, the game attempted to create a role-playing environment. The player is allowed to create their own character, including selection the character's race, background and a few details that would directly influence how the early parts of the

game's story would play out. It should also be noted that the player's character would speak within the story, which is fairly unique as custom player protagonists in RPGs are usually silent protagonists. Throughout the story, the player is also given the option to join one of three factions, with the player's choice affecting the story path they follow. However, the game's attempt to provide a feeling of choice and a non-linear story arguably fail, as the story always reaches the same conclusion regardless of any and all prior decisions the player has made. Through repeated playthroughs, the player can notice a pattern that their decisions are only relevant for limited portions of the story and always connect to the same points. This can entirely shatter the illusion of choice, as the player may realize their decisions are ultimately meaningless and they will always witness the same story regardless of what background, race or faction they have selected for their character.

After the game's initial story, it has continued to receive further story updates over time. Among the first bits of this additional story, the game changes the player's protagonist into a completely silent character. At the same time, the developers also moved the game to a more linear story, abandoning the earlier attempts at role-playing. Perhaps due to the conflict between using a silent protagonist in an entirely linear story, this idea was changed once again later on, in the game's first major story expansion *Heart of Thorns*. This new story sees the prior silent protagonist character become a fully speaking character instead, with significantly more frequent dialogue than the original story of the game. From this point onwards, the developers have continued with this approach to this day, treating the protagonist as a largely static character, referred to as the "Commander". After this, the protagonist, despite originally being a custom character made by the player, acts as a largely standard character with their own personality, motives and goals. This comes at the expense of the player's ability to perform more in-depth role playing: The actions and personality of the Commander may even contradict the player's original vision of their own character. However, this change increases the protagonist's presence in the story, as the character can be seen frequently making important plans and decisions, giving orders and being assertive, as would be expected by a commander. Therefore, it can be argued that this direction in protagonist design is more appropriate for the intended role of the protagonist in the game.

2.3.3.6. *Minecraft*

An open world sandbox game that originally released in 2011. Minecraft is a game that provides the player with a generated open world, built from 4x4 blocks, leaving the player to freely act in the world. The game features no story, but has various gameplay modes for players to try, including optional multiplayer with other players. What makes this game relevant to this thesis is that, as previously mentioned, despite the lack of a story, this style of sandbox gameplay arguably creates the best environment for unlimited role-playing.

With no story to speak of, the game's appeal naturally lies in its gameplay. Here, the player usually starts off with minimal tools in a generated open world. The objective is to simply survive: The player can obtain materials from the world through various means, eventually building themselves a home base and creating equipment to increase ease of exploration. Additionally, the game also features a "creative" mode, where the survival elements are removed and the player is able to freely build any constructs. This mode is creatively used by players to create massive cities, replicas of locales from real life or even artwork.

This leaves players to simply enjoy the game as they see fit. They can aim to explore, build a home and expand it in many creative ways. The game's simplicity allows for the player to creatively approach its systems and come up with many different ideas. As a result, players can find themselves fully immersed in the game while chasing their self-created goals and even make up a story in their minds for their current world. After this, they may create another world, with a different story and different goals. This freedom allows players to role-play as they wish within the possibilities provided by the game's mechanics. Similar to the prior mentioned Skyrim, this game also supports fan-made modification, which allows players to customize their game as they see fit. Arguably, this is the most complete form of role-playing, as no limitations are imposed on the player through a story or characters. This allows players significant freedom and lets them fully express themselves in the game through the constructs they can build or a story they may imagine within the game. As previously mentioned, players can also join other players, which can further enhance the experience through direct interactions with other people in the game, to replace the characters that would usually be present in another game.

This is not to say this game is perfect, however, as an argument can be raised that the total lack of story may not be preferable to all players. Some players may prefer being given direction by the game rather than being left entirely on their own. While those who enjoy performing creative acts such as building a home base and making up their own stories would enjoy this type of game, there are also players who would rather be told a story than make up their own. In which case, rather than being able to role-play in the game, such players may feel that the game is simply empty and meaningless instead, giving them no goals or direction to work with.

3.RESEARCH

3.1. Aim of the Research

The thesis analyses the design conflict in how numerous games try to place the player in a first-person perspective of the protagonist character, expecting the player to insert themselves into the role of protagonist, but failing to provide the player with sufficient ability to control and customize the protagonist. The aim is to prove that such a design does not positively contribute to the game experience, undermining the position of the protagonist within the narrative and failing to fulfil its purpose of allowing the player to express themselves through the protagonist.

3.2. Methodologies of the Research

The research was conducted through performing descriptive content analysis of six chosen video games and by surveying players through the internet. The chosen games were analysed based on how they design the protagonist character (Player avatar or standard character, can or can't be customized, etc), in addition to how much agency and customization they provide the player with. Each game was chosen to show a differing type of design in order to show comparisons between these differing designs and how they may affect the player's experience. The surveys were conducted through the social media site Reddit: This website was chosen as it is frequently used by gamers and has many forums (called "subreddits") that are dedicated to games or specific genres of games. The website also features a posting format that makes it more likely for more players to see and answer the survey. The survey was created through Google Forms and posted on numerous "subreddits" in order to reach as many players as possible. Ten questions were asked with a total of 246 players responding. The

questions revolved around the players' general preferences for video games, in addition to their preferences on the design of the protagonist and what type of protagonist they prefer in different narrative designs (Linear or non-linear narratives).

3.3. Scope and Limitations of the Research

Video games have numerous parts that make them up, such as graphics, gameplay, story and characters. This research analyses the design of the protagonist character in the context of gameplay and story, primarily concerning whether the game expects the player to view the protagonist from a first-person perspective (Player avatar protagonist) or a third person perspective (Standard character protagonist) and whether the game's gameplay design and story narrative supports its protagonist design. The analysed games were chosen in order to provide differing examples of how each game designs these specific parts: Other aspects such as a game's graphics or combat gameplay were not considered as these were deemed irrelevant to the research topic. More games were not analysed as the selected games were deemed to accurately represent common design tropes that are relevant to this research: Selecting multiple games that feature the same design wasn't considered, as this would not add any further value to the research.

3.4. Importance of the Research

Story and characters are a major part of the video game experience in modern video games and contribute significantly to making a more enjoyable and memorable experience. The player interacts with the game's story and characters through the protagonist character, either controlling the protagonist or viewing events from their perspective. Therefore, the design of this character is especially important for the game's narrative and delivering the messages and emotions the story wishes to deliver to the player. While there is a significant amount of research on the protagonist character in both a video game context and a narrative context, there was little research on the conflict of trying to make the protagonist into both a player avatar and a character within the narrative. This research aims to fill this gap and bring attention to this problem.

4.ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The survey respondents primarily consisted of players within the age group of 21-30. Majority of these players play games on PC, with about half of the respondents playing on home consoles or the handheld Nintendo Switch. A smaller portion plays on mobile. The majority of the respondents also answered they play games around 1 to 3 hours a day, with a large group playing for 3 to 6 hours. Fewer people ranged on the two extremes of less than an hour per day and 6 to 12 hours per day. Only a few people answered that they play for more than 12 hours a day.

The surveys conducted show that players put nearly as much importance on the story and fantasy components as they do on the gameplay itself (See Figure 6.5). Although stories were considered something for movies or books during the early years of gaming, it is clear that this narrative fiction aspect has long become an important part of video games as well. As this thesis is primarily concerned with the design of the protagonist and story, the players were questioned on their various preferences regarding these two aspects. Protagonist designs were split into standard character protagonists and player avatar protagonists, with story design being split into linear and non-linear stories.

While players did not particularly prefer linear or non-linear stories over the other (Figure 6.6), there is a considerable preference towards standard character protagonists over player avatar protagonists. The responses show that players prefer a player avatar protagonist within a non-linear story where they have some amount of agency. At the same time, the majority has answered that they generally prefer standard character protagonists. Standard character protagonists were also more favoured in non-linear stories, receiving 25% of the votes, whereas a player avatar protagonist in a linear story has received 18% votes. The idea of a linear story with a player avatar protagonist was also the least popular combination in the responses. In addition, role-playing was not rated a particularly important part of games by players. 25% of players have answered that they never role-play at all, even if the game provides them with the options to do so. This supports this thesis' claim that a player avatar protagonist should not be used if not paired with sufficient agency and control within the game: Players generally do not consider role-playing a major part of their experience and do not prefer a player avatar protagonist in a linear story where they cannot control the protagonist's actions.

Therefore, supporting the claim that player avatar protagonists are not desirable if the game does not provide the player with the agency to control this character's actions.

Aiming to include the player in the story may come at the detriment of the protagonist's role in the story, or put the player in a position where the game may appear to claim the protagonist represents the player, despite the player being given no options or methods to actually express themselves through the protagonist. This may even create a feeling where the player does not dictate how the protagonist acts or feels, but rather the game uses the protagonist to tell the player how they are supposed to feel instead. Using characters to give the player the intended emotions is a common storytelling method in games as well as other media. However, in this case, the fact that the protagonist is supposed to represent the player may cause this to feel too forced, as if the game is not naturally managing the player's emotions through the characters and story, but using the protagonist to directly tell the player what they should be thinking in a blunt manner instead.

It would be inaccurate to say this type of design may significantly hinder the overall story of a game. There are numerous games with this type of contradictory design that are still known for their engaging stories, including the above mentioned *Genshin Impact*. However, an argument can be made that such designs still fail to achieve their purpose of creating a role-playing experience. If the player avatar protagonist is not supported by any means for the player to express themselves, then there is effectively no purpose in using a player avatar protagonist in a given video game.

Role-playing can be performed to some degree even with a standard character protagonist, as seen in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, or with a relatively linear narrative with minimal decision making, as found in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. The game *Genshin Impact* can be used an example that achieves neither: Unlike *The Witcher 3*, the game does not feature any decision making at all, with a completely linear story. At the same time, it also offers the player no customization of the protagonist besides choosing between two characters, as well as not featuring any sort of a skill tree or other means through which the protagonist can be customized. The game also breaks its own silent protagonist design with the protagonist occasionally speaking normally. This type of design is not exclusive to the game *Genshin Impact*: Similar flaws are usually found across many games of the JRPG genre.

As previously stated in section 2.1.4.4., games of the JRPG genre may often find themselves in this conflict where the games focus on telling a single, linear story, yet still force a player avatar protagonist that the game is not built to accommodate. Arguably, the linear stories found in these games are similar to other games with entirely linear stories and characters such as the above mentioned *The Last of Us*, or other noteworthy titles such as the *God of War* or *NieR* series. Utilizing a similar design, but simply making the protagonist silent and providing the player with fake dialogue choices that have too little or no impact to establish an illusion of choice is arguably not effective at providing a role-playing experience. Additionally, it is debatable whether such a role-playing experience is desired in the first place. While interactivity is an important part of video games, due to increasing costs of game development, mixing in-depth interactivity with detailed storytelling has become a highly difficult task and it is arguably not possible to create a truly non-linear story where the player's own decisions matter: Evidently, the player will always be pushed along the story path that is intended by the game developers. Therefore, for games that focus on their storytelling, it is debatable whether a silent protagonist or player avatar should be used at all. There is arguably no point in attempting to squeeze role-playing elements into a game that is, for all intents and purposes, structured like an interactive movie.

5.CONCLUSION

Video games have evolved significantly since their inception. Starting from basic games with simple rulesets and goals, games have achieved the ability to simulate entire digital, fantasy environments. Video games can place players in all sorts of unrealistic, imaginary scenarios, which provide greatly varying experiences. This means that almost any given person is likely to find a video game that they can enjoy playing. Within this context, stories and engaging characters have evidently become a major appealing point of video games as well. Players put nearly as much importance on the story as they do on gameplay. Experiencing a fantasy world, characters and story is an enjoyable method of spending free time to many people, as proven by the success of the gaming industry. Therefore, it is important to put together the various pieces of game design together to ensure the best experience of a fantasy as possible.

Characters especially hold an important place in video games, as they can serve as the backbone of not just the fantasy story, but also the gameplay as well. Characters

serve as a mask for the computer and can make the player believe they are not interacting with a lifeless, dull machine, but interesting characters with their own personalities and stories instead. These characters can enhance the overall game experience by adding more depth to gameplay mechanics and providing players with a feeling of socialization as they interact with these characters, even when performing basic game functions such as using a shop. Among the characters, the protagonist stands out as an especially important one as the story will usually revolve around this character and the player will spend most of their time with this protagonist.

However, instead of designing a usual protagonist character, a number of games choose to place the player themselves in the position of the protagonist. This is usually to provide a role-playing experience, which further plays into the idea of video games allowing players to experience impossible scenarios. By making the player themselves the protagonist, players can feel as a part of the very stories they are experiencing. But this comes with numerous flaws as the position of the protagonist within the story has to be compromised in order to insert the player into this role. These “player avatar” protagonists tend to suffer from a lack of voice, personality, clear motives, goals or any character development, which are normally essential pieces of character building. In addition, some games, most notably those of the JRPG genre, feature an inherently contradictory design of the protagonist: The game attempts to present the protagonist as the player, yet this protagonist character will come with a set appearance, some amount of personality, motives and a goal, none of which can be directed by the player. These games usually do not feature any ability for the player to make decisions or choices that affect the story either, essentially eliminating any real possibility of role-playing. Therefore, as such games make no attempt to encourage role-playing, this brings into question the purpose of treating the protagonist character as a player avatar in the first place.

Finally, providing a truly non-linear role-playing experience is very difficult due to technical limitations of video game development. It is also arguable how much players seek to role-play in a story focused game in the first place. There are numerous video games that feature little to no story with the intention of acting as a blank canvas for the player to create their own scenarios and stories in. Such games can provide much larger freedom than one that is restricted to the limits of its own story. The argument this thesis raises is that in a heavily story-focused game, attempting to force the player

into the role of protagonist may significantly hinder the position of the protagonist within the story while also failing to provide a satisfactory role-playing experience. Even if such a protagonist design is ultimately not a hinderance to the overall story of the game, if it does not positively affect the player's experience and fails to achieve its goal of allowing the player to role-play, then the game in question should simply feature a normal protagonist instead.



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APPENDIX

Figure 6.1

How old are you?

246 responses

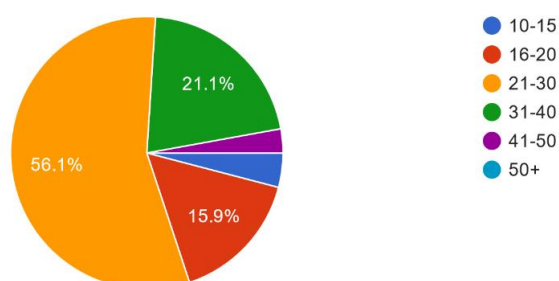


Figure 6.2

Which platforms do you play games on?

246 responses

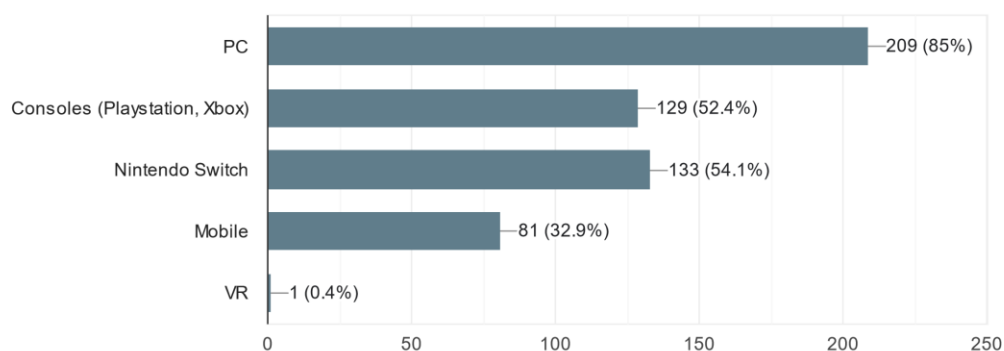
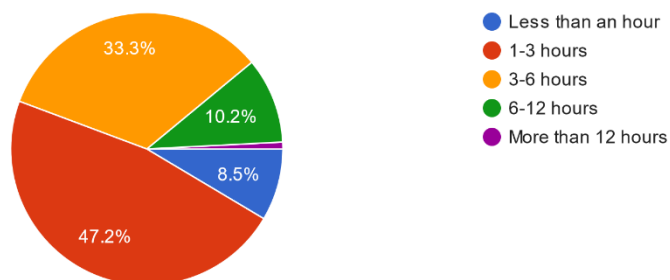


Figure 6.3

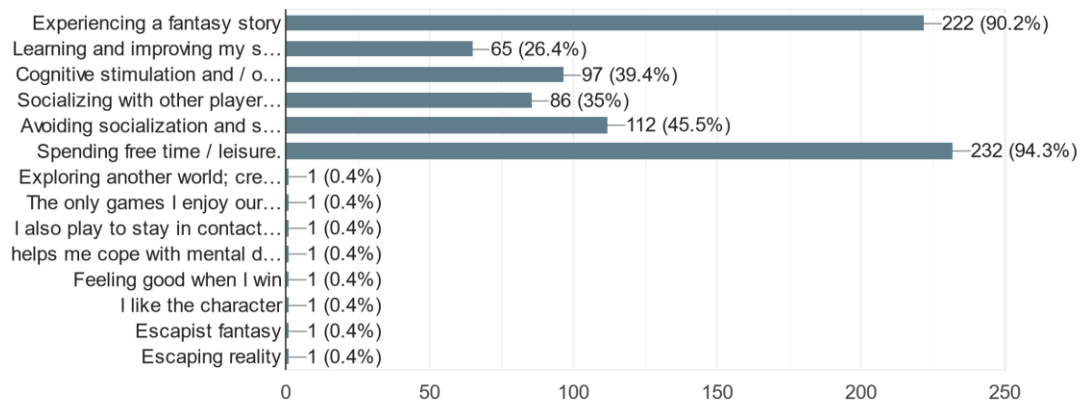
On average, how many hours a day do you play video games?

246 responses

**Figure 6.4**

What are your reasons for playing video games? (Select all that apply)

246 responses

**Figure 6.5**

How relevant are the following for your enjoyment of a video game?

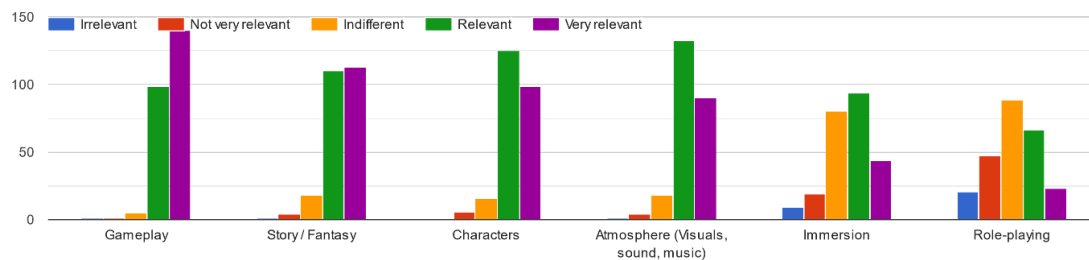
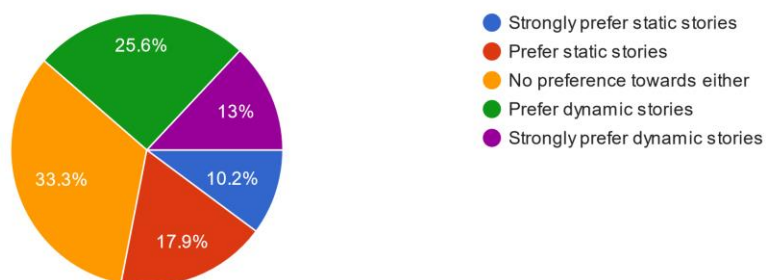


Figure 6.6

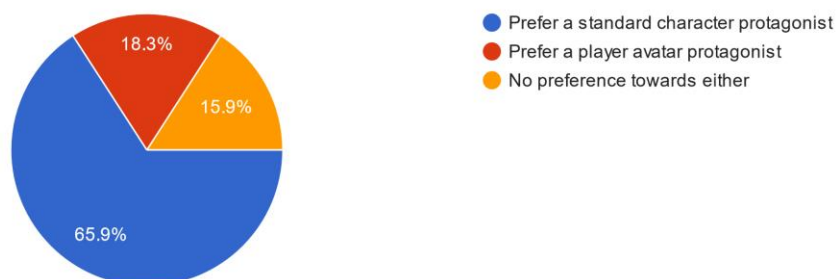
In a video game, do you prefer a static story or a dynamic, branching story?

246 responses

**Figure 6.7**

In a static story, what is your preferred type of protagonist?

246 responses

**Figure 6.8**

In a dynamic story, what is your preferred type of protagonist?

246 responses

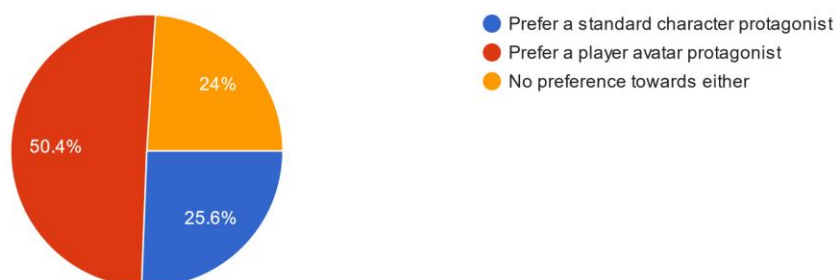
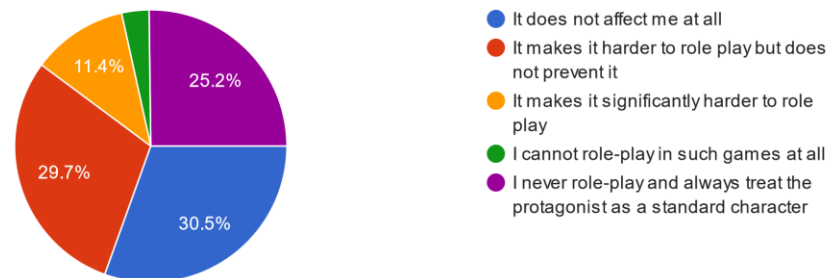


Figure 6.9

How does the usage of a player avatar protagonist in a static story affect your ability to role-play and immerse yourself in the game?

246 responses

**Figure 6.10**

Which of the following is your favorite combination of protagonist design and storytelling?

246 responses

