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Investigating the Design Elements for Positive Emotions and
Meaningful Parasocial Interactions in Narrative RPGs

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Declaration

I hereby certify that this dissertation, which is approximately 14,966 words in length, has been composed by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a degree. This project was conducted by me at the University of St Andrews from May 2024 to August 2024 towards fulfilment of the requirements of the University of St Andrews for the degree of Master of Science in Human-Computer Interaction under the supervision of Dr Miriam Sturdee.

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Miriam Sturdee".

August 13, 2024

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Firstly, I want to thank my supervisor, Dr Miriam Sturdee, for all her invaluable patience and advice. Thank you for believing in me from day one and always pushing me forward - this would not have been possible without you.

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Abstract

Despite growing recognition of the potential benefits of video games, the positive psychological impact of narrative role-playing games (RPGs) remains understudied. These games, with their immersive storytelling, are uniquely positioned to foster meaningful engagement. However, known protective factors for well-being such as positive emotions and character interactions - otherwise known as parasocial interactions - have yet to be thoroughly explored. To address this gap, this study employed a mixed-methods approach to investigate the design elements underlying positive emotions and meaningful parasocial interactions in narrative RPGs, combining an online questionnaire with open- and closed-ended questions completed by 100 participants and in-depth interviews with 10 individuals. Linear regression analyses demonstrated reciprocal predictive relationships between positive affect and parasocial interactions as well as positive affect and negative affect. Additionally, reflexive thematic analysis generated six themes that captured how players experienced these effects in narrative RPGs, ranging from the freedom of immersion to narrative soundness. Based on these insights, a set of research-informed recommendations targeted towards optimising player well-being was produced for developers of this genre. Overall, it is suggested that narrative-gameplay consistency, fantasy-reality balance, and negative but meaningful experiences stimulate positive emotions and meaningful parasocial interactions in narrative RPGs, providing implications for the future research, design, and evaluation of this genre.

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1 Introduction

Once considered a childish pastime, gaming has become a significant aspect of everyday life for individuals worldwide [8, 96]. While traditionally viewed as enabling aggression and inhibiting prosocial behaviour [15], recent studies suggest video games can benefit mental health [71]. A genre considered particularly impactful to player well-being is narrative roleplaying games (RPGs). These games allow players to adopt the role of a character inside a fictional world and focus predominantly on profound storytelling [32] - this has been linked to enhanced well-being compared to other genres [128, 29].

Despite extensive research on video games as a whole, the factors underlying the benefits of narrative RPGs remain understudied. Namely, although positive emotions are key to mental well-being [24, 56], it is unclear which design elements foster such outcomes. This ambiguity extends to the phenomenon of parasocial interactions, where players form one-sided bonds with fictional characters that facilitate feelings of friendship and intimacy similar to real-life alternatives [63]. Although recognised as fictional, these interactions can be personally meaningful to the point of decreasing loneliness [139] and increasing belonging [158]. Overall, further investigating narrative RPGs is imperative to support creators - ranging from developers within the entertainment industry to medical professionals aiming to develop novel mental health interventions - in optimising these positive outcomes to protect player well-being.

1.1 Objectives

The overarching goal of the current study was to investigate the design elements that foster positive emotions and meaningful parasocial interactions in narrative RPGs. Several existing narrative RPGs were analysed as case studies to provide industry-specific context for the following research. A mixed-methods approach - consisting of an online questionnaire with open- and closed-ended questions as well as online interviews - was employed to facilitate both breadth and depth of data gathering. Statistical and qualitative analyses were then conducted to develop a nuanced and multifaceted understanding of participants' lived experiences and personal opinions [69]. Based on this data, design recommendations for the aforementioned phenomena were developed to provide actionable insights for the wider community. The derived insights and recommendations were critically evaluated in the context of the wider literature. Subsequently, limitations and potential avenues for future research were discussed.

1.2 Contributions

As a result of the quantitative and qualitative analyses of player experiences in narrative RPGs, positive emotions and parasocial interactions were linked to a wide variety of factors including narrative-gameplay consistency, fantasy-reality balance, and negative but meaningful in-game experiences. This allowed for a collection of design recommendations targeted towards these outcomes to be developed with practical examples - these addressed elements regarding the narrative, character, environment, and gameplay mechanics. The findings from this study also contribute to existing theories on player experience, parasocial phenomenon, the societal significance of play, and inclusivity in games.

1.3 Structure

An extensive literature review of the psychological impact and underpinnings of narrative RPG play, positive emotions, and parasocial interactions is first presented. An overview of the gaps in existing work related to the current study aims are also highlighted. A brief summary of the case studies conducted in the early stages of research is presented in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 details the methodology of the

study - Chapters 5 and 6 report the quantitative and qualitative results respectively. Recommendations and accompanying examples are derived from this data in Chapter 7. The findings from the study are critically evaluated in Chapter 8 where implications, limitations, and directions for future research are discussed. Chapter 9 concludes the study.

2 Literature Review

With more people than ever engaging in video games [40], it is crucial to develop a nuanced understanding of its consequences. Historically, much of the research in this field has focused on the negative effects of gaming and specifically, the influence of violent video games [38]. However, recent studies have found that such literature displays evidence of publication bias, poor standardisation of applied measures, and problematic research practices [37, 45]. This suggests that the portrayed relationship between aggression and violent video games may be inflated and in turn, not accurately reflect real-life behaviour [36]. Efforts have since shifted to explore the potential benefits of the medium with a particular focus on its impact on mental health [60]. Not only is this approach imperative to safeguarding players but it can also lead to the development of more enjoyable video games which can simultaneously better promote well-being.

2.1 Narrative RPGs

A genre that should be considered in such pursuits is RPGs, which allow users to customise and/or assume the role of a character during gameplay [32]. Aspects of this entity - such as skills or appearance - evolve following progress and are embedded within a plot involving an in-game world of non-playable characters (NPCs) and audiovisual elements that enhance imagination. RPGs often feature a pre-defined narrative structure with distinguishing milestones and may require multiple playthroughs to explore all content [102]. RPGs where the story is central to the player experience can be defined as narrative RPGs.

Narrative RPGs are particularly pertinent to the current context as it has been suggested that video games with profound storytelling - such as The Last of Us [104] and Undertale [146] - are more likely to elicit meaningful responses than those focused solely on entertainment [128]. Since meaningfulness has been linked to improved well-being and life satisfaction [29], understanding how this effect can be fostered is imperative for future game development. This is especially significant since emerging analysis suggests that commercial video games have preventative and therapeutic potential, offering unique affordances that traditional clinical treatments or custom-made game-based interventions cannot [28, 25]. The accessibility and broad appeal of off-the-shelf games also attract a wider audience, allowing more players to obtain the intentional and inadvertent benefits of gameplay. As such, it is necessary to develop a nuanced understanding of the positives of narrative RPGs to guide the next generation of game design with applications in mental health and well-being.

2.2 Positive Emotions

Whilst research has begun to examine the potential benefits of narrative RPGs, little work has been done concerning a fundamental component of mental health: positive emotions. Positive emotions are pleasant affective states - such as interest, joy, hope, contentment, and love - elicited as part of a situational response [49, 50]. These experiences are predictive of subjective well-being [24], future growth [52], and success [34]. Improvements in attention and memory have also been reported as a result

of positive affect, suggesting that these effects are conducive to the promotion of cognitive flexibility including effective management of habits, thoughts, and interpersonal relationships [87]. Conversely, the deprivation of positive emotions due to external stressors escalates the long-term risk of depression and anxiety symptoms [121]. Given the global rise of mental health issues in the past decade [74], the investigation of how positive emotions can be fostered in everyday life, such as during the play of narrative RPGs, should be prioritised to reinforce its protective effect on well-being.

It is hypothesised that positive emotions may arise from narrative RPGs due to Self-Determination Theory (SDT). SDT posits that human motivation and behaviour are directed by three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness [131]. When fulfilled, individuals experience greater enjoyment, satisfaction, and vitality [80, 71]. This is significant as it has been shown that playing video games generally can satisfy the aforementioned requirements. For example, their interactive nature supports autonomy, especially in moral dilemmas where player decisions impact the in-game events to enforce a sense of responsibility [151]. Games also offer opportunities for mastery - such as acquiring new skills or tackling difficult in-game challenges - which can enhance perceived competence [12, 145]. In-game accomplishments are also regular and immediately rewarding in contrast to their real-life counterparts, further boosting self-efficacy [73]. Furthermore, engagement with a title indirectly embeds one into the wider community of fans, allowing them to feel as if they belong to something greater than themselves [132]. Direct in-game cooperation towards a shared goal can even foster a meaningful sense of relatedness [31]. Overall, these findings imply that aligning core game mechanics with SDT in narrative RPGs may lead to the elicitation of positive emotions.

Narrative RPGs may also foster positive emotions as a consequence of Flow Theory (FT), which describes a state of intense focus during an activity where individuals lose track of time and external stressors [103]. In video games, flow is thought to be achieved by balancing the difficulty of in-game challenges with player skill to create an equilibrium between boredom and arousal [47]. However, it has also been argued that to maximise flow, skill demand should fluctuate, incorporating rest periods and occasional challenges beyond the player's current capabilities [9]. Ultimately, the efficiency of each approach is likely influenced by individual differences in users and in particular, varying personality traits which lead to unique preferences for playstyle [113]. Despite these variations, flow is universally perceived as gratifying and complimentary to user experience with desirable outcomes including improved well-being [155], enjoyment [86], and player performance [61]. Therefore, it is suggested that the use of in-game qualities conducive to flow may support narrative RPGs in facilitating positive emotions.

2.3 Parasocial Interactions

Just as research on positive emotions in narrative RPGs is sparse, there is also a lack of work on another aspect of well-being: parasocial interactions. This phenomenon occurs when the user interacts with NPCs [39] and the avatar [7]. Following multiple encounters, a parasocial relationship can be formed where the feelings of friendship and intimacy are sustained long-term and persist outside of gameplay [64]. That is, players continue to care about and feel attached to the characters even when not directly engaged in the fictional world. Although parasocial relationships are acknowledged to be imaginary, they can feel meaningful and in turn, result in positive psychological outcomes [33]. This is especially relevant following the recent COVID-19 pandemic in which parasocial interactions were reported to counter social need deficits caused by worldwide quarantine rules and supplement real relationships to address loneliness [13, 70]. Indeed, whilst parasocial relationships cannot replace their real-life equivalents, they provide an alternative means of reaping the benefits of social interaction [39]. This may be useful for individuals who are otherwise unable to fulfil their desire for connection due to social anxiety or other

mitigating circumstances. As parasocial interactions have a varied protective impact on mental well-being, exploring how narrative RPGs can support parasocial interactions is crucial for informing game design best practices and maximising therapeutic potential.

The extent to which meaningful parasocial interactions are fostered in narrative RPGs may be dependent on the player-avatar relationship [6]. For example, if the avatar is seen as merely a tool for gameplay, the player may feel psychologically detached and experience the fictional world as an outsider [85]. In contrast, when the avatar is viewed as an extension of the user [7], there is a potential for identification - this process occurs when one imagines themselves to be in another's shoes [154]. Indeed, character customisation allows for ideal identity creation, exploration, and management which can lead to a strong emotional bond [98]. This freedom of expression is not only empowering and enjoyable [160] but also enhances perspective-taking [112], deepening NPC interactions and encouraging meaningful parasocial bonds [101]. Furthermore, the avatar may be considered a distinct entity that the player collaborates with to achieve their goals or a social other that the user can befriend [6]. Both cases are thought to stimulate empathy which can result in a desire to protect the avatar's well-being and make in-game choices for their benefit [166]. This can amplify engagement and attachment, strengthening the resulting parasocial relationship [92]. Overall, the literature suggests that the strength of the player-avatar relationship influences the depth of parasocial interactions in narrative RPGs.

Parasocial interactions within narrative RPGs may also be influenced by the degree of immersion they support. This is particularly relevant to the current context as it has been reported that well-written stories can help users lose themselves within the fictional world - this phenomenon is known as narrative transportation [59]. Such occurrences increase the psychological impact of gameplay, resulting in stronger emotional and cognitive responses that may influence beliefs, attitudes, and intentions [152]. Consequently, parasocial interactions may also be more impactful and create lasting interpersonal bonds. Beyond the plot, the nature of the characters is also often considered a crucial determinant of immersion [59]. For example, user-perceived similarities in personality traits to characters are associated with more intense parasocial relationships [101]. It is thought that this is because relating to a media figure in some aspects builds the belief that one can emulate their other desirable traits such as intelligence or strength [123]. This process, known as wishful identification, can intensify feelings of connectedness and loyalty [53, 89]. Indeed, players have been reported to mirror the behaviours of their avatars and favoured media figures, establishing a link of direct interaction which ultimately, reinforces the parasocial bond [72, 148]. In essence, these findings suggest that supporting immersion through effective plot and character implementation may foster meaningful parasocial interactions in narrative RPGs.

2.4 The Current Study

Overall, existing literature has shown a potential for positive emotions and meaningful parasocial interactions to be fostered in narrative RPGs. However, most studies have examined these psychological outcomes concerning video games as a whole rather than focusing specifically on this genre. Given that cognitive benefits [35] and enjoyment [42] differ across game categories, the consequent affective responses are also likely to vary. It is important to note that not all video games within a genre are homogeneous with many titles simultaneously featuring tropes from multiple categories such as shooters and strategy [153]. However, it is expected that narrative RPGs will share similarities due to the collective emphasis on storytelling and world-building [5].

To address the gap in research regarding positive emotions and meaningful parasocial interactions in narrative RPGs, genre-specific design elements should be examined. In doing so, targeted recommendations for creators can be developed to optimise these outcomes. These insights not only have the potential

to improve player experiences in commercial games but also extend to serious games, such as those used for mental health interventions [84], where increased engagement could enhance therapeutic outcomes. Moreover, in educational games, incorporating compelling narrative elements can make learning more engaging and memorable, thus improving retention and motivation [3, 105]. Therefore, the current study employed an online questionnaire and interviews to explore positive emotions and parasocial interactions in narrative RPGs, aiming to provide practical recommendations for game developers and professionals in related fields.

3 Case Studies

As discussed in the literature review, various factors are hypothesised to be associated with positive emotions and meaningful parasocial interactions in narrative RPGs. To provide industry-specific context for the current research, a selection of popular games including Fire Emblem: Three Houses (FE3H) [67], Final Fantasy XV (FFXV) [137], and Persona 5 [109] were analysed, leveraging the author’s first-hand experiences to allow a detailed insider’s perspective of resulting player experiences. In-game design elements and their effects on positive emotions and parasocial interactions were identified and evaluated using existing theories and concepts in the fields of gaming studies and psychology - this included SDT, FT, player-driven narratives, and immersion. In essence, these case studies illuminate how such theoretical concepts may be validated in real-world applications. For more details, see Appendix A.

3.1 Fire Emblem: Three Houses

FE3H [67] fosters a strong ”us-vs-them” mentality from the beginning of the game by allowing the player, who adopts the role of a mercenary-turned-professor at a medieval monastery school, to choose and lead one of three “houses” of student nobles into battle. This not only determines the achieved ending but also which characters are most encountered - likely fostering a deep sense of community [158] which may fulfil needs for relatedness and enhance emotional investment to intensify affective responses to in-game events [118]. The possibility of permanently losing students in battle also adds a layer of consequence, promoting positive eustress and simultaneously increasing feelings of mastery upon success [110, 163]. This is furthered by the development of bonds between students and the protagonist through ”support levels” - a relationship-building mechanic where exclusive cutscenes and dialogue can be unlocked to foster engagement and intrigue [41]. Depending on the support levels of the characters at the end of the game, students can share “paired endings” that describe their lives after the events of the game (Figure 1). Ultimately, this empowers players to feel as if they made an impact beyond the main storyline, making the in-game world feel alive and contributing to immersion.

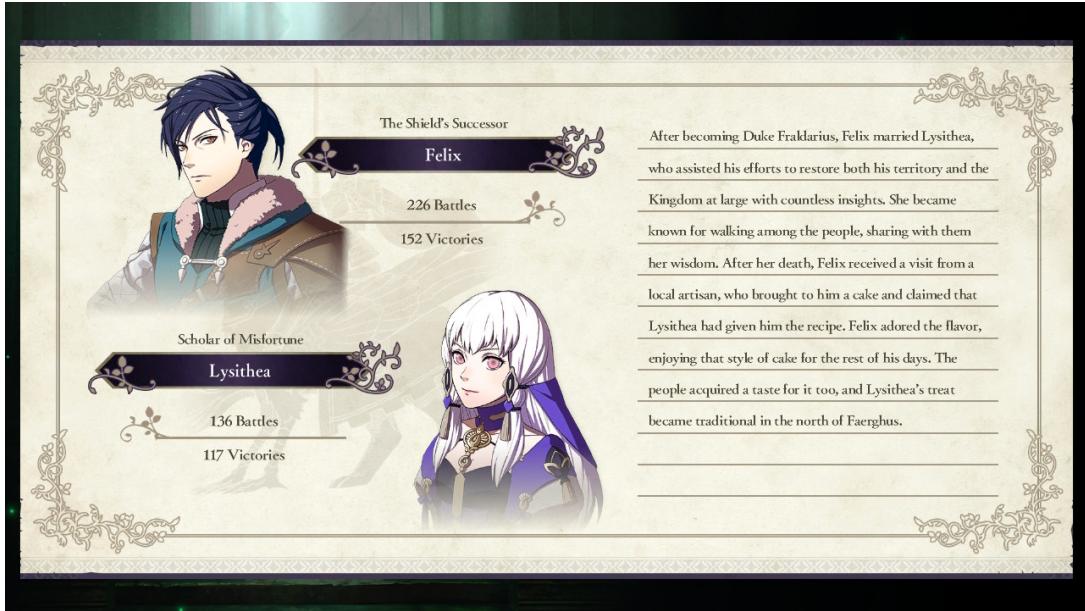


Figure 1: Felix and Lysithea's paired ending in Fire Emblem: Three Houses.

3.2 Final Fantasy XV

FFXV [137] sees the player assume the role of Noctis, the prince of the Kingdom of Lucis, who must travel across the world of Eos with his companions - Prompto, Ignis, and Gladio who are respectively Noctis' childhood best friend, adviser, and bodyguard - to save it from an invading empire. The tight-knit bond of the group is embedded into the core mechanics of the game, ranging from their constant presence and banter in-game to the cooperative attacks that can be performed during battles. This emphasises an enduring sense of teamwork that may fulfil the needs of relatedness [150], increasing the likelihood of flow by encouraging the player to feel as if they are on an adventure with old friends. In addition to the road trip-style core gameplay activities, which may be familiar to many, a feature of particular note is Prompto's photos where the character can take random photographs of himself, the team, the environment, and other random subjects for the player (Figure 2). This not only facilitates a sense of realism but also allows players to reminisce on their unique journey through the open-world environment [117], encouraging the imagination of the wider context and character interactions behind these images [119]. Ultimately, the consistent portrayal of the main quartet's enduring brotherhood contributes to a sense of comfort and connection, increasing the likelihood of emotional investment and flow.



Figure 2: Reviewing Prompto’s photographs at camp in Final Fantasy XV

3.3 Persona 5

Persona 5 [109] invites the player to adopt the role of a high-school student who forms a group of vigilantes to address the issues of their corrupt society with the supernatural power of “Personas”. The ”confidant” system allows players to build bonds with characters by delegating in-game time to converse with them, unlocking additional abilities, cutscenes, and quests that contribute to their development (Figure 3). Given the time commitment required for such endeavours, this likely fosters a sense of achievement and fulfilment as players can help characters overcome their challenges and achieve personal goals [77]. This is especially significant as it suggests the game’s broader themes of self-discovery and resilience [100] are directly reinforced through gameplay, which likely strengthens the overall impact of the story and increases the perception of meaningfulness.



Figure 3: Confidant quest-specific dialogue with Ryuji Sakamoto in Persona 5

4 Methods

4.1 Design

The current study aimed to understand what design elements contribute to positive emotions and meaningful parasocial interactions in narrative RPGs. As our research goals were exploratory, a cross-sectional mixed methods approach was employed. Namely, a multiple regression design was adopted to examine the relationships between emotional affect and parasocial interaction scores. Moreover, as we were interested in subjective lived experiences, reflexive thematic analysis was utilised to supplement statistical inferences and develop robust multifaceted insights [4].

Prior to data collection, the aims and planned analyses of the study were pre-registered on the 3rd of June 2024 on the Open Science Framework (<https://osf.io/gswfj/>).

Data collection occurred from the 4th of June to the 3rd of July 2024. Participants were recruited through the University of St Andrew's School of Computing undergraduate and postgraduate student mailing lists, personal contacts, and various social media sites including Reddit, X (formerly known as Twitter), and Facebook. The inclusion criteria for the study were individuals over 18 years old and interested in narrative RPGs - no incentive was offered.

4.2 Online Survey

4.2.1 Participants and Procedure

A priori power analysis was not conducted to determine the minimum number of participants required. Instead, we aimed to collect as many responses as possible given our existing resources as per recent recommendations by Albers and colleagues [2].

An online anonymous questionnaire was created and hosted on Qualtrics, featuring closed- and open-ended questions (see Appendix B). The survey consisted of four sections: demographics, gaming behaviours, experiences of emotions in narrative RPGs, and experiences of parasocial interactions in narrative RPGs.

Section 1: Demographics In Section 1, participants' gender identity, age, employment status and if applicable, sector, were collected. 155 participants completed the survey. However, after removing responses which did not feature complete sets of answers for both affect and parasocial interaction scales, the final sample size was 100 participants. This consisted of 34 women, 56 men, 8 genderqueer individuals, and 2 individuals who chose not to specify. Their ages ranged from 19 to 51 with an average of 26.98 years old ($SD = 8.1$). Participants' professions were distributed as 58 employed, 14 unemployed, 1 retired, 22 students, and 5 not specified. Respondents in employment were engaged in a variety of sectors such as IT, education, and engineering. Participants who were students also studied numerous subjects including computer science, biology, and English. The sector that the retired individual worked in was IT.

Section 2: Video Game Playing Behaviours In Section 2, participants were asked about their gaming behaviours. This included questions about their familiarity with video games such as how many years they have played for, how often they currently play, and how long a typical gaming session lasts. Respondents also indicated which platforms they utilise as well as their current and favourite narrative RPGs of all time.

Section 3: Positive and Negative Affect In Section 3, positive emotions in narrative RPGs were measured using the 20-item Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) [159]. As emotional responses can be multi-faceted [149], assessing both types of affect simultaneously provides a holistic understanding of positive emotions in the context of the absence or presence of negative emotions. Indeed, the PANAS was originally developed to evaluate everyday mood and has been shown to reliably assess positive and negative affect in video games with Cronbach's Alpha for positive affect ranging from .86 to .91 and negative affect ranging from .84 and .87 [75, 133]. As the current study aims to assess player experiences of narrative RPGs, the wording of the scale instruction was adapted to reflect this accordingly (see Appendix C) - this followed the framework of Francis [48] who conducted similar adjustments in the study of competitive video games. Furthermore, although PANAS originally utilised a 5-point Likert scale, a 7-point scale is more likely to reflect respondents' true opinions [46, 141]. As such, this approach was adopted for the current study with 1 being "really weak" and 7 being "really strong", corresponding to how strongly participants perceived experiencing each emotion. At the end of Section 3, four open-ended questions asked respondents to describe and provide examples of their experiences with narrative RPGs. This included accounts of what they did and did not enjoy, preferred in-game activities, and their favourite memory.

Section 4: Intensity of Parasocial Interactions In Section 4, the intensity of parasocial interactions in narrative RPGs was measured using an adaptation of the 8-item Parasocial Interaction Scale (PSI-Scale) [130]. Although constructed to capture reactions towards television newscasters, the PSI-Scale has been shown to reliably assess the strength of engagement with other media figures, such as romantic video game NPCs [58, 64] and YouTube content creators [124], with Cronbach's Alpha ranging from .84 to .91. Its suitability for measuring the intensity of such interactions over time - in line with the current research goals to establish a basis for meaningfulness - was further supported by Dibble and colleagues [33] when compared to alternate scales such as the Experience of Parasocial Interaction Scale [62]. As this study focuses on characters within narrative RPGs, the wording of the PSI-Scale statements was adjusted accordingly. Specifically, we utilised the adaptation created by Gong & Huang [58] in the study of online video games (see Appendix D). To increase clarity and relevance to the genre of interest, item 5 was also reworded. Overall, each item was measured on a 7-point Likert scale with 1 being "strongly disagree" and 7 being "strongly agree".

At the end of Section 4, participants were presented with four open-ended questions that asked them to describe and explain their experiences with their favourite game character. This included accounts regarding what they liked and disliked about interactions, preferred activities, and their favourite memory. Additionally, at the end of the survey, an open-ended question allowed respondents to add further comments about their experiences.

4.3 Interviews

4.3.1 Participants

A total of 10 participants took part in the interviews. This consisted of 4 women, 5 men, and 1 non-binary individual whose ages ranged from 20 to 36 with an average of 26.3 years old ($SD = 5.39$). Participants' professions were distributed as 6 employed, 1 unemployed, and 3 students. Interviewees in employment originated from various sectors including engineering, technology, hospitality, and education. Individuals who were students studied subjects such as human-computer interaction, anthropology, and creative writing. A summary of interviewee demographics information can be seen in Appendix E.

4.3.2 Procedure

All interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams and audio-recorded with participant consent to allow for software transcription. Once transcripts were manually verified for accuracy and edited to ensure anonymity, the audio data was deleted.

A semi-structured interview schedule was prepared to explore the topics addressed by the survey in further detail as well as to consider supplemental contexts such as participant sense-making and related themes informed by the wider literature (see Appendix F). Individuals were first asked about their basic demographic information such as gender identity, age, employment status and if applicable, sector. Questions about their gaming frequency, familiarity, and preferences of narrative RPGs were then presented. Participants were then asked to describe instances in which they experienced various positive affective responses in narrative RPGs and where possible, prompted for examples. Subsequently, they were asked about their favourite game characters in narrative RPGs and how such interactions influenced them with examples requested. Finally, participants were asked for their personal opinions on narrative RPGs including what this genre means to them, how it has positively affected their lives, and how it could be improved. Probing questions reflective of the interviewee's responses not listed in the interview schedule were also asked to enable a more thorough understanding of their personal experiences and encourage further discussion beyond surface-level details [126].

4.4 Ethics

This study was granted ethical approval by the Ethics Committee of the University of St Andrews School of Computer Science (see Appendix G). All respondents were notified of the study aims, aware that their involvement was voluntary, and provided informed consent prior to participation. Individuals were also reminded that they could skip questions or withdraw participation at any time.

Collected data was stored in a GDPR-compliant University OneDrive folder to which only the researcher and project supervisor had access. All identifying information in survey responses and interview transcripts were anonymised during analysis to maintain confidentiality.

4.5 Data Analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted using R (Version 4.4.1) [120] in RStudio [129]. Data wrangling and processing employed the tidyverse library (Version 2.0.0) and associated packages [161]. Cronbach's Alpha was calculated to assess the reliability of the two scales. Where appropriate, sensitivity analyses were conducted using the pwr package (Version 1.3.0) [23]. Participant scores were determined by calculating the sum of responses for each scale. Descriptive analyses were first conducted to provide an overview of the sample's demographics. Spearman's correlation analyses were then executed to assess the associations between variables before three multiple linear regressions were used to explore predictors. For example, in the model assessing parasocial interaction, predictor variables consisted of positive and negative affect. Additional exploratory analyses examined the effects of gender, age, and years of gaming experience on positive affect, negative affect, and parasocial interaction using nine linear regressions.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse responses to the survey's open-ended questions and interview transcripts, supporting the structured creation and critical evaluation of meaning within the dataset [17]. Given the novelty of the current context, this was particularly suited to capturing the nuances of diverse subjects and individual experiences. A reflexive approach to thematic analysis was adopted, enabling the researcher's personal experiences of narrative RPGs, knowledge of the wider literature, and analytical skills to enrich interpretations [18].

Reflexive thematic analysis was performed following the guidelines established by Braun and Clarke [16] and supplemented by Byrne [20]. A predominantly inductive approach was utilised where data was coded without the influence of pre-existing conceptual frameworks and instead, prioritised representing meaning as explained by the participants [17]. This was supported by deductive analysis to ensure relevance to the research questions. Familiarisation with the data was first achieved through active engagement before codes representing common points of interest relevant to the research questions were generated. Theoretically similar codes were collated into themes which were then discussed with the project supervisor. All themes were critically evaluated and reviewed for meaningfulness in the context of the dataset before being defined and named.

5 Quantitative Results

5.1 Descriptive Characteristics

In the final sample of 100 participants, the durations of video game playing experience ranged from 1 to 44 with an average of 21.56 years ($SD = 9.19$). The majority also reported playing video games every day (47%) or several times a week (40%) for typically 1 to 4 hours per session using the following platforms: desktop (61%), console (57%), and mobile (40%). Summaries of all demographic variables can be seen in Appendix H.

5.2 Reliability Analyses

Cronbach's Alpha scores were calculated for the positive ($\alpha = .78$) and negative affect ($\alpha = .87$) subscales of the PANAS along with the adapted PIS ($\alpha = .79$). Such outcomes demonstrate internal consistency of items and thus, high reliability for use in the current study [142]. In particular, the value observed for the negative affect subscale is consistent with existing research indicating Cronbach's Alpha ranging between .84 and .87 [75, 133]. However, the positive affect subscale and adapted PIS scores are less than what has been previously reported - that is, Cronbach's Alpha ranging from .86 to .91 and .84 to .91 respectively [58, 64]. This discrepancy may be because of context-specific interpretations of the items within the narrative RPG setting, which may have unique emotional dynamics, as this differs from other areas where these scales have been used. Nonetheless, both scales have been verified cross-culturally [127, 88] and the Cronbach's Alpha scores still exceed the widely accepted minimum of .70 [142]. As such, the positive affect subscale and adapted PIS were retained in the main analyses.

5.3 Descriptive Analyses

Descriptive data regarding the utilised scales can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Minimum, maximum, mean, median, and standard deviation of scores for each variable.

Scale	<i>min</i>	<i>max</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>SD</i>
Positive Affect	25	65	50.77	52	7.22
Negative Affect	10	10	28.33	29	10.91
Parasocial Interaction	18	18	39.73	41	8.37

Note. Positive and negative affect scores could range from 10 to 70 whilst parasocial interaction scores could range from 8 to 56.

A sensitivity analysis was conducted in which given the final sample size, the minimum effect size that could be reliably detected at 80% power across the total sample was $r = .276$ which is considered medium [27, 26]. Overall, positive affect had significant positive correlations with negative affect, $r(98) = .332$, $p < .001$, and parasocial interaction, $r(98) = .338$, $p < .001$. However, negative affect did not have a significant correlation with parasocial interaction, $r(98) = .009$, $p = .932$.

5.4 Main Analyses

The main analysis investigated if the main study variables - positive affect, negative affect, and parasocial interaction - are mutually predictive. This was achieved by three multiple linear regression models. Given the final sample size, the minimum effect size that could be reliably detected at 80% power across the sample was $f^2 = .099$ which is considered small-medium [27, 26]. Likewise, all data met the assumptions for the statistical tests used as checked by the performance package (Version 0.12.0) [93].

The regression model for positive affect in narrative RPGs was significant, $F(2, 97) = 18.890$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .265$. Both parasocial interaction and negative affect were significant positive predictors with parasocial interaction having a greater effect. The effect size for this model was large ($f^2 = .361$). Interactions are visualised in Figure 4. Additionally, the regression model for negative affect in narrative RPGs was significant, $F(2, 97) = 8.512$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .132$, with positive affect being a significant positive predictor. The effect size for this model was moderate ($f^2 = .152$). Interactions are visualised in Figure 5. Likewise, the regression model for parasocial interaction in narrative RPGs was significant, $F(2, 97) = 9.992$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .154$, with positive affect being a significant positive predictor. The effect size for this model was also moderate ($f^2 = .182$). Interactions are visualised in Figure 6. Full summaries of the regression models can also be seen in Appendix I.

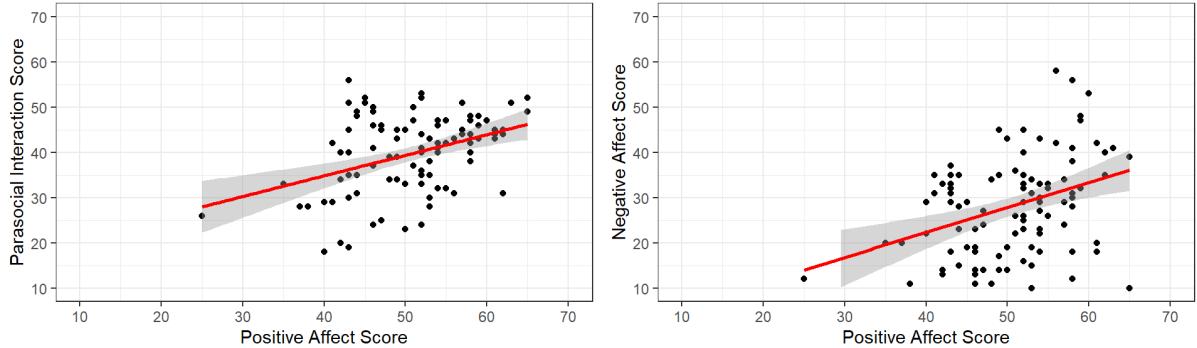


Figure 4: Interactions of Parasocial Interaction and Negative Affect on Positive Affect

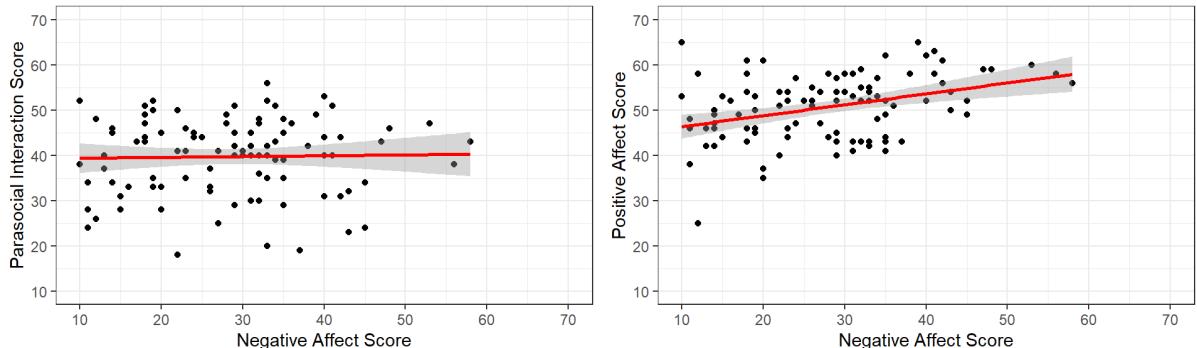


Figure 5: Interactions of Parasocial Interaction and Positive Affect on Negative Affect

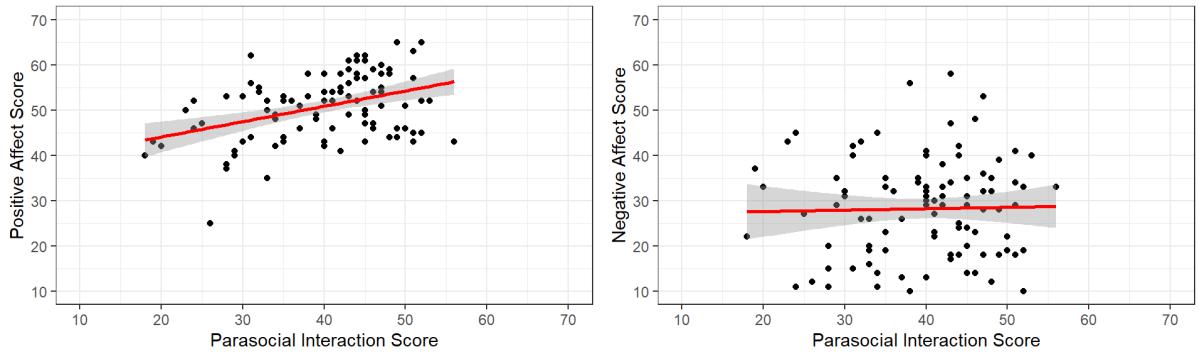


Figure 6: Interactions of Positive Affect and Negative Affect on Parasocial Interaction

5.5 Exploratory Analyses

Additional exploratory analysis was conducted to examine the effect of gender on positive affect, negative affect, and parasocial interactions in narrative RPGs. Given the small number of genderqueer individuals included in the final sample ($n = 8$), only women and men were included to prevent the following statistical models from being underpowered. The minimum effect size that could be reliably detected at 80% power across this sample was $f^2 = .089$ which is considered small-medium. Three linear regression models revealed that gender did not significantly predict positive affect ($F(1, 88) = 0.16, p = .691, R^2 = -.01$), negative affect ($F(1, 88) = 2.652, p = .107, R^2 = .018$), or parasocial interaction ($F(1, 88) = 2.404, p = .125, R^2 = .016$) in narrative RPGs. All interactions are visualised in Figure 7. Summaries of the regression models can also be seen in Appendix J.

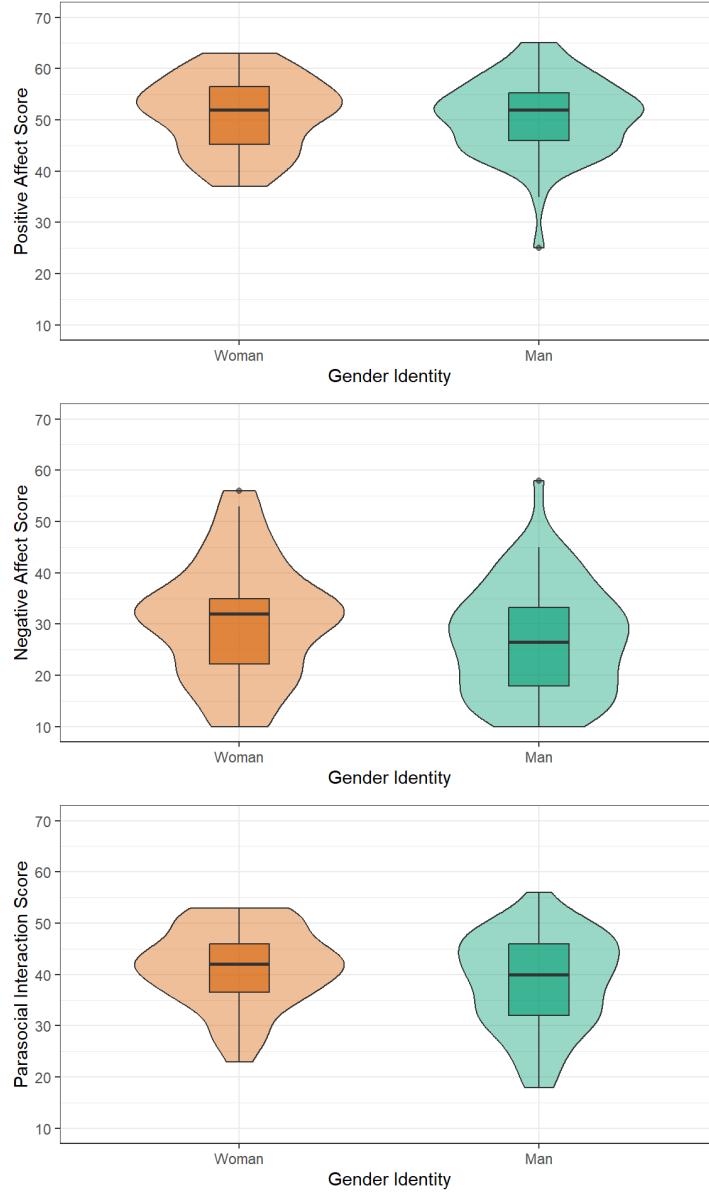


Figure 7: Distribution of Positive Affect, Negative Affect, and Parasocial Interaction Scores in Women and Men

Further exploratory analysis was performed to examine the effect of age on positive affect, negative affect, and parasocial interactions in narrative RPGs. The minimum effect size that could be reliably detected at 80% power across the sample was $f^2 = .083$ which is considered small-medium. Two linear regression models revealed that age does not significantly predict positive affect ($F(1, 95) = 1.825, p = .18, R^2 = .009$) or negative affect ($F(1, 95) = 2.24, p = .138, R^2 = .013$) in narrative RPGs. In contrast, a linear regression model showed that age significantly predicted parasocial interaction, $F(1, 95) = 6.197, p = .015, R^2 = .051$, where younger individuals experienced a greater intensity. However, it is important to note that the effect size of this model was small ($f^2 = .054$) and did not meet the assumption of normality. All interactions are visualised in Figure 8. Summaries of the regression models can also be seen in Appendix K.

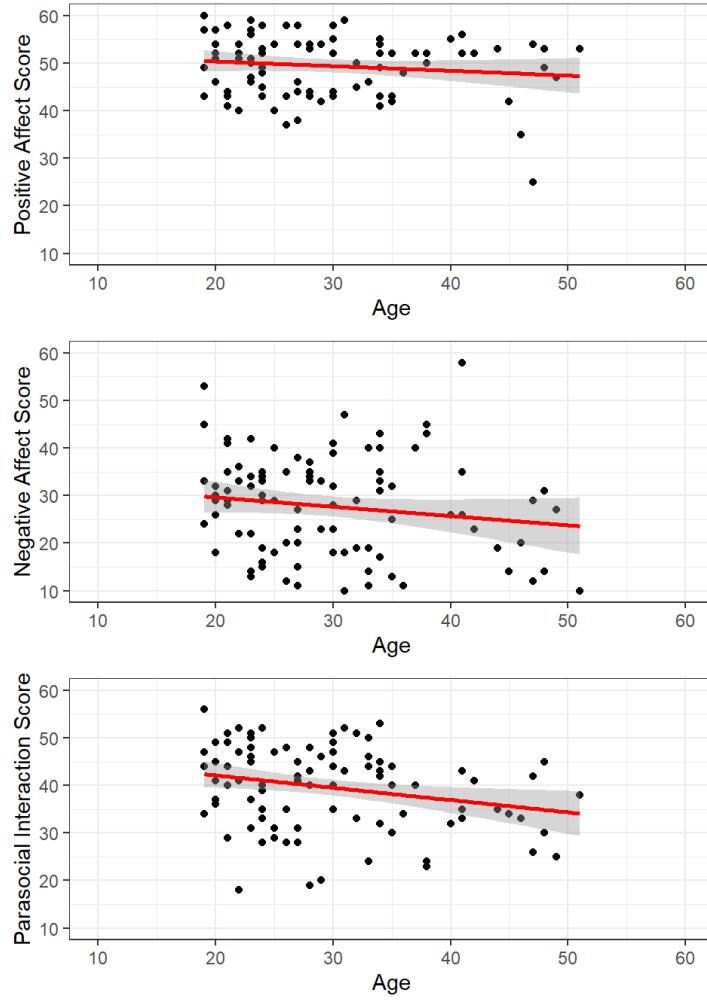


Figure 8: Interactions of Age on Positive Affect, Negative Affect, and Parasocial Interaction

Exploratory analysis was also conducted to examine the effect of years of gaming experience on positive affect, negative affect, and parasocial interactions in narrative RPGs. The minimum effect size that could be reliably detected at 80% power across the sample was $f^2 = .084$ which is considered small-medium. Two linear regression models revealed that years of gaming experience do not significantly predict positive affect ($F(1, 93) = 0.745, p = .39, R^2 = -.003$) or negative affect ($F(1, 93) = 3.381, p = .069, R^2 = .025$) in narrative RPGs. However, a linear regression model showed that years of gaming experience significantly predicted parasocial interaction, $F(1, 93) = 5.706, p = .019, R^2 = .049$, where individuals with less experience experienced a greater intensity. Although, the effect size of this model was small ($f^2 = .05$) and did not meet the assumption of normality. This interaction is visualised in Figure 9. Summaries of the regression models can also be seen in Appendix L.

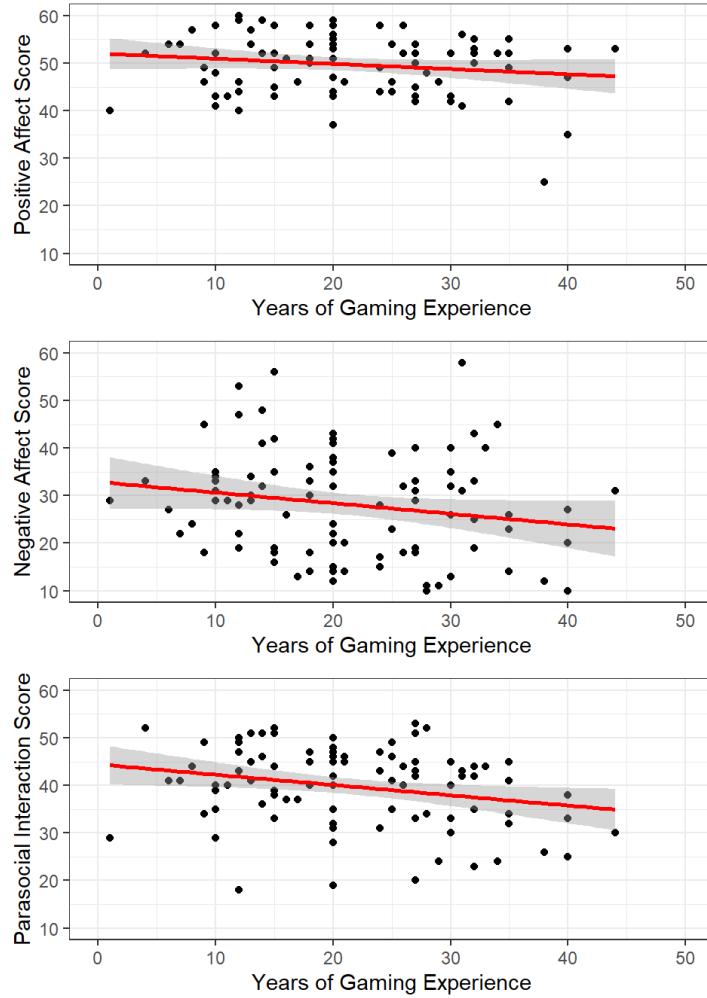


Figure 9: Interactions of Years of Gaming Experience on Positive Affect, Negative Affect, and Parasocial Interaction

6 Qualitative Results

Reflexive thematic analysis generated six themes that illustrated how positive emotions and meaningful parasocial interactions can be fostered in narrative RPGs along with how players realised such experiences. Findings from survey responses and interviews were collated during analysis. Namely, the sample noted various design choices that influenced how the game could be utilised as *a holistic narrative experience* and *a platform for change*, shaping player experience. Moreover, the ability to feel as if one is living *another life* and to experience *emotional highs and lows* determined the extent to which participants showcased positive feelings. Similarly, the belief that the characters were *more than pixels on a screen* and the desire *to love and be loved* shaped how users perceived meaningful parasocial interactions. Interactions between themes and subthemes are visualised in Figure 10.

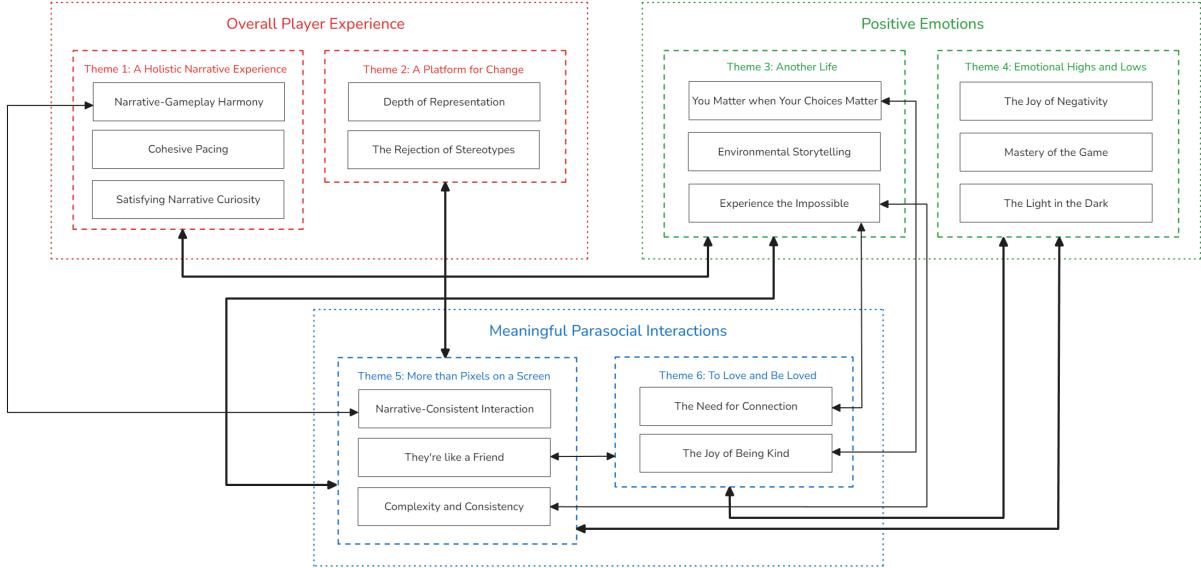


Figure 10: Diagram of Interactions between Themes and Subthemes

All participant quotes are followed by their gender (W = Woman etc.) and age - where individuals share the same characteristics, they were differentiated by a number attached to their gender. Additional extracts for each theme can be seen in Appendix N. A transcript extract of one of the interviews conducted can also be seen in Appendix M.

6.1 Theme 1: A Holistic Narrative Experience

A holistic narrative experience captures how the presentation of a story in narrative RPGs influences players' emotional experiences and perceptions of parasocial interactions. This highlights that the effectiveness of game controls, mechanics, and systems in supporting robust storytelling determines the intensity and nature of engagement.

6.1.1 Narrative-Gameplay Harmony

Respondents across the sample agreed that no matter how compelling a storyline was, the gameplay mechanics needed to reflect the nature of the characters, the world, and overarching themes. This was because it was perceived that these elements had to "contribute to the story that it is trying to tell, be it in complexity, difficulty, or type" (M1, 22) to foster a "coherent and authentic" (M, 43) player experience. For example, one participant described an instance of the protagonist's behaviours matching their unique role in the world that shaped their gameplay experience:

"His defence tactic is kind of running and dodging rather than direct attack which I think has purpose in a game like that because he's a child against a - you know, a massive like goddess or deity - who is not gonna, respectfully, have the tools. He does get a sword eventually. But again, he's designed in a way that most of it is kind of through jump, dodge. Get out. Don't get caught. And I think that works." (W1, 22)

As implied in this extract, the character's lived experiences of helplessness are embedded in the controls, likely facilitating greater immersion and empathy. This is significant as a deeper understanding of another's emotions and thoughts can foster stronger interpersonal attachments and engagement. Furthermore, the freedom to roleplay and ensure the protagonist acts "internally consistent" (M1, 41) with

the mood, tone, and setting influences the extent to which the player can ‘lose themselves in the story’. This is likely to promote greater enjoyment and in turn, enhance resulting emotions and parasocial relationships.

It is important to note that although an element may be cohesive with the plot, this does not ensure player satisfaction. Specifically, many criticised the notion of engaging gameplay being sacrificed for narrative continuity. For example, grinding, where players must “mindlessly defeat enemies or do other menial tasks to gain enough exp to reach a higher level” (Genderqueer1, 30) was thought to be one of the main pain points of narrative RPGs. Moreover, mandatory side stories with little relevance to the plot or repetitive side quests that were “purely just go here, kill this, then come back” (M1, 23) made some “feel like [their] time was being wasted” (M1, 30) which can ultimately “ruin the flow” (M2, 30). In other words, such activities are perceived to lack meaning and embody the most tedious elements of the grand adventure that users desire. This suggests that whilst the narrative and gameplay should largely be cohesive, liberties can be taken to safeguard player agency and attention.

6.1.2 Cohesive Pacing

Participants identified the pacing of both the story and the game systems themselves to influence all aspects of the player experience. Specifically, the large amount of time that could be spent within a narrative RPG was cited to be appealing to many. Aside from getting one’s money’s worth, this was because the individual can “take them at like, whatever pace that [they] want them to be” (W1, 34) and integrate physical breaks when necessary to “reflect and think” (M3, 30) on significant story events to foster greater appreciation. The ability to control the speed of progression was also described to lead a lasting sense of connection:

“Over the course of playthroughs lasting weeks, I feel like I’ve spent meaningful time with characters, in a similar way to how I feel about characters at the end of a long book... That time spent also helps dramatic reveals and sadder moments hit that much harder, because I have spent so much time with those characters that their struggles feel important to me.”
(M3, 30)

This extract implies the experience mimics the process of making real friends, developing relationships, and surviving hardships together due to the real-time investment required. Not only is this enriching - “you get to experience their triumphs and failures and watch them grow and change.” (W, 27) - but it has also been described to culminate in a “sense of catharsis” (M3, 30) upon completion, further amplifying the affective impact of these games.

However, other participants argued they often could not accommodate such an “extensive time commitment to get the full experience” (NB1, 22) due to responsibilities such as work or school. The games themselves were also reported to often “get a little bit stale before the ending finally comes” (M, 19) - this is likely due to inconsistencies in narrative pacing. For instance, presenting players with “word salad right off the bat” (W1, NA), otherwise known as lore-dumping, was perceived as overwhelming and stifled intrigue. Conversely, the lack of an introduction to important concepts as well as insufficient time spent with seemingly significant characters led to “confusion” (M1, 30) and in-game victories not “[feeling] earned at all” (W1, NA). These issues may be exacerbated by “long periods of non-agency” (M1, 24), such as unskippable cut-scenes, that made progression feel “like a slog” (Prefer not to say, NA). This implies that not taking sufficient time to establish a tangible player presence in the in-game world can make one feel like a “passive observer” (M2, 22) which ultimately, restricts meaningful gameplay.

6.1.3 Satisfying Narrative Curiosity

Many respondents considered narrative RPGs as a means of cultivating and satisfying curiosity about a fictional world. Namely, in-game elements are used as “imaginative building blocks” (NB1, 22) to speculate on the nature of NPC backstories, “piece together an overall idea of how the world came to be” (M1, 21), and “imagine what would happen next” (W1, 23) following the game’s conclusion. This sentiment extends beyond established characters and has been described regarding the player character, especially when they can be customised - “spending hours in the character creator and developing a complex backstory, headcanons and roleplaying as that character” (W, 29). The extent to which one is inclined to ‘flesh out’ their character and how the game rewards inquisitiveness is likely to influence enjoyment and subsequently, emotional investment. Likewise, incorporating “twists and reveals in the narrative” (M2, 23) perpetuates motivation to uncover the truth. Indeed, this “build-up” (M4, 30) of knowledge, immersion, and skill is cited to be significant in producing a satisfying ending. Ultimately, these factors combined with “the smallest, perhaps even mundane details” (W1, 22) that are only present to those who seek them make the world seem ‘alive’, enhancing resulting positive emotions and connections.

6.2 Theme 2: A Platform for Change

A Platform for Change captures how players actively acknowledge the potential of narrative RPGs to be more than a simple means of entertainment. Participants seek and encourage representation of topics that are commonly overlooked in mainstream media with a particular interest towards original interpretations of existing concepts. Such practices are thought to enhance the gameplay experience, allowing for more meaningful affective responses and parasocial interactions.

6.2.1 Depth of Representation

The subjects players wanted to see depicted in narrative RPGs and the subsequent effects of such representation were far-reaching, spanning from philosophical questions to social identities. Namely, morally ambiguous decisions and the portrayal of “evil to good, pacifist to warmongering, and everything in between” (M, 31) were thought to elicit intrigue and interpersonal reflection. Although such instances were not explicitly enjoyable, they were considered by players as “something that [they] needed to hear” (M1, 18) with a “very strong influence on [them] on a personal level” (M3, 30). The representation of varied cultural backgrounds was also reported to be deeply moving and memorable:

“Seeing totally Polish landscape in The Witcher 1 was empowering and tear-worthy too. Somebody finally embracing us and showing us we are as good as the West, that we’re no worse kind of people... that was a pure, generation-changing power.” (W2, 34)

This extract also suggests that narrative events and character interactions in this space may be particularly impactful due to the tangible sense of relatedness established in the environment. Similar sentiments are expressed with regard to expressions of LGBTQ+ identities - “this kind of representation in a bleak, impoverished world that parodies the direction of our own is profoundly meaningful and facilitated a deep bond to form between myself, this character and the world” (NB1, 22). Ultimately, these comments imply that greater inclusivity in narrative RPGs is a key factor in determining emotional resonance in all aspects of play as “it’s one of the things that gaming can actually push the envelope in society...as a way to normalise them” (M1, 36).

6.2.2 The Rejection of Stereotypes

A consensus shared among participants was that an overreliance on narrative tropes tends to impede interest, limiting one's level of engagement as a whole. For example, one respondent detailed: "It often feels like you've seen it all before or it's too simplistic so you know how it'll end" (M1, 33). Others echoed this idea, suggesting that common clichés such as high-schooler protagonists and classical heroes were "repetitive" (M2, 41) and "lose narrative meaning" (M1, 36) over time. In essence, this suggests the subversion of the player's expectations regarding the story structure may be particularly impactful in fostering engagement to increase positive emotions and parasocial interactions.

The normalised sexualisation of female characters is also perceived to be damaging to the ability of narrative RPGs to curate meaningful affective experiences. Not only does this "undermine [their] believability" (M3, 30) - implying that it may be more difficult to connect to such entities due to their lack of depth and individuality - but it is seen as especially offputting to some since "it's not how we treat the women who are close to us in our lives" (M3, 30). Even if such characters are not blatantly reduced to "gag characters" (M5, 30), they tend to fall short of the development dedicated to their male counterparts:

"So Aventurine, he has... his quest where he's the featured character and... you see the complexities behind his character, all the guilt and the low self-esteem... but then you juxtapose this with characters like Ganyu... they kind of boil her down to this girl who's just really, really hard-working, doesn't feel like she fits into society, but that's about it because they resolve it within like a 20-minute story quest." (W1, 20)

Likewise, another stereotype that is thought to detach one from the game is when the protagonist is "idolised as a hero from the beginning" (W, 51). This suggests that 'undeserved' praise garners little gratification, nullifying the sense of achievement players often seek. When this trope is internalised in NPC behaviours but does not fit the overarching narrative, such as when "you would be hard-pressed to find a playable character with a romantic interest that isn't the main character of the game" (M1, 21), the in-game world appears one-dimensional and in turn, less personally impactful.

6.3 Theme 3: Another Life

Narrative RPGs were considered across the sample as an opportunity to experience *another life*, be it in an idealised manner by inserting oneself into the fictional world or through a different perspective of another personality. This indicates that the way players utilise the genre's narrative transportation capabilities determines the extent to which their positive emotions and parasocial interactions are personally meaningful.

6.3.1 You Matter when Your Choices Matter

One of the most prominent factors responsible for immersion within narrative RPGs identified by players was when the user's choices and actions had tangible consequences on in-game events. This included instances where they achieved different endings or were held accountable for moral decisions as "characters begin to recognize [them] and acknowledge what [they've] done" (M, 26), allowing them to feel "actually in the game and changing the world [themselves] through [their] actions" (W2, 22). Allowing the player to manifest their own playstyle in 'unintended' ways, such as killing useful NPCs and solving puzzles using unconventional solutions, was also considered gratifying as although not optimal for play, it was "worth it... having that freedom was just so cool" (M2, 33). All in all, these experiences were

described to elevate the experience from “just a game you play and enjoy the story with [into] a game where your self is imbued into it” (W1, 19). This is significant as it illustrates a sense of responsibility where one is perceived to be personally involved with the happenings of the fictional world, which may emphasise emotional resonance and parasocial attachment.

In contrast, when multiple choices are presented to the player but have minimal impact in-game, this was considered to be particularly frustrating by many. Specifically, this ‘illusion of choice’ was acknowledged to “[take] away from the dilemma of making those choices” (M1, 38), leading to “disappointing...inconclusive” (M, 26) outcomes that left the user feeling “hollow” (M, 44). In other words, doing so undermined the narrative impact of these events, minimising consequent affective responses. In addition, when players are “forced to do something that doesn’t fit what [they] feel [their] character would do” (Agender1, 34), a dissonance between the storyline and gameplay is facilitated which detaches them further from the game. An example of when this may be particularly poignant is when in-game options are presented with ambiguous wording that results in the misunderstanding of intent and thus, mischaracterisation and player frustration: “Giving me the option to express ”doubt” about an NPC’s previous statement doesn’t necessarily imply I wish to angrily accuse them of lying in a confrontational manner” (M, 32).

6.3.2 Environmental Storytelling

The freedom to explore the in-game world and uncover the small details that make up a greater whole was reported to be a central component in the joy of immersion within narrative RPGs. For example, “finding all the hidden areas and secret additional loot that may be available” (M, 40) and “[poking] around...and [talking] to everyone” (M, 37) was noted to be what many players most enjoyed. Indeed, within open-world games, elements of thrill and wanderlust were associated with traversing the environment:

“If I see an interesting landmark, it’s something I want to investigate...or there’s a particularly big enemy over that way, I’m like, OK, let’s go and find out what’s happening over there. And if it’s, if it turns out that I’m not supposed to be there for good reason, then I get punished for it. But it’s still the excitement of finding out, OK, what’s over here?” (M1, 23)

This extract underlines how allowing players to determine their own adventure through the pursuit of personal points of interest can foster a sense of agency and thus, a greater attachment to the gameplay experience. Likewise, when the landscapes, architecture, and atmosphere are reflective of the narrative and its themes, this helps “set the scene” (M2, 30), allowing the world and its inhabitants to “come across as very real” (M3, 30). This is thought to be heightened by “the soundtracks, the subtle noises, distant chatter of NPCs, etc...[that] makes one feel like they’re in the game” (W1, 19). Overall, these aspects likely allow users to ‘lose themselves’ in the game, enriching emotional responses and perceptions of connectedness.

6.3.3 Experience the Impossible

Although using narrative RPGs to experience what one cannot in real life is reported across the sample, the goals underlying this behaviour determined how their affective responses were influenced by gameplay. For instance, some participants sought comfort in familiar idealised scenarios: “Simple things like reaching the farmhouse after a day of hard work in the farm or the mines and going to sleep next to my spouse really evokes the coziness of a home” (M1, 18). Others echoed this sentiment, perceiving the fictional world to be a “safe environment where you’re not in danger of getting yelled at if you say

something wrong” (M1, 33). This demonstrates the therapeutic potential of immersion as it may foster a sense of belonging to support a positive mood by “[distracting] from the negative parts of life” (M2, 41). This is implied to be particularly helpful for those uncomfortable in social situations:

“I have quite strong social anxiety and I’m pretty unsure of myself in real social interactions, and as much as I love my friends, I think I’m just too anxious and unable to surrender myself to other people enough to have that kind of dynamic in real life... Narrative RPGs which allow me to create a character that I can passably believe is me, and can act as I would, give me a chance to allow ”myself” to be seen by another which is incapable of truly judging.” (M1, 27)

It is suggested in this extract that as character customisation allows the individual to embed themselves into the game in a more meaningful manner, the benefits of resulting parasocial interactions are enhanced and may be akin to their real-life alternatives. Furthermore, as player actions have “no real-life consequences or pressure” (W1, 33), this allows them to “explore paths that [they] just wouldn’t take in life” (W1, 34) and to “explore the emotion of... playing [that] role” (M1, 38). This expression of freedom may lead to a sense of emotional catharsis, resulting in gameplay that is both more enjoyable and profound.

6.4 Theme 4: Emotional Highs and Lows

A complex interplay of player affect was demonstrated in the sample where many noted that within narrative RPGs, they often experienced *emotional highs and lows*. Indeed, it was shown that such instances were complimentary and necessary for meaningful gameplay, particularly regarding parasocial interactions and emotional resonance with in-game events.

6.4.1 The Joy of Negativity

Participants noted that experiencing emotional distress in-game, such as through character betrayal or suffering, subsequently resulted in a greater sense of positivity and a deeper appreciation of the narrative. For instance, although games where choices have significant consequences can be “upsetting” (W1, 34) and “annoying” (W1, 23) if one makes an ‘incorrect’ decision that leads to unwanted outcomes, it is all the more meaningful because it feels “like a real adventure” (W1, 23). This suggests exerting the perseverance and care needed to overcome these events may allow one to feel greater immersion and thus, more profound affective responses. Likewise, “the grief that is associated with watching a character experience something really horrible and unhappy” (M4, 30) is thought to accentuate a sense of second-hand catharsis when the character finally achieves their goals. Even if the conclusion is not ideal, players are still satisfied that “[they] won and made it through [and] found out what happened to the characters” (W1, 22). Overall, these negative emotions help deepen the player’s connection with the story and their fictional companions, likely leading to a more fulfilling gameplay experience.

6.4.2 Mastery of the Game

On a similar note, some participants acknowledged how the feelings of satisfaction associated with conquering in-game challenges were dependent on difficulty. For example, one individual detailed how boss battles - which typically require significant time to learn enemy patterns and develop counter-strategies - elicit both intense positive and negative emotions:

“It’s like you’re presented with an impossible task, which is doable, but you have to be very tight and when you get close and die, it’s infuriating and it makes you want to break stuff. And when you get it done, it makes you feel on top of the mountain...” (M1, 36)

As implied in this extract, although the fight itself may be stressful, it is the anticipation of a euphoric aftermath that drives the user to persevere, ultimately enhancing the gratification of success once it is ‘earned’. This is echoed strongly when the difficulty of the game varies - for example, due to changes in enemy behaviours or environment - as it encourages them to “come up with creative solutions” (W, 21). Such observations are supported by the “feeling of growth... from levelling and getting stronger” (M2, 18) that empowers players to perceive themselves as “capable” (W3, 34). In other words, a profound sense of self-efficacy can be fostered through the sense of achievement one experiences when overcoming in-game challenges which likely positively impacts user mood and personal development over time.

6.4.3 The Light in the Dark

As a result of the aforementioned in-game stressors, the sample also highlighted an increased poignancy regarding moments of levity. For example, this included random humorous dialogue - “there’s one where Astarion growls at a stuffed bear” (NB1, 22) - or light-hearted events that although not imperative to the plot, were entertaining: “They discovered music “from the old world” and really enjoyed it. It was a type of heavy metal and he was just headbanging along to it in his own little world” (W3, 34). These were thought to be particularly memorable as “those games get quite heavy, quite serious” (M1, 23), suggesting such instances emphasise the humanity of the characters, showcasing the endearing aspects of their personalities in a way that is empathetic and entertaining to many. This effect is enhanced when players can bond with them after a long adventure:

“It was just so wonderful to get to spend time in a completely relaxed, happy, pressure and doom-free atmosphere with a group of people that I’d come to love and value so much. Getting to spend a night by the water with people that I considered, at that point, close friends, just talking about this monumental experience we’d all shared and hearing what they’d been up to, it was such a pleasure.” (M1, 27)

This extract not only implies a profound emotional attachment to the characters can be facilitated following many hours of in-game hardships but also that this opportunity for additional interaction allows for a satisfying ending that ties up loose ends in a natural manner. In fact, this sense of comfort is even described by another as feeling “like it could happen in real life” (M2, 21). As a whole, these sentiments likely reinforce existing parasocial relationships and thus, enrich consequent affective responses towards the characters and the in-game world.

6.5 Theme 5: More than Pixels on a Screen

A belief widely shared across the sample was that one’s favourite characters in narrative RPGs were perceived as *more than pixels on a screen*. Although recognised as entirely fictional, the opinions, actions, behaviours, and most importantly, interactions with these entities were seen as real in the context of the game due to a variety of factors and therefore, had tangible effects on player experience.

6.5.1 Narrative-Consistent Interaction

One of the fundamental elements identified to contribute to the ‘realness’ of characters in narrative RPGs was when their interactions were complimentary to the narrative. Specifically, this included ensuring that

character personalities and behaviours reflected their unique lived experiences: “Don’t put me in a war-torn land then have the characters be lame and nice” (M3, 21). Although these worlds are “often very foreign to our own” (M2, 27), it is suggested that allowing characters to embody their defining themes adds another layer of realism to the in-game environment and simultaneously stimulates intrigue. This is further supported by the notion that they should also be narratively dynamic such as “[having] an opinion on the current situation or events” (NB, 27) or reacting appropriately to player actions: “When I play instruments in my camp, I hope everyone will come... to hear my music. But every time I play instruments, only one or two people or my dog will come to see me and other people just stand there” (W1, 23). In essence, these extracts suggest that when characters contradict the established narrative, player immersion is weakened and the gameplay is seen as one-dimensional which likely stifles the impact of parasocial interactions.

Participants also stressed that gameplay mechanics should actively support characters to behave in a way that is both lifelike and appropriate in the narrative. For example, it was important to ensure that gifting systems were developed beyond “[giving] insignificant items endlessly to eventually up the score enough” as it was considered “dumb to gift item XY and suddenly someone likes you more” (M1, 33). This approach may feel unfulfilling as it emphasises the simplification of the character to sustain gameplay systems, highlighting the shallow nature of the interaction and minimising their true-to-life qualities. Furthermore, players reported a particular affinity for ‘team banter’ outside of direct dialogue with the protagonist as it serves as “background chatter” (Agender1, 34) and “feels like listening into gossip in real life” (W1, 33). This, along with communication channels that make sense given the in-game world such as text messages, is not only engaging but also provides additional opportunities to display character personalities which may intensify the strength of parasocial relationships.

6.5.2 They’re like a Friend

It was acknowledged across the sample that their favourite characters in narrative RPGs were not just personally significant but could also be perceived as friends and sources of comfort. One of the elements that this was attributed to was the integration of “obvious chemistry” (W4, 34) within in-game interactions that allowed it to feel “genuine and unforced” (M1, 38). Such behaviour may be supported when characters demonstrate traits the player desires in real-life companions, including being “very practical with no two-facedness going on” (M1, 25), “really down to earth” (M3, 27) or “just generally [seeming] like a nice person.” (W3, 34). In other words, this suggests that when parasocial relationships are built on similar foundations to their real-life alternatives, a greater sense of connection and emotional significance may be experienced.

Another key attribute noted to be closely linked to the intensity of parasocial interactions in narrative RPGs was relatedness. Specifically, characters with ‘flaws’ were considered “more human” (M2, 25) and less “like a caricature” (W, 28) compared to those presented as idealised companions. This suggests that resulting interactions may be more meaningful as they parallel real-life socialisation. Indeed, even if these entities behave in a manner that the player disapproves of, their unique characteristics and backstories can elicit a profound sense of empathy over frustration: “I hate that these are the actions that you’ve taken. But I can see why you took them in your scenario. You were backed into a corner...” (M4, 30). In the case that the player has experienced a similar situation or shares traits with the character, this sentiment was reported to be amplified:

“Her personal quests tell the story of someone who carried her childhood trauma with her well into adulthood and found unhealthy ways to deal with it, and that was something that resonated with me deeply at the time.” (Genderqueer1, 30)

Indeed, the sense of solidarity and perception of ‘being seen’ as described in this extract is likely to strengthen connectedness as well as self-efficacy. This is significant as other respondents noted that “seeing this character evolve and become healthier makes me think and reflect on my life” (W2, 20), suggesting these interpersonal attachments can also be inspirational, resulting in growth and introspection. In particular, if one can relate to the character’s more ‘ordinary’ traits, they are encouraged to believe they too can also develop perseverance to overcome more difficult challenges as “they’re normal and nobody yet they keep pushing through” (M2, 24). Overall, these experiences reinforce the perception that these characters are genuine companions, therefore alluding to a strong parasocial relationship.

6.5.3 Complexity and Consistency

Although the individual traits preferred in characters varied across players, the consensus was that they should be “entertaining” (M, 46) and “endearing” (M1, 23) to the player. In contrast to the aforementioned sub-theme, this does not necessitate realistic personalities as some participants “prefer [their] characters to be more exaggerated and unlike what you’d find IRL” (M3, 23) and that “the more irredeemable the better” (M1, 25). Instead, it was more important to ensure that the entities “feel like they’re their own person and not just a character that is there to appease the player” (M, 34). This suggests that multi-dimensional characters, who may not always agree with the protagonist or are “deeper than [they] appear on the surface” (Genderqueer1, 30), are more likely to facilitate meaningful interactions. Consistency was also identified to be a crucial factor in developing depth as out-of-character moments throughout the game that contradicted their goals and opinions were thought to cause “well-made backstories... [to] fall a bit flat” (M, 20). In other words, these characters were perceived as disingenuous and poorly developed - this furthers the notion that such entities ought to be complex and ‘fleshed out’ to foster a deep parasocial connection.

6.6 Theme 6: To Love and Be Loved

The innate human desire *to love and be loved* was demonstrated throughout the sample to extend to the fictional world of narrative RPGs. This shaped player motivations and actions in-game as well as determined the extent to which parasocial interactions had a meaningful impact on well-being.

6.6.1 The Need for Connection

The primary motivation for playing narrative RPGs identified within the sample was to develop profound connections with the cast. Namely, many sought to “watch characters experience a wide variety of situations and overcome difficult trials” (W4, 34) and to “deepen bonds with characters, engage with them and with figures from their past to learn more and appreciate the time that’s gone into writing them” (NB1, 22). This implies an underlying curiosity regarding the stories and behaviours that make them who they are. Indeed, in the absence of interesting characters, players reported they “would struggle to remain engaged throughout the entire playthrough” (NB1, 22), suggesting the ability to feel and explore emotions with these entities is crucial to the enjoyment and construction of meaning during gameplay. The means preferred to elicit these experiences was reported to be a combination of dialogue, game mechanics that foster relationship development, quests that “allow specific characters to have a ‘spot-light’ moment where they get to display their strengths” (W5, 34), and interactions between characters where “different personalities [clash] to create various scenarios” (M1, 21). Overall, these elements likely intensify the depth of parasocial interactions as the player “[gets] more attached to them the more [they] learn about them and the more [they] do with them” (M2, 30).

6.6.2 The Joy of Being Kind

Many participants also noted that they simply enjoyed being kind to their favourite characters, even when such actions did not produce in-game benefits, as it helped deepen their sense of connectedness. For example, individuals would often “give [them] the best weapons and the prettiest clothes even if doing so did not increase [their] favourability in the game” (W1, 23). This is hypothesised to be personally meaningful as special treatment reinforces one’s parasocial relationship by allowing them to communicate their affection in a manner familiar to real life. This idea is supported by players who “tend to use [their favourite character] the most in [their] teams even if they are not the most optimal” (M3, 23) as this is perceived as a means to “hang out” (M3, 30). As greater time spent together stimulates engagement by providing increased opportunities for bonding, this is likely to promote lasting emotional attachment.

Respondents also noted that when they could make the characters ‘happy’, their own enjoyment of the game increased substantially. For instance, many prioritised in-game decisions that their fictional companions would approve of:

“I wasn’t making decisions as an abstract player trying to maximise the output from the game for my own benefit... I was ‘Oh, how’s Astarion going to feel about that?’ Or ‘how’s Karlach going to feel about that?’” (M3, 30)

The desire to acknowledge and respect the characters’ opinions in this extract is supported by another participant who reported distress when accidentally aggravating them: “When characters responded to me in a certain way I didn’t expect, I’d have to reload. Otherwise, I’d feel sad I upset them or did it wrong.” (W, 26). This not only alludes to the emotional resonance of such interactions but also illustrates a tangible influence on player well-being that may protect against real-life social deficiencies. Furthermore, the opportunity to save the character from a bad situation or help them grow was emphasised to be particularly gratifying for many as it was perceived as “fighting with [their] friend to give her life back” (M3, 30). The sentiment that “you’ll risk your own life but you won’t risk theirs” (NB, 20) demonstrates a profound sense of altruism and allows one to ‘prove themselves’, simultaneously strengthening the associated parasocial relationship and player self-worth.

7 Recommendations

A summary table that combines results observed in both quantitative and qualitative analyses can be found in Appendix O. Following the analyses conducted in the current study, a collection of design recommendations informed by the sample’s lived experiences and opinions was developed - examples of potential applications were also provided for additional context. They aim to help facilitate positive emotions and meaningful parasocial interactions in narrative RPGs, thereby enhancing overall player experience and psychosocial well-being. These guidelines are also not limited to developers of commercial titles and can be adapted for serious and educational games to enhance engagement and efficacy, providing multidisciplinary insights for professionals in diverse fields.

7.1 Narrative-Gameplay Consistency

1. **Ensure that the gameplay matches the narrative and vice versa.** Examples of narrative-gameplay dissonance include: completing a boss only for them to defeat the protagonist in a following cutscene, hordes of enemies spawning from nowhere after being triggered by a story event, and being unable to pass an obstacle despite an obvious path being present. Such instances

are perceived as frustrating because they do not make sense given the story, weakening player immersion.

2. **Ensure that characters are responsive and react to in-game events accordingly.** Character dialogue and behaviour should vary depending on player actions, progression through the narrative, and the current state of the in-game world. Doing so can make them feel more ‘alive’ and aid with immersion.
3. **Avoid taking agency away from the player for extended lengths of time.** Unskippable cutscenes - especially at the beginning of the game where the player has yet to develop a personal attachment to the narrative - are perceived as tedious. Quick-time events (where players are prompted to select inputs during cutscenes) are also perceived as superficial and lacking in comparison to genuine gameplay.
4. **Ensure coherent pacing of narrative, action, and progression throughout the game.** Avoid presenting a lot of information through a continuous stream of dialogue or text as this can be monotonous. However, at the same time, ensure sufficient context is provided to foster curiosity and understanding. In-game breaks between significant story events should also be implemented to encourage a perception of gradual progression due to real-time investment.

7.2 Narrative Design

1. **Avoid relying on overused narrative tropes.** Common narrative tropes condemned by players include the chosen one, defeating a god-like figure, amnesiac protagonist, teenage protagonist, etc. Utilising such clichés as the base of one’s narrative without an attempt at subversion or innovation is seen as dull due to overexposure.
2. **Allow ample opportunities for characters to interact with the protagonist and other characters.** Character dialogue can be direct (i.e. 1-to-1 conversation) and indirect (i.e. quips made during other gameplay) - when combined, the characters seem more ‘alive’ and dynamic. Relationship-centred mechanics (hangouts, shared mealtimes, etc.) and character-specific quests also allow the player to learn more about them, furthering connection.
3. **Integrate moments of humour to showcase character quirks.** Moments such as random character remarks in response to in-game events, the ability to wear unconventional clothing, and light-hearted interactions between NPCs can lighten a game’s ‘serious’ mood to prevent overwhelming players.
4. **If appropriate, allow the game to convey meaningful themes and messages.** Aim to cover concepts that are underrepresented by mainstream media to stimulate intrigue. For example, NieR: Automata [115] explores philosophical themes of meaning and nihilism which many players noted to prompt self-reflection and contemplation. Although, that is not to say that games need to be deeply profound to be meaningful. For instance, A Short Hike [1] tells a story of family and perseverance that has been reported to be both comforting and memorable.

7.3 Environmental Design

1. **If developing an open-world environment, ensure it is detailed enough to encourage exploration and satisfy wanderlust.** Integrate discoverable elements embedded in the world

(side quests, interesting landmarks, rare loot, collectables, etc.) that reward player curiosity. Such aspects should be optional to prevent overwhelming the player.

2. **Ensure that the environment (atmosphere, architecture, sound design etc.) complements and enhances the narrative.** In Elden Ring [51], bosses are scattered around the in-game map with their adjacent areas reflective of their backstories and significance in the world. Of particular note is Caelid, an unsettling region of corpses, hostile entities, and a desolate landscape that visually contrasts with the rest of the world. Not only does this build tension but it compels the player to move forward and uncover the truth, strengthening engagement and narrative transportation.

7.4 Character Design

1. **Embody the culture and atmosphere of the in-game world within the characters themselves.** Character dialogues, behaviours, and actions should be realistically informed by their presence within the world (job, social status, backstory, goals, etc.) and the type of world they live in. Details about the narrative conveyed through the characters allow players to piece contextual clues together, enabling intrigue and individual theories about what is not shown in-game to make the world seem more ‘lived-in’.
2. **Represent different cultures, identities, and mental health issues within the cast.** Disco Elysium [164] quietly but unashamedly establishes its deutagonist as a gay Asian man. Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice [107] presents a complex and empowering exploration of depression, anxiety, grief, and psychosis. Such representations have not only been noted to resonate with players with similar experiences but also foster an appreciation of ‘new’ perspectives for others. It is important to note that developers should have lived experience of these identities or consult individuals who do so to avoid unconscious biases/stereotypes.
3. **Develop characters with multi-dimensional personalities to appeal to different types of players.** Baldur’s Gate 3 [83] presents a varied cast of characters whose dispositions range from outright hostile to altruistic which can appeal to a wide audience. They all have flaws and challenges that the player can help them overcome, allowing a deeper connection to be fostered through perceived personal involvement in their fate.

7.5 General Gameplay Mechanics

1. **If implementing a gifting system, ensure it is developed beyond a simple “give-and-reward” approach so it cannot be easily manipulated.** In Persona 5 [109], each type of gift can be purchased once every playthrough so players must choose the recipient carefully, increasing the meaningfulness of each gift due to its rarity. Characters also have gift preferences and provide exclusive dialogue in response to certain items, providing greater incentives for players.
2. **Encourage player freedom and creativity during play.** In The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild [108], puzzles do not have a predefined solution, supporting player creativity in approaching such tasks. Players are also free to explore the world with minimal hand-holding after the opening
3. **Support character customisation to allow the player to establish their own presence in-game.** This may include: customising the protagonist’s appearance, developing their personality through in-game choices, customising clothing, etc. Forcing a predefined trait (moral alignment,

behaviour, etc.) during the game can contradict players' mental models of the character, reducing immersion.

4. **Stimulate players emotionally and mentally through in-game challenges.** Ethical dilemmas with in-game consequences and moments of vulnerability displayed by characters can challenge players emotionally in a way that is both meaningful and thought-provoking. Player skill can also be challenged to increase the resulting sense of achievement through adaptive difficulty or boss battles that require the culmination of techniques learnt across the game. To increase accessibility, users should be allowed to adjust game difficulty to account for personal preferences.

7.6 In-Game Choices

1. **Allow players to influence the outcome of in-game events.** Avoid perpetuating an illusion of choice. The choices a player is given during dialogue should influence the outcome of the interaction (improved/deteriorated character opinion, subsequent in-game event, achieved ending etc.). If the character responds the same way regardless of the choice selected, this is perceived as meaningless.
2. **Ensure all choices are explained clearly upon presentation to prevent player misunderstanding.** In The Wolf Among Us [143], the player can choose to "Glass him" when speaking to another character. Without elaboration, the meaning of this option is ambiguous. Upon selection, the protagonist will suddenly assault the man which may lead to accidental mischaracterisation and frustration from the player, resulting in a loss of immersion.

8 Discussion

This study aimed to explore the design elements that fostered positive emotions and meaningful parasocial interactions in narrative RPGs. The lived experiences of players were examined with both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to develop a nuanced understanding of these multifaceted constructs, resulting in a set of design recommendations covering elements such as world-building, narrative design, and core gameplay mechanics.

8.1 Positive Affect and Parasocial Interaction

Linear regression analyses demonstrated that positive affect in narrative RPGs was positively associated with the intensity of parasocial interactions and vice versa. In other words, this alludes to a positive feedback loop in which the more fulfilled players feel during the game, the greater their attachments to the characters, ultimately reinforcing a sense of meaningful play. This aligns with existing literature that has examined how aspects of positive affect - such as emotional engagement [89] and compassion [166] - enhance parasocial relationships which have also been observed to foster positive emotions in the form of self-efficacy [160] and connectedness [13]. The current study contributes to the field by emphasising the reciprocal nature of this relationship as it demonstrates how the majority of design elements responsible for either factor also overlap. This is significant as it implies the interplay between player gratification and social well-being in narrative RPGs is more interconnected than previously established. In essence, this promotes a more holistic understanding of how meaningful gameplay can be fostered and encourages creators to not develop such components in isolation and instead, focus on how interactions between elements can be leveraged to enhance the overall player experience.

Reflexive thematic analysis highlighted that consistency between narrative and gameplay is fundamental in shaping positive emotional experiences and meaningful parasocial interactions in narrative RPGs. In other words, the actions that the player could enact had to make sense given the story, world, and themes portrayed in-game. Conflict between these elements resulted in a loss of immersion, frustration, and disengagement - these results contribute a more nuanced understanding of the psychological impact of this phenomenon, also known as “ludonarrative dissonance” [147], to the limited academic literature. Given that curiosity was also identified as a core component underlying player experience, the importance of narrative-gameplay consistency is suggested to extend beyond maintaining one’s presence in-game. Notably, it is theorised that out-of-place elements within an otherwise sound narrative may foster intrigue [57], encouraging imagination and the construction of player-driven storylines outside of play. This likely facilitates enhanced emotional and cognitive engagement, reinforcing individual investment in the world and its characters [82]. Ultimately, this study provides insights into the multifaceted nature of narrative-gameplay consistency and establishes principles that could lead to more personally impactful game design, contributing to both player satisfaction and the broader appeal of narrative RPGs.

Reflexive thematic analysis also demonstrated the significance of characters matching the overarching narrative in cultivating meaningful parasocial interactions. Specifically, when characters’ personalities and behaviours are consistent with their world, players tend to perceive them as ‘real’ entities with influential opinions and backstories. This typically prompts a desire for connection, aligning with existing literature that holds the development of parasocial relationships mimics their real-life counterparts [44, 94]. However, it is important to note that a dichotomy in the type of relationship pursued was observed. Some individuals desired companionship where characters could be considered kindred spirits, role models, or trusted confidants. Others preferred those with qualities they would not seek in friends or partners in real life. This builds upon previous research on different forms of character attachment [14] by implying that those seen as irredeemable can still elicit a sense of connection. This may be attributed to relatedness if their characteristics resemble real human flaws [140, 150]. It may also be the case that such instances appeal to the phenomenon of morbid curiosity, where unpleasant topics such as evil or death are perceived as interesting and thrilling [135], as they allow users to explore and interact with these traits in a safe fictional context [134, 114]. Although further research is required to examine the underlying factors and wider psychological impact of such bonds, these findings showcase the potential for games to be used as tools for exploring complex social dynamics through diverse character portrayals.

Furthermore, reflexive thematic analysis indicated that the ability to escape the real world through narrative RPGs was a crucial component of player affective experiences. Namely, participants enjoyed the freedom of living another life which was sustained when their choices felt meaningful and the in-game world appeared ‘alive’ with immersive sound and environment design. This builds upon existing work on the benefits of escapism in this medium - such as increased life satisfaction [162] and social well-being through character interaction [139] - by highlighting the underlying in-game factors that contribute to its intensity. Likewise, the analysis stressed a desire for more respectful and nuanced representations of different identities, particularly regarding female characters. This finding is consistent with long-standing critiques within the industry [54, 79]. However, the current study suggests that these wishes are not merely about representation for its own sake, but about enhancing the realism essential for players to engage with and internalise their in-game experiences fully. This underscores the importance of balancing fantasy and realism in narrative RPGs, as this enhances escapism as well as constructs a platform for exploring and challenging societal norms. By doing so, these games can offer players more emotionally resonant experiences that extend beyond entertainment.

8.2 Positive Affect and Negative Affect

Linear regression analyses revealed a reciprocal relationship between positive and negative affect where an increase in one was associated with an increase in the other. This outcome was supported by the results of reflective thematic analysis which identified how unpleasant in-game experiences, such as emotional distress due to character suffering or stressful battles, heightened feelings of connectedness, achievement, and meaningfulness. This complements the related work of Bopp and colleagues [14] who reported that emotionally moving experiences, including sadness and grief, contributed to enjoyment. The current study also found that the more participants were satisfied and invested in the game as a whole, the more intensely they described these negative events. This alludes to a deep sense of immersion that temporarily heightens emotional sensitivity, building upon evidence that the interplay between positive and negative affect is fundamental to the richness of player experience in video games [97]. Not only can such insights allow developers to enhance the depth of gameplay in commercial narrative RPGs but they can also be leveraged for therapeutic interventions to promote self-reflection, behaviour change, and issue processing through uncomfortable but meaningful in-game experiences [65, 138].

8.3 Limitations

It is important to note that the current study is not without limitations. Namely, the sample was predominantly sourced from online communities and personal contacts with well-defined interests in gaming. This may be problematic as it suggests that players who already harboured intense experiences of positive emotions and parasocial interactions in narrative RPGs were more likely to participate - thus, resulting in a biased conceptualisation of the investigated phenomena [76]. This effect may be particularly pronounced in the interview data as this stage required significantly more time commitment than the survey, implying that it represented the views of those who were highly motivated or opinionated [125]. As such, in accordance with the recommendations by Johannes and colleagues [71], researchers should collaborate with game companies and industry stakeholders to enable access to populations more representative of typical narrative RPG players. This can also facilitate increased research transparency and credibility [66] to better inform medical professionals about player well-being and how it can be safeguarded.

Another limitation is that no distinction between Western and Eastern narrative RPGs was made. This is significant as the two types follow distinct design philosophies ingrained in the cultures they were originally marketed towards [19]. For example, Western RPGs tend to feature customisable avatars and non-linear storylines in which players have greater freedom to change story outcomes through their choices [122]. In contrast, Eastern RPGs typically present a protagonist with predefined characteristics and goals as well as a linear narrative where all major events are unavoidable [95, 156]. Given that player expectations and experiences also likely vary depending on the type they prefer, the nuances of their behaviour and affective responses may not be fully captured in the current study. Therefore, future research should conduct comparative studies to investigate potential unique patterns of emotional and parasocial dynamics in Western and Eastern RPGs.

8.4 Future Directions

Exploratory analysis did not indicate an association between binary gender and parasocial interaction intensity. This contradicts findings that women typically exhibit a greater involvement [43] and intent to develop parasocial attachments than men [78] - outcomes that are often attributed to an increased sense of empathy [88]. A potential explanation is that contrary to the wider literature, gender differences

in empathy may not be inherent but shaped by cultural norms, gender roles, and stereotypes [90, 111]. Although video game characters can be perceived as ‘alive’ with meaningful effects on player disposition and actions [53], players also acknowledge that they are objectively fictional and exist within an imaginary environment. As such, the influence of contextual factors on women may be less salient in such parasocial interactions compared to real-life figures like celebrities and live streamers - in which research regarding gender differences in this field is focused [81, 55]. Additional work is not only required to investigate these nuances but also to examine how such effects impact gender-nonconforming individuals to allow for a more inclusive understanding of parasocial interactions.

Exploratory analysis also implied an association between age and parasocial interaction where younger individuals experienced a greater intensity of such interactions. This outcome may be attributed to generational differences in media consumption habits. Namely, it has been found that motivations for gaming vary across ages - young adults primarily desire immersion whereas older adults seek opportunities for creative problem-solving and skill mastery [106]. This is important as individuals who utilise video games for stress relief, social connections, and escapism tend to report higher-quality parasocial relationships [99]. In other words, young adult players may actively pursue bonds with characters, heightening perceived closeness. It may also be the case that older adults believe new games are catered for younger audiences, leading to predisposed disengagement [136]. As there remains a paucity of research on older adults and how they perceive meaningful play in narrative RPGs [70], additional investigation is necessary.

A similar pattern was observed for years of gaming experience where less experienced players reported stronger parasocial interactions. This contradicts the idea that prolonged interaction increases emotional engagement and strengthens parasocial relationships [81, 89]. A possible explanation may arise from the related finding that tabletop RPG players with more experience demonstrate a heightened preference for flawed and complex characters [116]. Veteran video game players have likely been exposed to a wide variety of detailed characters which may make it increasingly difficult for new entries to stand out. This may be exacerbated by increased familiarity with the tropes and clichés used in game narratives, leading to a sense of predictability that reduces immersion [144, 22] and ultimately, emotional impact. This raises the possibility of ‘parasocial fatigue’ where long-term exposure to numerous parasocial relationships diminishes the intensity of these bonds. The aforementioned age-related factors may also influence this outcome as older players tend to have more gaming experience. Nonetheless, as this dynamic has yet to be explored, further research is required to understand the maintenance of parasocial relationships over time.

Due to the time constraints of the current project, a cross-sectional design was utilised. However, as players’ emotional experiences dynamically evolve alongside in-game progression and variations in personal factors [10], subsequent investigations should employ longitudinal frameworks to capture these developmental processes [21]. This may provide insights into how initial reactions lead to more complex affective states as well as the full impact of game design elements on player well-being and engagement. On a similar note, it may also be worthwhile investigating the real-time impact of parasocial interactions during gameplay using think-aloud protocols [165] or physiological monitoring methods [68]. This is important because the present study solely relies on retrospective accounts of experiences that originated at unknown times before collection. Given that autobiographical memory has been established as biased towards events of a positive nature [30, 157], these approaches would enable a more authentic understanding of how such connections are constructed.

9 Conclusion

Based on a quantitative and qualitative analysis of player experiences in narrative RPGs, it can be concluded that positive emotions and parasocial interactions are facilitated by a rich interplay of factors including narrative consistency, fantasy-reality balance, and negative but meaningful in-game experiences. Although additional research is required to achieve a more thorough understanding of the nuances underlying these phenomena, the derived insights and recommendations have various interdisciplinary implications. Not only can these findings enhance satisfaction with commercial games but they can also enhance engagement to optimise the therapeutic and educational outcomes of serious games. Ultimately, by contributing to a more nuanced understanding of player experience, this research-centred approach to narrative RPG design aims to empower the industry to be more protective of user well-being.

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A Full Case Studies

A.1 Case Study of Fire Emblem: Three House

Fire Emblem: Three Houses (FE3H) [67] is a tactical RPG where the user adopts the role of a mercenary-turned-professor at a mediaeval monastery school and is tasked with choosing one of three “houses” of students to lead in battles. This establishes a prominent “us-vs-them” mentality and determines the outcome of the narrative along with which characters are most often encountered. Indeed, these elements are likely to contribute to a perceived sense of community in-game [158] which may fulfil needs for relatedness and increase emotional investment to intensify subsequent affective responses to significant events [118]. The sense of responsibility imposed on the protagonist is also heightened by the fact that students can be lost permanently in battle, adding an additional layer of consequence to player decisions. Indeed, this heightened risk may promote positive eustress during difficult segments to foster immersion whilst simultaneously increasing feelings of mastery upon success [110, 163]. Overall, these design decisions may collectively contribute to facilitating a strong psychological attachment to the in-game world that increases with progression.

Throughout FE3H, a complex social network that not only encompasses the protagonist and the students they interact with but also the students themselves is constructed. Namely, bonds between students can be developed in both school and battle life - such as being invited to share a meal together with the player or supporting one another in battle - which manifests as “support levels”. As support levels grow, this can result in exclusive cutscenes and dialogue between students which provide additional depth to their character and relationship development to increase engagement and intrigue [41]. Likewise, as no two players interact with the students in the same manner, this aspect of the game is largely unique to each individual [11] - this may enhance their sense of agency and autonomy, leading to a more meaningful experience. Similarly, depending on their support levels at the end of the game, characters can share “paired endings” that describe what they do together after the events of the narrative. In essence, these elements allow players to feel as if their actions matter beyond the main storyline, facilitating an in-game world that seems alive and dynamic which in turn, may support more profound immersion.

A.2 Case Study of Final Fantasy XV

Final Fantasy XV (FFXV) [137] is an action RPG in which the user assumes the role of Noctis, the crown prince of the Kingdom of Lucis, who must travel across the world of Eos to save his homeland from the hostile Niflheim Empire. Throughout the journey, the protagonist is accompanied by Prompto, Ignis, and Gladio who are respectively his childhood best friend, adviser, and bodyguard. The group share an established tight-knit bond, one that is embedded in the core design of the gameplay experience. For instance, as the player explores the world, all three companions are present in-game, occasionally offering idle chatter or comments in response to specific in-game locations and events. Portraying these characters constantly by Noctis’ side - instead of only when they are necessary such as in battle - is not only cohesive to the narrative but also serves as a tangible reminder that the player is part of a team. Indeed, this sentiment is furthered by the “link-strikes” mechanic during combat where Noctis can perform strong cooperative attacks with another party member, accompanied by animation and voice lines that showcase each pair’s relationship dynamics. This feature mirrors the experience of playing with multiple players, especially when the characters react to when and how the user takes damage or defeats an enemy. This portrays a sense of teamwork that may fulfil the needs of relatedness [150] and imitate a sense of community. Overall, such features bring the in-game world and its inhabitants to life, increasing the likelihood of immersion and flow by allowing players to feel as if they are on an adventure with

friends.

Although the overarching plot and world-building of FFXV remain otherworldly in nature, the basic activities performed on each in-game day may be familiar to many players. Namely, as the party of characters travel across Eos, their voyage is reminiscent of a road trip as they journey by car or by foot to explore towns and areas of interest before locating a lodging or campsite to stay for the night. A feature of particular note is Prompto’s photos where whenever the character is in the party, he will take photographs of himself, other team members, encountered scenery, and other random subjects that the player can review each time they rest (Figure). Not only can users reminisce on the fond or comedic moments of their adventure but as each individual explores the open-world environment differently, it cumulatively catalogues the player’s unique gameplay experience [117]. Indeed, this mechanic goes beyond explicit in-game storytelling by encouraging one to imagine the context and character interactions that resulted in such images which ultimately, enriches the overall narrative experience [119] This - along with the inclusion of randomly triggered cutscenes that reveal heartfelt details about each party member’s motivations, backstories, and goals - helps depict a sense of realism in an otherwise chaotic realm that may allow players to find comfort in the enduring brotherhood of the main quartet.

A.3 Case Study of Persona 5

Persona 5 [109] is a story-driven RPG that invites the player to step into the shoes of Joker, a high-school student, who forms a group of vigilantes, known as the Phantom Thieves of Hearts, that aims to better the corrupt society they live in with the supernatural powers of “Personas”. When not saving the world, the user must partake in ordinary school life which can involve building tangible bonds with those who aid the protagonist on their quest - this is known as the “confidant” system. This can be achieved by delegating in-game time to converse with them, resulting in scenes and tasks that otherwise cannot be triggered. Not only does this unlock additional abilities that can be used in combat by party members but the development of characters throughout the story may be empowering to many [91]. For example, the story of Ryuji represents resilience as over time, he learns to become more level-headed and to never give up on his goals despite the setbacks he encounters. Given that reaching the maximum rank of a confidant requires significant time and planning, the player is likely to experience a sense of achievement upon completion which on a deeper level, may lead to fulfilment as they have helped the character become a better person [77]. Indeed, the narrative implications of the confidant system align with Persona 5’s overall theme of self-discovery and the message that even when circumstances are unfavourable, one should remain hopeful and strive to be the change one wishes to see [100]. Indeed, this is likely to strengthen the overall impact of the narrative, increasing immersion and meaningfulness of play.

B Survey Questions

The survey questions are shown on the next page and were obtained by exporting them directly from Qualtrics.

Demographics

What is your gender identity?

- Woman
 - Man
 - I describe my gender in another way (please state)

 - Prefer not to say
-

What is your age?

What is your employment status?

- Employed
- Unemployed
- Retired
- Student
- Other (please state)

Which sector (hospitality, higher education, media etc.) do you work in?

Which sector (hospitality, higher education, media etc.) did you used work in?

Which subject (computing science, english literature, psychology etc.) do you study?

Gaming Behaviours

Approximately how many years have you been playing video games?

How often do you typically play video games?

- Rarely
 - Once a month
 - Several times a month
 - Once a week
 - Several times a week
 - Every day
-
-

On average, how long does a typical gaming session last?

What platform(s) do you typically use to play video games?

Console - Playstation, Xbox, Nintendo Switch, etc. (please state)

Desktop

Laptop

Mobile

Tablet

Other (please state)

What are your favourite narrative RPGs of all time? (Please state up to 3)

What are your current favourite narrative RPGs? (Please state up to 3)

Emotions in Narrative RPGs

We would now like to know how narrative RPGs make you feel. Remember that there are no right or wrong answers; we are only interested in your personal opinions and experiences!

Please rate the following emotions on how strongly you feel them while you play narrative RPGs.

Ashamed	<input type="radio"/>						
Inspired	<input type="radio"/>						
Nervous	<input type="radio"/>						
Determined	<input type="radio"/>						
Attentive	<input type="radio"/>						
Jittery	<input type="radio"/>						
Active	<input type="radio"/>						
Afraid	<input type="radio"/>						

What do you enjoy most about playing narrative RPGs? Please can you describe any experiences to help explain your answer?

What do you not like about narrative RPGs? Please can you describe any experiences to help explain your answer?

What activities do you typically like to do in narrative RPGs (exploration, combat, socialising, crafting etc.)? Please can you describe any experiences to help explain your answer?

Can you describe your favourite memory whilst playing narrative RPGs?

Parasocial Interaction

Narrative RPGs will often have a varied cast of memorable characters that the user will encounter on their adventures. In particular, we would like to know about your favourite game characters and how you interact with them.

Please rate the following statements about your favourite game characters in narrative RPGs on how strongly you agree with them.

magazine, or social network service, I would read it.

I miss seeing my favourite game character when they are absent.

Why do you enjoy interacting with your favourite game character? Please can you describe any experiences to help explain your answer?

Have you ever not enjoyed interacting with your favourite game character? Please can you describe any experiences to help explain your answer?

How do you typically like to interact with your favourite game character (dialogue, quests, gifts etc.)? Please can you describe any experiences to help explain your answer?

Can you describe your favourite memory with your favourite game character?

Closing Statement

Is there anything else about your experiences with narrative RPGs that we have not covered which you would like to tell us?

C Adjustments to PANAS

- **Original Instruction by Watson et al. [159]:** Indicate the extent you have felt this way over the past week.
- **Adapted Instruction by Francis [48]:** Please rate the following emotions on how strongly you feel them while you play competitive video games.
- **Current Instruction:** Please rate the following emotions on how strongly you feel them while you play narrative role-playing games.

D Adjustments to PSI-Scale

The version of the PSI-Scale [130] used in the current study was adapted from Gong & Huang [58]:

- I find my favourite game character to be attractive.
- My favourite game character makes me feel comfortable as if I am with a friend.
- I see my favourite game character as a natural, down-to-earth person.
- I would like to meet my favourite game character in person.
- **Original:** I look forward to seeing my favourite game character in the new game episodes.
 - **Adapted:** I look forward to seeing my favourite game character in arcs/chapters throughout the game.
- If my favourite game character appeared in another game, I would play that game.
- If I saw a story about my favourite game character in a newspaper, magazine, or social network service, I would read it.
- I miss seeing my favourite game character when he or she is absent.

E Summary of Interviewee Demographics

Gender	Age	Employment Status	Sector/Subject
Male	23	Employed	Engineering
Female	23	Student	Human-Computer Interaction
Male	30	Employed	IT
Male	30	Unemployed	N/A
Male	23	Employed	Hospitality
Female	34	Employed	Education
Male	36	Employed	Education
Female	20	Student	Anthropology
Female	22	Student	Creative Writing
Non-binary	22	Employed	Nuclear Safety

F Interview Schedule

The interview schedule is shown on the next page.

Gaming Behaviours

1. When did you start playing video games? Why?
2. How often do you play video games?
3. What kind of games do you typically play? Can you describe any examples?
4. Do you prefer to play games with other people or by yourself? Why?
5. What is your favourite narrative RPG (or if you cannot pick one, describe as many as you would like/up to three)?
 - a. Why did you start playing this game?
 - b. What do you like the most about this game?
 - c. What do you dislike the most about this game?

Positive Emotions in Narrative RPGs

1. Does playing narrative RPGs make you feel positive emotions? If so, which ones and why do you think you feel that way?
 - a. Can you describe an example of this?
 - b. What aspects of the game contributed to this?
2. Does playing narrative RPGs help you reduce negative emotions (like stress or anxiety)? If so, which ones and why do you think you feel that way?
 - a. Can you describe an example of this?
 - b. What aspects of the game contributed to this?
3. Have you ever experienced moments of awe or wonder while playing narrative RPGs? If so, why?
 - a. Can you describe an example of this?
 - b. What aspects of the game contributed to this?
4. Can you describe any instances where your emotional investment in the game led to real-life reflections or insights?
 - a. What aspects of the game contributed to this?
5. Can you tell me about one of the most memorable moments that you have experienced while playing narrative RPGs?
 - a. What aspects of the game contributed to this?

Meaningful Parasocial Interactions in Narrative RPGs

1. Does playing narrative RPGs help you feel socially connected? If so, why?
 - a. Can you describe an example of this?
 - b. What aspects of the game contributed to this?
2. Who is your favourite game character?
 - a. What makes them your favourite character compared to others?
 - b. Have you ever missed them (outside of gameplay, in different chapters/arcs of the game etc.)? Why?

3. Can you describe a specific moment during the game where you felt a strong emotional connection to a character?
 - a. What made this moment special?
 - b. How did this influence your actions within the game?
 - c. How did this influence your actions outside the game?
4. When reflecting on your interactions with non-player characters (NPCs), can you recall any instances where you felt genuine empathy?
 - a. What characteristics or behaviours of the NPCs elicited these feelings?
5. Can you tell me about one of the most memorable moments with your favourite game character?
 - a. What aspects of the game contributed to this?
6. How does interacting with your favourite characters affect you (emotionally, behaviourally, etc.)?

Wrapping Up

1. What do narrative RPGs mean to you?
2. Have narrative RPGs had a positive effect on your life? How?
3. In your opinion, how could narrative RPGs be improved?

G Ethical Approval

The ethical approval letter from the University of St Andrew's School of Computer Science Ethics Committee is shown on the next page.

School of Computer Science Ethics Committee

23 May 2024

Dear Mandy,

Thank you for submitting your ethical application which was considered by the School Ethics Committee.

The School of Computer Science Ethics Committee, acting on behalf of the University Teaching and Research Ethics Committee (UTREC), has approved this application:

Approval Code:	CS17870	Approved on:	23.05.24	Approval Expiry:	23.05.29
Project Title:	Investigating the Design Factors for Positive Emotions and Meaningful Parasocial Interaction in Narrative Roleplaying Games				
Researcher(s):	Mandy Wan				
Supervisor(s):	Dr Miriam Sturdee				

The following supporting documents are also acknowledged and approved:

1. Application Form
2. Participant Information Sheet
3. Participant Consent Form
4. Participant Debrief Form
5. Advertisement
6. Interview Questions
7. Questionnaire Supporting Documents

Approval is awarded for 5 years, see the approval expiry data above.

If your project has not commenced within 2 years of approval, you must submit a new and updated ethical application to your School Ethics Committee.

If you are unable to complete your research by the approval expiry date you must request an extension to the approval period. You can write to your School Ethics Committee who may grant a discretionary extension of up to 6 months. For longer extensions, or for any other changes, you must submit an ethical amendment application.

You must report any serious adverse events, or significant changes not covered by this approval, related to this study immediately to the School Ethics Committee.

Approval is given on the following conditions:

- that you conduct your research in line with:
 - the details provided in your ethical application
 - the University's [Principles of Good Research Conduct](#)
 - the conditions of any funding associated with your work
- that you obtain all applicable additional documents (see the '[additional documents' webpage](#) for guidance) before research commences.

You should retain this approval letter with your study paperwork.

School of Computer Science Ethics Committee

Dr Olexandr Konovalov/Convenor, Jack Cole Building, North Haugh, St Andrews, Fife, KY16 9SX
 Telephone: 01334 463273 Email: ethics-cs@st-andrews.ac.uk
 The University of St Andrews is a charity registered in Scotland: No SC013532

Yours sincerely,

Wendy Boyter

SEC Administrator

H Summaries of Participant Demographic Variables

H.1 Summary of count, percentage, minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation of main demographic variables

Demographic Variable	<i>n</i>	%	<i>min</i>	<i>max</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Gender						
Female	34	34				
Male	56	56				
Non-binary	8	8				
Prefer not to say	2	2				
Age (in years)			19	51	29.68	8.1
Employment Status						
Employed	58	58				
Unemployed	14	14				
Retired	1	1				
Student	22	22				
Other	5	5				
Video Game Experience (in years)			1	44	21.56	9.19
Video Game Playing Frequency						
Not Specified	1	1				
Rarely	0	0				
Once a month	1	1				
Several times a month	7	7				
Once a week	4	4				
Several times a week	40	40				
Every day	47	47				
Consoles						
Console (PlayStation, Xbox, Nintendo Switch, etc.)	57	57				
Desktop	61	61				
Laptop	38	38				
Mobile	40	40				
Tablet	10	10				
Other (Nintendo DS, Steam Deck, GameBoy etc.)	5	5				

H.2 Count of employed participants in each sector

Employment Sector	Count
Information Technology	8
Higher Education	5
Engineering	4
Software	4
Government	3
Media	3
Education	2
Finance	2
Hospitality	2
Marketing	2
Security	2
Administration	1
Civil service	1
Construction	1
Creative	1
Energy	1
Game Development	1
Healthcare	1
HR	1
Land Development	1
Legal	1
Non-profit	1
Property	1
Public	1
Public service	1
Real Estate	1
Research	1
Self	1
Product Design	1
Healthcare	1
Painter	1
Not specified	1

H.3 Count of student participants in each subject

Subject	Count
Computer Science	6
Biology	2
Accounting & Management Information Systems	1
Aeroskills, Civil Engineering	1
Art & Design	1
Creative Writing	1
Cyber Security	1
Double Major in Anthropology and Communications and New Media	1
I.T.	1
Japanology	1
Mathematics	1
Pharmaceutical Science	1
Physics	1
Sociology	1
English	1
Human Computer Interaction	1

I Summary of Regression Predictors from Main Analysis

	Overall Positive Affect in Narrative RPGs		
Effect	Estimate	SE	p-value
Intercept	30.961	3.386	<.001 ***
Parasocial Interaction	0.332	0.074	<.001 ***
Negative Affect	0.235	0.057	<.001 ***

	Overall Negative Affect in Narrative RPGs		
Effect	Estimate	SE	p-value
Intercept	3.362	7.580	.658
Parasocial Interaction	-0.184	0.133	.170
Positive Affect	0.634	0.154	<.001 ***

	Overall Parasocial Interaction in Narrative RPGs		
Effect	Estimate	SE	p-value
Intercept	16.630	5.497	.003 **
Positive Affect	0.514	0.115	<.001 ***
Negative Affect	-0.105	0.076	.170

****, $p < .001$, **, $p < .01$, *, $p < .05$

J Summary of Regression Predictors from Exploratory Analysis: Gender

	Positive Affect in Narrative RPGs		
Effect	Estimate	SE	p-value
Intercept	51.118	1.255	<.001 ***
Gender	-0.636	1.591	.691

	Negative Affect in Narrative RPGs		
Effect	Estimate	SE	p-value
Intercept	30.676	1.885	<.001 ***
Gender	-3.891	2.389	.107

	Parasocial Interaction in Narrative RPGs		
Effect	Estimate	SE	p-value
Intercept	41.324	1.473	<.001 ***
Gender	-2.895	1.867	.125

Gender is coded as '1' for female and '2' for male; *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

K Summary of Regression Predictors from Exploratory Analysis: Age

	Positive Affect in Narrative RPGs		
Effect	Estimate	SE	p-value
Intercept	54.290	2.793	<.001 ***
Age	-0.123	0.091	.180

	Negative Affect in Narrative RPGs		
Effect	Estimate	SE	p-value
Intercept	33.623	4.043	<.001 ***
Age	-0.196	0.131	.138

	Parasocial Interaction in Narrative RPGs		
Effect	Estimate	SE	p-value
Intercept	47.230	3.193	<.001 ***
Age	-0.258	0.104	.015 *

****' $p < .001$, **' $p < .01$, *' $p < .05$

L Summary of Regression Predictors from Exploratory Analysis: Years of Gaming Experience

	Positive Affect in Narrative RPGs		
Effect	Estimate	SE	p-value
Intercept	52.327	1.882	<.001 ***
Years of Gaming Experience	-0.069	0.080	.390

	Negative Affect in Narrative RPGs		
Effect	Estimate	SE	p-value
Intercept	32.909	2.838	<.001 ***
Years of Gaming Experience	-0.223	0.121	.069

	Parasocial Interaction in Narrative RPGs		
Effect	Estimate	SE	p-value
Intercept	44.453	2.121	<.001 ***
Years of Gaming Experience	-0.216	0.091	.019 *

****, $p < .001$, **, $p < .01$, *, $p < .05$

M Interview Transcript Extract

The interview transcript extract is shown on the next page. The interviewer is indicated in bold text whereas the interviewee is indicated in normal text.

Can you describe a specific example of some positive emotions that you felt playing these games?

There's obviously both- Baldur's Gate 3 is a good example because it is so long. My first playthrough was over 200 hours.

And you generally pick a companion to have the whole way through. So I myself was Gale of Waterdeep, who's just this, like, goofy wizard that nobody really takes seriously. But he has a pretty, like, tremendous story arc. And at the end of it, he's kind of free from his burdens. And it's all very happy. And then the end of the game, you have, like, a scene, and it's kind of you get married to him. It's really cute, I guess. I was crying for sure.

So, you just- do you think that's sort of like culminated from the experience that you had during the game?

Yeah, absolutely. It does an excellent- the game, Baldur's Gate, does an excellent job of culminating on experience and having growth. There's characters at the start who are absolutely insufferable and by the end you just are in love with them.

It's. I've never seen a game do that so well.

Mm hmm. OK. And are there any other sort of like positive emotions that you may feel from playing these games apart from sort of like the happiness they get from, like, a character ending?

Well, there's a specific example in Disco Elysium, your sort of companion. Your sidekick, Kim Kitzuragi. There is a sort of sideline you can go down through various dialogue options where you grow closer to him. And then there's a- it's done quite comically, you- he says something in passing in conversation that would imply that he's gay. And then you, Harry, who's like, just a very average, allegedly straight white man is like is he? And he can't stop thinking about it. And then you like have to keep asking him and you like develop this thought and then you speak to him about it eventually. And he's like, yeah, it's not a big deal. Is that a problem? You're like, no. I just thought it was like it was very funny, but it was also- it was- it made me quite happy to see that kind of representation in a game like this, especially the- It's a very dystopian future game that kind of mimics our own.

Mm hmm. OK.

Where there's a lot of like alt right characters and imagery, like fascism is a big part of it. So, when you have that representation and like fighting against it, it's really done so well.

Would you say that representation is quite important for you when you're playing games?

Yeah, massively. I don't really want to play a game that's full of like, only like heterosexual relationships. All the characters are even like, I don't know, it's like fantasy games. So, there are different races, but realistically, they're for a human population. And regardless, it's important.

Mm hmm. Can you describe another game that you felt that the representation was done quite well?

Just like another game, like, personally, controversially, don't think it's done very well on Baldur's Gate 3.

So, you've got your main cast. So, first of all, when you're creating your character, the body types - you are either really skinny or absolutely massive, like muscly. There's no variation. You can't be.

You can't just have like an average body. You have to be like tiny or huge. Then you've got the main 6 companions. Gale is a white human, Astarion is white, Shadowheart is white, Karlach is red because she's a tiefling. But in alpha, in like the early alphas of the game she- like her hair, she had like typical natural Afro American hair. She more typically resembled a black woman, and they kind of whitewashed her gradually which it's sort of really nasty to see, especially like the voice actor is a person of colour.

Lae'zel is green. She's from space, so it doesn't really count. And then I'm forgetting... Oh, and then there's Will who is black. So, there's one. The one that's there and a lot of people don't like Will because of, like, inherent racism. I love Will I think he's an excellent character, but he is sidelined unfortunately. But yeah, if you look at the main cast, two of them are fantasy races. The rest of them are white. And there's one black guy. And that's it. It's like it's not- it's there are some representation, but I don't think it's particularly sufficient.

OK. Hmm. Do you think this affects, like other aspects of the game?

I think so to an extent, because in Baldur's Gate... Well, the D&D universe in general does have a lot of that that is part of the story. And generally, if I'm playing Dungeon Dragons, I stay away from it because it's quite a heavy topic to handle and I don't feel myself a white person can do it can massively do it justice and it can be difficult if a character engages in it and you're like, that's actually making me quite uncomfortable. I know these are like fantasy races, but I don't like it. Sorry, what was the original question? I've gone on a tangent about D&D.

No, no, it's OK. It was just like, what kind of positive emotions you may feel from playing narrative RPGs.

Oh yeah, and I've somehow got on to this, but yeah. So yeah, yeah, I don't think... Yeah, Baldur's Gate 3 doesn't do diversity particularly well. I think the Disco Elysium does it tremendously well. And I think that it does have an impact on the game because it's not like, it's obviously they don't have the room to go into racial discrimination in Baldur's Gate because they haven't made room for it. It's just- I feel like it's a huge game, extremely lengthy, a platform that could be used to capitalise on that and it just isn't.

N Additional Extracts for Themes and Subthemes

The additional extracts for the themes and subthemes generated during reflexive thematic analysis are shown on the next page.

Theme 1: A Holistic Narrative Experience

Subtheme	Participant Gender	Participant Age	Extracts
Narrative-Gameplay Harmony	Woman	34	When the goals are embedded into the storyline, they give a sense of accomplishment as you progress through the story.
	Man	30	Some RPGs demand a high level of investment into "grinding" to reach a power level where you are allowed to proceed with the story, especially true if you're not interested in the side content. Example: Shin Megami Tensei 3 is a fairly difficult game and I don't know if I could have beaten it without spending considerable time fighting the same enemies repeatedly to get stronger which was not very fun to me.
	Man	24	I dislike how they sometimes limit themselves by reducing story in exchange for gameplay. This cool skill is locked for a reason that doesn't make sense in the story.
	Man	22	Often, although the main storyline may be excellent, the side quests and narratives in RPGs can be very one-dimensional and repetitive, with no impact on the larger narrative and very little narrative interest. For example, Fallout 4's infamous "Another settlement is in need of your help; I'll mark it on your map" repeating quest very quickly becomes a chore for players, rather than serving as an interesting story or opportunity to explore the environment.
	Man	30	Some games such as life is strange will make you do random pointless tasks in the middle of really serious great stories, it can ruin the flow a little bit.
	Man	18	Going along with the game's tone and setting, this may seem a bit abstract so I'll explain in a way I hope will make sense. In Stardew Valley, I see little reason for exploration up until the moment Ginger Island is unlocked (I do not see the mines or Skull caverns as exploration most of the time) as I have my focus set on some of the goals of the game (Community center, marriage, perfection) generally interacting quite a bit with the NPC's on the way there. On other more exploration focused games, I am naturally drawn to interact and look at most things, while in games like the above mentioned Fire Emblem: Three Houses, there is outright no

			exploration at all, but you are meant to be a strategist, so naturally i enjoy putting myself in the role and commanding my units the way i think benefits me as a player the most, while trying to minimise the damage dealt to them.
Cohesive Pacing	Man	27	I enjoy that narrative RPGs, particularly cRPGs, generally move at a pace slow enough for me to be more in control of my own experience's pacing and intensity to a degree that an action game, for instance, doesn't. I enjoy being able to decide between several different paths to pursue, set my own priorities, and think and reflect on my own decision-making process.
	Man	23	I think generally I end up playing longer games more than not more often than not, as I think it's just I like being able to sink a lot of time into something and you know it allows me to get more attached to the game and appreciate it more.
	Man	19	The story can sometimes be too long and overly complex to follow, especially when parts of the overall story are fragmented into optional readable items and quests.
	Woman	23	Like sometimes I don't know if it's the problem of translation or something- like some of the story I can't understand like what exactly happened for example like the story of Gale. Like he always talk a lot, but I just can't understand what happened and sometimes the conversation is really long. I can't pay like attention to all of it.
	Woman	N/A	No proper pacing. Tbh WuWa's Avengers-like cutscenes during Act 6 didn't feel earned at all. Some characters I didn't know just showed up like they're part of the group.
	Woman	35	I do not like RPGs that force you to watch a lot of scenes that cannot be skipped or have dialogues that feel forced.
Satisfying Narrative Curiosity	Man	23	<p>But it's it just cause just cause it's such a big game like this, you know?</p> <p>There's probably dozens of planets you can go in between, like a story. So and they all have quests that you can do. So like all kind of grows on your character, but like it's secondary to the main quest. But like it helps you build like on the mental image of what your character is doing around the Galaxy and like where he stands like his importance like kind of thing.</p>

			...As some recurring characters that help flesh out like the whole immersion parts a bit like they're probably one point in that they stop somewhere else and you know, it's like, oh, there's other things going on just besides your character's main story, like, so it's not just your character, but the stuff going on around him that helps kind of engage him with the whole kind of environment.
	Man	32	Uncovering storylines and shaping them. For example when foreshadowing reveals a liked NPC may die as a result of your actions, I enjoy the attentiveness and determination that arises from that mechanic and trying to execute my behaviours in a manner that'd result in their being saved. Bonus points if the developer anticipates these player behaviours and has a storyline ethical/moral/impactful conundrum.
	Man	32	...the ending of TLOU2 when both the main characters were fighting on the shore and it almost felt biblical.
	Woman	24	Doing the 'chasm spelunkers' quest in Genshin Impact and arriving at the place where the celestial nail is located, where obvious signs of both celestial and abyssal influence can be found in the environment. Having seen/heard of these nails before the implications of its appearance here are fascinating.
	Man	44	I enjoy exploring and discovering lore items like books, I hated The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, the combat system was rubbish, the lack of differing voice actors and the repetitive dungeons killed the immersion, but I loved reading all the books, and that game had plenty to read
	Woman	22	There's some really cute subplots, and it's a linear narrative. That's another thing that really impressed me, that this is a linear narrative that I enjoyed, just playing it as it is without having a choice. I didn't need choice in this because it felt right.

Theme 2: A Platform for Change

Subtheme	Participant Gender	Participant Age	Extracts
Depth of Representation	Woman	51	One thing that appeals to me about Honkai: Star Rail and Genshin Impact is that there is no clear "villain". Every time I start thinking a person or a faction might be the villain or untrustworthy the game shows me a different perspective.
	Man	23	I enjoy when the RPG has something to say about the world. My favorite RPG is Nier: Automata, whose story explores philosophical questions like the meaning of life (or lack thereof).
	Man	27	My first time playing Final Fantasy X really cemented this for me; as the world feels alien to ours despite drawing influence from real life South and Southeast Asian cultures. Narrative RPGs often post interesting questions that make me evaluate my own experiences; one specific example of this being FFX's exploration of organized religion and how indoctrination can often take shape, which I was able to draw parallels with my own experience of leaving a religion in which I grew up (Christianity) - the abstraction of religion in the game to a fantasy religion helped me connect my own experiences to it more easily than if the game drew strict inspiration from a real world Eastern religion or spirituality. I believe the abstraction of real world concepts in fantasy RPGs is a big draw for me.
	Man	18	But over all (in OMORI), one line of dialogue has stuck to my self hatred focused self “Just because you’ve done something bad...doesn’t make you bad.” I have had a hard time accepting this, but i know it is something that i needed to hear after years of seeing myself as a monster that doesn’t fit with the rest of humanity. That finale made me cry the first time i saw it, and it still brings tears to my eyes after that agencytime.
	Woman	20	I guess game developers should take more caution in making sure that they do not accidentally play into certain stereotypes, because I know there's a character that a lot of people have dissatisfaction with. Which is Dori from Genshin Impact. Like a lot of people say that, you know, she's- because they kind of boil her character down to a very shrewd merchant, which is especially when they

			<p>make her from, especially when they made a region like typically Middle Eastern. It's like a very negative stereotype, right. And then people make the argument that no, you know, she's only like this because of her back story because she grew up poor and everything. I do feel that I do agree that that can be a reason to back it up. It's the way that when reading through her back story, I really didn't really know why she got so much backlash. It did feel like a very cheap excuse as to why they made her like that because.</p> <p>It wasn't really well, like even the writing wasn't really very well done. It was like, oh, you know, her sister died and she felt really bad. So, she vowed to never again be, like, be that poor. And that was kind of it. Like, that was the whole reason. So it was a bit flat. Yeah.</p>
	Non-binary	22	<p>I don't really want to play a game that's full of like, only like heterosexual relationships. All the characters are even like, I don't know, it's like fantasy games. So there are different races, but realistically, they're for a human population. And regardless, it's important.</p>
	Man	30	<p>It made me realise that there is so much to be said for, even if even if the universe is a kind of arbitrary place that we're just here by luck, there's no, there's no ultimate meaning or purpose or finish line that there's going to be reached. There is there's something so personally meaningful in being able to extend to helping someone else I'm not has been that has been I suppose for me a real.</p> <p>A real shield against nihilism. Real shield against despair.</p> <p>Silly as as dramatic as that might sound, maybe I'm probably getting very dramatic terms, but but that NieR Automata ending has been something that has stuck with me for a very, very since I played that game came out, I think in 2016 that was and I played it. I played it on release and that was eight years ago when I still think about it. To this day, I think it's it's had a real it's it's had a real positive impact on me as a person.</p>

The Rejection of Stereotypes	Man	27	Cliche and or unfunny dialogue options that sometimes that are shoehorned in to the interaction for just being quirky.
	Woman	20	<p>Like most of the characters, they are- that I've like at least talked, at least had dialogue with. They're usually either like very typical, oh, you know, it's like it's really weird because a lot of them usually have some sort of trauma, too. To back up their backstory. So I'm not sure if this is like a kind of coping thing that they do to make their characters seem deeper.</p> <p>...Because then it just feels like trauma is a bit like it's a very lazy trope, you know, to make characters feel deep.</p>
	Man	23	I do not like when narrative RPGs use outdated tropes which ultimately cheapen the impact of the game. Both Nier: Automata and Persona 5 sexualize women in their narratives which are otherwise interesting and well-developed.
	Man	30	<p>I think the main the main thing comes to mind for me for now of RPGs is just I think that treatment of female characters is definitely something that thankfully I do see less of it in modern games. I do. It's definitely something that isn't as frequent that I see, but when I do, I kind of roll my eyes and I kind of go like, who's this for? First of all? And secondly, you know, this is you've written these great characters. You know, you've created these great compelling characters and then this is kind of what you're reducing to. You're doing your own writing a disservice, in my opinion.</p> <p>And it's it's. You're also taking me out of the characters because I'm being reminded that I'm playing a video game and you're trying to. You're trying to titillate me rather than immerse me as two very different things. So that would be, that would be my, my, my core suggestion. If there was something I could see changed.</p>
	Man	27	Say Dragon Age: Inquisition, one NPC in it is very religious so I assumed she'd be hard headed and try to push her views on people but thought the game you find out shes pretty open minded and doesnt bash you if you dont believe in her god and it made me respect her character a lot.

	Woman	51	I dislike stories where the self-insert main character is idolized as a hero from the beginning. I prefer stories with no self-insert or with ones that don't focus the story on how everything relates to the main character.
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Theme 3: Another Life

Subtheme	Participant Gender	Participant Age	Extracts
You Matter when your Choices Matter	Woman	19	Another thing I enjoy is Disco Elysium/Detroit's freedom to explore different options. For Disco's case, I see it as a singular story with a million ways to experience it through altering your character's world views and thinking processes via skill points and thought cabinets - in Detroit's case, its a choose-your-own-adventure story that is simultaneously reflective of real concerns in society. Both games are what I feel is a reflection of the player's choices and beliefs; so not just a game you play and enjoy the story with, but a game where your self is imbued into it
	Woman	34	<p>if you play Mass Effect 1, 2 and 3 you can...They changed it so you can save like your game play from the first game so it continues the story like through to the next games. So it remembers like the choices you've made and it gives you like summaries of stuff. But so, if you, you know, you're nice to this person in the first one, but the third one you can end up being like really close friends. So that was like quite satisfying to actually like, have that sort of cohesive storyline through it. But also like your choices made like an impression in the next game, but also that, you know, you took this really grumpy character and then actually got them to like you.</p> <p>And not just by, you know, being like sort of really sickeningly good, but, you know, like telling your line, sometimes doing some, like interactions that weren't always like the most like, because sometimes they talk about, like, paragoning games. So, like, not doing the paragon choices, but like the renegade choices. So I quite like that. That's quite satisfying.</p>

	Man	18	...while in games like Fire Emblem: Three Houses, i legitimately felt part of the cause i was aiding, i wanted to fight, because i was doing what i thought was correct.
	Man	44	I don't like when choice is an illusion, when the ending is almost the exact same no matter which factions you choose, or if your alignment is good or evil. Neverwinter Nights 2 left me feeling a bit hollow when the only real difference was a couple of companions change sides at the end
	Man	27	Occasionally, there are moments where none of the options available are what I would want to do in the game or all the options are bad. For example, there was one moment in an RPG where a certain character claimed to have had their home stolen by someone else, but after arriving to the place it was pretty clear to me that the home was not stolen, but the only options are to either kill the people inside or ignore that storyline entirely. My preferred option would be to talk to those people to find out if they really are thieves or not.
	Man	30	Building a character or building a game where a character is like supposed to be your sort of every man. Like a real blank slate for you to project this character onto. I think it that is something that really needs to be stuck to and there are occasions in games where they have the game developers have like prescribed a thing about that character.
	Man	33	I try immediately to choose "other paths" or ways of playing the game that is not the standard way. For example, if I don't like an NPC I will immediately kill them. This may or may not affect my playthrough in a positive manner but that's ok.
Environmental Storytelling	Man	33	As for exploration, I enjoy discovering things on my own, and in RPG games you can easily explore areas and find all sorts of alternatives routes or secrets that are not obvious for players that just stick to the standard route.
	Man	24	Exploration is key. Being able to explore the world or the options available to you allows you to be in the game. Without that, there is nothing to enjoy.
	Woman	30	In Red Dead Redemption 2, I spent the majority of my time simply exploring the world and doing side quests as I found the game to be incredibly immersive.
	Non-binary	22	...in Skyrim which has a pretty bland cast but such rich world-building and exploration, it (a vibrant

			cast) doesn't feel necessary - simply a story told through a different method.
	Woman	26	<p>Personally, I'm drawn to the post-apocalyptic genre, and games like Fallout 4 and Horizon Zero Dawn allow me to explore that interest. Similarly, as a history enthusiast, Assassin's Creed lets me delve into past civilizations. I often find myself just walking around the map and enjoying the scenery and locations. As I have Aphantasia being able to see digital renderings or images of the past makes it easier to learn and understand it better.</p>
	Man	30	<p>There's a specific moment in Elden Ring where there's like, an elevator in just a random kind of ruined building in the middle of a forest, if I remember rightly. Or there's another one, like in a crevice, just in some valley. And I was like, oh, like it's a ruined elevator. Whatever. I'll go down and see what's in there.</p> <p>Looks kinda rundown and it's a really long elevator and then it starts off as like you're just descending down this stony pit and then eventually that stony pit opens out into a massive vista of like what looks like stars or constellations, there's this big city off in the distance, floating in the middle of the stars. And just as the moment like it went from just this dank, stony pit to this bright, beautiful, glinting starlight, I actively like- mouth open like, Oh my God.</p> <p>That was kind of cool. That was really cool. And then you even get an opportunity to go there sort of later in the game. I was like gunning to get there just because the first time I saw it, I was like, absolutely gobsmacked.</p>
Experience the Impossible	Woman	47	You are an active participant in the storytelling. It's like wish fulfillment. You get to do all these cool things you couldn't do in real life, and create a more exciting universe with your friends.
	Man	38	Escapism of putting myself into the position of my character. Being able to take actions that I wouldn't be able to in real life. Making choices that would be different to that which I would make in the real world. E.g. playing an "evil" character making choices that cause others pain or hurt. Jade Empire involved a choice where you could bind NPCs to you and force them to take actions against their

			will so they keep fighting for you, despite their moral objections. This isn't something I could do in real life, and is morally wrong, but I can explore the emotion of that in playing the role
	Woman	23	Yeah, I think RPG means another life for me. Because like in the real world, I can never get some adventure like that. But in this game I really think- I wish I was the character. I can do all these adventure. I can meet all of these people.
	Man	33	I think it's just a safe environment where you're not in danger of getting yelled at if you say something wrong. It feels more direct and honest than natural human interaction where societal norms and everyone's weird habits and thoughts sometimes make people say things that they don't mean? This probably says a lot about my upbringing but in games there can be characters that are there for you in good and bad times and I feel like in real life that doesn't happen enough, everyone has their own lives to live.
	Man (I)	36	I feel on a level of society, not on a level of games that you get to fuck around and live without consequences in a virtual environment. Your feelings are real, but everything else is great, so it kind of gives you the confidence and the ability to just keep trying and keep going and.

Theme 4: Emotional Highs and Lows

Subtheme	Participant Gender	Participant Age	Extracts
The Joy of Negativity	Non-binary	22	Even if it's like a difficult time for them in their story, or if it's a negative story. I think ultimately it'll be positive because I've engaged more with them and I've learned more about them. So they in the end, they are always going to be a positive emotion on me. And I like, enjoy doing it, even if it's hard sometimes. Because they're going through something.
	Woman	34	Like sometimes it can be upsetting, like when you've chosen like you've made a decision about something like ages before and then you don't realise like the ramifications of your decisions. And then you feel like you've sort of, like messed up the storyline and you can't go back to like that point because it's been like too far and it will take too

			long to redo everything. So like, like, I kind of like that. It's the realistic gameplay like that. But it's also sometimes really frustrating. So, like, I annoyed a character before, and then they wouldn't do- like they left basically my camp and wouldn't come back. And you're like, oh, that's really sad. They disappeared.
	Woman	34	I kind of liked the fact that it had like these, like serious consequences. But I suppose it's also, then encourage you to like you to play the game like again, because it is really dynamic, like the storyline.
Mastery of the Game	Man	33	Combat, is the payoff for your character becoming more powerful throughout the game. As well as you the player getting better at the game over time. Its always fun when enemies do something new and you have to think in realtime about what to do in order to stay alive.
	Man	36	<p>Even though it's like a, you know, sword and slash games, I played it at the hard difficulty. Not because I, you know flexing or anything that I think it makes the game better in game design terms because you have to kind of become a detective like for every monster or quest that you're going through.</p> <p>You have to study. You have to find the evidence and you have to prepare. So you have to get your, you know, buffs and your traps and even you know how you approach the encounter. So that and plus the world and the side quests and...</p> <p>Yeah, it's so easy to get lost and I think kind of reflecting on the series.</p>
	Woman	34	Sometimes it's like satisfaction when you've, like, got that. Like you've got like to achieve the thing you needed to achieve because you know, like a lot of the games, you can do things like increase your persuasion. So you can, like, persuade people to get, like, the outcome you want. So like, that's going to be, like, quite satisfying. Like, if you've managed to meet the requirements to do, like, a particular storyline.
	Man	23	Mostly exploration and combat. I enjoy going around the world in a sort of completionist sense, and seeing every corner, and conquering any challenges thrown at me.

The Light in the Dark	Man	23	A humorous discussion about how the sith emperor's spirit is not the first annoying ghost in your head you had to deal with.
	Genderfluid	27	After defining a town from an ambush two of my companions, Tekehu and Maia Rua, got into a fight about their race war and once that dialogue interaction was done Aloth asked my character out... So that was a roller coaster, especially since we almost died and mood was not there.
	Man	21	The Citadel DLC for Mass Effect 3 is an amazing dlc, not for its plot, but because it is almost entirely devoted to character interaction. It is an opportunity to talk to essentially every character in the game, some of which have been in all three games, as friends. It is a break from the high stakes plot and a chance to breathe both in universe and for the player, ending with a massive party for all the main characters.
	Woman	23	Like in the end of this game, if you choose the good path of Astarion and you have him in the end, he will hug you and say: go through hell with others. I always be there for you. Like he- it's like he's waiting for me to go home with him. You know, it's warm...I always want to go back to that archive too, to see that hug again. Yeah, it's like we're a real couple.
	Man	21	A recent memory is a "Mission" with the in ME2 with the companion Garrus. There are no stakes, all the player does is hang out with them and have a shooting competition. However, the feeling of the mission is great. It allows the serious companion a moment to level with the player and relax, reinforcing their friendship, and also sets up Garrus to be less serious in the future. In all, it feels like it could happen in real life.

Theme 5: More than Pixels on a Screen

Subtheme	Participant Gender	Participant Age	Extracts
Narrative-Consistent Interaction	Man	30	The sort of the characters that you are supposed to sort of like and empathise in in Cyberpunk are few and far between, just because that's the nature of the dystopic capitalist future that they have presented. But you know, I suppose, in just being

			one of few who's trying to fight the system and survive is more comradery than you might otherwise have...
	Man	23	I can sometimes be annoyed by my favourite characters if they are performing poorly in gameplay sections like by missing attacks or being defeated by enemies for example.
	Man	32	I love it when a character I'm playing will just say something totally random while I'm doing something too
	Agender	34	Dialogue both background chatter (dragon age inquisition party chatter/triggered by walking into area at base)
	Woman	22	Recently Palia has made me have a great appreciation for giving gifts to favorite characters which I never thought would be an option I interact with, but in Palia it adds to the larger storyline of supporting the community.
They're like a Friend	Woman	34	I love when the dialogue is natural and there is an obvious chemistry, it creates a much more immersive experience. Good voice acting helps.
	Man	30	My favourite characters are the complex ones. Fei Fong Wong, 2B, Shulk, characters that reflect upon themselves and the world around them and struggle with how to deal with their reality. I suppose I see myself in that to some degree, being a very introspective person myself.
	Non-binary	22	Though entirely fictional, it would be disingenuous to say I do not feel a bond akin to friendship and even love with fleshed out RPG characters like the previously mentioned Kim Kitsuragi and Gale Dekarios. Developing these relationships, albeit entirely parasocial as they are fictional, is the main source of enjoyment for me in any game, and they stick with me, hence my love for the previously mentioned Kim and Gale.
	Man	18	As stated previously, I don't have many friends, the few I do have are far away, one of them in another city. I get lonely, and since i am generally rejected by society, I almost have more empathy towards fictional characters than to real people. There are so many examples that I can't give one, so i'll just say that the feeling of having someone that understands me and is there for me, or even the feeling that i understand them and that if they were real i'd be there for them is something I generally lack in my personal life, so when a

			fictional character brings it to me, it feels real, even if it isn't it feels like it is, and it helps me feel human when my friends are not around.
	Man	19	Playing as Kazuha for that period of time, I made so many fun memories that he came to feel like a brother to me.
Complexity and Consistency	Man	30	<p>But they're like, they're off doing their own thing now, and that one helps reinforce the realness of it. You know? You know, there's always, like, they're off doing their own thing you're doing. You're you're with these new characters.</p> <p>You know it, it builds on the reality of the setting. A lot of a lot of things might write reasons to get rid of old characters, whereas Trails doesn't really have to do that. It just kind of goes. You're doing your own thing. They've got their own stuff going on. You're not currently on the same working towards the same goal, but yeah, it's it's, it's definitely it's. It's one of the stronger. I think it's definitely one of the consistent emotions those games create where your favourite character has to depart the party for a time and you're desperately wanting them back.</p>
	Man	20	The thing I find the most annoying in RPG characters is when character development gets stunted by actions that feel out of place or evidently made to satisfy the general public (e.g. Characters in Baldur's Gate 3: the well made backstories of the PCs fall a bit flat when in the first act, after the goblin raid, everyone asks you to spend the night together out of the blue)
	Man	33	I like characters in RPG games that are badass. If they aren't then I know they probably aren't going to offer me any fun throughout the game. If they are then they probably have an interesting story, and future quests, etc
	Genderqueer	30	I think she's one of the best-written characters in the game. She's much deeper than she appears on the surface, and the writers left so many tiny details that hint at her interests and values even before you learn about them from her directly. I'm the type of person who loves exploring a character's psychology, and I love that the writers gave me so much to work with.
	Man	34	Their attitude is interesting -not always agreeable, but understandable. They often but not always

			have confidence, and moral limits past which they will not be pushed. They are often witty and funny.
	Male	23	Well, as I said, like with the Hans Capon like, it's not like just interesting. Oh, hey, here is the guy. He's gonna be your friend. He's gonna support you all the time. Like, no, he starts as somebody you meant to hate. But then as he grows you, you realise it's not like you just go off on the wrong foot or like there's more to him than you initially thought. So it's not like just a character that's there. And that's all there is to it. Like it's not just, you know, a very one-dimensional thing like.

Theme 6: To Love and Be Loved

Subtheme	Participant Gender	Participant Age	Extracts
The Need for Connection	Non-binary	22	Often what attracts me most and keeps me engaged is the main cast of characters and the opportunity to grow a deep bond with them. Without a compelling cast I would struggle to remain engaged throughout the entire playthrough...Gale Dekarios, from Baldur's Gate 3, is the main companion that I engaged with, learning about him and seeing him develop over the course of the game was my favourite part of him. When I think of Baldur's Gate 3, I don't miss the game, I miss the characters that make it.
	Man	31	...they contain meaningful stories with incredibly well-written characters that drive forth an excellent plot that has plenty of emotional moments to keep you hooked. Playing video games is just like reading books or composing music; it's absolutely an art form, and just like any other art piece, we find truth--actual, genuine emotions--that the rest of the world seems privy to hiding from us. Life is emotion. Life is feeling. Video games, especially the ones I listed, have taught me what it means to truly feel. To totally, actually "be."
	Woman	19	I love getting to know more about a character's background, especially a character I enjoy. Most recent one is probably Aventurine's "story quest", or the Honkai Star Rail Penacony quest released in 2.1. Learning about exactly why he is the way that he is, uncovering the shaky foundations of himself

			under the facade of collected arrogance he wore in previous quests created an emotional bond with him as a character.
	Non-binary	22	...typically I am looking for opportunities to deepen bonds with characters, engage with them and with figures from their past to learn more and appreciate the time that's gone into writing them. In games like the Fire Emblem series, this aspect is present but takes more of a backseat to the turn-based combat gameplay, but ultimately. I find myself spending far more time in support screens learning about each character.
	Woman	20	Another thing I really enjoy about these kind of characters is that you know when you interact with them, you get to learn more about their story, or if you're like me, you get to dissect. Like there are different back stories and words that they say in kind of do a personality analysis and see, like, oh, what parts are maybe like, what parts of his personality are maybe relatable to you or what parts do you see yourself in.
The Joy of Being Kind	Woman	28	If a quest is stupid but it's requested by my favorite character, I'll do it.
	Non-binary	20	when there's no actual social or gift mechanic i like doing it anyways, putting something special in their inventory or whatnot
	Woman	34	Ooh, it's hard if you have to say something that you know will really hurt them but needs to be said ("giving it to them straight" or "tough love" dialogue choices).
	Woman	26	Well-written, interesting characters are a big draw for me, and I find speaking with them and helping NPCs to be enjoyable. I feel a sense of guilt when I can't help NPCs or when I have to be mean to them - it's hard for me to break out of that mindset. A good example of this is in Baldur's Gate 3 I spent every minute on the side quests whereas my partner spent his time minmaxing and getting the best gear. I also found when characters responded to me in a certain way I didn't expect I'd have to reload otherwise I'd feel sad I upset them or did it wrong. I might enjoy what some would call the 'softer' side of games, as combat and crafting are my least favourite aspects.
	Woman	23	Even though that portion is really useful, I never choose that option. I don't want my Astarion to do anything he doesn't want to do.

	Man	30	<p>I think, you know, maybe it's just me, but I do find myself kinda like if I'm running a party and everybody's very nice in that party, I'm going to make the nice choices, you know, because it's like, oh, you know, I don't want to upset these people. I like these characters. You know, whereas if you're probably running, let's say, if you if you run an evil or I don't want to say evil, but I'm I'm more morally loose party, shall I say it's got to be easier to pick evil options.</p>
	Man	23	<p>As I mentioned, she's a bit of a shut in character, likes to stay indoors and as you find out about her, her family life in the game and her dad in particular, you realise why that is and it's.</p> <p>That makes you that made me feel a bit more like, oh, that's I can't believe that's horrible. I wanna get you away from that situation. You're part of the team. Keep you away from that as much as possible.</p>

O Integrated Results from Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis

The integrated results table is shown on the next page.

Quantitative Results	Qualitative Results	Example Quotes
Positive affect was a significant positive predictor of parasocial interactions in narrative RPGs.	Participants described how a sense of 'being seen' through in-game representation and character customisation strengthened parasocial bonds through immersion.	<p>"I went bald in my early 20s and there's a character in that game that is also bald and I like- he's a good character...the only character I can think of in media that I've seen or played, that is not just like, you know, that Jason Statham stereotype big, burly, angry, violent man. That character is basically the opposite of that. He's like soft and gentle and considerate and inquisitive...that stuck with me for a long while, especially considering that character is a very important character to the story, but also just a very well-written character." (M4, 30)</p> <p>"When I play this game, I think I'm the character. If my character is a Tiefling, like in the beginning, there is a Tiefling village and I'm a Tiefling so I want to help all my [brethren].” (W1, 23)</p>
Positive affect was a significant positive predictor of negative affect in narrative RPGs.	Participants detailed how greater engagement and emotional investment led to intensified worry and stress in response to distressing in-game events.	<p>"Towards the end, essentially you're given a choice to start killing people. Start killing the characters that you've played the game with and it felt like the stakes were real. You just get rid of 6 pixels on your screen, but it really felt like it was harrowing." (M1, 36)</p> <p>"In the situation where Kim can leave, like that stressed me out so much, the fact that I would have to play half the game without him...Thankfully you could load back. You can sort it all out, but if that happened and you couldn't do that and Kim was taken, I probably would have stopped playing the game." (NB1, 22)</p>
Parasocial interaction was a significant positive predictor of positive affect in narrative RPGs.	Participants described how the opportunity to form bonds with the characters was central to their overall enjoyment and engagement of narrative RPGs.	<p>"When I think of Baldur's Gate 3, I don't miss the game, I miss the characters that make it." (NB1, 22)</p> <p>"I think narrative RPGs are really more so than any other sort of genre of games, they represent an opportunity to really immersively visit new places and meet interesting characters because even compared to television and books, there is actually there's a real opportunity to spend a great deal of time with these characters in the settings in the world they live in at the player's own pace." (M3, 30)</p>

<p>Negative affect was a significant positive predictor of positive affect in narrative RPGs.</p>	<p>Participants detailed how the negative emotions elicited by challenging or distressing in-game events intensified subsequent feelings of catharsis and meaningfulness.</p>	<p>"Had I not gone through like the series of really bad endings, I don't think that that final ending that I took would have made would have meant quite as much." (M4, 30)</p> <p>"I love playing narrative RPGs, even though some of them are really tough...I'm like, Oh my gosh, I have no idea what's going to happen or I've messed up and I'm like so finished, but I feel I always feel good. It's always a positive emotion and I think that's because I always come out of narrative RPG games feeling like I just fell in love with stories again." (W1, 22)</p>
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